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Tampa at Midcentury: 1950

Dr. Gary Mormino

The 1950s triggered Tampa Bay’s Big Bang. National prosperity, Social Security, and Cold War defense spending made the Florida Dream possible to new generations of Americans. Technological wizardry, most notably air conditioning, DDT, and superhighways, made Florida endurable and endearing. In 1950, Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties totaled 409,143 residents. By the end of the decade, the two counties combined had almost three-quarters of a million residents, an astounding population increase of 89 percent. Demographers, bureaucrats, and wordsmiths coined new terms to describe the changes sweeping the new decade: suburban sprawl, climate control, and metropolitan area.

When officials released the results of the 1950 census, local and county leaders reacted with expected ballyhoo. Upon closer inspection, the tabulations posed more questions than answers. In 1950, census takers counted 124,681 Tampa residents, making the Cigar City Florida’s third largest city. The tumultuous decade of the 1940s experienced dizzying population mobility, but Tampa had grown a scant 15 percent. If Tampa’s growth was modest, Hillsborough County’s increase was spectacular, its population expanding 39 percent to 249,894.

For all of the self-congratulation, Tampa’s expansion paled when compared to its urban rivals. While Tampa grew by 15 percent during the decade of 1940-1950, St. Petersburg and Miami surged by 59 percent and 45 percent respectfully. To most Tampa leaders, the lesson was simple: Expand or Die. Indeed, the early 1950s spawned a number of annexation attempts to bring into Tampa’s boundaries the population rich neighborhoods of Palma Ceia, Beach Park, Sulphur Springs, and Port Tampa City.

The schism between Tampa and Hillsborough County widened in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when for the first time, the county’s population gains outpaced the city’s. For almost a century, Tampa had claimed the lion’s share of Hillsborough County’s population. It was not that Hillsborough County’s other towns threatened Tampa’s hegemony; in fact, in 1950 Plant City numbered 9,230, Port Tampa City 1,497, and Temple Terrace only 423. Rather, new growth was settling in the county’s unincorporated areas. New developments were springing up along South Dale Mabry Highway, Sulphur Springs, and especially the Interbay peninsula. In 1950, Fowler Avenue was a crude dirt road while Temple Terrace Highway, the future Busch Boulevard, was a two-lane road. To the north, east, and west was undeveloped, cheap land.

Midcentury downtown combined curious parts of dynamism and decay. Downtown Tampa still claimed the area’s most powerful banks, most envied corporations, and most prestigious stores, but the central business district had been stagnating for some time. No significant new building had been erected for decades. The era’s most colorful baseball player and philosopher,
Yogi Berra, could have been describing Tampa’s central business district when he said of a certain restaurant, "No one ever goes there anymore. It’s always crowded!" Shoppers and commuters complained incessantly of downtown’s lack of parking lots, overabundance of parking meters, and rush-hour traffic. By the end of the decade, shoppers literally and figuratively steered away from downtown Tampa, electing to patronize the new shopping malls and suburban businesses.

In 1950, real estate traffic was brisk. New construction filled in vacant lots in the city, but the most frenzied development occurred in the unincorporated county. No single individual comparable to David P. Davis had yet sketched out a vision for Tampa’s postwar suburbs; indeed Davis Island still had large sections waiting for homebuilders. Large numbers of young Latin families left Ybor City in the 1950s, gravitating toward West Tampa, but also to the more Americanized neighborhoods "off limits" to Latins before the war. In 1950, a family could buy a new 3-bedroom home in Beach Park for $10,250. In Hyde Park, Miss Jonnie L. Cape purchased the Peter O. Knight "honeymoon" bungalow for $11,000. The home, located on Hyde Park Avenue, later became the headquarters for the Tampa Historical Society.

As the Tampa Bay area began to grow very rapidly in 1950, and the population grew more prosperous, the newest automobiles were just the way to move families of baby-boomer kids to homes in new suburbs. Shown is the Oldsmobile 88 Holiday hardtop coupe for 1950. Cost? $2183. (Photograph courtesy of Ferman Motor Car Company)

Honeymoon bungalows and Mediterranean Revivals in Palma Ceia and Hyde Park graced the real estate section of the Tribune and Times, but the era’s most popular home was the inexpensive, concrete-block ranch
house. Terrazzo floors were the rage. Tampa's working classes were also on the march, migrating to newly developed sections of Sulphur Springs, West Tampa, and Belmont Heights. Sulphur Springs had boomed throughout the 1940s as thousands of working-class homeowners sought cheap housing, a country setting, and freedom from zoning. Jim Walter homes and septic tanks characterized the development of Sulphur Springs and other unincorporated areas. Walter's "shell houses" found eager buyers who paid $850 (lot, appliances, and moving fee not included) for a slice of the Florida Dream. Property in the county was cheap. A 10-acre farm off 22nd Street was advertised for $6,560.4

The suburbs and country enticed shoppers increasingly frustrated by Tampa's traffic. In 1950, the automobile reigned supreme. Tampa had ended its trolley operations in 1946. Residents in Hyde Park, Ybor City, and Seminole Heights still patronized small, family-run grocery stores, while new chain supermarkets - many of them air conditioned - opened in the suburbs, such as the new A & P supermarkets on Dale Mabry Highway near Henderson, and Dale Mabry and Jetton.5

