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## TAMPA'S CUBAN HERITAGE

by Tony Pizzo\*

I would like to share with you some of the exciting information I learned as a result of research into the activities of José Martí in Tampa in the cause of Cuban liberty, and my community's involvement in that cause. My adventure into Tampa history started October 20, 1948, when the Ybor City Rotary Club received its charter. The club was royally inaugurated by 300 Rotarians from Florida and Cuba in a tropical setting in the patio of the Cuban Club. I had the honor of being the club's charter president. At our first official meeting at the Columbia Restaurant, Rabbi David Zeilonka, a member of the Tampa Rotary Club and program speaker said, "Your Rotary Club has the opportunity to be an ambassador for the Rotary Clubs of the United States to Latin America because of the language similarity of the members." The Ybor City Rotary Club accepted his counsel and adopted a long-range program of international relations with particular emphasis on Cuba, where Rotary was a great community force.

On November 3, 1948, I and several other Ybor City Rotarians made the first goodwill trip to Havana. We were entertained royally, as only the Cubans can. The trip renewed old bonds and set into motion a social, cultural, and commercial exchange between Tampa and Cuba which lasted until 1959 when Fidel Castro came to power.

During this decade Tampa became the mecca for Cuban visitors. They literally worshiped the ground José Martí had walked on. This was their chunk of land in America because it had helped deliver their dream for a *Cuba Libre*. Tampa's mayor at the time, Curtis Hixon, was so impressed with the great flow of Cuban visitors that he appointed an official "Greeters' Committee," whose members spoke Spanish to welcome arrivals at the airport. Welcome signs in Spanish were displayed in the terminal. The Tampa Chamber of Commerce advertised in Cuban newspapers. These ads attracted many organizations which held meetings and conventions in Tampa through the years. Some of the organizations meeting in Tampa included the Cuban Dental Association, the Cuban Medical Society, the Havana Society of Engineers, La Sociedad Colombista Pan Americana, the Historical Society of Havana, the Cattlemen's Association of Cuba, the Ladies of the Cuban Lawn and Tennis Club, and many Rotary Clubs, as well as a yearly visit of the queen and her court of the Havana Carnival to participate in Tampa's Gasparilla festivities.

Two political mavericks who made an indelible mark on Cuban history also made the pilgrimage to Ybor City to baptize themselves in the waters of Tampa-Cuban history.

On October 2, 1950, Senator Eduardo R. Chibas, candidate for the presidency of Cuba under the Partido Ortodoxas appeared at a meeting of Ybor City cigar workers held at Cuscaden Baseball Park. The podium was decorated with Cuban and American flags. Chibas opened his speech in memory of José Martí, extolling his efforts in Tampa on behalf of Cuba Libre.

The Ortodoxas party he started was the "party of the common people, who were being robbed by

\*Delivered on October 24, 1992 at a conference in Ybor City devoted to Jose Marti, this address is Tony Pizzo's last major publication on Tampa history.

the corrupt political pirates." His friends called him "Escobita" (Little Broom), which was also the emblem of his party and reflected his obsession to sweep corruption from public life. In his Ybor City speech he declared that he stood for a "better nation, without thieves and without traitors to the ideals of José Martí." Chibas related that Mrs. Sorano, a member of the O'Halloran family of Tampa, had loaned him Jose Marti's gold ring to wear that memorable evening. She also owned the *chaveta*, a knife used to make the cigar that carried the order to start the revolution of 1895, and the pistol that General Maximo Gomez had given to Martí for his own protection.

Chibas informed the public, "I have gold in my hand but it's not the gold of the people of Cuba, it's the gold ring that belonged to José Martí, the apostle who found hearts and minds in Tampa which blended with his." Mrs. Sorano promised that if Chibas lived up to his promise to implement into practice the ideals of José Martí when he became president she would give him the precious ring to keep. Chibas responded, "If I falter in my duties as president, if I fail to reconstruct the political morals of Cuba, then I expect the noble lady who owns the precious memento of Martí to send me the pistol to punish myself for not keeping a sacred promise to the people of Cuba."

On Sunday, August 5, 1951, Chibas addressed the Cuban nation over CMQ radio network. This would be his last verbal broadside aimed at the corrupt administration of President Carlos Prío Socarras. His last words to the people of Cuba were for them to "forge ahead for independent, economic freedom, political liberty and social justice! Sweep the robbers out of government! People of Cuba, awaken and arise! This is the last time I will knock at your door!" He punctuated his last statement with a pistol bullet to his body. He died a few days later.

