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THE SUMMER OF ‘47

Gary R. Mormino

It was the summer of our discontent, a seedtime of change. In Washington, an embattled Democratic president blamed a "do nothing" Republican Congress for the nation’s woes, while a resurgent GOP pledged to return America to family values and limited government. A prying press greatly annoyed the President and First Lady, who attempted to protect their only daughter from publicity. In Hollywood, a handsome actor testified that the movie industry was controlled by subversives holding un-American views; critics charged that the fading movie star was more interested in Washington than Hollywood. In the Middle East, Palestinians and Jews battled in the streets, while in England, royalty blazed anew as the public fell in love with a young princess.

In far-away Florida, summer ushered in a season of controversies. Red tide and overflowing sewers lapped the shores of Tampa Bay, while overhead, military aircraft sprayed chemicals to combat new and old pests. When students returned to classrooms, they discovered "portables," visible symbols of overcrowding. In Tallahassee, lawmakers faced angry taxpayers and frustrated educators. A combative "He Coon" governor announced plans to improve Florida’s educational system. Tampans squared off in an ugly debate over the "big league" image of its football stadium. It was the summer of 1947.

That summer, a surging economy ignited by pent-up consumer demand and cold war anxieties buoyed the spirits of Floridians. An optimism borne of victory and postwar prosperity swept Tampa Bay. But the demons of the southern past—segregation, poverty, and nature—clashed with dreamers' visions of a new Tampa.

In 1947, the ghosts of World War II still lingered. Following the conflict, Congress had drastically slashed the military, shutting down most of Florida’s military bases. But for some crisscrossed runways, Henderson Field, located in sparsely-settled northeast Hillsborough County, became a memory. In peacetime, Henderson Field’s 2,000 acres served new purposes. The federal government deeded the scrubland to Hillsborough County. Within a decade the area served as home to two breweries and the University of South Florida.

Fortune also favored Tampa when the U. S. government decommissioned Drew Army Air Field. Emblematic of World War II’s galvanic impact upon the region, Dale Mabry Highway was built to connect MacDill and Drew Fields. In the summer of ’47, Drew Field named after businessman John H. Drew faded into history, when officials renamed the facility Tampa International Airport. The city inherited a $20 million windfall.1

MacDill Army Air Field alone survived the postwar blues. In September 1947, the Army Air Corps officially became the United States Air Force, a move which strengthened MacDill’s profile.
Cold War tensions in Latin America and the Caribbean assured MaeDill's survival in the 1940s and 50s. Indeed, the mood in Congress swung dramatically from isolationism to containment in 1947, with the declaration and passage of the Marshall Plan and Truman Doctrine. The Cold War and the Military Industrial Complex funneled millions of dollars into the Tampa Bay economy.

Two years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, atomic technology continued to preoccupy Tampa residents. Hurricanes also haunted residents, thus on June 24, 1947, The Tampa Tribune asked Courthouse Square strollers the following question: "Would you like to see a scientific test made to discover whether 'baby hurricanes' could be killed by [atomic] bombs?" Strollers endorsed the idea.

Technology seemed to hold out a dazzling future to residents of the Tampa Bay area. In August 1947, thousands of shoppers flocked to the Maas Brothers’ Franklin Street showcase to gaze and ponder the meaning of a brand new medium: television. The department store sponsored an exhibition of the latest technology; shoppers watched with fascination as images of local singers and talking heads magically appeared on a six-inch screen. Alas, since Tampa Bay had no television station in 1947, residents could not watch the magical November wedding of Great Britain's Princess Elizabeth and Lt. Philip Mountbatten.

The year 1947 introduced another new medium: FM radio. WDAE—owned by the Tampa Daily Times—promised the area's 5,000 radio listeners who owned FM receiving sets static-free reception. Twenty-five years earlier, WDAE had become Florida's very first licensed AM radio station.

The bewitching new technologies—DDT, television and FM radio—promised a better day for Tampa Bay. Technology also lured visitors to Florida with the modern comforts of air travel, sleek postwar automobiles, and air conditioning. The future seemed now.

