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*P*EEERLESS PAGEANT:  
THE FIRST TEN YEARS  
OF TAMPA'S GASPARILLA FESTIVAL

BY ROSANNA ENSLEY

*T*he Gasparilla Festival has, since its inception, both reflected and shaped civic events and public perceptions in Tampa. A harbinger of the nation's imperialist and demographic expansion in the first decade of the twentieth century, Gasparilla was attached to celebrations of the Panama Canal's construction and of Tampa's population growth as reported by the U.S. Census. The festival was part of spectacles that featured the first cars and airplanes in Tampa, heralding modernity.<sup>1</sup> Gasparilla was further affected by national issues as it was put on hold during economic downturns and both World Wars. In 1924, Gasparilla engaged an Egyptian theme to honor the discovery of King Tut's tomb, and during the Great Depression, former participants ("pirates") too poor to pay their dues to the organization sponsoring the celebration received keys to the poorhouse instead of keys to the city, their usual bounty.<sup>2</sup> A powerful social indicator, the festival also came to shape cultural consciousness. When Tampa was awarded a National Football League franchise in 1974, piracy already so thoroughly dominated the iconography of the area that Buccaneers seemed the only fitting choice for the team's mascot.<sup>3</sup>

Until 1991, the mayor of Tampa traditionally surrendered the keys to the city to Gaspar's band of rogues. That year, the coincidence of the local spectacle of Gasparilla with the national spectacle of Super Bowl XXV illuminated inequalities in the organization of Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla, which sponsors the parade. With

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<sup>1</sup> Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg Printing, 1950), 298-99.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Turner, "Gasparilla's First 100 Years," *Tampa Tribune*, February 7, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Turner, "Tampa Comes Full Circle," *Tampa Tribune*, February 7, 2004.

750 members at the time, Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla was considered the most prestigious and secretive of Tampa's clubs. When faced with the demand to admit twenty-five black members, the Krewe withdrew their sponsorship of the parade rather than comply.<sup>4</sup> By the next year, however, Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla had admitted some African American members and again resumed sponsorship of the parade as Krewes more representative of Tampa's diversity were formed.<sup>5</sup>

The 1991 controversy demonstrates the festival's importance as an indicator of change and social conflict. Chroniclers of Gasparilla's early years, however, have presented the festival as a popular, apolitical, inoffensive civic ritual. Further, scholars have paid little attention to the motivations of Gasparilla's organizers—members of the urban elite attempting to work out their own sense of identity. Indeed, the festival seems to stem from elite efforts to create and call attention to a sense of community in Tampa. Though newspaper accounts of the festival from 1904 to 1914 portray the crowd as passive viewers, not active participants, the evolution of the festival's form demonstrates that Gasparilla provides a dynamic and viable connection between Tampa's business and working class. By 1914, Ye Mystic Krewe had changed its collective visage from the courtly pirate, a figure that called particular attention to class, to the more inclusive rogue pirate. And yet, as the 1991 controversy illuminated, while Ye Mystic Krewe had adopted styles of inclusion in form, in practice the group often maintained mechanisms of exclusion and hierarchy.

The story of the first years of the Gasparilla Festival is one of appropriation, where piracy was featured as an aggressive element that effected a twofold takeover of Tampa's public space and public consciousness. The festival celebrating King Gasparilla had always featured piracy as its organizational theme. In the carnival's first few years, however, Gasparilla's band of merry followers, Ye Mystic Krewe, affected all the rituals and mannerisms of courtly life. Further, the Gasparilla Festival itself was originally tangential, an amusing distraction from other expositions meant to glorify the city of Tampa and help the state of Florida assume a place of dominance in the New South. But the thematic content of Tampa's festivals quickly changed from glorifying the nation and imperialism, to addressing the state's agricultural industry, and finally to venerating the city itself and its appeal as a tourist destination. As the Gasparilla Carnival assumed more importance, imagery of the rogue, criminal pirate came to increasingly dominate the appearance of the festival itself. The specter of pirates invading the city and seizing the keys was both a symbolic and literal process. During this time, organizers adopted a more aggressive form—that of the bloodthirsty pirate—to inform visitors that Tampa's leaders would stop at nothing to achieve the prominence their city deserved.

Gregory Bush notes that this powerful combination of promotion and

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Rimer, "A Tradition for Tampa Raises Questions of Bias," *New York Times*, October 15, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kerstein, *Politics and Growth in Twentieth-Century Tampa* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 1-2.