Contemporaries praised the new suburban businesses and homes, so described by an observer as "built mostly in the bright tropical motif." Suburbia, contended a reporter, was "unsnarling traffic" and "rekindling the small-town spirit of mutual helpfulness and leisure living." A half-century later, few Tampa Bay residents agree that decades of suburban growth have "unsnarled traffic."6

Tampa faced competition not only from suburban Hillsborough County, but Pinellas County. The 1950s was a decade of reckoning. St. Petersburg and Pinellas County, once regarded as a quaint collection of beach resorts and small towns, began to challenge Tampa. Surging numbers of new residents, chiefly retirees from the Midwest and Northeast, buoyed the populations of Dunedin, Kenneth City and Pinellas Park. Trailer parks were the rage. St. Petersburg grew dramatically during the 1940s, adding 36,000 new residents. The average age of the population of St. Petersburg made it one of America's oldest cities. Almost one in every four residents was 65 years and older; in Tampa the proportion was 1 in 11. By 1950, Pinellas County was Florida's most densely populated county, with over 600 inhabitants per square mile. Pinellas had grown by 73 percent during the 1940s, in contrast to Hillsborough's 39 percent.7

Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties battled for supremacy throughout the 1950s. The rights to fresh water, the location of a public university, and the recruitment of industry fostered a bitter rivalry. Historic jealousies notwithstanding, the U.S. Census of 1950 confirmed that Florida's west coast was becoming a major population center. Henceforth, announced officials, Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties would be considered one metropolitan unit. Tampa Bay, once a body of water, had become an urban yardstick, the largest population center in the fastest growing state in America.8

Tampa Bay may have been Florida's most populous metropolitan area in 1950, but it still had no public
university. That year did bring good news to the University of Tampa. Since its founding as a private junior college in 1931, the University of Tampa had struggled in depression, war and peace. Returning veterans had bolstered enrollment, but the school's academic and financial woes persisted. In 1950, the University received news that accreditation was imminent. The G.I. Bill, accreditation, and an endowment of $500,000 saved the University of Tampa. Future civic leaders, such as Bob Martinez, Sam Rampello, and Dick Greco took advantage of educational opportunities at the University. In 1950, a new faculty member, historian James Covington, arrived under the Minarets.

The 1950s also brought a "golden age" of football to the University of Tampa. Playing in front of small crowds at Phillips Field, the University's football team, the Spartans, delighted local fans. Since the 1940s, the University of Florida had played one game a year at aging Phillips Field but this ended in 1950 when Auburn University refused to play at such a "small stadium." Florida State University, however, was delighted...
to be invited to Phillips Field. On New Year’s Day 1950 the Seminoles’ fledgling football team played in Tampa’s Cigar Bowl. The Cigar Bowl represented Tampa’s attempt to lure tourists to the city. Hosting teams such as Missouri Valley, Rollins, Delaware, and Wofford, the Cigar Bowl hardly rivaled Miami’s Orange Bowl. In the late 1950s, teams from Wisconsin La Crosse Teachers College and Valpariso accepted invitations to play at the last Cigar Bowl. Betty Jo Grubbs was crowned Cigar Bowl Queen. A bedazzled reporter wrote, "The lovely daughter of Mr. and Mrs. T.W. Grubbs stepped from a giant cigar box to receive a jeweled crown of cigars . . . " In 1950, two Tampans, Rick Casares and Nelson Italiano, had just begun remarkable athletic careers at the University of Florida and Florida State University.

The most entertaining event of 1950 was played not at Tampa’s Phillips Field but in the political arena. For sheer melodrama, Florida’s U.S. senatorial race had it all: compelling personalities, a poisonous environment, and a captivated audience. Though only 50 years old, U.S. Senator Claude Pepper was Florida’s senior U.S. senator. With passion and conviction, Pepper had served the Sunshine State since his improbable election in 1936. (He might have been elected senator in 1934 had it not been for blatant vote fraud in Ybor City and West Tampa.) A champion of New Deal liberalism and government activism, this passionate spokesman for President Roosevelt’s programs dutifully brought home “pork” in the form of military bases, highway construction, and jobs. Floridians cheered Pepper’s liberalism during an economy of scarcity, but postwar prosperity and the Cold War created new anxieties.

Pepper’s once vaunted political instincts failed him in the years preceding 1950. A series of political gaffs left the senator vulnerable and embarrassed. He visited the Soviet Union where he praised "Generalissimo Stalin." Pepper idolized Franklin Roosevelt, but frankly thought Harry Truman was a lightweight. When he sought to block Truman’s nomination at the 1948 Democratic convention, the president was furious. Harry Truman never forgot nor forgave him. An overconfident Pepper also challenged the South’s color line. Earlier in his career, Pepper had trimmed his liberal sails on the race question - even using the phrase "white supremacy" - but in the late 1940s he openly courted the African-American vote. The Florida Sentinel, Tampa’s black newspaper, urged newly politicized readers and voters to support Pepper. To place an advertisement in the Sentinel was one thing; to share a New York City stage with singer-actor-activist Paul Robeson, suspected Communist, was quite another.

