Waiting for War to Begin: News Dispatches from the Tampa Bay Hotel

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Henry Bradley Plant's recently opened Tampa Bay Hotel and its magnificent lawns and gardens stand ready in this 1892 scene to capture the world’s attention in 1898 as headquarters for the U. S. Army and hundreds of news correspondents who arrived to report on the "splendid little war" with Spain.

Photograph courtesy of the Tampa Historical Society.

Troops of the New York 71st Infantry bound by rail for Tampa, stop over in Lakeland for coffee and rest from the long train ride.

Photograph courtesy of the H. B. Plant Museum.
WAITING FOR WAR
TO BEGIN: News Dispatches
from the Tampa Bay Hotel

Alexandra Frye

A recent acquisition to the archives of Tampa’s Henry B. Plant Museum is a collection of news clippings from the Spanish-American War period. A. E. Dick, manager of the Tampa Bay Hotel in the 1890’s, subscribed to the clipping service owned by Henry Romenke. The service, located at 110 5th Avenue, New York, NY, was billed as the “most complete newspaper cutting bureau in the world.” Drawn from publications throughout the nation and world, these clippings offer a window into life amongst the thousands of regular and volunteer troops and officers gathered in Tampa in preparation for embarkation to Cuba. On behalf of the Henry B. Plant Museum, Alexandra Frye choose from all the clippings ones which best describe the town and residents of Tampa, the Tampa Bay Hotel and the general conditions of camp life as reported by correspondents to an eager reading audience throughout the world.

When the Spanish American War burst onto the stage of history on February 15, 1898, with the sinking of the U. S. Battleship Maine, it was only to last until the signing of the Treaty of Paris on December 10. As short as the actual fighting may have been, the "splendid little war" occurred during the era when Americans obtained their information, entertainment and opinion through the print medium, and daring correspondents went to great (and sometimes dangerous) lengths to bring back the news.’ This was America’s first military incursion onto foreign shores, and our regular and volunteer soldiers and sailors, and our nation, would be changed forever.

By the turn of century there were, according to Charles Brown in his book, The Correspondents’ War, about 14,000 weeklies and 1,900 dailies throughout the nation serving a highly literate American population (near 90 percent). Competition was fierce for readers. New York alone had eight morning and seven evening dailies and at least two dozen weeklies.1 The names of the most important publishers and editors of that era still resonate today, Joseph Pulitzer, William Randolph Hearst, James Gordon Bennett Jr. among them. Popular writers enjoyed celebrity status: Richard Harding Davis, for example, served as the model for "The Gibson Man," (masculine counterpart of The Gibson Girl).2 Stephen Bonsal, James Creelman, Ambrose Bierce, and Peter Finley Dunne were names well known to reading audiences in cities from coast to coast. Illustrators such as Frederic Remington shared in the star status; although photography was used to document events, its reproduction in books and newspapers had not yet reached its full potential.

These elements came into confluence during the Spanish-American War, the first time the United States sent troops to fight far from home and its last amateur war. There were fewer than 30,000 regular army soldiers when the war was declared. President McKinley issued a call for 125,000 volunteers and later for another 75,000. An estimated 60,0003 soldiers passed through Tampa, Florida, chosen as the base of embarkation for the army because of its
deep water port, its rail line and its proximity to Cuba.

The first troops arrived April 20, 1898. They continued to pour in through May and into June. Along with the soldiers came correspondents from newspapers throughout the nation, as well as foreign observers from such countries as Great Britain and Germany. By May 22, the *Tampa Daily Tribune* reported that 125 journalists were in town, with more arriving. One rather young reporter, the audacious 16-year-old son of Missouri’s 11th Infantry bandmaster, persuaded the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* to pay his way to Tampa in exchange for some articles. The young entrepreneur’s name was Fiorello LaGuardia, and fame would come to him at another time as mayor of the City of New York. To their surprise, these reporters would remain in Tampa for a month or more, waiting for the invasion to begin. Stringent army censorship precluded strategic information reports. Consequently, many of the dispatches they sent back home gave readers news of their volunteer sons and sweethearts, announced the latest promotions within the ranks and described day-to-day life in the camps of Tampa.

The vignettes they penned described heat, dust, monotony, and military frustration--but also offered humor and insight.

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Tampa’s tall trees, scrub grass, palmettoes, and sand is the setting for the men of K Troop. Pictured in an original photograph by William Dinwiddie is Sgt. Philip K. Sweet, Henry S. van Schaick, Colton Reed, Allen M. Coville, Henry Fletcher, and Sherman Bell.

Photograph courtesy of Burgert Bros. Collection.
In the first week of May, the editor of the *Plattsburgh (PA) Press*, reported that the 21st Infantry was in camp as were some six thousand men, all waiting for the 'expedition' to Cuba to begin—although no one quite knew when that would be. "The troops have not been idle since coming here," the editor wrote. "Drills in extended order and practice marches are the order of the day. These are made with full equipment to inure the men to the climate and hard service and with the thermometer in the nineties are no pleasure jaunts.

