The Summer of '46

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It was the summer of our discontent. In Washington, a Democratic President hurled thunderbolts against a "do nothing" Republican Congress, while the GOP maintained that the liberal Democratic Party had lost touch with mainstream America. In Hillsborough County, residents cursed Dale Mabry Highway while abandoning mass transit. July rains swamped the Interbay and Sulphur Springs but the first sign of summer practice augured promise for football fans. Boosters unveiled a new bowl game, sure to put Tampa on the map. An epidemic struck young Floridians while critics prophesied that failure to fund schools threatened the future of the state. And in the worst cut of all, Tampeños complained that the classic Cuban sandwich had gone to white-bread hell. Yet many Americans contend, that like the film produced that year, it was the best year of our lives. It was the summer of 1946.

Tampa struggled to redefine itself. Everyone still recognized Tampa as "Cigar City," but the fabled cigar industry never recaptured its lost markets. World War II had hooked a new generation on cigarettes. But Tampans wished not to dwell on the past. In the
summer of ’46, Americans were bent on establishing new lives. V-J Day was a memory. New priorities demanded attention: everywhere, veterans looked for jobs, enrolled in college, and built homes. A heady optimism prevailed, punctuated by the Baby Boom. Veterans quickly became part of Tampa’s leadership.

Across America, a grateful America offered laurels for Ulysses, electing war heroes to public office. In 1946, Bostonians elected John E Kennedy to Congress. In Miami, "the Fighting Leatherneck," George Smathers also went to Washington. Tampa’s war heroes, Sam Gibbons and Julian Lane, achieved later success in the political arena.

Returning veterans, touched by the genuine camaraderie of the foxhole and buoyed by the optimism of victory and prosperity, eagerly joined voluntary associations, reviving the American Legion, the Moose Lodge, and Knights of Columbus.

In the year following the end of WWII, consumers confronted a confusing world of free markets and price controls. Americans scrambled frantically to find suitable housing, a new car, or even a T-bone steak. Americans discovered in the summer of ’46 that reconverting a wartime economy from guns to butter was excruciatingly slow. When local merchants located a horde of butter—even priced at $1 a pound—shoppers snapped up supplies. In September the *Tribune* reported, "Tampa Is Nearly Meatless, Soapless." Housewives who frequented Frank Pardo’s Market on Eighth Avenue or Snow Avenue’s Woodward Grocery recoiled in horror to discover "dressed and drawn" fryers at 64 cents/lb. Turkeys at the downtown City Market fetched a mind-boggling 95 cents/lb. Patrons of Tampa’s Fulton Fish Market at Platt and Magnolia found more tempting bargains: flounder sold for 35 cents/lb. and large shrimp at 65 cents/lb.¹

Nothing is more illustrative of 1946 Tampa than the neighborhood grocery. Tampans purchased foodstuffs from neighborhood markets and the county supported fully 500 individual stores. El Recurso Co-Operative Grocery, Mench's Complete Food Store on Grand Central (now Kennedy Blvd.), and Hosegood Grocery Company at Highland supplied community needs. In addition, the city supported eighteen coffee roasters, when a cup of coffee (hold the mocha decaf) sold for a nickel.²

In 1946, Tampans enjoyed an Indian Summer devoid of franchised restaurants, interstate highways, and shopping malls. Shops and businesses tended to be small, family-run affairs. To see a hint of the future shopping center, one drove across the Gandy Bridge to St. Petersburg's Webb's City. Begun by a modern Horatio Alger, "Doc" Webb brought his marketing flair to Tampa Bay in the 1920s. Shoppers waited in lines for bargains and entertainment at the "The World's Most Unusual Drug Store," a sprawling complex of stores. Webb's ability to deal in huge volumes allowed him to secure "scarce" goods in the summer of ’46. In just a few hours on July 25th, 30,000 shoppers stripped the counters of 3,600 pounds of oleo margarine, 8,000 cans of peaches, and 4,800 boxes of pudding.³

