Tampa at the Turn of the Century: 1899

Leland M. Hawes Jr.
One hundred years ago in Tampa, nobody seemed excited about the impending turn of the century. In fact, the entire country made little fuss that December of 899, because everyone seemed convinced that the 20th Century wouldn’t start until Jan. 1, 1901.

In fact, Jan. 1, 1900, was just another New Year’s Day in Tampa. Fireworks kept the town jumpy and agitated, while New Year’s Eve socials at Ballast Point and in Ybor City swung into the wee hours of the morning.

The Outlook, a national weekly magazine, reflected prevailing opinion when it editorialized: "There was no year naught. The year 1 was the first year of the first century. The year 101 was the first year of the second century. And the year 1901 will be the first year of the 20th Century."

Apparently Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany was the sole national leader who decreed that his court and his army would mark the new century on Jan. 1, 1900. All others, including U.S. President William McKinley, were willing to wait until 1901.

The year 1899 had stirred plenty of events and emotions in Tampa, whose population was just pushing towards the 15,000 figure. In many ways, it reflected a letdown from the stresses of the Cuban invasion of 1898, when some 60,000 troops swarmed into an ill-prepared town to board ships for an ill-prepared war.

Merchants looked back wistfully on the cash windfalls in a boomtown atmosphere, but were grateful to avoid the wilder side of the wartime "invasion" - a mule stampede, a race riot and an outbreak of typhoid fever.

But 1899 proved to be a landmark year also. Among the major developments that occurred in Tampa that year:

- Railroad tycoon Henry Bradley Plant died in June. His South Florida railroad had put Tampa on the map as its terminus in 1884 and brought construction of the giant Tampa Bay Hotel in 1891 as a luxury destination for northern vacationers.
- An effort by cigar manufacturers to introduce weight scales into Tampa's factories brought the first total industry shutdown. Workers won in the strike/lockout, but their success was short-lived.
- A "cineograph" of the Jeffries-Fitzsimmons prize fight gave Tampans a taste of crude film action on a screen.
- Three institutions had their beginnings: Tampa Electric Company which replaced the Consumers Electric Utility; Jesuit High School, then known as Jesuit College, and The Home, originally called The Old People's Home.

The Morning Tribune paid tribute to Plant as "Florida's firmest friend." Plant, who was 79, died at his home on Fifth Avenue in New York City. His death would set off a years-long legal battle over his will. Eventually it would result in the sale of the Tampa Bay Hotel to the City of Tampa. (Its distinctive minarets became symbolic of the city. Today it is Plant Hall of the University of Tampa and houses the Henry B. Plant Museum.)
Plant’s steamships were an important link in enabling Cuban cigar workers to travel cheaply between Tampa and Havana. After Cuba’s "liberation" from Spanish rule, several thousand Cubans left Tampa for their native island. Finding conditions there still unsettled and jobs scarce in the aftermath of the war, many came back to the immigrant community of Ybor City.

But Ybor City was stirring with ferment, too. Labor issues were rising to the fore, provoked by an effort of the manufacturers to allot certain amounts of tobacco to each cigar maker for the production of his or her hand-rolled cigars. Traditionally, the cigar filler had never been weighed, but now the owners were distributing scales to regularize the output.

Workers viewed the move as questioning their integrity. The manufacturers’ effort “galvanized an unorganized Ybor City work force into a unified front,” historian Gary Mormino wrote in *The Florida Historical Quarterly*. Factory lockouts provoked as many as 10 meetings a day among the workers, vowing not to give in.

But the shutdown cost Tampa, basically a one-industry town, between $60,000 to $70,000 a week in lost wages. Store owners believed unfriendly to the workers’ cause found themselves being boycotted. “Wholesale paralysis” of the industry, as the *Tribune* characterized it, proved painful to the entire community.