"The climate is torrid, sure enough" he continued. "At mid-day the thermometer hovers in the nineties but the nights are cool and pleasant. There has been no rain in this vicinity in eight months and the black, grimy dust is enough to choke you. It gets into your eyes, your nose, your food and, were it not for the ample bathing facilities in the vicinity, it would be unbearable."

Dean A. C. Peck wrote to the *Denver (CO) Republican*, charitably describing the area as "beautifully located at the head of ... Bright Tampa Bay with crystal spray" and an adjacent countryside dotted with clear lakes, many swamps, and "a species of ragged, shred like moss hanging from the trees ... which is "self-propelling." When it came to the town, A. C. Peck wrote: "We do not call Tampa much of a place in the North or West where our eyes are accustomed to well
paved and kept streets and fine business blocks ... The soil is a fine, gray sand. With one or two exceptions, where dilapidated and uneven pavements of wooden blocks make locomotion dangerous, the streets, including the main shaft, have this sand to a depth of at least a foot, through which teams and pedestrians alike must struggle ... There are few business blocks of any pretension. There are some fine residences."

That was about as kind as descriptions of Tampa ran. The New York Times reporter wrote: "There is no shade at the artillery and cavalry camps, and very little at the infantry camps near Tampa. There is not a regiment that would not prefer going to Cuba at once to waiting here in the heat and sand glare and monotonous inaction."

There was something everyone agreed on: The Tampa Bay Hotel, "a magnificent winter resort built of brick in the Moorish style, with spacious grounds, wide verandas, a casino, bicycle track and natatorium ... only a quarter of a mile from the business part of the city ... Every night the electric lights shine on handsome uniforms and elaborate summer costumes. A regimental band plays on the broad veranda and the walks are full of young couples whose talk is certainly not of war," wrote the New York
Press on May 6, the same day the Providence (R. I.) Journal called the Tampa Bay Hotel a "magnificent 'caravansary' built by Mr. Plant...a beautiful place and good hotel. One of the few complaints sounded came from a Detroit man with the 32nd Michigan volunteers, who wrote to the News Tribune: "It is a great resort just now for all the army officers and their ladies, but I understand they do not go out of their way to make it a pleasant for a common private, and the prices charged, especially for wet goods are so high that a $13 a month man would not go back a second time. One of the boys told me that he went in there last night with five others and the six glasses of beer cost 80 cents. In this climate where the boys have a thirst with them all the time, you can imagine how long they could keep that up."

The first soldiers to reach Tampa were seasoned veterans of the regular army. By mid-May, according to a Providence Journal report, the 1st, 4th, 5th, 6th, 9th, 10th, 13th, 17th, 21st, 22nd and 24th Infantry had arrived, plus part of the 9th Cavalry and Light Batteries E and K of the 1st Artillery. An "immense gathering of officers" convened at the Tampa Bay Hotel, which served as army headquarters. It is the most remarkable reunion of officers actually in the regular service, probably, that there has been since the war...

The writer also detailed the lack of formality among American officers. "These officials are all cheery, approachable, genial American citizens. Many of them insist on wearing civilian clothes, even here and now, at all times when they are not actually on duty. In business clothes they look very much like prosperous business men." The Tampa Daily Tribune summarized an article from the Jacksonville Times-Union and Citizen about General Wheeler's decision to move into the campsite with his men, rather than stay with other officers at the Tampa Bay Hotel. The dispatch ended with "That is the way for an American general to treat American soldiers, and they appreciate it." Another correspondent wrote of seeing an American captain at the Tampa train station, where he was seen off by ten or more of his men. The captain had personal words and a handshake for each soldier. When the writer commented that this kind of cordiality would never exist between a European officer and his men, the captain replied: "Well, bless your soul...they are my boys. You be with them, as I have, behind a wagon train or in a hastily scooped out trench and feel that each and every one of them would die for you in a minute and not one of them dream of leaving you while there was a drop of blood left in his body and see if you would ever forget it. My boys, God bless them! I have three of them on the train going to Atlanta with me and they have everything just as good as I have and will, so long as I have a dollar."

The American regular soldier was often compared in print to his continental counterpart. Writing to the Baltimore Sun in mid-May, American Major J. G. Pangborn declared there was "absolutely no compari-
European soldier, who "is simply a bit of this big machine in which he plays so insignificant a part that his individuality is wholly gone when he answers his first roll call. By and of himself he is a wooden image compared to the American soldier."