Fifty years later, American presidents and candidates demand the end of big government, but in 1946 citizens hailed the GI Bill of Rights as the greatest piece of legislation in American history. Passed at the end of the war, the GI Bill of Rights rewrote the American dream, enabling a generation of veterans to finance a home and receive a college education. Across Florida, veterans poured into near empty universities,
so overwhelming the University of Florida that surplus students enrolled at a nearby military field near the Florida State College for Women. In 1947 FSCW became Florida State University. The University of Tampa, threadbare from the lean years, welcomed a record 900 students, most of them veterans. In Temple Terrace, Florida Christian College opened its doors.4

The GI Bill fueled a housing boom that reshaped our cities and expanded the suburbs. The housing boom unwittingly undermined older neighborhoods. Since the GI Bill only subsidized the construction of new homes, the value of older and deteriorating homes in Ybor City and Tampa Heights fell as young families fled the old neighborhoods for the new American dream. Post-war housing abandoned the bungalow and up-scale Mediterranean Revival styles. A new architecture, notably the California-style, concrete-block, one-story tract house, predominated. These homes emphasized economy and efficiency, and proved readily adaptable to the residential air-conditioning revolution of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1946 Jim Walter began marketing shell homes in Tampa, introducing the idea of modular construction to the housing market. Critics

In November 1946, the DeSoto Hotel occupied the block astride Marion Street, between Zack and Polk. Built in the 1890s, the DeSoto stood until 1955. The site is now occupied by the Robert Timberlake Federal Building.

— Hampton Dunn Collection, Courtesy University of South Florida Special Collections
lamented the absence of sidewalks and front porches in many of these new developments.

Many families found it cheaper to buy a home rather than renting. In 1946, a three-bedroom home in Forest Hills went for $5850. A home in Hyde Park, "splendidly located...lovely condition" sold for $9,000. A beachfront lot in Pinellas County went begging for $4,000. In St. Petersburg, the city offered free lots to veterans.5 The GI Bill helped to democratize Tampa, but it also reinforced racial and class barriers. For decades, Ybor City and West Tampa had housed the great majority of the city’s Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians—"Latin" in the vernacular. But 1946 witnessed the first great breakout, as young Latins, liberated by the war, moved to take advantage of new opportunities. Left behind were older and poorer residents. African Americans, who did not enjoy the liberty of unrestricted mobility, began moving into Ybor City to fill the housing vacuum. The portents for the urban renewal of the 1960s had been foreshadowed in 1946.

Economically, Tampa struggled to find a new niche in the postwar world. Tampa Bay and Florida braced for an economic boom not experienced since the giddy 1920s. But the Tampa economy emerging from WWII differed dramatically from the city that made hand-rolled cigars famous. Changing tastes and mechanization had greatly diminished the importance of cigars to Tampa's economic health. "The last of the Mohicans," as described by one aging tabaquero, worked in the antiquated cigar factories.

The largest employer in the postwar Tampa Bay area, and the source of unimaginable benefits to power brokers who could master its intricacies, was the federal government. Politicians scorned Washington's insidious federal bureaucracy, but routinely begged for more of the economic resources.

Pundits called this irresistible alliance of universities, defense contractors, congressmen, ex-generals and lobbyists, the military-industrial complex. A resurgent federal government had built the runways and hangars of Drew Field, soon to become Tampa International Air Field. Washington underwrote the lucrative shipbuilding contracts at Hookers Point, the mega-complex of MacDill Army Air Field, and the facilities at Bay Pines Veterans Hospital. A Cold War, growing hotter because of Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech and U.S.-Soviet skirmishes, ensured a steady stream of defense dollars to bolster Florida's citadel.

New residents and newly affluent tourists raced toward Florida almost as quickly as federal dollars. World War II had caused an unprecedented upheaval in the Sunshine State. But perhaps most dramatically, the war lured millions of servicemen and travelers to Florida. The war meant, above all else, migration, movement, and mobility. Between 1940 and 1947, 70 million Americans changed residences. The yet unnamed Sun Belt had been discovered.