Historically, tourism serves as an accurate barometer of public confidence and the state’s fiscal health. In 1947, tourism reinforced America's love affair with Florida, but profound changes in the marketing and nature of tourism were occurring amidst the honky-tonk of old Florida. In 1947, bulldozers cleared a site on U.S. Highway 19 between the isolated settlements of Homosassa...
Springs and Spring Hill. Newton Perry, a former Navy frogman, called the new attraction Weeki Wachee, named for the glorious springs. Weeki Wachee’s promotion of "live mermaids" anticipated the marketing strategies used by future theme parks.5

Older tourist attractions—pristine beaches, bass-filled lakes, and alligator farms—lured record numbers of winter visitors in 1947. The sheer number of visitors so impressed local and state officials that economists predicted with giddy optimism that tourism would someday become a twelve-month a year industry.6 Air conditioning, still rare in 1947, eventually helped fulfill the tourism-in-August prophecy.

The economic boom was driving the price of Tampa Bay beachfront property higher and higher. From Pass-a-Grille to Clearwater Beach, a postwar prosperity drove the price of gulf property threefold in just a few years. In a decade the Pinellas beachfront population had grown 700 percent. In Tampa, city officials bemoaning Hillsborough County’s paucity of sandy beaches, began to convert land along Ben T. Davis Causeway (now Courtney Campbell Parkway) into a municipal beach.7

Reinventing a city’s image proved even more difficult than creating public beaches. In tourism, image is everything. Thus, when editors of the influential Holiday magazine came to Tampa, boosters rejoiced. Quickly, jubilation turned to lamentation. Holiday released an advance copy, bluntly commenting that Tampa smelled, that its Gasparilla Festival smacked of "slapstick comedy,” and that slum areas "beggared a Mexican Peon village."8

In Tampa, old economies and new realities collided in 1947. "Cigar City" struggled to redefine itself. Thousands of cigarmakers, many of them pioneers from the handrolled heyday of Ybor City as the capital of premium cigars, remained unemployed. The Great Depression and the popularity of cheap cigarettes during the war—a tonic for "war nerves"—had seriously eroded the market for Tampa’s finest. Most notably, fashionable men no longer smoked cigars.9

Still, the moniker "Cigar City" lingered. In 1947, Tampa was becoming a city though famous for cigars, more important for phosphate and shipping, construction and services, military defense and organized crime. Old firms and first families held power and controlled civic affairs, but a new generation of businessmen and leaders emerged after the war, typified by Jim Walter, Sam Gibbons, Tony Pizzo, and Julian Lane.

In an earlier era, a local bromide held that when Ybor City caught a cold, Tampa contracted pneumonia. The 1940’s Tampa economy, however, depended upon the comparative health of military defense spending, small-scale manufacturing, retail service spending, agricultural products, and the housing-construction business.10

If homebuilding supplied the oxygen for Tampa’s postwar boom, the G.I. Bill provided the fire. The sounds of hammers and saws disrupted the peaceful summer of ’47, as homes went up in new developments and old neighborhoods.
An older bungalow in Hyde Park or a Mediterranean Revival in Suburb Beautiful could be purchased for less than $10,000, but most buyers preferred a new home, a ranch style with large lot in the fast-growing suburbs. Unincorporated Hillsborough County boomed. Brandon, famous for its serenity and strawberries, took off in the late 1940s.

Dynamic new developments occurred around the South Dale Mabry area. In 1947, Dale Mabry had not yet celebrated its tenth birthday, but clearly the road formerly called Vera Avenue pointed toward the future. Realtors gasped when a developer paid $13,500 for a corner lot at the future traffic nightmare of Dale Mabry, Morrison, and Henderson Avenues. A scant seven years earlier the lot was worth only a hundred dollars.11

Tampa was experiencing significant internal shifts in population. Ybor City, once the social and cultural center for Spanish, Cuban, and Italian immigrants, failed to hold its magic for the children of those immigrants. In 1947, Ybor City was losing population, as young couples—many of them veterans—moved from the beloved but dilapidated ethnic quarters. Many Latin families moved to West Tampa, taking advantage of the G. I. Bill to build a new home and share the camaraderie of West Tampa’s ambience.12 Hillsborough County’s population surged dramatically during the 1940s, growing from 180,000 in 1940 to 250,000 a decade later.