The American volunteers who began arriving in Tampa in May did not, at first, get high marks from some journalists like New York Evening Post writer who observed in a May 19 dispatch: "In many ways these volunteers are ridiculous in comparison with the regulars. They are younger, smaller, paler, weaker. They are undisciplined. Though they are mostly of a very good class of people morally, they furnished more cases of drunkenness in a day than all the regulars had furnished in a week. That was not because they were as individual men more inclined to drunkenness but because they were undisciplined youths, suddenly turned out of their homes into a camp, and felt themselves bound to something rough and soldier-like. As soldiers they are simply not, man for man, one-half what the regulars are."
The volunteers also had no appreciation for distinctions of rank, as the *Evening Post* correspondent recounted in his article the following week. A group of Michigan 32nd volunteers trekked over to the Tampa Bay Hotel (possibly including the Detroit man mentioned earlier, who thought the beer cost too much) and "taking possession of the tables in the writing room, proceeded to write letters home on sheets bearing the heading: 'Headquarters of the Army.' The officers of the regular army who frequent and often fill these tables in writing their own letters, officials and others, took this irruption with perfect philosophy, nor had the volunteers any idea that they were guilty of any breach of discipline." Other articles alluded to the better meals that the regular army enjoyed, because they had experienced cooks who knew what to order and how to get the best available.

As soldiers, officers and correspondents spent the month of May speculating on when the invasion of Cuba would begin (and sometimes erroneously reporting that it had begun), journalists had a chance to observe the Cubans who lived in Ybor City. *Chicago Tribune* correspondent H. J. Whigham, described the weeks leading up to embarkation in the book, *The Spanish American War*. Recalling Ybor City, Whigham wrote: "This was my first introduction to the people for whom, ostensibly, we were going to war, and it was something of a shock. I talked with the secretary of the local junta and the editor of the Cuban newspaper and many other patriots and I expressed my opinion of them in a dispatch at the time which I have not since felt included to alter. They were childlike, simple and which they could certainly have done as far as numbers were concerned, but their sole knowledge of warfare was confined to the use of the machete. In their belief there was nothing so terrifying to the Spaniard as the Cuban sword. ...Altogether the Cubans were amusing children, but if these Ybor City people were good specimens of the race, it was plain that a free and independent Cuba would be a very dangerous experiment."

Correspondents chaffed under the censorship that General Shafter imposed on all journalists, and some grew testy enough to take out their irritation on the small town that was struggling to accommodate them. But few dispatches can match the satiric note of Charles E. Hands, for the *London Mail*, who painted the quintessential "Wish You Were Here" postcard of soldiers lolling under the palms. He began by writing: "The United State army for the liberation of Cuba is sitting down amid orange grove and palm trees, and bright flowers, at Tampa, in Florida, gazing dreamily out of the Gulf of Mexico. General Shafter and General Wade, with the headquarters staff and as many of the army war correspondents as there is room for, are at the Tampa Bay Hotel. Here we have been for a fortnight or three weeks, or more or less--in this balmy scent-laden atmosphere one loses count of time--and here, for all one can see, we are likely to remain until the war is over." Mr. Hands recites a litany of tongue-in-cheek complaints, starting with the Tampa Bay Hotel lobby: "The most grievous of all the hardships we are suffering is the terribly long walk from the great, cool, airy hotel lobby, where we smoke and otherwise carry on the war, to the dining room." Occasionally, he admits, they think about Cuba--but not for long. (Too hot to think of anything for very long.) Instead, they go to the "queer little town (Tampa) and watch an acrobatic monkey chained to a porch, or parrots or even the live alligator on exhibit in a packing case. Then they go back to the hotel where there is a man selling horses suitable for soldiers or war correspondents,
and when they tire of that they smoke a cigar or have some fruit. And so it goes. "A restful blissful feeling of sweet indolent content pervades the place. You know now why it is that the Southerner is easy going and poor, and why he drawls in his speech …"

By June 7, the waiting was over, and soldiers and journalists piled into waiting transports, eager to put Tampa behind them and get on with the war. With the reported sighting of Spanish ships, there would be yet another week’s delay before they finally sailed. The classic army motto, "hurry up and wait," could very well have described the long, hot weeks of boredom, anxiety and uneasiness they endured. By mid-August, the invasion had concluded.

Correspondents of almost every major newspaper, including artists and photographers, sent to report on America's preparation for war, instead found the small town of Tampa and the spectacle of Henry Plant's moorish-design Tampa Bay Hotel. The Tampa they found was still small and struggling with man and nature to exist. Thrust onto the pages of history in 1898, soldiers, sailors, writers and artists would not forget their brief stay.

The history of its part in the war is short, and not altogether flattering, but it was the nation's and the world's first glimpse of Tampa and it would not be forgotten by the war’s participants, correspondents or by the residents who found themselves described in newspapers in every major city in America, Great Britain and Europe. To Tampa, it was a "splendid little war" in so many ways.

ENDNOTES


2 Ibid. p.77

3 J. Schellings, Tampa's Role in Spanish American War (University of Miami Press.)

4 C. Tebeau, History of Florida, (University of Miami Press), p.313