In 1946, Florida readied for the first wave of a tidal surge of retirees, tourists, and new families. In 1940, Florida's population had not yet reached the two million mark. Yet by 1950 demographers trumpeted Florida’s spectacular growth, as the census recorded almost three million residents, a 46% increase.

Hillsborough County luxuriated in the 1940s boom. On the eve of Pearl Harbor the county numbered 180,000 residents, a figure spiralling to 250,000 a decade later. In 1946, Tampa included about 125,000 residents, a
city restricted by its narrow geographical boundaries. Port Tampa, Palma Ceia, and Sulphur Springs had not yet been annexed to Imperial Tampa. Planners noted that many new residents were moving into unincorporated Hillsborough County. A new era dawned. The rural simplicity of Brandon and Lake Carroll would soon be more nostalgic than real.

Retirees and midwestern transplants more often than not chose neighboring Pinellas County. Upstarts St. Petersburg and Clearwater aggressively recruited new residents and industries; indeed, Pinellas proved more successful than Hillsborough in the quest for high-paying defense industries. But in 1946, Hillsborough leaders chuckled at the efforts of Pinellas County, which then boasted a population only slightly over 100,000. Yet early in the 1960s the census figures verified the humiliating evidence: Pinellas had surpassed Hillsborough in population. At least Pasco County knew its place. In 1946, Pasco County contained about 20,000 residents.

In the summer of '46, Tampa Bay's most expensive real estate centered around Franklin Street. Downtown Tampa stood at its zenith; its stores, offices, and banks defined fashion, power, and status. The
Tampa Tribune enjoyed a statewide following, earning a reputation for its journalistic crusades.

In those halcyon years after World War II, residents from Arcadia to Zephyrhills drove to downtown Tampa to patronize up-scale stores, such as the region’s only modern department store, Maas Brothers. When veterans retired their khaki uniforms, they instinctively returned to Wolf Brothers for the latest seersucker and linen suits. Customers weary from window shopping enjoyed the air conditioned sanctuary of the Tampa Theater.

Downtown Tampa reigned as the region’s capitol of capital while its buildings exuded power and influence. The Floridan Hotel, with its nineteen stories, stood as the tallest building between Atlanta and Miami. The Tampa Terrace Hotel’s Palm Room entertained the city’s elite.

Downtown Tampa’s most graceful building, its most distinctive structure, was the County Courthouse. Built in 1891 and designed by architect J.A. Wood, the Hillsborough County Courthouse featured a giant Moorish dome, stylish red brick, and captivating park. In 1946, county commissioners announced that the doomed courthouse was obsolete and a fierce debate ensued to find an appropriate location for the new structure. The Tampa Tribune and Tampa Daily Times warred over the suitability of appropriate sites. The historic courthouse was demolished in 1951.6

Another beloved Tampa institution received a death penalty that summer. The Tampa Electric Company announced that its streetcars would discontinue. For a nickel, residents could travel from Sulphur Springs to Ballast Point, West Tampa to Ybor City. A monument to Tampa’s irrepressible Peter O. Knight, the streetcar system had crisscrossed Tampa since 1899. But the streetcars, victims of neglected maintenance, postwar affluence, and collusion between Detroit automakers and utility companies, ceased operation in early August 1946. Colonel Knight, a bastion of conservatism and Tampa’s most powerful businessman, also passed away late that year. The streetcars found afterlife, in South America. The demise of the streetcar symbolized the complete triumph of the automobile. Residents had long complained that the noisy trolleys interfered with the efficient flow of auto traffic. Officials promised that a bus system would make residents forget the streetcar.7

Tampa’s bus system required new rules of etiquette for passengers long familiar with the trolley’s manners and mores. In the beginning, passengers attempted to exit enmasse, blocking the narrow doors of the buses. Racial etiquette, however, followed the old order. In 1946 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation of African Americans on interstate buses was illegal. E.S. Matthews, a Tallahassee official, stated that separate seating for black and white passengers would continue.8