Conservative Floridians had waited for this day: "Red" Pepper stood square in the cross hairs. For a decade, Pepper had openly and bitterly clashed with the most powerful man in Florida. Ed Ball, the senator’s arch-nemesis, managed the duPont Trust. The entangled Ball controlled powerful interests in the state’s communications, railroad, banking, and industrial sectors. Ball easily found allies in his crusade to destroy Pepper. The American Medical Association loathed him because of his steadfast support for nationalized health care. President Truman summoned to the
White House a little known congressman, informing him, "I want you to beat that son of a bitch Claude Pepper."  

George A. Smathers was the antithesis of Claude Pepper. Whereas Pepper was homely and ungainly, Smathers was dashing and handsome and a decorated athlete. "The people don’t care whether a homely man or handsome man goes to the Senate," laughed Pepper. "If it had been a Hollywood contest, I wouldn't have put up a qualifying fee." Ironically, Smathers worked to elect Pepper while an undergraduate at the University of Florida, where he served as a cheerleader and student body president. During World War II, the square-jawed Smathers enlisted in the Marines and saw combat in the South Pacific. A close friend of fellow Congressman John F. Kennedy, Smathers was simply an irresistible candidate in 1950.  

The election attracted national and international attention because of the fascinating personalities and the high stakes prize. The election also served as a vote of confidence for Wisconsin’s U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy. In January 1950, the roguish-looking McCarthy may have been America’s least known senator; but, by May, he was the most revered and despised man in Washington. McCarthyism burst upon the national scene like a Cape Canaveral rocket in Wheeling, West Virginia, when in February 1950 the 41-year-old ex-Marine announced that he had in his hand "a list of 205 Communists known to be working in the State Department." At times, one might have thought that Josef Stalin was on the ballot. Each time the Daily Worker, the American Communist party newspaper, trumpeted the achievements of Senator Pepper, the Smathers’ team smiled.  

Endorsements from Pravda and the Daily Worker notwithstanding, the 1950 campaign was determined by voting blocs along Tampa Bay, Central Florida, and the Gold Coast. Claude Pepper counted heavily upon his past accomplishments. A military hawk, he worked tirelessly to build an arsenal and citadel. During each visit to Tampa Bay, Pepper pointed with pride to shipyard contracts, military bases, and federal grants he had helped steer home. His wife Mildred was a St. Petersburg native, as were mounting numbers of retirees from Ohio and New York who...
now called St. Petersburg home. His impassioned defense of Social Security made Pepper a popular speaker in Pinellas County. The senator assumed that the transplanted seniors who brought their life-long associations with the Republican Party would support the candidate Time magazine had called "Roosevelt’s weather cock."

The campaign took on the passion of a religious crusade, as the candidates traded insults and accusations. Pepper complained of "dirty literature," "race prejudice," and "religious prejudice;" Smathers bewailed the interference from organized labor and "delusion, deception, and trickery." Florida’s last great old-fashioned election, the 1950 primary was refreshingly free of TV soundbites (only Miami and Jacksonville operated television stations and then only a few thousand households owned television sets.) The candidates endured a punishing cross-state campaign, filled with hundreds of speeches, handshaking, and fried chicken benefit suppers. Politics was still spectacle, and in Tampa no respectable rally was complete without a courthouse square appearance. Spectators appreciated pit barbecue, live music, and old-time oratory. WDAE and WFLA, Tampa’s two premier radio stations, bombarded listeners with interviews and political commercials.13

In Tampa, Pepper relied upon his pro-labor record to turn out union supporters. He closed out his campaign with huge rallies at Tampa’s Courthouse Square - ironically, the much-loved courthouse would soon fall to the wrecker’s ball - and St. Petersburg’s Williams Park. Pepper used the occasion to announce a million dollar federal grant to Mound Park Hospital.14

Race was a major issue in the 1950 election. "This is the most important primary held in Florida since the turn of the century," wrote C. Blythe Andrews, publisher of the Florida Sentinel. Pepper enjoyed the support of an energized black electorate, but social and political customs lingered. Manuel Garcia helped manage the Smathers’ campaign in Hillsborough County. A lawyer by training and confidante of Governor Fuller Warren, Garcia knew intimately the details of the 1950 election. He recalled, in a 1982 interview, that he hired bodyguards to ensure that no African-Americans were ever photographed shaking the hand of George Smathers. Indeed, Smathers canceled a scheduled address at the Metropolitan Bethel Baptist Church in St. Petersburg, a black congregation, because a St. Petersburg Times photographer threatened to take pictures. Pepper also played the race card, accusing his opponent of "buying the Negro vote." Smathers "tells the white people I [Pepper] am too friendly with the Negroes and he is telling the Negroes I have betrayed him."15

A master of mullet fish fry and hushpuppy oratory, Pepper failed miserably convincing Florida’s leading newspapers that he deserved another term in Washington. Among the state’s leading dailies, only the St. Petersburg Times and Daytona Beach News-Journal endorsed the incumbent. The Tampa Tribune and Tampa Times deserted their old friend, taking up arms with the hard-charging Smathers.