Lesley Collection, Tampa Bay History Center - 1994.004.077

Captain James McKay, Jr. was photographed astride his horse during the second Gasparilla invasion in 1905. During the early years of the festival, Krewe members invaded the city on horseback rather than by ship.

myth had the ability to create, or at least accentuate, new modern modes of urban engagement. In his work on Miami, the author notes that primary accounts of the city in the first decades of the twentieth century combined vigorous promotion with active myth-making as they described tourists and new residents alike flocking to public festivals. These accounts emphasized attendance at these spectacles, along with the progress of the south Florida land boom and Miami's fast-paced way of life, to portray the city as an idyllic vacation destination and a place to procure instant wealth.<sup>6</sup>

French anthropologist André-Marcel d'Ans, too, examines the power of myth as promotion in his work on Tampa's most famous festival. D'Ans claims that José Gaspar completed his most successful conquest by transcending historical knowledge to commandeer the public consciousness, becoming the primary cultural identifier for Tampans.<sup>7</sup> Like its inspirational nucleus, the Gasparilla Festival, too, has transformed from its humble origins. What started as a carnival sideline, a thrilling interruption

<sup>6</sup> Gregory W. Bush, "Playground of the USA: Miami and the Promotion of Spectacle," *Pacific Historical Review* 68, No. 2 (May 1999), 54.

<sup>7</sup> Andre-Marcel d'Ans, "The Legend of Gasparilla: Myth and History on Florida's West Coast," *Tampa Bay History* (Fall-Winter 1980), 9.

of an otherwise ordinary parade, has become Tampa's foremost civic ritual. In this way, the Gasparilla Festival has embarked on its own hegemonic process, different from the imperial and agricultural celebrations of which it was originally a part. Over the course of a few years, Gasparilla so consummately completed this process of legitimation that Tampans appear to have forgotten the time when it was not so.

Previous scholars have examined the Gasparilla Festival only from an anthropological perspective, seeing it as a redistributive or quasi-religious ritual. D'Ans, in his 1980 article, examines the genesis and structure of the legend of the festival's inspiration, José Gaspar, to understand how and why the Spanish pirate became the patron of Tampa. D'Ans, like all who have written about the festival, looks to the legend of Gaspar to historicize his work, virtually ignoring the Festival of Gasparilla as a historical phenomenon. D'Ans focuses on the legend of Gaspar as it expressed "striking features" of the local elites who chose to adopt the myth and organized the festival. Further, Gaspar's story possessed the necessary characteristics to encourage and sustain the participation of the other social classes who shared in the legend and voluntarily engaged in the festival.<sup>8</sup>

D'Ans examines the debate that lies behind the festival concerning the historical authenticity of José Gaspar. He recounts the various narratives of Gaspar's life, claiming that the absence of records in the United States and Spain proves that Gaspar never existed. Thus, d'Ans is able to loudly discredit the existence of Gaspar while pointing to his cultural importance as Tampa's most famous legend. To d'Ans, the very absence of historical authenticity merely proves that José Gaspar's story has indeed become legend. Further, the historical truth of Gaspar as a legend can be found in its annual celebration.<sup>9</sup> Initially, Gaspar's tale was transmitted orally, but, fittingly, the very first written version of the Gasparilla legend can be found in an advertising brochure for a railroad company. All other written accounts reference for authenticity the stories of an eyewitness, Juan Gomez. Gomez, though a real person, was a very unreliable source. He claimed, among other things, that he was a forty-three-year-old sailor aboard Gaspar's ship in 1821, which would have made him 122 years old upon his death in 1900.<sup>10</sup>

The creators of the festival universalized the story of Gaspar and shifted to a symbolic interpretation to suit their purposes and move the legend away from its territorial association with Charlotte Harbor. D'Ans contends that Tampa's elite purposefully hid the legend of Gaspar behind an apparatus of fabrications to make it appear authentic without losing too much of its romantic character.<sup>11</sup> All the written works on the pirate Gaspar, despite some differences, had to make claims to historical truth. The existence of written historical accounts of Gaspar's legend, despite authorial intent, has helped preserve the legend in the collective consciousness of Tampans.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 5, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