Growth posed new problems for Hillsborough County’s beleaguered school system. When the county’s 30,000 children returned to school in September 1947, they encountered overcrowded conditions. Everyone seemed aghast at the state of education in Tampa, but the roots of the crisis required little research. Hillsborough County, for reasons of austerity and depression, had failed to build a single new school since 1927. The portents of future crises were everywhere, as pregnant mothers carried with them thousands of prospective students, the fabled Baby Boom. One solution, unveiled in 1947, involved the use of temporary army barracks (a.k.a. “portables”). Citizens expressed alarm at such stopgap solutions. The Tampa Daily Times declared temporary barracks a "step backward—a concession to apathy and indifference.”13

The debate over the future of education took on ominous overtones during the legislative session in Tallahassee. Florida faced a staggering deficit, as the bills for decades of neglect came due after the war. Governor Millard Caldwell, an aristocratic looking man who operated Harwood, an 800 acre plantation near Tallahassee, desperately pleaded for new revenues and an accounting. The Legislature passed a $63 million appropriation—a budget twice as large as ever approved in Florida—stitching a crazyquilt package of sin taxes and managing to delay a dreaded sales tax for two years.14

The 1947 legislative session has been described as one of the most historic in Florida history. Legislators helped create the Everglades National Park, an event punctuated by the publication of Marjory Stoneman Douglas’s River of Grass.

But it was education which preoccupied and dominated the debate. The Governor, supported by a young
Tallahassee legislator, LeRoy Collins, worked steadfastly to modernize Florida's antiquated educational system. Gross inequities marked the system, characterized by gaps between rich and poor counties, and even disparities within counties. Caldwell and Collins proposed the Minimum Foundation Bill. The ambitious program promised a minimum floor beneath which no county could fall. More importantly, for the first time the state contributed to funding school construction and paid for operating expenses. The bill further mandated nine-month school terms, the requirement that county superintendents possess a college degree, and for the consolidation of school systems within counties. The legislature overwhelmingly passed the landmark educational bill.\textsuperscript{15}

If the Minimum Foundation Bill served as the most significant achievement of the 1947 legislature, the most sensitive bill concerned co-education. In 1947, legislation transformed the Florida State College for Women into Florida State University. The event brought male students to the rarefied campus, while the legislation also allowed females to attend the male bastion at the University of Florida. President Doak Campbell announced that Florida State was launching a football program, hoping to schedule games with Stetson, Alabama State Teachers College, and the University of Havana.\textsuperscript{16}

How does one explain this sudden outburst of liberalism, the passage of the Minimum Foundation Program and the breaking down of single-sex barriers at Florida's universities? For a state desperate to attract new business and tourists and obsessed with image, the solutions are understandable. The reforms, moreover, may have been enacted because of the prospects of federal courts monitoring segregated education in the South.

College underscored the promise of postwar life. Florida's institutions of higher education struggled to accommodate the waves of new students flooding dormitories and classrooms. In 1943, enrollment at the University of Florida had plummeted to fewer than a thousand students. In 1947, inspired by the dreamscape of postwar possibilities and subsidized by the G.I. Bill, a new student body emerged at Gainesville, composed of traditional young men, but now also married couples, veterans, and women. Married veterans attending college received $90 a month plus full benefits for books and tuition. Overwhelmed by applications—the admissions office expected 9,000 students in September—the University of Florida asked admitted students to consider enrolling in February.\textsuperscript{17}

Hardened veterans, pimply freshmen (including one Leland Hawes of Tampa), and co-eds rushed pell-mell to the red-bricked campuses at Gainesville and Tallahassee. Administrators encountered problems rarely seen in earlier classes. So many students drove automobiles that the Florida Highway Patrol assigned officers to control traffic in Gainesville. More alarming, at least to the deans, was the dramatic number of new fathers enrolled in school. The University of Florida erected special housing for married students—FlaVet Village—richly earning the nickname the "Fertile Crescent." In spite of freshman ratcaps, hopeless overcrowding, and wretched
football teams, most alumni remember 1947 with special fondness.\textsuperscript{18}

Higher education in 1947 reflected Florida’s historic distrust of big cities, a malapportioned state legislature, and a failure to recognize urban needs. Tallahassee, 20 miles from the Georgia border but 500 miles from Miami, boasted two public institutions of higher education, while Miami claimed none. In 1947, the state of Florida had not even invested in a medical school.

