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A DIARIST’S TALE: ROBY McFARLAN’S
TAMPA, 1887-1888
by Heather C.R. McClenahan

On July 3, 1884, Roby Hull McFarlan, her son, and her daughter-in-law stepped off Henry Plant’s new narrow-gauge train and into a sultry town that was just set to boom.¹ As they left the train station, son Hamilton looked at his young wife and said, "Sarah, this is the place for me." She glanced over the landscape that a visitor just a few years earlier had described as "a sleepy, shabby southern town," and wondered what was going wrong inside her husband’s head.² But the trio would make Tampa home for the rest of their lives.

The McFarlan family experiences must have been ordinary, but we know something about their lives from a diary Roby McFarlan kept with help from the others from January 1, 1887, to April 11, 1888. Age sixty-four at the diary’s midpoint, Roby left behind a glimpse of what Tampa was like for a middle-class family whose main wage earner was a carpenter who also played horn in a band. We learn about their friends: the families of a baker, a butcher, a builder, and other carpenters. We discover their daily activities, from raising chickens to sewing clothes to "murdering mice." And Roby faithfully reports the weather in almost every entry.³

Of the six years she lived in Tampa, Roby could not have picked a better time to keep a diary. Controversy raged over temperance reform and the presence of Latin immigrants in the city and county. Incredible disasters, from a fire that destroyed two blocks of downtown Tampa to the city’s worst yellow fever epidemic, jump out from the diary pages. Roby McFarlan left a vision, of what the disputes and disasters meant to average people.

The diary is also revealing for what it does not tell: strikes by radical cigarmakers in Ybor City, results of city elections, and construction of the first bridge over the Hillsborough River, to name just a few. We hear nothing of Sadie’s pregnancy until the child is born, but clues are evident if one reads backwards from that event. Roby McFarlan’s diary is not introspective or spiritual. It records the events that affected her life, from the weather to the death of her old hen and the birth of her new granddaughter. She only wrote about those occurrences that directly touched her.

Because the diary is short, it would be difficult to explore in chronological order. Rather, this article looks at important themes in the life of the McFarlans, including health, politics, religion, crime, and daily life.

The diary opens on a cloudy Saturday, January 1, 1887. A cold front struck Tampa that afternoon. Hamilton had received an account book from Sarah - known in the diary as Sadie - for the coming year. That book became the diary. Sadie wrote the first entry in it, noting that she had penned a letter that day and that she and Roby went to the Women’s Christian Temperance Union reading room for a New Year’s party of ice cream and cake. She paid grocer Frederick Fenman $3.50 for flour. The house she sat in as she wrote was fairly new; the family had bought the land in I. S. Gidden’s new subdivision between Ybor City and Tampa the previous March. They had only lived there six months, and Hamilton still had work to complete.⁴
The first page of Roby McFarlan's diary, which is now in possession of her
great-granddaughter, Roby Pixton Hendrick.
Roby Hull was born July 3, 1823, in New York and married Daniel McFarlan there in 1859. Daniel died in 1882 and plays no role in the diary. Roby bore three children in her late thirties and early forties; a daughter died after three days, and two sons, Hamilton and Marquis, survived. Hamilton was the star of Roby's story. She rarely wrote about "Markie," who had been in the Chatahoochee Insane Asylum for almost two years when the diary began. Hamilton's wife, Sarah "Sadie" Layton, was born in 1864 and left her family in Wilmington, Delaware, a year after she was married to head to the Florida frontier.

In a study of nineteenth-century, midwestern diaries, Marilyn Ferris Motz found that they served as "account books for all aspects of life." Such diaries were filled with descriptions of events like the weather, births, holidays, work accomplished, and visits with friends. National events were seldom recorded, and the writers rarely expressed their own opinions. Although she lived in a southern boom town, Roby's diary fits Motz's model.

The most prominent element in the diary is the daily weather report. It offers descriptions of the warm spells in winter when Roby decided not to wear her stockings, the heavy rainstorms, and the miserably hot and humid weather of south Florida summers long before air conditioning. Entries from the summer days are peppered with sayings, such as "hot as mustard," "hot as cotton," and "hot weather has struck butt end first, I mean goat fashion." Entries by Hamilton are often the most colorful. On February 11, he wrote that the wind was so strong that it would "blow bait in the fishes mouth's [sic]."

Writing in most of the entries is short, clipped sentences, but Roby did have a dry sense of humor that peaks through occasionally. For example, on July 12 she noted that Hamilton earned three dollars for playing with his band, and she went on to lament, "I wash, got nothing." Hamilton followed in his mother's footsteps, joking one day when his wife and mother received four female friends that it was "a regular old hen picnic."

While obviously literate - penmanship in the original diary is exquisite - the McFarlans were not much concerned with grammar or capitalization. Run-on sentences are common in the diary, punctuation is rarely used, and words such as "baked" or "knawed" are capitalized at random. Spelling, on the other hand, is generally good, although occasional lapses occur, such as "staid" for stayed. To retain as much flavor as possible, quotes from the diary will be divided into sentences, but the grammar and spelling will be left with the original authors.