The organizers' adoption of the myth of Gaspar speaks to the ethos of Tampa's business class, who helped create the festival in his name. The legend, itself a product of a specific historical context, would come to act upon the circumstances in which it was created.<sup>13</sup> The legend of Gasparilla provided a rationale and historical character that the local elite used, in D'Ans's words, to "glorify its power and wealth." A different popular version served to "brighten the Florida landscape." For all classes, then, the powerful myth of Gasparilla made life more pleasant than historical reality could have.<sup>14</sup> According to d'Ans, the legend of Gasparilla, despite its Latin origins, is product and property of Tampa's Anglo establishment, reflecting the social and ethnic divisions within the city. D'Ans examines the festival as a fraternal ritual that ameliorated violence and class tensions. But the spectacle was only the most visible part of a phenomenon whose "primary function lay elsewhere."<sup>15</sup> The large crowd the festivals attracted made possible the central role that redistribution played; d'Ans characterizes the festival as a ceremony similar to potlatch. But the actual redistribution of wealth that was central to potlatch was never a part of Gasparilla since the Krewe distributed worthless tokens and, more recently, plastic beads. Still, the population expected the "system itself will provide its own rewards," and symbolic gifts proved enough to demonstrate cross-class cooperation and the efficacy of the festival as a safety valve.<sup>16</sup>

Like that of d'Ans, the main focus of other historical accounts has been on the pirate Gaspar and not on the festival as a historical phenomenon. Edwin Lambright's 1936 account identified the festival as a Tampa institution that had attracted nationwide attention. He set out to record the Krewe's annual appearances and provide a biography of the real Gasparilla, creating "the first and only authentic story of the pirate himself." He emphasized his desire to give graphic descriptions of both Gasparilla's life and the annual festival, imparting to the narrative the "accuracy of history" while leaving the "appeal of romance and adventure." Lambright's publishers maintained that his purpose was to make a book of "history, reminiscence, record and reference," that would become a "prized possession" of all who were a part of or interested in the exploits of Ye Mystic Krewe.<sup>17</sup>

Gasparilla organizers commissioned Lambright, then the *Tampa Morning Tribune's* editor, to create the magisterial version of events that would become the Ye Mystic Krewe's bible. This publication was never marketed commercially and was maintained only among Krewe members and their families.<sup>18</sup> Lambright designed his version of Gaspar's story to give it every appearance of historical reality by relying

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> Edwin D. Lambright, *The Life and Exploits of Gasparilla, Last of the Buccaneers, with the History of Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla* (Tampa: Hillsborough Printing Co., 1936), foreword.

<sup>18</sup> D'Ans, 16.



Hillsborough County Collection, Tampa Bay History Center, 1996.051 317.109

Floats during the early years of the Gasparilla Parade took the form of automobiles decorated with flowers and other natural materials. One of the occupants in the car pictured above is Hortense Oppenheimer, namesake of the clock atop Tampa's Old City Hall.

on the coincidence of the geographic place-names of Gasparilla, Sanibel Island, and Captiva Island. Lambright further embellished his courtly version of Gaspar's story to make him appear the "most gallant [and] tender of men, except that he was a pirate," emphasizing the respectability of Gaspar and the festival that bore his name.<sup>19</sup> Tampa's ruling class already emulated the ideals and mannerisms of Lambright's Gaspar as piracy became a mystique to the Mystic Krewe.<sup>20</sup>

The festival emerged just as Tampa's business class was consolidating its power during a period characterized by social conflict and the arrival of large trusts.<sup>21</sup> As Tampa possessed both a railroad connection and the possibility of an improved port, business leaders organized a Board of Trade in 1885 whose function was to promote growth in the community.<sup>22</sup> With the end of the pioneer era, these Anglo-Saxon,

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>22</sup> Kerstein, 24.

Protestant men became the city's new elite. Very quickly, though, the celebration the elites created evolved from entertainment by and for the city's leaders to "grandiose festivities designed for popular consumption." Nevertheless, only wealthy Anglo-Saxon men were allowed to join the exclusive Mystic Krewe.<sup>23</sup>

The carnival, as Gasparilla was initially labeled, was born out of casual conversation between the *Morning Tribune's* society editor, Louise Dodge, and George Hardee, who suggested using the story of the already known pirate, José Gaspar, in an effort "to develop a spectacular and merrymaking feature in connection with the [May] Festival." Hardee, from New Orleans, ensured that Gasparilla would be modeled on Mardi Gras from its inception. José Gaspar would give the festival a "name, a foundation, the Spanish atmosphere" and would serve as the "nucleus for a fete."<sup>24</sup> In Gasparilla's first few years, observers expected sumptuous costumes and pageantry and trappings of royalty, not bloodthirsty rogues. Elites perhaps desired to overtly demonstrate their authority and so fashioned themselves as royalty. José Gaspar was likely conceived in this majestic manner to strengthen this association. Newspaper accounts detailing his life labeled him the "pirate Prince," though these accounts never explained how or why he obtained this title.<sup>25</sup> These early years of Gasparilla seemed to reflect elite attempts not only to rationalize their authority but also to exaggerate it.