Thousands upon thousands followed the funeral cortege to Colon Cemetery in Havana. The August 26 issue of *Bohemia* magazine was dedicated to the life of Eduardo Chibas. A full-page photograph standing before the statute of José Martí in Ybor City was placed in his coffin. The cutlines under the photograph stated that Chibas had made sensational declarations before the Martí statute and that he was disposed to end his life if he failed to rid the government of corruption.

In November 1955 a young unknown Cuban rebel appeared on the Ybor City scene. He did not come so much to be inspired by the spirit of José Martí, but to garner support and funds to launch an uprising against the dictatorial regime of Cuba's President Fulgencio Batista. His name was Fidel Castro.

During his sojourn in Tampa, Castro had difficulty finding a place to hold a meeting with his supporters. The Cuban Club and the Italian Club denied him the use of their quarters. At the last minute he was able to meet at the CIO Hall on Tampa Street. The following day he was interviewed by Channel 8-WFLA and the Spanish Radio station, WALT. Castro stated that he would go to Cuba to fight for the cause of Cuban liberty, regardless of the obstacles thrown in his path by President Batista.

While in Tampa, Castro had dinner with a few supporters at El Boulevard Restaurant, then located on Nebraska and Palm avenues. He was photographed at the dinner table showing the

\$250 he had raised. The next morning he left for Key West, "the historic route of José Martí." Castro later wrote, "The Key West odyssey was worse than the Tampa one. We could not find a place for a meeting."

Castro and his band made it to Cuba and launched a guerrilla-type warfare. In 1959 Castro's rebels came down from the mountains of the Sierra Maestra and entered Havana. In Ybor City the news sparked a wild celebration. Cuba, they thought, was free again. Fidel launched a program of agrarian reform. In Ybor City jubilant Cubans raised funds to buy a farm tractor.

The numerous Cuban students in exile in Tampa made a mad-dash for their homes in Cuba. Many of them were attending the University of Tampa and were sons of my friends in Cuba. I was somewhat their guardian. They came to visit me frequently. In time they started returning, this time with their families. Cuba had become a red regime under Castro, their former idol.

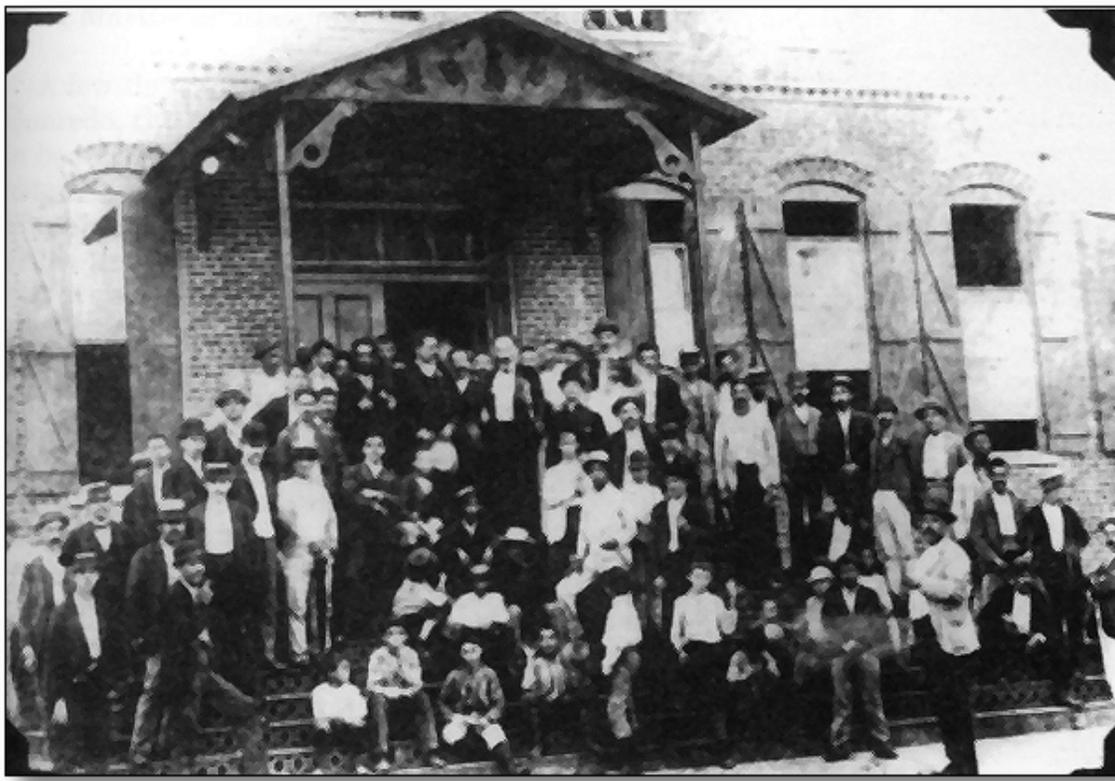
This renewed interest of Cubans in Tampa during the 1950s was sparked by members of the Ybor City Rotary Club. Their first act in launching an international program was to send letters to 800 Rotary Clubs in Latin America stating that the Ybor City of Hispanic heritage planned frequent interchanges of visitors to promote the good neighbor policy of the United States.