Everyday Life

*Feb. 16th. Sewing all day on Mrs. Glenn Dress. Ma went Down town. Sadie went to Mrs. Ordway this afternoon. Hamilton worked on Dennis house, cut his thumb just before quitting time. Hamilton paid Ordway $1.25 last Saturday Feb. 12th for Scientific America[n], Book. Cloudy all day, wind south east but warm. W. C. T. U. made an excursion down to the bay, cleared $100, Mrs. D. Bruce very sick.*
While longer than most entries in the diary, February 16, 1887, tells much about a typical day in the McFarlan household. It describes the work, the visiting with neighbors, and what Hamilton did that day. It also recounts a fund-raising drive by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, an organization in which the family was very involved, and notes the illness of a community member, in this case, a doctor's wife.

The daily work of Roby and Sadie was not atypical for town-dwelling women in the late nineteenth century. They washed clothes in rainwater and then ironed them, cleaned the house (including windows), gardened in small plots near their homes, shopped for groceries, and cooked over hearths and cast-iron stoves. They made clothes for themselves and Hamilton but also bought some of these items. The women also contributed to the family income. In addition to their household chores, they sewed dresses and other items of clothing for women in town. Roby created floor mats and rugs, which she sold in this era before wall-to-wall carpeting. They also raised chickens, which sold for fifty cents apiece, and occasionally peddled eggs to neighbors.

Hamilton, meanwhile, was a jack-of-all-trades carpenter. He often worked for Melvin Woodbury Ordway, a prominent housing contractor whose craftsmanship the Tampa Tribune called "superior." He also helped build what was known as "Sparkman's block," one of the first all-brick structures in Tampa, and occasionally worked in lumber mills. But the work was not steady, as the diary notes on February 15 when Hamilton "got through working on [street] cars and is ready now for anything to come to hand." In the off times, he worked on his own new house with such tasks as finishing the upstairs portion or putting in window frames. His pay was fairly good for the times. While skilled cigarmakers in Ybor City were making about $10 per week, the diary records that Hamilton took in $11.50 for the week of January 22 and $15 for the week of February 12. He made extra cash by playing trumpet in a band.

After the weather, visiting represented the most common component in the daily lives of Roby and Sadie McFarlan. Until they left town on October 8 because of the yellow fever outbreak, they either visited or were visited almost every day - sometimes both and often more than once. The families they knew the best were other middle-class artisans who shared their values and interests. Mrs. Helen Ordway and her grown daughter, Elva Burton, play a more prominent role in the diary than the contractor that Hamilton worked for so often. Much was written about visiting with baker Anspaugh’s and butcher Frierson’s wives. The Glenn family also visited frequently with the McFarlans. In fact, much of Sadie’s sewing was for Mrs. Glenn.

As a vital part of daily life, visiting took many forms. Sometimes the reasons were economic, such as those for sewing or selling chickens. At other times, the visitors took a meal or shared a watermelon in season. Most often, though, it was a simple call to say hello and to catch up on news. In this way Roby and her family knew about disasters or upcoming events in town long before the city’s two newspapers.

The McFarlans contended with daily difficulties in the tropical environment such as rats, mice, and roaches. Soon after the diary opens they "found a big rat in the house and Knawed Hamiltons wollen [sic] shirt." One day when Roby found no bugs after cleaning the bedsteads,
Hamilton and Sadie McFarlan with their daughters (from left to right) Roby, Mildred, and Elva, in 1897.

Photograph courtesy of Roby Pixton Hendrick.
the diary notes "that is good luck." They also had to go through the chores of "scalding" roaches after cleaning the kitchen and "murdering" a pair of mice that made a nest in the stove.  

Another significant item from the February 16 entry that gives us a glimpse of the McFarlans’ daily lives is their subscription to *Scientific American*, a magazine that dubbed itself then as the "weekly journal of practical information, art, science, mechanics, chemistry, and manufacturers." The McFarlans were interested in expanding their horizons beyond Tampa, and reading seemed to be one of their favorite past-times. In addition to the magazine, they subscribed, for a short while at least, to what the diary calls "The World Paper," probably the *New York World*. In mid-January, they received a book on the history of the United States from that newspaper.  

They also kept busy writing and receiving letters from relatives left behind in Delaware. Mail from Sadie’s family as well as other friends and relatives arrived weekly - sometimes more often. The weddings, illnesses, births, and deaths of loved ones far away were as duly recorded in the diary as those of local folks. The McFarlans did not seem at all homesick after three years in Tampa, perhaps because they were kept so close through the post offices. Sadie even received a piece of her sister’s wedding cake from Delaware by mail.
Mail was not the only source of interaction. At 8 p.m. on April 20, 1887, the diary records that Sadie, loaded up with presents, boarded the train to Delaware for a visit. Though the *Tampa Tribune* society column incorrectly noted she was heading for Chicago with her good friend Mrs. Ordway, she arrived safely in Wilmington on the twenty-third. (Mrs. Ordway debarked in Chicago two days later.) In the three months she was gone, Sadie wrote no less than nineteen letters to Hamilton and Roby and received at least nine from them, according to the diary.17

Overall, the McFarlan household was a bustling place. Between their housekeeping, working to supplement the family income, writing letters, and visiting with friends, Roby and Sadie seemingly had little time for outside activities. Yet a variety other interests kept them active in public and private arenas.

**Politics**

[September] 30 Friday. A pretty day. *Election day, great excitement, wet or dry is the watch word. Hamilton votes dry, but plays for the wet and gets $5. 00 for his days work...* 18

Tampa bristled with political issues in 1887. The growing city needed a new water system. The *Tampa Tribune* clamored for electric lights, while city officials voted to annex Ybor City and to write a new city charter.19 A municipal election in July focused on many of these volatile questions, but they did not concern Roby. Even more explosive was a drive launched by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and other teetotaling groups to rid the county of alcohol.