In Hillsborough County, administrators and students struggled to support and keep afloat two private colleges: The University of Tampa and Florida Christian College. Florida Christian College, which opened its doors in 1946, had taken over the abandoned buildings of the Temple Terrace Country Club, located on the Hillsborough River. The school enrolled 175 students. The University of Tampa, founded in 1933, had already survived the Scylla and Charybdis of the Great Depression and World War II.\textsuperscript{19}

The G.I. Bill probably saved the University of Tampa. In 1945, enrollment had plunged to 210. When students registered in September 1947, the registrar announced that veterans constituted more than half of the university’s 1,200 enrollment. Enrollment did not guarantee the University of Tampa success or serenity. New crises appeared in 1947. The university needed accreditation, but accrediting officials demanded that the school raise half a million dollars toward a threadbare endowment. Throughout that summer, President Ellwood C. Nance cajoled and pleaded with businesses and clubs to enlist in the civic crusade, but the university fell short of its goal.\textsuperscript{20}

In the first assembly of the fall term, President Nance warned students that communist-front organizations would be barred from the University of Tampa, “until Joe Stalin allows democratic organizations to meet in Moscow and promote the ideals of the American way of life.” In an interview with a reporter, President Nance confessed that as a young student he had joined a communist-front organization. Communist witch hunts attracted increasing attention in 1947. In Washington, Ronald Reagan—then a "hemophiliac" Democrat—testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities that communists had.\textsuperscript{21}

If any single person symbolized the spirit and buoyancy of postwar Tampa, Paul Straub merits the distinction. A former football player at the University of Tampa, Straub had enlisted in the Marine Corps during World War II, only to lose both legs at Guadalcanal. Friends raised $8,000 to help with rehabilitation. In 1946, when the University of Tampa announced the limited return of the football Spartans, Paul Straub became head coach. In 1947 the Spartans hoped to raise $25,000 to put a team on the field.\textsuperscript{22}

In many respects, the Tampa sports scene of fifty years ago is more recognizable than the American athletic arena. In 1947, professional basketball dribbled toward its second full season. Lineups, featuring white players from then-powerhouses City College of New York, New York University, and Holy Cross, reflected basketball’s popularity
in the Jewish and Irish neighborhoods of the urban northeast. The Baron Adolf Rupp was beginning a dynasty at the University of Kentucky. Professional football struggled for league stability and national visibility. Hockey, wildly popular in the northlands, held no appeal on the frozen ponds of Tampa Bay. In 1947, baseball was America’s game. In Tampa, the beloved Smokers, led by manager Tony Cuccinello, reinforced the love affair between sport and community.

If Tampans enjoyed the minor-league exploits of the Tampa Smokers and the abundant semi-pro and amateur teams, they adored football at the high school and college level. Football meant, among many things, the end of the long, hot summer and the revival of local turf wars. And of course, there was always the possibility that this might be the year the Gators won it all.

The war had disrupted, even discontinued college football, but peace brought little hope to a University of Florida football team that had not won a single victory since 1945. Coach Ray "Bear" Wolf pleaded patience. The drought ended in mid-October when the Gators vanquished North Carolina State, 7-6, before "a howling [home] crowd of 17,000." The Tribune headline reported, "Gainesville Goes Wild After Florida Grid Win." The 1947 season also introduced the school’s first cheerleaders. A fashion correspondent noted, "The girls wore uniforms of white sweaters and blue skirts with orange lining ... and will be a permanent addition to the new co-educational school."23

In November, the University of Florida football team came to Tampa to play Furman University. Tampa enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the university; ten Tampans played on the 1947 team, most notably Marcellino Huerta, Julian Schamberg, Hal Griffin, and Fletcher Groves. A Tampan, then a sophomore at Jefferson High, Rick Casares would become one of the greatest athletes at Florida.