The club's activities received good coverage in the press. On March 13, 1949 an editorial appeared in the *Tampa Tribune* entitled "Tampa Must Get Busy." The editorial written by Edwin D. Lambright, editorial editor and past president of the Tampa Rotary Club, declared: "Tampa's promotion in Cuba to be effective must be concentrated and organized. It is too large a project for any one organization to handle alone. The effort must be unified - we can do something progressive and productive in regaining some of the lost prestige and profit lost to inattention and apathy. We can establish a permanent organization for the development of relations with Cuba and other Latin American countries." About the same time a story in *Time* magazine reported that Miami Beach had become a favorite summer gathering for Cuban tourists, resulting in a windfall to the city of \$33 million from the Cuban visitors. Up to that time Miami Beach had been strictly a winter resort. The Ybor Rotarians quickly recognized that Tampa had to recapture its former position in trade and cultural relations with Latin America and particularly with Cuba.

The idea expounded in the *Tribune* was accepted by the Ybor City Rotary Club. It invited thirty-two local organizations, city officials, county representatives, the officers of the Tampa Chamber of Commerce, and the Tampa Consular Corps to participate in organizing an association which would become "the State Department" of Tampa and Hillsborough County. The name was the Pan American Commission. Today it is an arm of the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce and is known as the Tampa Bay International Trade Council.

The Pan American Commission was endorsed by the Tampa delegation in Congress and Florida's two U.S. Senators. Through the years the organization has served the Bay Area in promoting trade, commerce, tourism, and cultural relations with the world.

A dramatic event happened during the Gasparilla festivities in 1948. This event led to the establishment of a memorial to José Martí's memory. Theresa Maria de Cárdenas, queen of the Havana Carnival was presented flowers by Tampa's Mayor Hixon. The queen asked to be taken



**Jose Martí on the steps of the Ybor factory after a speech to cigar makers.**

Photograph from *Ambito de Martí* by Guillermo Zendegui.

to the monument of José Martí. When told there was no such statute here, tears welled in her eyes. She and her maids were taken to the steps of the Ybor City cigar factory where Martí had addressed Cuban cigar makers in 1891 and 1893. She placed the flowers at the door entrance. The next day the *Tribune* ran the historic photograph of Martí standing on the steps of the factory in 1893. Queen Maria Theresa's tears touched the hearts of the Ybor Rotarians.

The Ybor Club promptly announced that it would start a program to erect a monument to Jose Marti. After the news was published, seventeen organizations in Ybor City, including three Spanish newspapers, asked to join in the effort. Again the Ybor City Rotary Club was the pacesetter. A new organization was created and called the José Martí Memorial Foundation. U.S. Senators Spessard Holland and Claude Pepper introduced a bill in the U.S. Senate to provide funds for the project.