**Tampa was a town of approximately 14,000 when this photograph of Franklin Street was taken just before the turn of the century. Although electric lines and trolley tracks are visible, horse-drawn wagons and dirt streets are evident.**

(Photograph courtesy of the Special Collections, USF Library.)
On Aug. 14, an abrupt cave-in by the owners brought victory for the workers. Not only were the weight scales removed, but the workers won the right to work under a "general committee" - in essence, a local union.

Within weeks, 120 factories were turning out cigars by the hundreds of thousands again. But even as the cigar makers relished their triumph, the nature of the industry was changing. By September 1899, a Cigar Trust was being formed, enveloping the major factories in a massive cartel.

As Mormino pointed out, the weight strike of 1899 was the last one ever won by the cigar makers of Tampa.

A Labor Day parade brought a crowd of 3,000 to watch cigar makers and their families parade through Tampa. A Tribune writer noted the presence on a key float of "a very dark brunette" surrounded by young Cuban girls attired in bright colors. A legend on the float read, "Labor Knows No Color, Creed or Class."

But color and class issues cropped up periodically in 1899. A black newspaperman, M. J. Christopher, began publishing a newspaper called the Labor Union Recorder, taking potshots at the Tampa establishment, the police in particular.

Christopher used terms such as "overgrown tramps" and "sneaking curs" to attack policemen involved in a case of alleged brutality of a black woman who refused a vaccination in a smallpox scare.

In a confrontation with several policemen in a Polk Street restaurant, Christopher was beaten about the head and shot fatally. At the funeral, more than 5,000 people marched to protest his death.

A near-lynching was avoided in another case in which an Italian, Giuseppe Licata, was accused of killing a Pasco county man in a dispute over a cow. A posse of farmers sought to extract Licata from the Hillsborough county jail, but without success. Licata did go to trial later in the year and was found innocent.

A Republican editor who lived in a rural Hillsborough community called Peck ran up against "unreconstructed" Southern sentiments that left him painfully humiliated. W.C. Crum, postmaster in the area near today's Harney Road, had the temerity to employ a black man to assist him in the post office. He thus became a victim of what was then called a "whitecapping."

On a Monday night in August, Crum was accosted by a dozen masked men wielding shotguns and revolvers. According to his account, they dragged him from his horse, tied his hands and legs, stripped him, beat his back "almost to a jelly," poured carbolic acid and tar on his wounds, then lashed him with a whip. Crum's whiskers were sheared from one side of his face.

Although twelve defendants later stood trial in federal court, a jury turned them loose.

Another form of "Tampa justice" was dispensed by Police Court Judge C.C. Whitaker. After finding two youths guilty of stealing from a riverfront boat, he decided against sending them to jail. Instead, Whitaker consulted the parents of the youths and settled on an alternative: whipping the teenagers with rawhide. "The justice administered the medicine on the spot," the Tribune reported.

Chinese laundrymen had their legal problems in Tampa that year, as well. A license of $25 was assessed by the city
councilmen, aimed specifically at the Chinese. G.A. Hanson spoke in their behalf, calling it an unjust, inequitable tax. Hanson cited a federal court ruling that legislation could not be "enforced against Chinamen simply because they were Chinamen."

But several councilmen insisted the laundrymen were not desirable citizens, for they sent money back to their homeland. The "critics" view prevailed, and the license fee continued on the books.

Cigarette smokers were relieved when a Jacksonville judge knocked down a law prohibiting the manufacture and sale of the coffin-tacks," as they were called by opponents. The American Tobacco Co. sent in its legal artillery to attack the law which had been passed by the legislature in the spring.

The "Duke" brand of cigarettes was promptly offered for sale in two Tampa saloons, following the ruling.

Other offbeat events attracted the attention of Tampa residents in 1899.

One of those rarities in Florida, a snow storm, hit town in mid-February. Although the Tribune gave no details of how long the snow stood on the ground, it did mention a three-hour snowfall on a day when the
Ballast Point was a favorite destination of Tampa residents in the 1890s and could be easily reached by the street car line which ran along the Bayshore. This fanciful scene of the Ballast Point Casino includes rowers enjoying the bay.