Roby mentioned the July 12 election only in passing, noting that Hamilton earned three dollars playing with his band "on account of the town election." She was not impressed that George Sparkman, who occasionally employed her son to work on his brick building, won by fourteen votes over H.C. Ferris. She did not celebrate, as the *Tampa Tribune* did, that "every class" was represented on the new city council, including merchants, manufacturers, old citizens as well as new-comers, Knights of Labor, and "the colored population." Surprisingly, Roby, who generally recorded exciting events, did not even write about the big celebratory parade the evening after the election. The world of traditional, male-defined politics did not interest her.20

On the other hand, she played an active role in what is generally considered the woman’s sphere of moral reform. Hillsborough County’s referendum on prohibition in 1887 took up much of the three McFarlans’ time. The Florida Constitution adopted two years earlier allowed each county to decide whether to permit the sale of liquor.21 Although the town newspapers did not start writing about the issue until the summer as the vote drew close, Roby and the others had already been active.

For example, on January 9, Roby skipped church in order to recruit for the cause and went to a "very good" temperance meeting. She joined both the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, which boasted sixty regular members by May, and a similar group, the Royal Templars of Temperance. Socials, suppers, and fundraising events - all in the name of prohibition - punctuate the diary’s pages.22
Three buildings that stood on the northwest corner of Franklin and Lafayette (today’s Kennedy Boulevard) in the 1880s. The large three-story building in the center held the Branch Opera House on the second floor. It served as Tampa’s primary place for social, political, and civil affairs.

Photograph from *Tampa Town*, 1824-1886, by Tony Pizzo.
The crusade picked up steam in July. The following month, the Board of County Commissioners received enough petitions to place the issue on the ballot for a September 30 vote. A number of speakers for both sides arrived in town, and the wets and drys held regular mass meetings. From July 18 to August 17, Hamilton attended three such gatherings, playing with his band at the last event. He went to three more in the week preceding the election, again playing for the last pre-election rally. The *Tampa Tribune* reported that the question of whether the county would go wet or dry was more common than "Ain't it hot," leading the editor to predict the fall election would be bitterly contested.23

In fact, the campaign got downright nasty in at least a few cases. The *Tribune* recorded one fight over the question by September 15. A few weeks earlier, the newspaper ran a short piece at the request of the anti-prohibitionists "to state that the charge made that they carried a keg or barrel of whiskey to the Seffner picnic last week is false."24

The battle raged on the pages of Tampa's newspapers. The *Tribune* published a letter by former Confederate President Jefferson Davis explaining why he was against the prohibition movement in Texas. In another front-page article, the paper touted the benefits of alcohol. And, significantly, it carried a letter from cigar magnate Vicente Martínez Ybor warning that if his immigrant workers were not allowed to drink the "light wines to which they have been accustomed to use in their meals from their childhood," there would be an "exodus to other shores." The *Tampa Journal*, which favored prohibition, responded that Martínez Ybor's warning was baseless as the law did not prohibit the use of alcohol in private, as long as it was imported from another location.25

The printed debate between Martínez Ybor and the *Journal* revealed deep fissures within the community. Local historians contend that an important reason behind the prohibition movement in Tampa involved social control over the influx of immigrants to the cigar factories of Ybor City. Tampa's native, white community feared the social customs of the Latins and sought to regulate their behavior.26

While that may be true in many cases, Roby and her family genuinely felt for the cause. She was quick to point out on April 16, 1887, that a man who ran over the Japanese plum tree in their yard was "whiskey bound." When deputy sheriff E.O. Kibbie was found dead in his bed on September 9, Roby displayed rare emotion, calling the man a "miserable drunkard." Historians have revised views of prohibition supporters over the last few decades, demonstrating that they hoped "to raise the shield against the social devastation" caused by excessive drinking rather than force rural, Victorian standards upon the majority of the populace. The McFarlans joined those families that viewed alcohol as a menace to all parts of society and crusaded to stamp out its influence.27

Despite all the work Roby and Sadie devoted to the prohibition campaign, when the big election day came, all they could do was watch while the men cast their votes. They spent the day sewing, crocheting, and visiting with a friend while the town buzzed with excitement. Church bells pealed, children marched through downtown singing temperance songs, and bands hired by the "Antis" deafened the people who hung pro-prohibition banners and flags in the courthouse square. Hamilton voted dry but earned five dollars with his band playing for the wet rally.28
The Tribune celebrated the outcome with one short sentence: "The county saved, 29," referring to the difference in votes between wet and dry. The loss must have been discouraging for Roby, but she did not editorialize in her diary entry on October 3: "We hear the County went wet, 33 majority. Tampa went wet." The final count actually showed a difference of 28 votes.29

Religion

Jan. 16.... *We did not go to church this morning - But stayed at home and Murdered two mice that made a nest in our little stove.*30

Roby McFarlan’s participation in the prohibition movement and kindness to neighbors demonstrated her piety. Occasional references in the diary underscored her faith in the Christian God, such as this poignant entry from July 4, 1887:

This is the 4 of July and there is to be a great celebration at the reservation [Fort Brooke]. Hamilton goes but I am to [sic] low spirited to go anywhere, got a letter from Capt. Mosley...
saying Markies mind is not one bit better, and I am grieved almost to Death. It seems as I must see him die, and may the good Father forgive me. 31

At the same time, the journal leaves a distinct impression that Roby was not an avid churchgoer. In fact, on the forty Sundays before the yellow fever outbreak, Roby did not record attending a single service. Hamilton, accompanied about half the time by Sadie, attended twenty-one services while no one went to church at least fourteen Sundays.