During the last days of the long campaign, local and state newspapers unleashed withering editorials undermining Pepper’s candidacy and
even questioning his loyalty. The *Miami Herald* depicted the race "as a trial of radicalism and extremism," while the *Tampa Tribune* accused Pepper of defending "welfare proposals." In case any voters had not already been saturated with the point, Smathers’ supporters published a wicked tabloid, *The Red Record of Claude Pepper*. Incendiary quotations accompanied photographs of Pepper standing alongside Josef Stalin, Henry Wallace, and Paul Robeson. An exasperated Pepper confided to a reporter, "If they can’t make a black out of me, they want to make me a red."16

As the 1950 Smathers-Pepper race recedes deep into the past, and the warriors who clashed in the town squares of Florida die away, one imperishable memory remains. Americans first read about it in the 17 April 1950 issue of *Time* magazine. "Are you aware that Claude Pepper is known all over Washington as a shameless extrovert?" fast-talking George Smathers is said to have whispered to an unlettered, rural audience. "Not only that, but this man is reliably reported to practice nepotism with his sister-in-law, and he has a sister who was once a thespian in wicked New York. Worst of all, it is an established fact that Mr. Pepper before his marriage habitually practiced celibacy." The legend not only endures, it grows. New material has embellished the speech. "Are you aware that Pepper’s great-aunt died from a degenerative disease? That his nephew subscribed to a phonographic magazine? That his own mother was forced to resign from a respected organization because she was an admitted senile?" Smathers swears he never gave the speech and has even promised to pay a reward to anyone with evidence that he was ever so clever. Historians believe that the "wicked thespian in New York City" speech actually resulted from a bored press corps, who in the evenings following the same stump speeches in Niceville, Marianna, and Vernon, concocted a speech they wanted Smathers to deliver.17

On Tuesday, May 2, 1950, the greatest political race in Florida history concluded. In this era of the Solid South, the winner of the primary was guaranteed victory in November. The Secretary of State announced that a record one million Democrats had registered for the primary. In contrast, 69,000 Floridians admitted they belonged to the Republican Party. Pepper’s hopes soared when hours before the election, national columnist Drew Pearson predicted a Pepper victory. In the 1950s, the *Tampa Daily Times* and its radio affiliate, WDAE, earned an enviable reputation for reporting "lightning" fast election results. Hampton Dunn, the paper’s managing editor and "Palm Tree Politics" columnist, knew minutes after the polls closed that Smathers had achieved a smashing victory.18

Smathers, the upstart challenger, claimed 55 percent of the vote, winning the election by 64,771 votes. In spite of the steadfast support of the *Tampa Tribune* and *Tampa Times*, Smathers lost Hillsborough County 29,111 to 25,749. In Pinellas County, the *St. Petersburg Times’* embrace of Pepper failed to help the Senator, who lost 18,244 to 15,906. "Senator Pepper brought it on himself," editorialized the *Tampa Times*. "The news of Smathers’ victory is flashing
signals of hope to the moderates of both old parties . . . "

Smathers’ smashing victory may have been the most exciting political story of 1950, but it was not the most significant. Quietly, a political revolution was taking place in Pinellas County. Dormant and inert since the 1880s, Florida’s Republican Party came alive in November 1950, when GOP candidates swept Pinellas County. Led by a 28-year-old lawyer and war hero, William Cato Cramer, Republicans captured all the legislative seats and every county office except tax collector.

On April 27, 1950, the Tampa Times prophesied, "A confused United States of America will look to voters representing the diversified interests of Florida . . . " The Smathers-Pepper race proved to be a mirror reflecting local and national anxieties. As much as anything else, Smathers had tapped the sensitive vein of anti-communism. Midcentury America was awash in McCarthyism. The tactic of smearing one’s opponent as "red" worked in other regions as well. In North Carolina, Willis Smith defeated U.S. Senator Frank Porter Graham, a respected educator and southern liberal. Smith’s campaign manager was a relatively unknown radio announcer, Jesse Helms. In California, Richard M. Nixon destroyed Congresswoman Helen Graham Douglas, claiming "she’s pink alright, right down to her underwear!"

Americans: the Alger Hiss case, the "slave states" of Eastern Europe, displaced persons, the Fall of China, the Iron Curtain, and Soviet atomic spies. Joe McCarthy’s contribution to the anti-Communist hysteria was his ability to personalize the attacks. Harry Truman and Richard Nixon had long warned of treason; McCarthy spoke of traitors.