(Photograph courtesy Special Collections, USF Library.)

Roland A. Wilson in uniform in a standard studio portrait taken in 1899. He would soon meet and begin courting Miss Martha Leiman of Tampa.

(Photo. courtesy of Roland A. Wilson III.)
temperature ranged from 28 degrees to 32 degrees.

Other area temperature lows reported: Fort Meade, 20; Wauchula 21; Ellenton 21; Seffner 26; Bartow 26; Gainesville 18; Jacksonville 10. "Florida Is Hit Hard," a Tribune headline reported.

Among those hit hardest was former Mayor Myron Gillett, who lost 10,000 budded orange and grapefruit trees he was preparing to send to Cuba. An early account had them frozen to the ground.

Gillett wasn't the only Tampa businessman hoping to cash in on the American occupation of Cuba. A Tribune correspondent told of well-known local figures in Havana and in other Cuban cities in the aftermath of the war.

Perry G. Wall of the Knight and Wall hardware firm had set up a Havana branch of the store, managed by John Harllee. A real estate man, Leon J. Canova, was seeking colonists from the U.S. to grow oranges on tracts in the island nation. And H.J. Cooper, formerly editor of a Tampa newspaper, had become postmaster of Santiago, Cuba.

Another offshoot of the Spanish-American War had an ironic twist. More than a year after the end of hostilities in Cuba, coastal artillerymen began arriving in Tampa to take over fortifications just constructed on Egmont Key, at the mouth of Tampa Bay. Fort Dade would continue as an active military installation into the 1920s.

December brought a bicycle race to Tampa, with Fred Ferman, founder of the automobile firm of the same name, as starter. First prize - a medal valued at $30 - went to O.J. Campen, who pedaled 10 miles in 23 minutes.

Another name-in-the-news that would become well known in the future was 13-year-old David Paul Davis, son of the engineer aboard the bay steamer Manatee. It seems young Davis took over the engine room when he heard the "go ahead" gong sound. His father was still ashore.

But the Manatee returned to the wharf to pick up its regular engineer as well as some excursionists left behind. The son’s accomplishment in running the steamer for a while apparently went unpunished. He later gained fame as the developer of Davis Islands, dredged from Hillsborough Bay in 1924-25.

In addition to what may have been its first movie, Tampa saw another spectacle which the Tribune headlined as a "Revolting Exhibition." An admission of 25 cents was charged to witness a fight to the death between a wildcat and a bulldog. "The death of the feline ended the conflict," a correspondent wrote. More than 200 people watched the event Christmas afternoon.

Amusement of another nature was in prospect with the sale of Sulphur Springs by the Krause family to Dr. J.H. Mills for $10,000. The transaction involved 93 acres of land and was already considered a resort destination for town residents.

As 1899 drew to an end, the Tribune ran an editorial predicting: "The New Year, which dawns tomorrow, promises to be a great year for Tampa - a year of accelerated growth, of increased population, of new enterprises, of valuable developments of natural advantages."
Roland A. Wilson and his new bride, Martha Leiman of Tampa, are shown in their formal wedding portrait taken in 1901 at the Burgert studio in Ybor City.

(Photograph courtesy Roland A. Wilson III.)
It went on to say: "The purpose of every citizen of Tampa, in the new era which 1900 will introduce, should be to work with a determined purpose for the general good of the city. All differences that militate against progress should be amicably adjusted...

"On Jan. 1, 1901, the first day of the 20th Century, Tampa should be a larger city and a greater city. It will be, if the people do their part."

ENDNOTES

The author wishes to express his thanks to Julius J. Cordon, whose index of events in the year 1899, as found in *The Tampa Weekly Tribune*, made the writing of this article immeasurably easier.

Two Men With Tampa Ties Fought 'The Filipino Insurrection' As The Twentieth Century Began

Although the war with Spain had resulted in quick takeovers of Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898, the United States" armed forces still had plenty of action going on in the Philippines in 1899.