Hamilton remained active in organized religion throughout his life, joining Tampa’s First Methodist Church back in the days when it was known as the Little White Church. He later served for ten years as chairman of that body’s board of stewards. When Sadie died in 1950, she was remembered as one of the church’s oldest members. 32
Southern religion in the late nineteenth century experienced a series of schisms as Methodist and Baptist church leadership accepted the white, middleclass aspirations of the New South. "Plain folks" defected from such churches. However, Roby must be considered a member of the middle class based on her friends and associates in Tampa. What, then, might explain her lack of Sunday worship?

In a series of lectures written shortly after Roby's death, Edward Caird pointed to a "large and increasing class" conscious that their spiritual life was based on the Bible but who felt alienated from dogmatic beliefs. Perhaps Roby, a widow whose younger son was locked away in an "insane asylum," felt some of this estrangement. Or, perhaps she was a hard-working, older woman who found the only time she could rest was Sunday mornings while her family was away at church. Whatever the case, the church itself obviously did not play a role in her life. Nevertheless, religion remained an important subject, because she regularly noted when she did not attend.

Health

*Mar 16 Wednesday. South wind very dry and dusty. Ma sell a pad for $2 and buy a pr. of spectacles $1.00 and dinner... Hamilton came home in pain with his side apply hot cloths and at 10 o’clock is asleep, Sadie tired out tonight. I (mad clean the stove pipe and all, awful foul.*  

References to family and community health pervade Roby’s diary. For the most part, she wrote about births, deaths, and illnesses in the same tone as house cleaning and visiting. But the numerous citations on aches and pains, medicines and doctors showed that she considered health a paramount concern.

For instance, Hamilton had what was probably a hernia that flared up six times while the diary was kept. The chronic ailment complicated the carpenter’s life because his job included heavy lifting. He missed work at least twelve days and spent some painful, restless nights. The application of hot cloths usually soothed the pain.

One fascinating health-related component of Roby’s life is that she acted as a distributor for Dr. Flagg’s Stomach and Liver Pads. The flannel pads that served as chest protectors were part of the patent medicine craze of the nineteenth century. The *Tampa Tribune* regularly carried advertisements for such wonders as Henry’s Carbolic-Salve, the "most powerful healing ointment ever discovered," and other nostrums. Patients in those days wanted mild and pleasant solutions to their medical problems promised by patent medicines as an alternative to the more "rugged regimens" proposed by doctors. Roby ordered the pads by mail from Dr. Flagg for about fifty cents apiece, plus shipping. She then sold them to various townpeople for two dollars each. Business was fairly brisk, with five dollars worth of pads selling out in about six months, including time the family was out of town during the yellow fever epidemic.

Roby also helped out her neighbors by taking care of them and their homes during illnesses. On March 26, 1887, she reported to the home of Dr. and Mrs. Hiram Bruce. The doctor recovered quickly but asked Roby to stay on until his wife was better. She finally returned home April 6. In mid-May, she spent the better part of two weeks at the house of mason and contractor William.
Crawford, nursing his wife and overseeing her domestic duties. The diary does not state whether Roby was paid for her services, which, noting the way it records other payments to the household, probably means she was not.39

Until the yellow fever scourge, death and illness were regular occurrences in life, and were treated as such in the diary. One entry began with daily visits and mentioned that Rob Glenn had gone to Bartow to work. Then it noted "a dutch baker cuts his throat and kills himself last night, call on Mrs. Kinsman found her sick, came home and washed, rained a nice shower this afternoon." The gruesome death of the "dutch" baker, actually a German, was described fully in the Tampa Tribune. His throat cut from ear to ear, he was found lying in a pool of blood. Authorities later decided the incident was murder rather than suicide, but Roby never mentioned it again. For her, the death became part of another day.40

In the same way, birth was an ingredient in everyday life. The diary never mentions Sadie's pregnancy. Yet on October 17, it tells us, "Sadie gave birth to a fine daughter about 3 oclock, now at 7 oclock P.M., all are comfortable." Elva Hazen McFarlan, who later owned Roby's diary, was named after the family's dear friend, Elva Ordway Burton. Looking back nine months through the diary, subtle clues to the pregnancy begin to emerge, such as Sadie going to bed with headaches, feeling tired, and crocheting "little socks" in late September. But the family did not feel compelled to write about her condition.41

The average life span in the 1880s was less than fifty years. The birth rate for women age fifteen to forty-four was 155 per 1,000 in 1880 and still 137 per 1,000 in 1890, making births a fairly common event in a town with almost 7,000 residents. Doctors were becoming more professionalized than they had been, but much of the public still embraced the soothings of patent medicines. Without germ-killing medicines such as penicillin or even surgery for a hernia, health issues governed much of life.42

Crime

Jan 21st. Been warm and pleasant all day - ironed this morning, Sadie made herself a skirt . ... On the night of the 19th a negro at Cuba town Shot and killed his wife then killed himself. on the 20th. Th[e]y don't know whether it was the knights [of Labor] or not shot and killed one man and wounded four more. Wednesday night a man stabbed another in the bowels and he will die from the effects, all at cubes town. Tonight will be the Social of the R. T. of Temperance.43

In January 1887 Tampa experienced something approaching a crime wave in the eyes of the McFarlans. The lawbreakers ranged from a drunkard who rode through the McFarlans’ yard and broke off a Japanese plum tree to a man caught rolled up in a mattress after stealing chickens.44 Roby's information on such incidents is not always correct, nor does she always tell the full story. The January 21 entry is a good example.