In Tampa, the bonfires of anti-communism burned brightly. One individual stood out above others in his holy crusade against the Communist menace. Maj. General Sumter L. Lowry had already packed enough exploits and
One of the many charts displayed during the Kefauver hearings in Tampa. "ORGANIZED GAMBLING, IN TAMPA" was an attempt to link Tampa's political figures with gambling, narcotics, assassinations and murders. (Courtesy of the Hampton Dunn Collection, Special Collections, Library, University of South Florida)
accomplishments into the first half of the 20th century to stuff scrapbooks. Born on the grounds of St. Augustine's Castillo de San Marcos in 1893, he grew up on the Lowry ancestral estate in Hyde Park. Upon graduation from Virginia Military Institute, his life accelerated in newsreel fashion: chasing Pancho Villa across Mexico at Pershing's side, leader of Company H, Second Florida Infantry, a colonel in the 116th Field Artillery, and a series of successful investments during the Florida Boom. Prior to World War II, Lowry's most dangerous moments may have occurred while enforcing Tampa's peace in the face of vigilantes and mobs. During the war, he saw action in New Guinea and the Dutch East Indies.21

Lowry commanded the most strident voice of anti-communism. Like an Old Testament prophet hurling thunderbolts of red nightmare, Lowry attacked effete college presidents, pussy-footing politicians, and American resolve. Only a "rebirth of patriotism," believed Lowry, could save America. He saved his most withering criticism for the University of Florida, charging that the school advocated "a doctrine of world citizenship and world government." He advocated the establishment of a special school to "teach our young people how to recognize, understand, and combat Communist spheres of influence in the U.S." Adjusting his aim toward the public schools, Lowry warned that textbooks used in Florida schools were "slanted toward socialism and communism." Senator-elect Smathers applauded Lowry's stand, urging that the U.S. consider putting "Reds under surveillance."22

(Note: The superscript to endnote 23 was omitted)23

To many Floridians, Communism represented not only a threat to the United States but in the United States. A red spectre was haunting America. Tampa was not immune from the witch hunts. Dr. Ellwood Nance, president of the University of Tampa, confessed that in a fit of youthful indiscretion, he had joined a communist-front organization. When a Soviet party newspaper Izvestia branded Nance as a warmonger, the educator was delighted. Hyde Park Methodist Church seemed an unlikely setting for such fears, but in February 1950, the church's board of stewards voted unanimously to ban all literature disseminated by the Methodist Publishing House. Citing social and political concerns, pastor O.A. Murphy explained the church's stand:

Two of the Sunday school periodicals . . . have developed within recent months a trend in their treatment of the race problem - especially the relation of the Negro and the white races in the United States - which in our judgement is unwise.

In 1950, the Cold War turned very hot. Anti-communism, the oxygen of the Cold War, became sword and shield. The principle of containment governed U.S. foreign policy, a commitment to check Communist aggression anywhere, everywhere. The most ardent hawk could not have imagined that the principle would be tested in Korea.

A desolate and harsh land, Korea had been an afterthought since the final days of World War II. In 1945, while the U.S.
was preoccupied with defeating Japan, Soviet troops crossed Manchuria and occupied sections of northern Korea. Hurriedly, officials in the U.S. Department of Defense sketched an arbitrary line across the 38th parallel, hoping the Russians would halt their advance. They did. The United States reluctantly became South Korea's protector. Chinese, Russian, and North Korean leaders were certain that the United States would be unwilling to fight for such a faraway land.

In 1950, many American leaders also questioned U.S. fighting capabilities. U.S. Air Force Lt. General Curtis LeMay, the architect of saturation bombing during World War II, spoke in Tampa where he maintained the U.S. had lost its military supremacy. In fact, the U.S. armed forces had atrophied to 591,000 troops.

On June 25 1950, ten well-armed divisions of the North Korean People's Army poured over the 38th parallel, smashing the weak defenses of the South Korean Army. "It looks like World War III is here," noted President Truman in his diary. "By God I am not going to let them have it," he told his daughter. While the United States Congress never officially declared war in 1950 - Truman declared it a "police action" - few Americans made such semantic distinctions.

In spasms of jubilation and horror, clarity and confusion, the public attempted to understand a distant war that Americans knew almost nothing about. Newspapers brought the brutality and nobility of the conflict home. In rapid fashion, the public mood shifted wildly: the threat of an Asian Dunkirk checked by General Douglas MacArthur's daring gamble at Inchon; the promise of a decisive victory at the Yalu repulsed by hordes of Red Chinese. Decades later veterans lamented Korea as "the forgotten war," but Tampans remembered all too vividly the Pusan Perimeter, the tides of Inchon, and the Chosin Reservoir.

The Korean War evoked stirrings of patriotism and duty, but the conflict never captured the public imagination or soul as did World War II. Soon after the war's start, the Tampa Daily Times' Man-on-the-Street Survey found support as well as frustration. "I think it is awful," said Miss Helen Waters, a restaurant cashier. "Just when we are getting settled down in peace. It is going to mess up a lot of lives . . ." Others felt the war camouflaged the real test. General Sumter L. Lowry explained it was not Korea we were fighting, "but the might of Russia."