Once a luxury, a Chevrolet or Ford coupe became necessities in 1946 Tampa. The result, of course, meant increasing congestion. Traffic gridlock dominated the letters-to-the-editor. Dale Mabry Highway, became synonymous with gridlock, as an alarming number of accidents occurred on its southern route. Authorities optimistically implemented new plans to solve traffic woes: stoplights.9

Customers fortunate enough to purchase a Ferman Chevrolet encountered still another hurdle—finding a parking place in downtown Tampa. In July 1946 a young
Negotiating traffic and then having to feed a parking meter was one thing; driving downtown and not finding a space truly aggravated loyal customers. Downtown, despite its glitter, began to show serious cracks. A glance at downtown cornerstones revealed that Tampa's skyline was frozen in a 1920s timelock. Not until 1960, when the Marine Bank and Trust Company built the blue-windowed monstrosity, would a significant new building be erected in downtown Tampa. In 1948, Maas Brothers opened a department store in St. Petersburg. Suburbanization, with its attendant features of decentralization and low population density, was reshaping the region.

Glaringly absent from Tampa's skyline were large corporate headquarters and diversified industries with high-paying, unionized jobs. While World War II had ignited an economic boom, Florida attracted few industries which complemented the emerging Cold War economy: aircraft production, computers, electronics, automobile and chemical factories, petroleum refining, medical and educational research. In 1946, the State of Florida threw down the gauntlet to union organizers, passing the first Right-to-Work law. Agriculture, tourism, and extractive industries continued to characterize Florida's underdeveloped economy.

Whereas states such as California, invested heavily in education to help create Silicon Valley and the aerospace industry, Florida ignored its educational needs. In 1946, Florida supported only three public universities, none south of Gainesville. The state had no medical school and no veterinary school.

Underfunded and overextended, education was in a deplorable state in 1946. Across Florida, but especially in Tampa Bay, citizens and educators confronted the reality of an educational system long neglected. In Tallahassee, State Senator LeRoy Collins lobbied for reforms, culminating in a sweeping piece of 1947 legislation, the Minimum Foundation Program. In Tampa, the Tribune championed school reform. In a series of extraordinary exposes, the paper attempted to inform the public of the shocking details found in state and local schools. Led by crusading journalist, J.A. "Jock" Murray, the Tribune unleashed a furious assault upon one of the area's sacred cows.

Throughout the summer of '46, Tampans read the depressing news. "Mango School," wrote columnist Jim Killingsworth, represented one of the "worst" schools in the county. "Rats, repair neglect, filth, outhouse privies, sewer gas, fire hazards—Mango has them all." In Cork, Principal L.I. Walden confessed that teachers helped pay the janitor's salary. Students complained of inadequate lighting, and for good reason. The Cork School had never been wired for electricity.

Even vaunted Plant High School received serious criticism. Reporters cited Plant for the worst rat infestation of any school in the city; during a routine inspection, three dead rats were found in the cafeteria. In addition, the article described broken plaster and un repaired toilets. At Gorrie Elementary, officials noted leaking sewer gas, a dozen
broken drinking fountains, and a restroom described as a "disgrace." 

In 1946, African-American schools were separate and very unequal. "The Keysville Negro School," cried a reporter, "is an ugly blot on the Hillsborough County school system...a broken down shack...that would have been a disgrace 100 years ago." The Christine Meachem School featured "rotted walls and ceilings, falling plaster, and broken desks." The Dobyville Negro School contained "fire and health hazards and the worst lunchroom..." Conditions at Lomax Negro School were summarized simply, "Everything wrong with it." 

Across the state, vast differences in tax rates and attitudes exacerbated the educational distance between rich and poor counties. In 1946 Dade County spent fourteen times as much money per pupil as Holmes County, and twice as much as Hillsborough County.

At least one educational enterprise thrived in 1946. Tampa’s three high schools—Jefferson, Plant, and Hillsborough—embraced football with fervor. High school football, noted the Tribune, had become "big business." Emblematic of that athletic prowess was the legendary Hillsborough Terrier team, led by the imperious coach with the hall-of-fame name, Crockett Farnell. During the war years the Farnell-coached teams boasted a record of 37 wins and only 3 defeats. Going into the '46 season, the Terriers enjoyed a 26-game winning streak, during which they outscored opponents 618 to 57. For his leadership skills, Farnell was promoted—cynics suggested demoted—to superintendent of Hillsborough County schools.