Roby can be excused for any misinterpretations on the first item in the entry about a man killing his wife. The story itself is difficult to unravel. According to the Tampa Tribune, Cuban cigarmaker Enrique Roca had just returned to town from Key West where he had picked up a letter to seventeen-year-old Priscilla Roberts from her mother. He reportedly delivered the epistle
to Priscilla at the home of Mrs. Harrison, where she boarded. The story of what happened while the pair sat on Mrs. Harrison’s front porch is confusing. Mrs. Harrison said she heard a gunshot, ran to the porch, saw Roberts lying dead and saw Roca shoot himself. But the Spanish physician who attended the scene said Roca had suffered two shots, one to the eye and one to the temple, either of which could have been fatal. He hoped to do an autopsy, but the newspaper did not report the results if he did. At first Mrs. Harrison said the couple was married. Then she said they were not married but had lived together five years. Whatever the case, all agreed that Roca was "a shiftless, lazy fellow who rarely did a day's work."45

The stabbing mentioned in the January 21 entry was not life threatening but, rather, a light flesh wound on the victim's right side. Whether it demonstrates ethnic tensions, the need for prohibition, or both is unclear. The injury occurred during a fight, according to the newspaper, between a drunk Frenchman and an Italian in the tobacco stripping room at a cigar factory. The Frenchman, John Gignac, suffered the cut, but his assailant was released from police custody when no witnesses came forward.46

The final crime-related item in the January 21 diary entry had occurred the day before as a result of the first major strike in Ybor City. Spanish members of the Knights of Labor union walked out of the Martinez Ybor factory, demanding a Cuban foreman be dismissed for firing a Spanish worker. The shooting took place during a meeting of strikers above the Mascotte saloon. The Tribune reported that few men in town went to work the next day. Instead, they gathered on the streets to discuss the situation, and they expected more trouble. Two men were charged with firing into the union meeting, but, with the exception of the shooting itself, none of that information was included in the diary.47

The writings about crime in Roby's life are revealing in many ways. No matter how heinous or amusing, such as when Mrs. Dorsey's groceries were stolen on March 10, 1888, the acts are described in the same matter-of-fact way as the weather or visits and are included simply as additional daily information.48 While Roby and the others were interested in events, they did not feel a need to describe why such actions had occurred, or what the results were. The diary's multiple references to "Cuba town" show a need to point out the location of the crime, as opposed to the McFarlans' neighborhood or other "respectable areas" of town. Interestingly, a publicized argument between two young white women at the same time as the other January 21 crimes was not mentioned in the diary. Their fight, apparently over a man, resulted in one of the young ladies stabbing the other in the hand with a pen knife and being arraigned for the crime.49 Pointed references to race and location, as well as those left out, expose attitudes that Roby and her family shared with many of her neighbors and, indeed, the white population in the nation as a whole.

Race

[June] 28 Tuesday. A nice morning. I work on mats & start for Friersons, get caught in a rain, stop at a darkies house untill shower is over. ... 50

Late nineteenth-century relations in Tampa between whites and blacks and between Anglo-Americans and the Latin immigrants have been described as turbulent and violent. Tampa
was, of course, a southern town. The African-American community reached 1,632, or thirty percent of the population, just two years after the diary ends. The city’s neighborhoods were rigidly divided along class, ethnic, and racial lines, with most blacks living northeast of town in an area known as "The Scrub." Subjected to violence and discrimination, they lived at the lowest end of the economic and social scales.51

Ybor City set Tampa off from other southern towns in this period. The dominant Anglo, Protestant community opposed immigrants because of their foreign and "un-America" backgrounds, a form of prejudice known as nativism. While Tampa’s Anglo residents appreciated Ybor City’s economic impact, they distrusted the Latin cigarmakers’ Catholicism and radicalism. The *Tampa Tribune* noted in the late 1880s that Cubans and Spaniards are "not bad when no evil influences are working amongst them." In 1887, Tampa formed a "Committee of Fifteen" to rid the town of Cuban radicals after a strike. The diary does not mention the group, and Hamilton was not a participant, although the family did know many committee members.52

Roby and her family were no different than many of their white neighbors when it came to race relations - patronizing and racist by today’s standards, but typical for the times. The diary calls African-Americans everything from "coloured" and "darkies" to just plain "nig." Roby noted one day that Mr. Hinsman, whose wife frequently bought chickens from her, sold his house to "a coloured man." The mere fact that she mentioned the buyer’s race indicated her surprise at the
transaction. Her references are not belligerent, but, like most of the diary, are matter-of-fact. She was quick to point out when wrong-doers are not white, but was willing to allow blacks to perform menial tasks like chopping wood or providing her shelter from a storm.  