D'Ans discusses Gasparilla's first years, when the parade was initially coupled with commercial fairs to attract businessmen from other cities. Gasparilla served a special function during these celebrations as a demonstration of the power and authority of Tampa's business class and the resources the city itself offered. At this time, Gasparilla's display was aimed primarily at outside businessmen, not the greater public.<sup>26</sup> But if Tampa's festivals were to truly emulate the great expositions in St. Louis and Chicago, they also needed an element of popular amusement, a midway. These amusement avenues served as "cathartic respites from social upheaval."<sup>27</sup> It appears that Gasparilla fulfilled both functions—it was a show of strength and resources to outsiders and an entertaining distraction for its citizens.

The year 1904 marked the first Gasparilla celebration, but Tampa businessmen were more concerned with national matters. The city was hosting the Panama Canal Convention, to which delegates from all southern states were invited. It was the first convention in the United States devoted to the development of the waterway, and Tampa's leaders, because of the city's geographical location, expected to benefit greatly from the canal's construction.<sup>28</sup> Florida's governor, William Jennings, preached that the

<sup>23</sup> D'Ans, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Lambright, 44.

<sup>25</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 22, 1914.

<sup>26</sup> D'Ans, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 94.

<sup>28</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 21, 1904.

canal would contribute to the development of Florida's rich resources and encourage an industrial revolution throughout the state. He predicted that the waterway would eventually transform Florida into a great manufacturing state.<sup>29</sup> President Theodore Roosevelt himself encouraged the convention and the interest it would arouse.<sup>30</sup> In Tampa, the Panama Canal Convention was unequivocally considered the great event of the festival. The May Festival was further designed to encourage visitors and their capital to the city. To this end, the *Tribune* informed citizens that "everything that helps Tampa helps you individually."<sup>31</sup>

In his 1936 work, Lambright describes the first announcement of Ye Mystic Krewe as a cause for statewide concern as Tampa's citizens and outside newspapers anticipated the coming of Gasparilla and his men.<sup>32</sup> The third day of the May Festival signaled the beginning of the Panama Canal Convention, and the parade marked the first appearance of Ye Mystic Krewe as "distinguished guests and citizens stood in respectful salute." Interestingly, the first King Gasparilla did not participate in the parade but sent a proxy instead. Lambright speculated that Colonel Edward Gunby declined to participate out of modesty or fear he would be recognized, making it the only occasion the reigning king did not lead his court in the carnival parade. Whatever the reason, whether humility or the desire to create an air of secrecy, the first king's behavior characterized the beginning years of Gasparilla—exaggeration and self-congratulation coupled with a sense of insecurity.<sup>33</sup> The *Tampa Morning Tribune* noted that while all eyes turned toward the Krewe, all failed to pierce the mask that hid "his presumably handsome features." Unable to see the king, many still had faith in his innate superiority.<sup>34</sup> The round of applause that greeted the king and his court during the inaugural ball showed "no ill will was felt for this sudden attack upon [their] peaceful borders."

Lambright described the virginal white gown the queen wore at the coronation ball that "enhanced her dark beauty and regal carriage," making the respectable woman appear dark and exotic, like José Gaspar himself.<sup>35</sup> A *Morning Tribune* reporter, writing about the whole spectacle, was delighted by the ball and thrilled that Gasparilla would become a permanent institution with plans for annual appearances. Lambright noted that Tampa society and the Tampa public, both the working and business classes, were likewise so enthusiastic about the invasion that they demanded the organization be made permanent and a carnival produced each year. The account, however, was furnished by the fair's participants, who likely stood to benefit from the transformation of the invasion into tradition.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., April 29, 1904.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., April 30, 1904.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., May 2, 1904.