Tampans adored football, in large part because it was almost the only game in town. In 1946, the University of Florida football squad lost every single game, and Florida State was exclusively female, known as the Florida State College for Women. The Tampa Smokers, a minor league baseball club, drew modest crowds, but nothing compared to the fall classics. In 1946 the annual Plant-Hillsborough Thanksgiving game attracted 17,000 fans.

Tampa, hoping to rival Pasadena, Miami, and New Orleans in the lucrative post-season spectacles, gleefully announced the first Cigar Bowl. The newly revived football team of the University of Tampa would meet Rollins College. Former player Paul Straub coached the Spartans. The inspirational coach had lost both legs during the war. Downstate, the University of Miami canceled a football game against Penn State because the Nittany Lions team included black players.

Unofficially, the most popular sport in 1940s Tampa was bolita, a local version of the numbers game. Off the books, bolita made a huge impact on the local economy. Bolita also shaped the political economy, helping produce an incredibly corrupt system of government. A men's magazine labeled Tampa, "Hell Hole on the Gulf Coast.

Mayor Curtis Hixon typified a long line of Tampa mayors. Southern-born, a druggist, he stood for fiscal austerity, law and order, and an undisturbed Jim Crow line. Allegations before a U. S. Senate committee in 1950 that Hixon allowed gambling to flourish would later be embellished by Danny Alvarez, a Hixon protege and member of the Tampa Police Department. He confessed that he served as the mayor's "bag man," collecting huge sums of protection money from bolita lords.
In 1946, Nick C. Nuccio exercised formidable influence as county commissioner, and the Latin community's most powerful politician—a time when that was not a bad word. In his inimitable style, he supplied constituents with complimentary sidewalks and park benches, each stamped with the imprimatur, "Nick C. Nuccio, County Commissioner." Never a wordsmith, Nuccio once remarked after a medical checkup, "They filled me up with chalk and looked at me with a horoscope."

For Tampa's African Americans, the summer of '46 bristled with great expectations. Emboldened by Supreme Court decisions and energized by local protests, African Americans were doing something not seen in fifty years: registering as Democrats and voting in the primaries. Early in the century, the Florida legislature had empowered the Democratic Party to restrict membership to whites. The White Primary further eroded the black franchise, reasoning that in a one-party state, the primary constituted the only important election. And in Tampa, politicians erected still another hurdle to block black political aspirations. In 1906 leaders established the White Municipal Party, a nonpartisan, racially-exclusive design to eliminate the black vote and "reform" politics.

The 1940s shook the foundations of Tampa politics. In 1944 the Supreme Court outlawed the White Primary, although Hillsborough County's Supervisor of Elections, John C. Deckle resisted efforts by African Americans to register as Democrats. "Negroes can register as Democrats if they want to," scowled Deckle, "but we don't invite them." Thurgood Marshall, representing the NAACP, assisted Perry Harvey, Sr., James Hargrett, Sr. and others to challenge the barriers to voting. C. Blythe Andrews, publisher of the Florida Sentinel, complained of humiliating Jim Crow voting booths. But the dam had been breached and increasingly, African Americans participated in Tampa's political debates. In 1983, Perry Harvey, Jr., became the first African American since 1887 to sit on Tampa's City Council.20

On the state level, 1946 represented the highwater mark of Democratic dominance. Yellow dog Democrats, who preferred voting for a jaundiced cur dog than a Republican, ensured Florida was alien to the GOP. No Republican served in the 1945 Florida legislature. The state GOP was moribund at best, downright embarrassing at worst.