The news was all over Cuban newspapers. In Havana the Cuban lodge, Los Caballeros de la Luz, raised funds for a bronze bust of José Martí. The gift arrived in Tampa and was placed on a marble pedestal in front of the Cuban Club. A large delegation of Cuban officials, a Cuban warship, and lodge members attended the unveiling of the first Martí statute in Tampa. In time

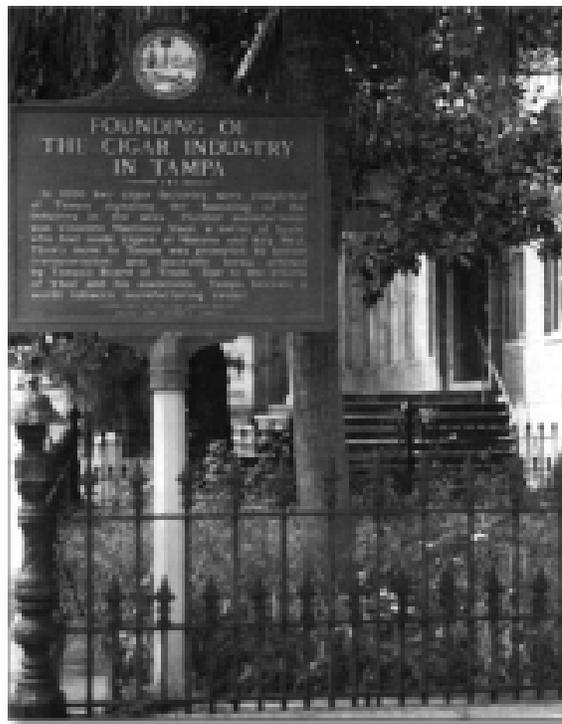
there were others erected. The noble efforts of the Martí Foundation faded away after the colorful dedication.

The Ybor City Club erected a stone marker in front of the Ybor factory's iron steps, where Martí was photographed in 1893. The marker appeared in newspapers across the island of Cuba. Ybor City had truly become a hallowed place to all Cubans. Being photographed by the stone marker in front of the Ybor City iron steps was a must for Cuban visitors.

Another Martí statute proposal that came to naught due to political intrigue was a lifesized statute that was to be placed on the steps of the Ybor factory. The idea was initiated by Dr. Jorge Trelles and Dr. A. A. Gonzalez, two physicians who owned clinics in Ybor City. I was named chairman of the project with several Rotarians on the committee. We raised about \$3,000 and obtained the services of José Fidalgo, a well known Cuban sculpturer. He sent us two models made in his studio in Havana. One was to be presented to President Truman and one to Mayor Hixon. Fidalgo had finished the lifesize statute in bronze. At the base of the statute he placed the inscription, "Para Cuba que sufre" ("To Cuba in bondage"). These were the first words in José Martí's first speech in Tampa in 1891.

The photograph of the statute and the story appeared in Cuba's *Bohemia* magazine. President Batista, who was having serious opposition, interpreted the inscription on the statute as a personal insult. Batista sent his troops to the studio and demolished the statute and all of the miniature statutes. Fidalgo was put on a tramp steamer to Mexico and was never seen again. The money, the effort, and the statute went to waste. It was a great idea. I hope someday in the future someone will revive the project.

Another project which culminated after more than five years of effort was the establishment of José Martí Park, which has become a patriotic shrine to Cubans in exile. One morning in 1952 as I was walking along 8th Avenue near 13th Street, Leno Menendez, a black Cuban known as "Bigote" because of his long handlebar moustache, approached me and said, "Tony, this is the house where Martí lived." I was born on 8th Avenue about five blocks away from the building, and I had never heard that. It really piqued my interest. My first thought was to turn it into a Cuban museum memorializing the great Martí--another magnet to attract Cuban and Latin American visitors.



**The marker Tony Pizzo helped place next to the Ybor factory (today's Ybor Square). The steps in the background are the ones where José Martí stood.**

A few days after this incident, I was told by a friend that Colonel Manuel Queredo, the owner of the airline Aerovias Q, I was at the Tampa Terrace Hotel in bed with the flu. I had become close to Colonel Queredo when I helped him obtain a permit in Washington for his airline to come to Tampa. I went to see him at the hotel to see if I could do something for him. In the course of my visit I brought up the Martí house. The colonel looked at me, raised his arm, and pointing a finger said, "Go buy it! Don't worry about the money. I will send it to you, pronto."

I left him and went directly to the First Federal Bank. General Homer W. Hesterly was president and a member of the Ybor City Rotary Club. I explained what had transpired between Colonel Queredo and me only a few minutes before. General Hesterly called Lesley Blank, a realtor, that same afternoon. The three of us went to see the proprietor of the house, a Mrs. Crenshaw, and the deal was made. I sent the documents to Colonel Queredo in Havana. By return mail, he sent a check for \$3,500 to me. Colonel Queredo donated the house and the land to the Cuban government.