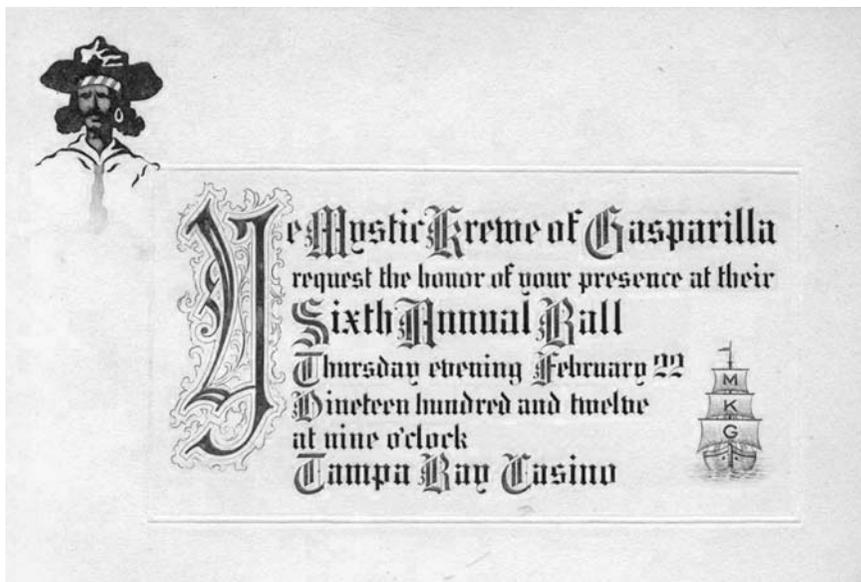
<sup>32</sup> Lambright, 45.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>36</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 10, 1904.



*Hillsborough County Collection, Tampa Bay History Center, 1996.051 347.001*

Invitation card for the Sixth Annual Gasparilla Ball, which took place at the Casino at the Tampa Bay Hotel (now the University of Tampa) on February 22, 1912.

The next year, the carnival was moved to coincide with the Florida State Fair, a decision Lambright stated the Krewe members “deemed best.” The Krewe again invaded the city without any sort of vessel, but Lambright noted they assembled “presumably just ashore from a pirate craft.” It was in the second year of Tampa’s annual festival that new “horseless carriages” were used in the parade as Gasparilla II led a parade of what Lambright labeled “trustworthy pirates.” In this phrase, Lambright employed a description perhaps never before used on a group typically characterized as entirely untrustworthy as he highlighted the civic virtue of Gasparilla’s pirates and dismissed their transgressive nature.<sup>37</sup>

That year the pirates—or knights, as they fashioned themselves—staged various tournaments. The use of regal nomenclature in the first years of the festival is intriguing. The festival’s promoters could have merely been confusing powerful archetypes, or perhaps they desired spectators to conceive of them as royalty. It is simple enough to assume that elites merely enjoyed regal titles, but it is more problematic to consider why they chose to mix these archetypes of authority with those of transgression. Perhaps King Gasparilla and his court enjoyed their liminal status, appearing to promote transgression from the pedestal of privilege. The legend of José Gaspar that Ye Mystic Krewe propagated so vigorously served an important

<sup>37</sup> Lambright, 53.

function since the pirate's life represented a vital link between respectability and depravity.<sup>38</sup> The connection between pirates and monarchs was nevertheless strange since, by the first decades of the eighteenth century, pirates had become targets of the Atlantic empires. Marcus Rediker notes that these imperial powers, led by Britain, embarked on a vigorous international campaign of extermination and terror, hanging pirates throughout Great Britain and the New World.<sup>39</sup>

The *Tampa Morning Tribune* noted in its coverage of the first year of the festival that Prince Gasparilla made his first official proclamation stating he would *visit*, not *capture*, the city. In fact, the proclamation made no mention at all of Gaspar as a pirate. He was the sovereign, surrounded by knights and his royal court paying friendly visit to the beautiful city. Accounts that followed referred to Gasparilla merely as "his majesty."<sup>40</sup> It was not until the day before the May Festival that the *Tribune* mentioned Gasparilla as a pirate king. The paper barely mentioned Ye Mystic Krewe, except as the carnival feature of the May Festival exercises. The following week, the Krewe debuted in the opening parade on horseback. The paper noted that "mounted pirates will be something of an innovation," but added that the men were sure to be as adept in the saddle as they were on the decks of their buccaneering ship. In this first appearance, Ye Mystic Krewe behaved more like medieval knights than the eighteenth-century pirates from whom they descended.<sup>41</sup> The closing evening of the May Festival witnessed Gasparilla's coronation ball. The *Morning Tribune* labeled it the social highlight of the week and delighted in the royal court's display of pomp and pageantry. Descriptions of the parade and the ball dwelled on the ancient court dress and made no mention of piratical deeds. It seems that in the first year of the festival, King Gasparilla did not invade Tampa to pillage and plunder—he was merely on vacation.<sup>42</sup>