The November contest between Florida and Furman drew 14,000 fans at Tampa’s Phillips Field. Commentary over the suitability of Phillips Field as a first class facility drew more interest than the game itself. A legacy of a $72,000 New Deal grant, Phillips Field had served as the region’s largest stadium since its construction in 1937 adjacent to the University of Tampa. Until the construction of soon-to-be demolished Tampa Stadium in 1967 (the first edition), Phillips Field entertained large crowds, most notably the annual Plant-Hillsborough High School Thanksgiving day game.24

But in 1947, critics depicted Phillips Field as minor league, which matched Tampa’s image. Wilbur Kinley of the Tampa Daily Times pointed out "the crying need of a larger and better football stadium in Tampa," a facility which at best, seated 17,000; at worst, served as an embarrassing venue for the Cigar Bowl, Tampa’s recent effort to become a major player in the New Year’s bowl games.25

The debate over a new stadium persisted longer than the Cigar Bowl. George Blaine Howell, shipbuilder, banker, and civic leader, answered critics. Howell, who had helped erect the old stadium in 1937, asked the relevance of a new stadium, since the 17,000 seat Phillips
Field had almost never been filled—not even for the Florida-Furman game. The dream and debate endure.26

In 1947, bolita had reached its apogee. In the 1940s, bolita exercised a tremendous influence in Tampa’s political and economic affairs. Danny Alvarez, an ex-police officer, bag man, and aide-de-camp for Mayor Curtis Hixon in the 1940s, has described how he collected huge sums of money from gamblers, the price of doing business in Tampa.27

By the 1930s, the harmony which characterized the "golden" era of organized crime, disintegrated. Flash points and fault lines appeared in hotly contested mayoral races and power struggles between the offices of county sheriff and state’s attorney. Casualties in the bolita wars mounted. Whereas Charlie Wall solicited and enjoyed the support of Cubans, Anglos, and Italians, no single leader after 1940 could control the various factions. The election of Hugh Culbreat as Hillsborough County Sheriff upset the balance of power.28

In 1947, the most interesting games in town, infinitely more dramatic and compelling than Gator football or Smokers baseball, were gambling and politics. In truth, organized gambling and Tampa politics became so intertwined, so interdependent, that they qualify as a single entity, a serious blood sport appreciated by insiders and spectators.

The Floridian and Tampa Terrace Hotels and the Citizens Bank Building defined Tampa’s urban skyline, but with little doubt, the most important “industry” in 1947 was bolita. Begun by Cuban immigrants in the late nineteenth century, bolita—an illegal numbers game—had evolved into a dynamic enterprise, employing hundreds, influencing elections, and handsomely rewarding many. Boliteros (bolita peddlers) mentioned schedules, taking bets at City Hall, the Scrub, and restaurants.

Highly romanticized, Tampa’s organized gambling network can be understood by patching together oral reminiscences and written accounts. Roughly understood, bolita had originally been controlled by Cubans and limited to Ybor City and West Tampa. The ascendancy of Charlie Wall, a scion of Tampa’s leading Anglo families, assured the protection of gambling and the penetration of bolita into non-Latin areas. The Volstead Act (1919) opened new sources of vice, and Italians capitalized on the possibilities of bootlegging. Necessarily, bolita and bootlegging enjoyed the protection of city and county police.

In 1947, The Tampa Tribune launched a holy crusade against bolita. For decades the Tribune and Daily Times had winked at organized crime, running occasional editorials but offering little opposition. On October 5th, the Tribune began a twelve-part jeremiad, “Gambling Interests Rated No. 1 Power in Tampa’s Politics.” J. A. “Jock” Murray, perhaps the Tribune’s greatest investigative reporter, named names, scolding and embarrassing public officials. Murray began with a shocker: "Gamblers hold the balance of power in Tampa today ... organized politics are run by the rackets in this county." The previous year, Murray had charged the windmills of public education, and his series had been highly effective in mobilizing action. While the Tribune’s exposé angered
Police Chief Eddings, and County Sheriff Culbreath all denied the very existence of illegal gambling. Bolita continued to flourish until 1950 when Senator Estes Kefauver subpoenaed Tampa gamblers and politicians to testify in a dramatic televised hearing.  

If reforming bolita was more difficult than the Tribune figured, bringing together Tampa and its fiercely independent suburbs proved impossible. Urged on by a barrage of editorials and stories by the Tribune and the Daily Times, leaders scrambled to secure an annexation plan and put it on the ballot.