But time was on the side of Republicans. The very forces reshaping Florida (migration, postwar prosperity, disillusionment with federal controls) breathed life into a state Republican Party dormant since the 1880s. In the November 1946 elections, the Republicans won control of the U.S. Congress for the first time since 1928. Republicans won 12 seats in the U.S. Senate and 55 in the House. More shocking, a Republican was elected to the Florida House of Representatives. The lonely Republican, Alex Akerman, Jr., of Orlando, once practiced law in Tampa.21

In the summer of '46, all parents, black, white, and Latin, faced a threat far more serious than yellow dog Democrats or vengeful Republicans. While politicians worried about the Iron Curtain, parents dreaded the Iron Lung. Polio was sweeping across Florida. The fear of contagion and the ignorance surrounding the disease led to a series of bizarre events. The State of Georgia imposed a quarantine on travelers from Florida passing through the Peach State. The City of Tampa announced on
June 15 that sanitary workers would begin spraying DDT to arrest the spread of polio.  

The witches brew DDT had been unveiled the previous year, and already, authorities touted the miracle pesticide as the savior of Florida. DDT proved extraordinarily successful against salt water mosquitoes and cattle ticks. Lamentably, DDT also proved lethal against fishes and birds, but not the polio virus.

As if infantile paralysis, Republicans, and Communists were not enough, Cuban bakers delivered the cruelest cut of all in 1946. In July, Cuban bakers struck, causing shortages of Cuban bread. American white bread replaced the crusty Cuban loafs as Tampans resigned themselves to a world where John L. Lewis could lead coal miners and Cuban bakers out on strike. Still, many Tampans argue that this was the best year in their lives.

In Shakespeare’s Henry V, huddled French officers dispute a report revealing the enemy’s strength before Agincourt. “Who hath thou measured the ground,” asks the French Constable. The decade following the summer of ’46 can be measured in momentous change for Tampa Bay.

A decade of sustained prosperity brought hundreds of thousands of new residents to the bay area. Joseph Schumpeter once observed that capitalism breeds creative destruction. As evidence, hundreds of suburban developments bulldozed away orange groves and palmetto scrub. Television replaced radio and instantly, roof lines sprouted antennae. Hillsborough County rejoiced when State Senator Sam Gibbons helped secure the University of South Florida for Tampa. Its location anticipated the future growth of the county. The year 1956 marked the opening of Tampa’s first shopping malls, Britton Plaza and North Gate. The shopping mall signified the decline of downtown, dislocation of neighborhoods, and appeal of suburbanization. More ominously, the passage of the Interstate Highway Act doomed many of Tampa’s most beloved neighborhoods. Interstate highways 4 and 275 cut grievously into the urban fabric of Ybor City, West Tampa, Seminole Heights, and Central Avenue.

Ybor City may have been in irreversible decline, but not so the political career of Nick C. Nuccio. In 1956, he became Tampa’s first Latin mayor. Ironically, his career came to an end in 1967 when a dashing, and brash thirty-four year old challenger crushed the veteran politician. Tampa’s young mayor was Dick Greco, Jr., barely a teenager the summer of ’46. Not even Greco, however, could explain why a Cuban sandwich could not hold the mustard of those a decade earlier.


2 Polk’s Tampa City Directory, 1946 (Vol. 34) (Richmond, VA, 1946).


4 “FSCW to Take up to 1000 Men Students,” “Governor Asks Plan to Put 1000 Men Students at FSCW,” “Florida U. Asks Students to Wait Until February,” “U. of F. Faces Loss of 60 Teachers In Housing Crisis,” “Most Tampa U. Students to be War Veterans,” “New Church College to Open Here Monday,” Tampa Tribune, September 3, August 28, August 20, August 25, and September 15, 1946.
5 See want ads, summer of 1946. See also "Pinellas Beaches Booming: Prices not up to 1925," *Tribune*, February 13, 1946.


13 "Plant High Has Worst Rat Infestation In City," "Gorrie School Conditions Bad," *Tribune*, June 18, 20, 1946.


17 "Hillsborough Beats Plant Here, 26-0," *Tribune*, November 29, 1946.

18 "University of Tampa To Have Informal Team," "Straub, Legless Vet, Will Coach Tampa Gridders," *Tribune*, September 10, August 14, 1946.