Despite proclamations of the May Festival's success, organizers scrapped the celebration the following year, and Tampa leaders focused their attention on the State Fair to be held in November 1905. The *Morning Tribune* depicted the festivities as becoming more opulent each year, and organizers promised the fair would eclipse anything before imagined. That year, organizers focused on displaying the prosperity of Tampa and the agricultural wealth of Florida. The fair, not without its amusement features, would benefit every soul in the state.<sup>43</sup> Dedicated to the untold wealth the future of Florida held, the president of Gulf Coast Railroad, Charles Brown, subverted the adage "see Naples and die," urging southerners to "see Florida and live."<sup>44</sup>

King Gasparilla was again to embark on his invasion of the city and effect his

<sup>38</sup> D'Ans, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>40</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 23, 1904.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, May 1, 1904.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, May 10, 1904.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, November 5, 1905.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, December 1, 1905.

“peerless pageant,” but *Tribune* writers still characterized the festival as an innocuous amusement. The Gasparilla Carnival was not even the only pageant of the fair, though all were employed to signal the state’s “era of prosperity.” As expected, all descriptions of the Gasparilla Carnival and its participants were couched in regal vocabulary.<sup>45</sup> Further, King Gasparilla’s coronation was only one of two balls to be held that year, and the event was still by invitation only.<sup>46</sup> An observer of the opening parade described His Majesty, who wore royal purple and carried the scepter of authority, as looking “the picture of a monarch.” His band of merry followers even staged a knightly tournament to entertain the crowds. In these first two years, not only were Tampa’s celebrations not about the Gasparilla Festival, but Gasparilla was not even about pirates.<sup>47</sup> The *Morning Tribune’s* summaries of the fair further noted the industrial parades and expositions, against which the knightly pageantry of Gasparilla must have seemed a ridiculous anachronism.<sup>48</sup>

In its first years, King Gasparilla appeared only during the opening parade and closing ball, and by 1906 the Gasparilla Carnival had become even more obscure. The *Morning Tribune* made no advance mention of any invasion, either royal or piratical. In fact, the opening parade was cut altogether. The fair’s committee decided the parade delayed other opening-day activities and distracted participants from the exhibit booths. The interests of all should have been assisting in making Florida “the greatest State south of the Mason Dixon line.”<sup>49</sup> Gasparilla was to have its own parade during the afternoon but would not be the focus of the day. Indeed, the *Morning Tribune* made clear that all could amuse themselves by observing the Gasparilla spectacle, but that they were then expected to attend the many agricultural and industrial exhibits.<sup>50</sup>

Gasparilla was still accompanied by a royal band, and in 1906 he arrived “without incident,” not in a pirate ship but rather in a “stately galleon.”<sup>51</sup> He was labeled the Carnival King, mildly transgressive but more benevolent and regal. For the first time, Gasparilla rode on a float, but he still carried his scepter of authority evoking the pleasant memory of a “modern Camelot.”<sup>52</sup> The coronation ball was still the most prominent social event of the season, and invitation was “absolutely essential for admittance.” The “kingly” invasion ended, and the Krewe returned to their distant home.<sup>53</sup> These first three years, the Gasparilla Krewe carried themselves with a royal demeanor, reflecting the exclusivity of their functions.

The first lapse in Gasparilla’s celebration occurred from 1907 to 1909.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., November 12, 1905.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., November 15, 1905.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., November 16, 1905.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., December 1, 1905.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., November 13, 1906.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., November 11, 1906.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., November 14, 1906.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., November 15, 1906.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., November 18, 1906.



*Tampa Bay History Center Collection, 1997.003.002*

The Gasparilla Krewe was still formulating its traditions when this photograph of a medieval jousting tournament was taken during the Gasparilla festivities in 1914. During this time, MKG could have just as easily stood for “Mystic Knights of Gasparilla”.