**Disasters**

*Mar 17 ... A young cyclone passed over Tampa crossed the Hillsborough River took Mrs. Hartmans house down killed Mr. Rossbuck baby by falling lumber, then struck Mr. Tinneys house, leveled that, killed his baby, injured Mrs. Tinney some, knocked many houses from their pins, uprooted many trees, done a great deal of damage, rained some.*

*Aug 4 Thursday. The first thing I heard this morn was a big fire on Franklin St, two blocks burnt, except two houses. All the licor saloons burnt except one.*

*[October] 5 Wednesday Beautiful day, sun shine hot. we wash, get done, then a report of yellow fever in town. Mr. McKinzie sick, He died this eve, people scared.*

One of Tampa’s worst year’s in history for disasters had to be 1887. A tornado killed two babies and uprooted buildings and trees, the first street car fatality occurred, a lumber mill burned down, another fire destroyed two blocks downtown, and the city’s worst yellow fever epidemic raged into the next year. With the exception of the tornado, Roby’s diary records these tremendous events with characteristically scant details.

The March 17 entry on the "young cyclone" exemplifies Roby’s most graphic writing, but the *Tampa Tribune* amplified the story. The storm blew in from the west around 5:30 a.m. Tin roofs rolled up like paper while trees and housetops "lay upon the ground in a chaotic mass of timbers." Mr. Ferman’s new grocery store twisted off its foundation. The Tinney baby died when the family’s home at the corner of Cass and Tampa streets collapsed. The newspaper proclaimed that the storm was the worst in years and that damaged amounted to thousands of dollars.

Another tragedy occurred less than a month later when a thirteen-year-old Cuban boy fell off a street “rail road” and was run over by it. Gonzalo Perez de Guzman apparently was playing around while the vehicles stopped, standing with one foot on a car and the other foot on the car behind it. When the street cars started again started, he fell. The conductor quickly halted, but not before the youngster was "horribly mutilated" with a dislocated right foot, fractured jaw, and nearly severed left arm. "No blame what ever is attached to the rail road company," the *Tribune* reassured its readers. The diary simply noted, "Cuban boy killed on the street rail road last night near Ybor City, a resident of that city."  

The next month, a large mill with 25,000 feet of lumber burned. Authorities suspected an arsonist, and nothing was saved. But the lumber mill fire served as a harbinger.

At 2 a.m. on Thursday, August 4, a fire began in either Thomas’s barber shop or Cole’s restaurant on Franklin Street. It rapidly engulfed the one- and two-story wooden buildings that housed retail shops, fruit stalls, grocers, and saloons. In two and a half hours, two blocks burned, and only three buildings - the *Tampa Tribune* office and the homes of the Glenns and McKinzies -
survived. Roby went to town that morning and called on her good friend Mrs. Glenn. She reported that "they took everything out of the house thinking it would burn but it escaped." The Tampa Journal attributed that, and the fact that the fire did not spread even further, to super-human efforts by the city firemen. The Tribune calculated individual losses that added up to $55,930. But the Journal later celebrated the fire because it opened up "two of the finest business blocks in the city" for "substantial and valuable improvement." Both newspapers were confident the great citizens of Tampa could rebuild, bigger and better, in no time. They certainly did not anticipate that in two months Tampa would become a virtual ghost town.

When yellow fever struck Key West in May 1887, city officials took a number of precautions, quarantining everything except tobacco and mail from Havana and Key West. Still, Tampa's elite had grown complacent because the town had been relatively free of yellow fever since 1871. They believed that their continuing economic prosperity was a sign of God's favor. Officials were confident by August that the outbreak in Key West had passed them by. But confidence cannot control germs.
Roby reported the first yellow fever rumor on September 21, the day before barbershop manager and alleged fruit smuggler Charlie Turk died of the disease. Turk’s Cuban doctor declared death by yellow fever but later said he was mistaken. Roby ended her September 22 entry, "Report no yellow fever." Rumors persisted, and on the twenty-sixth, she wrote about another man dying of the fever in Ybor City.62

The diary is loaded with yellow fever reports after Wednesday, October 5, the day painter A.B. McKinzie died and Dr. John Wall began spreading the word to get out of town. On Thursday, Hamilton came home from work at noon because Mr. Ray, an architect and builder he was working for, had closed his shop. The McFarlans’ neighbors and some of their friends were already leaving town. P.E. Sprinkle died and "a great many sick with the fever," Roby wrote. The next day Roby saw Dr. Wall, who "told me the fever was yellow fever, and advised all the people to get out of town."63

George A. Bell, the former city marshal and later a policeman, invited the McFarlans to join him and his wife at their country home eight miles north of Tampa near the present day intersection of Nebraska Avenue and Skipper Road.
They started out at 8 a.m. Saturday. With two very pregnant women Sadie was nine months along and Mrs. Bell was not far behind - the trip took four hours and was described by Roby as "hurry burly." But the house was comfortable, and Roby even went so far as to write that she was enjoying herself.\(^{64}\)

The next several weeks were spent pleasantly, with Hamilton and Mr. Bell fishing and hunting alligators, deer, squirrels, and rabbits while the women performed minimal chores around the house. The temporary refugees visited others in the vicinity such as Mr. Diaz, Mr. Grables, and their nearest neighbor, James Metcalf "A pleasant day and all is well. Mr. Metcalf call, a social chat with him," Roby wrote on October 9. But while the refugees could escape the plague in the country, they were not immune from bad news. Mr. Bell went to town on October 15 and reported that six people had died the day before. He also brought a letter from Sadie’s mother, who panicked when she read about the epidemic in the Wilmington, Delaware, newspaper. The day Elva was born, Roby wrote "yellow fever raging," and reported eight more deaths.\(^{65}\)