Tampans came to understand the war's progress through the experiences of old friends and neighbors. From a relative's home on Highland Avenue, Mrs. Dora Church explained how she heard frantic calls over a Seoul radio, "Prepare to evacuate!" Newspapers captured the poignant moments of wives, sweethearts, and families bidding farewell to servicemen at Union Station. One of the first local residents to be called to action was a "leather-faced sergeant," a veteran of Iwo Jima who asked not to be identified. He confessed to a reporter, in pure Tampanese, "I've been shaky for days. This kind of thing is just like bolita - sometimes you win and sometimes you lose."
Tampa Bay area followed the conflict through the pages of the local papers. *Time* supported the war but understood the public’s frustration. "The man of 1950 was not a statesman," wrote *Time*; rather, the man of the year was "destiny's draftee," the American fighting-man. Tampa had its share of heroes. Baldomero Lopez personified the citizen soldier. The son of Spanish emigrants, a 1943 graduate of Hillsborough High, Lopez enlisted in the U.S. Navy, serving eleven months until the end of World War II. Superiors recognized his leadership skills and encouraged the Ybor City native to enroll at the U.S. Naval Academy. Commissioned in the U.S. Marine Corps, First Lieutenant Lopez was killed in his first engagement, a daring assault of the Inchon beachhead. Shot while assaulting an enemy bunker, he fell upon a live grenade to save the lives of his fellow Marines. In recognition of extraordinary gallantry in combat, the military bestowed upon Lopez posthumously the Congressional Medal of Honor. Tampans learned that Lopez had written a prophetic letter to his parents on the eve of battle.

Dear Mom, Dad and Joe,

Well, here I am fat and happy and not doing much of anything at the present . . . Mom, it makes me very happy to hear you say that military

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The *Tampa Morning Tribune* of December 30, 1950 reports the big story of the day: Kefauver Committee members were investigating Tampa’s unsolved murders and questionable real estate deals by public officials. *(Courtesy of Special Collections, Library, University of South Florida)*
men are always subject to orders from higher authority.

. . . Knowing that the profession of arms calls for many hardships and many risks I feel that you all are now prepared for any eventuality. If you catch yourself starting to worry, just remember that no one forced me to accept my commission in the Marine Corps.

Baldy, September 14, 1950

The war produced many more stirring tales of heroism. When U.S. forces retook the capitol of Seoul, Marine corpsman Luther D. Leguire planted the Stars and Stripes on the roof of the U.S. Embassy. On Thanksgiving Day, victory seemed imminent. By December, U.S. troops heard the terrifying blare of enemy trumpets and were fighting for their lives against overwhelming numbers of Chinese troops at the Chosin Reservoir in northern Korea. Albert Thomas, a veteran of the South Pacific and a lieutenant in the First Marine Division, Tenth Corps, wrote his parents on Tampa Bay Boulevard about the cruel conditions.

Dearest Mom and Dad:
Here I am, believe it or not. It was only through the grace of God that we made it out of North Korea.

We were cut off in six different places and had to fight for our lives to be taken prisoners. We were surrounded for 15 days. We couldn’t even get our feet out of our shoe pacs because the socks were frozen to the inner soles.

Thomas was one of only 31 men out of an original outfit of 400 to escape the Chinese advance.

The odyssey of Herbert Doyle Harvill was the stuff of dreams and nightmares. The son of a Primitive Baptist preacher, Harvill grew up in the rural Hillsborough County community of Keysville. When the Korean War began, he was working in the composing room of the St. Petersburg Times. Six months later he was fighting on the border of Manchuria. In late December 1950, the Times reprinted one of Harvill’s letters:

We made Inchon, Kimpo air strip and Seoul, and believe me it was hell. We lost a lot of good men.

We pulled out of Wonsan . . . The Marines drove forward into the mountains . . . The Chinese started pouring in by the thousands and the Marines were outnumbered 100 to 1. The weather was 24 below zero at the Chosin reservoir and we were pinned down.

Harvill returned from the war and began a distinguished career with the Tampa Tribune.

The Korean War may have been the first American war to be fought by integrated troops, but the contributions of black soldiers are largely invisible in the Tampa Bay dailies. The pages of Tampa’s black weekly newspaper, however, were filled with heroism. On October 21 and 30, 1950, the Florida Sentinel headlines read: "Negro Troops In Korea Were Tough and Brave," and "Negro Troops Save Beachhead In 18 Hour Fight Down To Last 8 Bullets."
To a public confident of its military, the news of 1950 was sobering. Two historic military retreats had humbled the United States. The prospects of a land war against China, argued General Omar Bradley, "would involve us in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy." Once optimistic of victory by Christmas, the public began to doubt the war's purpose and outcome.

The home front war was equally unsettling. Tampa, more than most cities, understood the paradoxes of war: sacrifice acid profiteering, heroism and greed. The Korean war, while lacking the global sweep and domestic tumult of World War II, left its mark upon Tampa Bay.

With memories of 1940s rationing and shortages all too fresh, Tampans reacted predictably to the war's urgency. Tribune headlines captured the mood in July 1950: "Tampans Race to Stock Up Anything Money Can Buy In Incredible Hoarding Spree." Purchases included not only sugar, coffee, and nylons, but also automobiles and washing machines.31

The war strengthened arsenal and citadel. Tampa's depressed shipyards, which employed 16,000 workers during World War II, bustled again. An influx of workers, military personnel, and families flooded Drew Park. Over 720 acres of new homes and businesses suddenly appeared in an area adjacent to Tampa International Airport. World War II had endowed Tampa Bay with a military profile; Korea solidified the military-industrial complex. MacDill Air Force Base served as a "post-graduate school" for B-29 and B-50 bomber crews.32

The war also hit the University of Tampa. The registrar feared a rush of enlistments threatened to drain the school of its manpower. During the fall semester of 1950 alone, 74 students had left school to join the armed forces.33

In 1950, Tampans fought still another home front battle. While American troops fought a desperate retreat in North Korea, Cuban bolita peddlers, aging crime bosses, and a prominent sheriff stared down a congressional committee in Tampa, Florida. The U.S. Senate Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce, chaired by Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, blew the lid off Tampa's corrupt establishment, reinforcing and stigmatizing the image of Cigar City as a "Little Chicago" or "Hell Hole of the Gulf Coast."