Lambright cryptically stated “various causes conspired to disband the organization.” Notably, Lambright admitted there was no auspicious local occasion to which the festival could have been connected during these years “to enlist its interest and prompt its activity.” It was not that Gasparilla was illegitimate, according to its proponents, but rather that there was merely nothing spectacular enough to warrant the king’s appearance. Again, Lambright ascribed to the festival an imaginary level of importance.<sup>54</sup> D’Ans proffers a different reason for Gasparilla’s hiatus in 1907, claiming it was a result of financial crisis due to the “Rich Man’s Panic” that depressed the nation’s economy. Either way, in these early years the festival clearly lacked the viability to exist on its own.<sup>55</sup>

The opportunity to stage another fete presented itself in 1910 with the Panama Canal Convention. As Tampa was deemed the closest adequate port to the canal, it was in the advantageous position of receiving the new commerce the construction would help produce. That year the knightly tournament was abandoned. Gasparilla the next year was part of a celebration of Tampa’s growth and magnificence. The census celebration, which marked Tampa as having the largest growth of any city east of the Mississippi River, provided the legitimizing opportunity for the appearance of

<sup>54</sup> Lambright, 55.

<sup>55</sup> D’Ans, 16.

Gasparilla. Clearly, the first ten years of the twentieth century had afforded Tampa great cause to celebrate.<sup>56</sup> The year 1911 was the first in which the Krewe arrived by ship. It was also the first year that the mayor would surrender the key to the city to Ye Mystic Krewe.<sup>57</sup> By the following year, the Krewe and their admiring onlookers would abandon their rigid adherence to courtly ritual and royal vocabulary and, possibly recognizing the arrival of modernity, would fashion more aggressive identities for themselves.

The year 1912 proved to be a turning point for Gasparilla. It was the first year the invaders of the city were continuously identified as pirates, and although the festival was a part of another celebration, George Washington's birthday, organizers acknowledged their active emulation of New Orleans and Mardi Gras. That year the "bloodthirsty" Krewe arrived under the Jolly Roger intent on capturing maidens and carrying them to their distant island. In fact, the outlaws would bodily take the city, as Tampa's mayor surrendered the golden key. The *Tribune* mentioned José Gaspar as the inspiration for the festival for the first time since Gasparilla's inception, signaling a rebirth for the pirate and the festival that bore his name.<sup>58</sup>

Pirate bands and pirate captains led the parade and carnival attractions. The coronation ball, originally the quintessence of royal excess, featured different decorations that year—electric lights and walls covered in skulls and crossbones. The *Tribune* labeled the costumes for the ball more splendid than any previous year. While Krewe members still wrote many of the articles for the *Morning Tribune*, it appears that the more the Krewe presented themselves as criminal pirates, the more popular the festival became.<sup>59</sup> Tampa's leaders even acknowledged that the festival had taken a darker turn and that the city itself was changing. At the ball, Tampa's mayor surrendered two sets of keys to the city, a gold key representing the city's joys and a black key to the city jail, meant to signify Tampa's own dark side.<sup>60</sup>

In 1913, the Gasparilla Festival witnessed another breakthrough. Realizing the importance of the festival, Tampa's merchants paved the way for a more "elaborate presentation." Desiring to further emulate Mardi Gras, merchants went on record stating they would assist Ye Mystic Krewe in implementing all its future plans. While their promises were vague, merchants for the first time acknowledged the significance of the festival and the need for its continuation.<sup>61</sup> The legitimation that Tampa's merchants afforded Gasparilla in 1913 would help transform the festival the next year and make the 1914 celebration a watershed moment for Gasparilla. Any hint of the festival's illegitimacy or the need to attach it to other celebrations vanished. It was the most important event, unrivaled by any other. That year, the *Tribune* mentioned

<sup>56</sup> Lambright, 55.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>58</sup> *Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 22, 1912.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, February 23, 1912.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, February 19, 1913.

Washington's birthday only to call attention to how incidental it had become, stating, "it will be marked by nothing more than the closing of banks and the city hall."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the 1914 festival was a rebirth for Gasparilla as a modern celebration. The *Tribune* also took care to publish the festival's mythical inspiration and its actual origins. The newspaper even featured a special border for Gasparilla Week—a one-eyed pirate with a cutlass in his teeth. Further, Krewe members grew more militant in their proclamations. The *Tribune* announced the "bloody crew," death's head flying, would arrive and capture the city, "putting to death all persons who dare resist [their] orders." Gasparilla was still a mighty monarch, this time reigning over a festival that "would not be second in point of brilliancy to even the world-famed Mardi Gras festivities." King Gasparilla would appear before the city's fathers demanding surrender, "with death and destruction as the alternative."