The Bells and McFarlans did not celebrate Thanksgiving or Christmas in 1887; the former "because we could not get anything to cook for a big dinner," and the latter because Roby and the others "got discouraged with this business." While the house was bursting with new life - Mrs. Bell gave birth to a daughter on November 30 - news of death surrounded them. The saddest came in early December when word reached the McFarlans that Melvin Ordway had died of yellow fever. His family had moved east of Ybor City to escape the disease, but it was to no avail. Son Austin Ordway and others in the family apparently came down with the fever, too, but Mr. Ordway was the only one to die.\(^{66}\)

By January, the epidemic appeared to be running itself out, and people began returning to town. The W.C.T.U. started meeting again, and officials planned to reopen schools. However, with their new baby, the McFarlans were not taking any chances. Hamilton gave up his hunting and fishing to start building a house for Judge Williams in Tampa that month. He still returned to the Bell’s place each night, bringing mail and news. Sadie ventured into town on January 21 to stay for a week and visit the Ordways, but it was not until March 12 that the family loaded up and headed back to Tampa for good. The last diary entry to report a yellow fever case was on January 13, when Mrs. Eddins, the wife a builder, contracted it.\(^{67}\)

Following the epidemic, Dr. Wall estimated about 1,300 people had suffered from the disease and about 110 people died. City fathers would long argue over the merits of urging people out of town and the economic havoc wrought on the city by the four-month plague. But for ordinary citizens like the McFarlans, health and welfare manifested greater concern. Since Hamilton did not have work anyway, the family chose to survive in the country on game and fish, and tried to carry on life as normally as possible.\(^{68}\)

**Conclusion**

__Apr 11 Wednesday. Warm day. Sadie & I wash, Dr. Bruce called for a chat, was glad to see him, Mrs. Durst baby pretty sick, Mrs. Ordway sold her cow & calf to Robles.\(^ {69}\)__

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And so the diary ends on April 11, 1888. The next - and last page - of the original maroon and orange volume lists the Hull family tree. Roby Hull McFarlan survived two more years: she died September 27, 1890, and was buried in Oaklawn Cemetery.

Hamilton built a new home for his growing family in 1895 at 1211 Nebraska Avenue. The Bells, their roommates during the yellow fever scare, lived behind the McFarlans, and the families remained life-long friends. Hamilton and Sadie had two other daughters - Roby, born in August 1890, and Mildred, born in 1896. Hamilton stayed in the carpentry business, managing lumber companies and doing other such work. He was also affiliated with Williams and McFarlan Insurance Company at the time of his death in 1925. Sadie lived on another twenty-five years in the same home, raising two of her grandchildren and treating the others to sugar toast when they rode their bicycles down from Seminole Heights. The last name of McFarlan died with Hamilton, but one of his grandsons is named Henry McFarlan Williams and goes by the nickname "Mac." Roby's great-grandchildren, Keeblers, Pixtons, and Williamses, live throughout Florida.

They have little knowledge of the impact their great-grandmother and grandparents left on the history of Tampa. Some might say the myriad of references to weather and death show just how much the McFarlans' lives were controlled by outside forces. But such an analysis excludes the choices in which they participated. Roby, Hamilton, and Sadie chose to move to Tampa as it was beginning to boom, giving Hamilton fairly steady work and allowing him to keep the family in good financial circumstances. They chose to participate in the temperance movement and to socialize extensively with their neighbors. Had they decided to stay in town during the yellow fever epidemic, perhaps the diary would have ended that much sooner.

The diary is full of much more than descriptions of a terrible epidemic, heinous crimes, and prosaic household chores. It is Roby McFarlan's life. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich wrote about the diary of a New England midwife from 1785 to 1812, it was in its very dailiness that the power of the document lay. Ulrich showed how such an apparently mundane diary can be turned into a marvelous work of history. This more modest exploration of Roby McFarlan’s world seeks to show how she lived and what her experiences tell us about life in Tampa in the 1880s.

The McFarlans’ lives in the late 1880s were not much different from hundreds of other white, middle-class Tampa residents, such as the Glens, the Anspaughns, the Friersons, and the Dursts that they wrote about. But the McFarlans left behind a small part of their story, a story that shows they were active pioneers, who "watched Tampa grow from a small village to one of the leading cities of the South," and they contributed to that growth.

Epilogue

Like so many documents from the past, Roby McFarlan’s diary answers many questions while leaving numerous mysteries. First and foremost, why did she stop keeping the diary on April 11, 1888? Her great-grandchildren do not know, and unless more evidence is uncovered elsewhere, we may never know. What might we have discovered had Sadie decided to buy Hamilton another account book and the diary had continued?
Why was Roby married so late in life compared to other women at the time? Why was Markie in a mental institution and when was he released? We know from the family Bible that he died in Florida in 1918, but where or how remains a mystery.

What brought the McFarlans to Tampa in the first place - a growing construction industry, a sense of adventure, or some other, unknown factor? Roby’s great-granddaughter, Roby Pixton Hendrick, remembers hearing a story of her grandfather’s desire to settle "at the end of the [railroad] line," and Tampa was certainly that in 1884, but what details can be added to the story?73 Just who were the Glens and why did they leave so little mark on Tampa history after having such a big impact in the lives of the McFarlans?

Roby's diary is a rich source for those who seek a glimpse into the late 1880s in Tampa or Florida or the United States. Life in a boom town, social struggles, epidemic diseases, and other issues are explained from the point of view of an average, yet somehow remarkable, family. The diary can be approached from many different angles and can give many different answers to the question of what life was like for Roby McFarlan. This article serves only to scratch the surface of the treasures she, Hamilton, and Sadie left behind.