Florida has always straddled the line between respectability and licentiousness, between honest toil and a fast buck, between the rules of the Protestant Work Ethic and the dreamland of luck and chance. For all of the rectitudinous Bible thumping and sermonizing against the wages of sin, the rules were different in Tampa. Here the line between investment and gambling has always been very narrow.

Tampa's reputation for corruption was well deserved. Bolita, a version of the Cuban Lottery or numbers game, had paralleled the rise of Ybor City. What had served as an innocent vice in the 1880s became a wellspring for economic wealth, political corruption, and widespread cynicism. Gamblers sought political protection for their lucrative business, creating a chain of payoffs from the lowly bolita peddler to the
governor's office. If gambling made a handful of survivors very rich, the business of *bolita* made democracy in Tampa poorer. By the 1930s, powerful gambling coalitions determined elections and ensured continuity. As the financial stakes increased, so did the violence. Beginning in the 1930s, Tampans became accustomed to gangland slayings. James Clendinen, the late editor of the *Tampa Tribune*, arrived in the city in 1935 and quickly sized up Tampa as "one of the rottenest towns in the country."  

By 1950, corruption had become intolerable. Forces locally and nationally resolved to publicize and attack organized crime. The *Tampa Tribune* led the assault locally. For decades the *Tribune* had largely ignored the problem of organized crime, but beginning in 1947, managing editor Virgil M. "Red" Newton unleashed his most talented reporters. J.A. "Jock" Murray, the state's most feared journalist, investigated the rotten state of Tampa. The gangland murder of Jimmy Velasco in 1948 had embarrassed Tampa, but nothing like the shame which followed the reportage by Murray and Paul Wilder. The journalists persuaded Velasco's relatives to tell all. Much of the evidence was turned over to the Kefauver Committee. Tampa's sordid image was especially galling to an influential group of young veterans bent on reform. Beginning in the early 1950s, Chester Ferguson, Julian Lane, Ed Rood, John Germany, and Sam Gibbons brought a combination of youth, idealism, and talent to Tampa's civic and business community.

In 1950, Senator Kefauver announced he was bringing his Senate committee to investigate organized crime to Tampa. Kefauver - he of the coonskin hat - spearheaded the investigation. Kefauver's motivations may not have been as pure as Caesar's wife. He quickly realized these televised hearings would bolster his bid for the presidency. Tampa, along with 13 other cities, would hold hearings for the committee.  

The announcement of Kefauver's visit coincided with still another sensational murder. The *Tribune* headline announced, "Jimmy Lumia, Tampa's No. 1 Gambling and Mafia Chief, Shot To Death By Gangsters." While mourners filed by Lumia's casket, solid bronze adorned with 220 floral pieces, *Tribune* reporters persuaded the gangster's family to share business records. It seems the *capo di tutti capi*'s friends inhabited the underworld and city hall. 

Fittingly, the Kefauver Traveling Road Show closed out the turbulent year 1950. Tampa's day in the sun was not what boosters had hoped. Not since the Spanish-American War in 1898 had dateline Tampa been so associated with a national event. Even if no one in Tampa watched the hearings on live television, everyone knew about them. "Tampa is agog over the appearance here of the Kefauver Committee," wrote Hampton Dunn. Since the investigating committee had earlier visited Miami, Tampa knew what to expect: public humiliation, private ruin and sordid details. 

(Note: The superscript to endnote 38 was omitted) 

Kefauver Committee staff arrived in Tampa weeks before the hearings began on December 28. Klieg lights and elaborate crime family-tree charts
awaited witnesses. Ironically, Kefauver never came to Tampa. His place was taken by Senator Lester Hunt, a Democrat from Wyoming. The committee issued subpoenas to scores of residents, from the mayor and sheriff to bolita peddlers and bagmen.

Hollywood central casting could not have orchestrated a more colorful opening witness. Charlie Wall, dressed in an elegantly tailored pin-stripe suit and stylish bow tie, took the witness stand amid a flutter of flash bulbs. Called by the Times and Tribune "a former overlord" of Tampa's underworld, and "an aging and much-shot-at maestro of Tampa gambling." Wall reminisced about the "old days." The scion of Tampa blue bloods, Wall waxed nostalgic about how he first worked at a gambling house and how he had been a frequent target of hit men. Admitting that he was once "the biggest" boss, Wall confessed that he had been largely an observer during the last decade.39

If Charlie Wall played to perfection the role of the aging gangster and chatty informant, Hugh Culbreath performed the part of stoic witness and besieged public official. Born in 1897 at the pioneer family homestead on Old Tampa Bay, Hugh Lee Culbreath seemed destined for something special. In 1914, he signed a contract with the Chicago Cubs, but enrolled instead at the University of Georgia. In 1917, he enlisted in the U.S. Army. While Charlie Wall was learning the intricacies of the roulette wheel and the probabilities of bolita, Culbreath was learning the mechanics of a Springfield rite and the lure of campfire poker. Following the Great War, Culbreath worked in the meat business. In 1932, he entered public life, winning the race for constable. In 1940, he became sheriff of Hillsborough County, a powerful position. A patriot, he served in the Army Air Corps during World War II, returning to office upon his return.