By 1914, organizers consciously abandoned royal terminology in favor of more piratical vocabulary as they self-consciously modernized the festival. Gasparilla was actively molding itself after and competing with Mardi Gras, as organizers used New Orleans artists to design parade floats. Like Mardi Gras, Gasparilla finally existed in its own right, occurring annually for the sake of itself. The *Tribune* estimated record-breaking attendance and great crowds of tourists. The paper even presented in a positive light the need for Pinkerton guards to control crowds, reporting that the guards had described the behavior of Tampa's citizens as "first-class." By 1914, Tampa's leaders appear to have recognized the need for a celebration that was exclusive to the city to boost its appeal as a tourist destination as they outlined their intentions for Gasparilla.<sup>63</sup> They aimed to please the people of Tampa while advertising the city and amusing its visitors.<sup>64</sup>

Meanwhile, Krewe members continued to project a frightening image. While complimenting Tampa and her brave citizens, they declared themselves prepared to "devastate; to kill; to burn and destroy," stating that they would demand the city's keys and her daughters. Pirates had taken over the visage of the Gasparilla Festival just as surely as they had taken over the city.<sup>65</sup> In mock relief, the *Morning Tribune* remarked that fortunately the Krewe had committed no acts of depredation in capturing the city.<sup>66</sup> At week's end, Ye Mystic Krewe staged their coronation ball, at which they still clung to regal imagery, thus inverting the Victorian paradigm of public respectability and private depravity. The Krewe's public face was the fearsome countenance of the bloodthirsty pirate; it was during their invitation-only coronation balls that members again behaved as royalty.<sup>67</sup>

The willingness of organizers to transform Gasparilla during its first few years

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., February 22, 1914.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., February 21, 1914.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., February 24, 1914.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., February 22, 1914.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., February 23, 1914.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., February 24, 1914.



Hillsborough County Collection, Tampa Bay History Center, 1996.051.378

Invading Tampa by sea was still new for Ye Mystic Krewe when this photograph was taken in 1914. Finding a suitable vessel for the invasion was a vexing problem for the pirate Krewe for forty years, until the acquisition of the current ship in 1953.

ensured it would remain viable for the next century and demonstrates that festival's sensitivity as a social indicator. In 2002, in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, one of the Gasparilla Krewes invited New York firefighters to ride the float of their patron saint, Saint Florian.<sup>68</sup> But cannons booming and guns ablaze had assumed new meaning after 2001, and, in light of that tragedy, the image of invasion by bloodthirsty pirates that the festival's organizers had so carefully cultivated over the past century may have added overtones more unsettling than lighthearted. In addition to the new vigilance against terrorism, officials dealt with their chronic concern with controlling the drunken, rowdy fans integral to the celebrations.<sup>69</sup> More ubiquitous than the Pinkertons of 1914, Tampa police and federal agencies stationed officers every ten feet along the parade route.<sup>70</sup>

Had Tampa's affair with pirates been permanently contaminated? Marcus Rediker argues that pirates indeed utilized terror to accomplish their goals—to obtain money, to inflict punishment, to exact revenge, and to instill fear in all who wished to resist them. And yet, pirates have become cultural heroes.<sup>71</sup> Had their image come full

<sup>68</sup> Amy Scherzer, "NY Firefighters Invited to Join 97th Gasparilla," *Tampa Tribune*, December 1, 2001.

<sup>69</sup> Kathy Steele, "Security a Focal Point of This Year's Gasparilla," *Tampa Tribune*, January 26, 2002.

<sup>70</sup> Amy Scherzer, "NY Firefighters."

<sup>71</sup> Rediker, 5.

circle, from terrorist to hero, back to terrorist again? If the festivities that marked Gasparilla's one-hundredth anniversary in 2004 and celebrated its continuing cultural significance are any indication, the answer is "no." The imagery of pirates in Gasparilla and the festival itself still truly resonate with Tampa's citizens and visitors alike.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Gasparilla's organizers, namely Ye Mystic Krewe, seemed to have recognized the need to democratize the festival and the legend of José Gaspar. Once the Krewe adopted representations of rough, criminal piracy, the festival evolved from merely an annual elite appropriation of public space to an active event that incorporated Tampa's citizens. Indeed, the 1991 controversy seems to have forced Ye Mystic Krewe to shed even more of its elements of hierarchy, secrecy, and exclusivity as the local festival was thrust into the national spotlight. In its first years in the early twentieth century, a period where festivals often fell by the wayside with variations in the economy or public opinion, the Gasparilla Festival proved itself a success, becoming the most popular public spectacle for perpetuating Tampa's growth and celebrating the city's prominence in Florida and the New South.