NOTES

1 The last name of Roby and her family has been spelled numerous ways, including McFarlan in the Works Project Administration version of her diary, McFarlane in Oaklawn Cemetery records, MacFarlan in Hamilton's obituary, and McFarlain in the 1900 U.S. Census. McFarlan is the correct spelling.


3 The diary used for this paper was typed by the Works Progress Administration in 1940 from the original found in the Florida State Library, and is now in possession of the Special Collections Department of the University of South Florida Library and hereafter referred to as RHM diary. A second copy, typed in 1959 by Mrs. John Humphreys, is in possession of the Hillsborough County Historical Commission. The only differences in content between the two is a postscript on the last page of the historical commission version that states, "This diary written by Roby Hull McFarlan, assisted by Hamilton and Sarah McFarlan." References that differ from the original diary are noted.

4 Hillsborough County Deed Book U, 335. The house stood at Governor Street between Kay and Scott streets. The property is now owned by the Dioceses of St. Petersburg; RHM diary, 1.

5 RHM diary, 30.

6 Oaklawn Cemetery records, 8, supplement (Hillsborough County Historical Commission); McFarlan family Bible, in possession of Roby Pixton Hendrick; RHM diary, 8; 1900 United States Census, University of South Florida Library, microfilm.


8 RHM diary, 19, 30, 9-10.

9 Ibid., 29, 10.
10 Ibid., 11.

11 For examples, see ibid., 12, 15, 16, 20, 25, 5, 18, 3.


13 Most names and occupations were found in the Webb Tampa Directory, (New York and Jacksonville, 1886). See also Oaklawn Cemetery records.

14 RHM diary, 1, 15, 25, 4.

15 Ibid., 11, 2-3; *Scientific American*, February 12, 1887.

16 RHM diary, 64.

17 Ibid., 20-31; *Tampa Tribune*, April 22, 1887, p. 3.

18 RHM diary, 41.

19 James W. Covington and Debbie Lee Wavering, "Mayors of Tampa: A Brief Administrative History" (unpublished manuscript, University of South Florida Library Special Collections, no date), 30-35.

20 RHM diary, 29; *Tampa Tribune*, July 15, 1887, 2-3.


22 RHM diary, 2, 5; *Tampa Journal*, May 5, 1887, 4.

23 *Tampa Tribune*, Aug. 11, 1887, 2; RHM diary, 30-35, 40-41; *Tampa Tribune*, July 28, 1887, 3.

24 *Tampa Tribune*, September 15, 1887, 3 and August 25, 1887, 3.


27 RHM diary, 19, 38; Norman H. Clark, *Deliver Us From Evil, an Interpretation of American Prohibition* (New York, 1976), 139.


29 RHM Diary, 42; *Tampa Tribune*, October 6, 1887, 2.

30 RHM diary, 4.

31 Ibid., 28.

32 "Pioneer of City to be Given Burial," *Tampa Daily Times*, June 11, 1925, 8B; "Mrs McFarlan Taken by Death," *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 11, 1950, 2.


35 RHM diary, 15.

36 See Motz, "Folk Expression." In her analysis of nineteenth-century rural diaries, Motz explains entries juxtaposing death and illness with "meals prepared, crops planted, and parties attended" are common, "an integral part of life and of the community experience"; see also Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York, 1990), Chapters 5 and 7.

37 RHM diary, 3, 6, 14, 15, 24, 26; For hernia symptoms, see Stanley Loeb, ed., *Professional Guide to Diseases* (Springhouse, Pennsylvania, 1992), 667-669.


39 RHM diary, 16, 17, 22-24.

40 Ibid., 23; "Was it Suicide or Murder?" *Tampa Tribune*, May 27, 1887, 3.

41 RHM diary, 44-45, 18, 39, 41.


43 RHM diary, 5. The reference to the Knights of Labor is contained in the original diary on that date. The WPA version notes that the reference is unreadable.

44 Ibid., 19, 26.


46 "A Cutting Affray at Ybor," ibid.


48 RHM diary, 66.


50 RHM diary, 27.


53 RHM diary, 7, 6.

54 Ibid., 15.

55 Ibid., 32.

56 Ibid., 42.

58 RHM diary, 18; "Fatal Accident," *Tampa Tribune*, April 15, 1887, 3.

59 *Tampa Tribune*, May 13, 1887, 3.

60 "Tampa Scorched," *Tampa Journal*, August 4, 1887, 1; "A Big Fire," *Tampa Tribune*, August 4, 1887, 3; RHM diary, 32.


62 Ibid., 53; RHM diary, 40.

63 RHM diary, 42; Barker, "Seasons of Pestilence," 54.

64 RHM diary, 42-43. House site is based on location of nearest neighbor, John Metcalf, whose farm was cited in Mormino and Anthony F. Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City* (Tulsa, 1983) 86.

65 RHM diary, 43-45.

66 Ibid., 58-59, 65.

67 Ibid., 66.

68 Barker, "Seasons of Pestilence," 77-78.

69 RHM diary, 70

70 1900 U.S. Census; McFarlan Family Bible; "Pioneer of City to be Given Burial"; "Mrs. M'Farlan Taken by Death"; interview with Angus Williams, Jr., great-grandson of Roby McFarlan, November 19, 1992, interview notes in possession of author; interview with Roby Pixton Henrick.


72 Ibid.; "Mrs. M'Farlan Taken by Death."

73 Interview with Roby Pixton Henrick.