Hugh Culbreath was certainly not the first Hillsborough County sheriff to become a wealthy man in office, but he was the first to be questioned by the congressional committee. For three hours, crime committee attorney Downey Rice interrogated the sheriff, who asked, among other questions, why he had paid no income tax for the years 1932 through 1940, and why his spending and savings far surpassed his salary. The committee uncovered $97,698 of assets held by Culbreath, much of it scattered in out-of-town banks. Bagmen employed by Jimmy Velasco verified that they paid the sheriff - cabeza de melon (melon head) - $1,000 a week as protection money. Other witnesses described land and investment deals that benefitted the sheriff.40

Wall and Culbreath may have been the stars of the hearings, but others saw their reputations and careers suffer. Former Police Chief J.L. Eddings and State Attorney J. Rex Farrior were accused of accepting protection money from gamblers. Charles Marvin, a lieutenant in the Air Force, testified that as a member of the city's vice squad from 1947 to 1949, he was told by Chief Eddings that 105 bolita places were off limits, and not to be raided. Current Chief of Police Beasley told the committee that the records documenting 15 of Tampa's gangland slayings had all been stolen.41
Senator Hunt’s gavel ended the Tampa phase of the Kefauver hearings. Angrily, he called for “an aroused and determined public” to demand reform and clean up the city.

Two days of infamy changed everything and changed nothing. To be sure, the publicity brought humiliation and shame to the city. Earnest leaders promised change. Cody Fowler, who had recently been elected the head of the American Bar Association, resolved to clean up Tampa. Civic associations, such as the Palma Ceia Civitans and the Tampa Junior Chamber of Commerce, voted to purge the city of corruption. Sheriff Culbreath, State Attorney Farrior, and others would never hold office again. On April 18, 1955, the "dapper dean" of Tampa gambling, Charlie Wall, was killed at his Ybor City home at 1219 17th Avenue. On his side table, a book lay open. It was *Crime in America*, by Estes Kefauver. 

Cynics, however, might contend that the Kefauver hearings had more to do with cosmetics and politics, and less to do with organizations and crime. *Bolita*, the source of all evil, had been in decline since the late 1940s. Voting fraud had also been largely absent since the introduction of voting machines in the late 1930s. By the 1950s, compared to drugs, prostitution, and racketeering, *bolita* was penny ante. If Tampa was too hot, there was plenty of money to be made in Cuba. Local politicians may have been humiliated but none was sent to jail because of evidence brought to the Kefauver hearings. Others simply ignored the commotion. Santo Traficante, Sr., for instance, disregarded the subpoena, while "Red" Italiano conveniently sailed for Sicily. Organized crime in Tampa did not disappear with the Kefauver Committee.

Events of local, state, national and international importance rocked Tampa in 1950. A war abroad created suspicions at home. *McCarthyism* poisoned the wells of civility and confidence. The shrill theme of anti-communism destroyed a popular U.S. senator in what was arguably Florida’s ugliest election. Although a hot war and a hotter election captivated Florida, the event that cast the greatest shadow was a congressional indictment of Tampa’s corruption and crime.

When the calendar flipped over to 1951, few Tampans shed tears. A year of private disillusionment and public shame, 1950 was also a year of challenge and resolve. History later vindicated some of the crestfallen figures of 1950 while indicting others who succeeded. Who could have imagined that Claude Pepper would emerge in 1962 as a national icon?

ENDNOTES

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2 Ibid.


10 Tracy E. Danese, *Claude Pepper & Ed Ball* (Gainesville, 2000).


14 See Tampa newspapers, 28-30 April 1950.


17 “Anything Goes,” *Time* (17 April 1950): 27--28; James Clark, a former journalist with the *Orlando Sentinel* and an adjunct professor at the University of Central Florida. He generously shared his to-be-published study with this author.


20 “Warning Flags Fly For Democrats In Florida,” Orlando Sentinel, 9 November 1950; "Pinellas Political Primer For Democrats Rewritten By Republicans’ Sweep,” Tampa Morning Tribune, 12 November 1950; St. Petersburg Times, 8 November 1950.

21 Sumter L. Lowry, Ole 93 (Tampa, 1970).


25 Ibid., Halberstam, 69.


33 "Tampa's Young Men Rushing To Colors," Tampa Morning Tribune, 6 January 1951.

34 James Clendinen, interview with author, 22 August 1980, Tampa.


36 See Tampa newspapers, June 6-8, 1950.


38 "Kefauver's Aides Begin Inquiries In Tampa," Tampa Morning Tribune, 19 December 1950; "Kefauver To Call Sheriff, Mayor, State Attorney," Tampa Morning Tribune, 23 December 1950.