It took about five years to create the park. A delegation of Tampans made three trips to confer with President Batista. Among the committee members were former Governor of Florida Doyle E. Carlton, Mayor Hixon, John Diaz, Tony Grimaldi, and Earl Mullen. The house was too far gone to preserve. The Cuban government suggested a park be established. The plans were drawn by No de Menecis and the contractor was Rañon y Jiménez. The Cuban government had pledged \$23,000, but only \$18,000 was finally sent to the Cuban consulate in Tampa. The statue of José Martí located in the center of the park was made from funds left from the failed project to erect a statute of Martí on the steps of the Ybor factory. Alberto Sabas, the sculptor, who created the Christopher Columbus statute on Bayshore Boulevard, donated his services.

Through the years of effort to establish the park, the Tampa committee was supported by Cuban civic leaders, journalists, and historians. Today Cuban exiles take great pride in keeping the Martí Park in beautiful condition. This is their little piece of Cuba where they gather to celebrate patriotic dates.

The 1950 Gasparilla festivities were the greatest in the city's history. The *Tribune's* headlines read, "Gasparilla Goes Latin." The Cuban government sent the frigate *José Martí*, fifty conga dancers, seventy newsmen, the Havana Carnival Queen and her court, and hundreds of Cuban visitors. This was one of the most colorful and festive events in Gasparilla's history. A few months later the king of Gasparilla, Howard Frankland, and Queen Mary Dupre and her court received an invitation to participate in Havana Carnival. The interchange between Tampa and Cuba was now at its peak.

On one of our goodwill trips to Havana we visited with President Batista and members of his cabinet. As we were leaving, I was approached by the president's press secretary whose name was Cabus. He said to me, "You know, Tampa is the cradle of Cuban liberty. If you research the history of Martí in Tampa we will make historical markers with the information you send us." I was taken to the military school outside of Havana, and they showed me the foundry where the work on the markers would be done. In charge of the military was a Havana Rotarian, Fifi Bock, the son of a Cuban tobacco tycoon. I was beside myself with the proposition. This was truly a great opportunity to cement historical ties with Cuba.



**Jose Marti Park with a statue of the Cuban martyr in the background.**

When I returned to Tampa, I went to the local library for information. I found little to nothing on Ybor City and Marti's activities here. At the time there were quite a few veterans of the Cuban revolution living in Ybor City. In fact they had a veteran's association called Delegacion en Tampa de las Emigrados Revolucionarios Cubanos de la Guerra de Independencia. I started interviewing veterans and old-timers of Ybor City. The first man I interviewed was Blas O'Halloran. He was ninety years old and the son of Blas, Sr., the man who had made the cigar that concealed the message from the Cuban junta to start the revolution in 1895. I found this story so intriguing that it prompted me to write my first historical article. It was published in Tampa magazines and in Cuba.

I had gathered a lot of historical data, but the political climate in Cuba was becoming so volatile that it affected the historical markers project. In 1959, with Castro's revolution a success, the project died. Nevertheless, in Tampa, funds were raised from various corporations, and we were able to erect all twenty-four historical markers in Ybor City. This made quite an impact on the community. Leland Hawes, in a full page story in the *Sunday Tribune*, lauded the project. The project has been an ongoing one. Today Hillsborough County has more historical markers than any other county in the state.

In 1955 Tampa celebrated its 100th anniversary as an incorporated town. This was a year-long celebration. Cuba honored our city by issuing commemorative stamps of El Liceo Cuban, the

original Ybor wooden factory where José Martí formalized the Cuban revolutionary party and a stamp of the historic photograph of Martí on the steps of the Ybor factory. The Havana Rotary Club and the Cuban Tourist Commission were on hand for several events. Tampa and Havana celebrated their century-old ties, including the tobacco industry, blood ties, and the fabulous history echoing to the clang of Spanish armor a full century before Plymouth and Jamestown were settled.

The programs started by the Ybor City Rotary Club have made a lasting impact on the Tampa community. It brought together civic, social, and cultural business organizations in an effort to unify the community, promote its port and industries, and exhibit its rich history by erecting monuments, parks, and historical markers. Today the former Pan American Commission carries on with worldwide efforts as the Tampa Bay Trade Council. It is the hope that in the future Tampa will again embrace the people of Cuba and renew old bonds.

As for me personally, delving into the history of Tampa in relation to Cuba has enriched my life. We have proven that history is not the dead past but a rich bond in building bridges of friendships and goodwill.