In 1947, the city of Tampa comprised a scant 19 square miles. Compared to Miami or St. Petersburg, Tampa was geographically much smaller. In fact, St. Petersburg was about three times the size of Tampa in 1947. Reformers hoped to add 17 additional square miles to the city, by persuading voters in unincorporated areas to see the uplifting advantages of annexation. Historically, the residents of Palma Ceia, Ballast Point, the Interbay and Sulphur Springs had expressed little interest in political alignment with Tampa. Taking a page from the Republican Party, which in 1884 accused the Democrats of rum, romanism, and rebellion, opponents of annexation saw the specter of bolita, taxes, and corruption. Voters resoundingly defeated the measure. It was not until 1953 that the annexation measure finally succeeded.

In addition to the controversial annexation issue in 1947, Tampans also went to the polls to select the mayor. Candidates included incumbent Mayor Curtis Hixon, George T. Taylor, a contractor and member of the Board of Representatives (now the City Council), and Don V. Giunta, a schoolteacher. In an ugly election Taylor, "A Builder that's Building Minded," pounded away at Hixon's failings to run a safe and well-maintained city as seasonal floodings, the result of record rainfall, inundated city streets. Giunta advocated new sources of support for the University of Tampa. But in the end, Tampans overwhelmingly returned Hixon to the mayor's office, where he remained until his death in 1956. A young dairy farmer and former football captain at the University of Florida, Julian Lane, was also elected to public office—the school board—for the first time in 1947.  

The elections of 1947 mark a political crossroads in Tampa. Profound changes shook the very framework of local politics. The source of change came from as far away as the United States Supreme Court and as close as the neighborhood soapbox. For forty years, Tampa politics had been governed by the White Municipal Party. A nonpartisan party designed to eliminate African-American voters, the White Municipal Party had been the law of Tampa since its enactment in 1909, when Mayor D. B. McKay vowed to "eliminate the Negro vote in Tampa."

But in 1944, the Supreme Court's landmark decision, Smith v. Allwright, declared the White Primary unconstitutional. Southern leaders resisted the implementation of the Smith decision, delaying the registration of African-American voters, but the Court ruled again in 1947 that blacks could not be denied the ballot in the all important primary. The Daily Times and the
Tribune realized that the White Municipal Party had become an anachronism. The Daily Times editorialized in August 1947, "The White Party has never served anything except a prejudiced purpose . . . why not junk all the tomfoolery and put city primaries on the normal Democratic and Republican basis?"33

African-Americans, who had dreamt of this for decades, besieged the voter registration office—waiting in separate lines—to enroll in the Democratic Party. On August 2, 1947, C. Blythe Andrews, the editor of the black newspaper Florida Sentinel, wrote, "For the first time in many years, Negroes will participate in Tampa city primaries." He warned, "Negroes don't need our white friends to tell us who to vote for ... We wish to do our own thinking, our own planning, our own campaigning."34

Events that summer of '47 connect to some far-reaching themes in the history of Tampa and America. The seeds of the 1950s and 1960s—a civil rights movement, the Cold War, the growth of suburbia at the expense of downtown, and the decline of industries—were sown in the 1940s.

ENDNOTES

1 "Drew Field's Name Changed to International Airport," "City To Get Formal Deed To Drew Field," and "Pioneer's Son Protests New Airport Name," Tampa Morning Tribune (hereafter cited as Tribune), October 16, June 29, October 19, 1947.


3 "Maas Bros. Demonstration Brings Television to Tampa," Tribune, August 1, 1947.


6 "Florida Brims Over In Summer Tourists Year Round Resorts," Daily Times, August 20, 1947.


13 "Tampa's Schools Will Be Overcrowded This Season," "Army Barracks Suggested To Help Crowded Schools," and "Army Barracks Not


18 "Cars So Thick At Florida U. State Police Patrol Campus," Tribune, September 6, 1947; "Florida Colleges Spend Over $21,000,000 For Expanding Facilities," Tribune, August 24, 1947; Samuel Proctor, Gator History (South Star Publishing Co., 1986).


24 "Florida-Furman Tied 7-7 At Halftime in Game Here," Daily Times, November 1, 1947; Covington and Laub, 11, 22, 26, 105.


26 Ibid.


28 Ibid.


32  Tribune, November 19, 1909; Compilation of Charter Legislation of City of Tampa, Florida (1939), Chapter 155 33, Sect. 19, 20, 231.


34  Florida Sentinel, August 2, 1947.