"The Filipino Insurrection" had turned into Vietnam-like guerrilla warfare, with native troops resisting American occupation forces. Although the Spaniards were gone, the Filipinos were not eager to submit to a different form of outside domination.

U.S. Regular Army troops who had fought in Cuba were now seeking to suppress the rebellion that broke out in the strategic islands of the far Pacific.

At least one young Tampa woman was awaiting the return of an Army sweetheart from the Philippines.

Martha Leiman had met South Carolinian Roland A. Wilson when he was stationed in Tampa Heights, preparing to take part in the invasion of Cuba. A sergeant in Company B of the Fourth Infantry, Wilson happened by the Leiman home on Seventh Avenue one day.

Grandson Roland A. Wilson III passes on the family account that the Leimans had baked cakes and pies for the troops, doing their "patriotic bit" by placing treats on their front porch railing.

Sergeant Wilson accepted the Leiman family hospitality, was invited in for a visit and met young Martha. From that first visit, "he knew then he was going to marry her," the grandson related.

"He came back whenever he could," Wilson said, "and they started writing letters."

The courtship continued after the Army sergeant returned from Cuba, then proceeded to the Philippines. Not until 1901 did he return for his discharge at the Presidio in San Francisco. The couple were married April 23, 1901, in the Leiman family home in Tampa.

Wilson later joined his father-in-law in a firm manufacturing cigar boxes out of cedar wood. At that time it was owned by New Yorker William Wicke, and Roland Wilson joined Henry Leiman in buying the company. The Tampa Box Co. became locally owned, the predominant source supplying boxes to Tampa's cigar industry when it was at its peak.
The family is now in its fourth generation in Tampa.

Another Regular Army man with Tampa ties had also gone to Cuba in 1898, then reenlisted for the campaign in the Philippines. David Fagen was a 23-year-old black man, described as five feet six inches tall and with a curved scar on his face. A resident of Tampa, he had enlisted in the 24th Infantry, a black regiment in the Army, when the unit was readying for departure from Port Tampa City.

After the Cuban campaign, Fagen was discharged in the cutback to peacetime strength, but he somehow reenlisted at Fort McPherson, Ga., in February 1899.

Four months later, Fagen and his regiment sailed for Manila. By the fall of 1899 his unit was engaged in a major campaign near Mount Arayat, an extinct volcano in central Luzon.

In an article in the Pacific Historical Review, Michael C. Robinson and Frank N. Schubert tell of the Tampa man’s growing bitterness with the Army and his difficulties with his superiors. He unsuccessfully sought transfers to other units.

November 17, 1899, Corporal David Fagen left his company and slipped off into the jungle with a Filipino insurrecto officer. He basically changed sides - joining the native forces. According to the authors, "... the audacity and vigor with which [Fagen] led insurrectos over the next two years illustrates the depth of his commitment to the Filipino cause."

Fagen was promoted from lieutenant to captain in the Filipino insurgents, gaining a reputation for cunning and skill as a guerrilla. Stories of his activities in at least eight clashes with American troops appeared in the New York Times.

By the spring of 1901, the Filipino cause began to dwindle, and "Fagen’s superiors had begun to give themselves up,” the Pacific Historical Review writers assert. There were reports Fagen and two other deserters asked through intermediaries if they might leave the islands if they surrendered.

But U. S. officials made it plain Fagen would be court-martialed and probably executed. They posted a reward for "Fagen, dead or alive," and hunted him like "a bandit."

On Dec. 5, 1901, a Filipino hunter brought in a sack which contained the "slightly decomposed head of a Negro" which he said was Fagen’s. Along with the head were weapons, clothing, Fagen’s commission, and the West Point class ring of a former captive of Fagen’s.

The hunter claimed Fagen’s head had been severed with a bolo in a melee. But there were doubts as to the identity of the head, and searches continued. The authors raise the possibility that Fagen and his Filipino wife may have spent the years to come "in the dense, overgrown back country" of the Philippines.

At any rate, the one-time Tampa man never came home.

- Leland M. Haves, Jr.