The Aftermath Effects on Culture in Florida by the Spanish-American War

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La libertad! La justicia! Santiago! Cuba libre! These were "gritos de guerro" or long distance war cries and distress signals of the Cubans that traveled across the ocean to reach Florida and the ears of many Americans. The Cubans wanted independence from Spanish rule that became quite oppressive because Spain was afraid of losing one of her last possessions in the New World and one of the last reminders of the once great Spanish Empire. Thus the Spanish became quite harsh and cruel to the rebels and American journalists wanted excitement so they created war where and when there was none.

When news reached the United States of these events many were sympathetic to their cause, which was similar to the American colonies with Britain, and they wanted to leap to Cuba’s aid. After the mysterious explosion of the battleship Maine, President William McKinley reluctantly asked for a declaration of war against the Spanish from Congress. Even though there is much debate whether the U.S.’s entry into the war was for the noble reasons of freedom and democracy, or for more selfish reasons such as the growing fever of imperialism, or just so the American business men and the American people could have something to do, the short war was one of the most glorious, well-fought, successful wars of United States history as the U.S. emerged as a world power, but much of the benefits of the war are more cultural than weight and strength.

UNIQUE MELTING POT

For the war was fought from Port Tampa in Florida which was closest to Cuba and of Spanish descent, and the Cuban immigrants that were a result of the war for independence brought with them a culture full of rich traditions that went into the making of Florida, more specifically in Tampa’s Ybor City. In Ybor City there is intermingling of cultures and the Spanish-Cuban element is another ingredient with rich flavoring that adds to the overall taste of the unique melting pot of the city.
and state within the even larger melting pot of the United States.

Florida was under Spanish rule before it became a part of the United States, so its Spanish heritage runs deep— in fact it was discovered by the Spanish conquistadors. At one time the Spanish Empire of Carlos V was the greatest military and political power among civilized men including many other vast areas of the New World (Lodge 2).

**MANY ARE PLEASED**

Many people viewed the Spanish-American War with great pleasure and joy that the last of the once-great Spanish Empire full of splendor and grandeur was being divided. For instance, one person’s opinion of Spain losing the war and territory to the U.S. is:

The final expulsion of Spain from the Americas and from the Philippines is the fit conclusion of the long strife between the people who stood for civil and religious freedom and those who stood for bigotry and tyranny as hideous in their action as any which have cursed humanity (Lodge 5).

These ill feelings towards Spain stemmed mainly from the Yellow Journalism created by the roving reporters or filibusters who flocked to Florida in search of adventures and exciting stories. These reporters flocked to Florida with or without assignments hoping to get Cubans to join insurgents in the field (Brown 64). These were the romantic escapades of danger and intrigue that added to the whole romantic allure of the war. The more famous accounts of overseas adventures to Cuba were those of the two filibusters Paine and McCready. They told of their secret expeditions on ships and special projects and missions (Brown 65-67). Another person who joined the excursions and recorded events was the famous novelist Stephen Crane, author of The Red Badge of Courage. Employed by the Bacheller Syndicate, Crane’s narrative relates his experiences aboard the ship Commodore, and life in an open boat (Brown 69-74).

"**OUTRAGEOUS" STORY**

In continuation of the effects of the war on Florida and Yellow Journalism Richard Harding Davis and Frederick Remington are two reporters to gain fame publicizing the Spanish atrocities mainly by General George Weyler "The Butcher." One outrageous story and picture of theirs is a picture of civilian women being brutally strip searched and abused by three male Spanish officers, but the truth was the search was conducted by one female Spanish officer without brutality (Brown 82). Therefore, Yellow Journalism was the start of furnishing news and stories where there are none. Later when Davis was interviewed on the subject he said skeptically that he:

Had been kept sufficiently long in Key West to learn how large a proportion of Cuban War news is manufactured on the piazzas of that town and or Tampa by utterly irresponsible newspapermen who accept every rumor that finds its way across the Gulf to the excitable Cuban cigarmakers of Florida and who pass these rumors on to some of the New York papers as facts and as coming direct from the field (Brown 82-83).

Speaking of Tampa, a town in Florida chosen for the central concentration point of the war, the effects were more lasting in its development and culture than on the state, because nothing in Tampa’s history approached the rush of publicity generated by the Spanish American War. Tampa was selected over Miami, Pensacola, and New
Orleans for its natural resources including rail and port facilities and its proximity to Cuba (Mormino, 114). The long channels and the bays made the area reasonably safe from being attacked by the Spanish Navy (Covington 3). During this time Tampa had to stage over some 30,000 troops for shipment to Cuba to wage war (Dunn 19). The fine hotel that served as headquarters for the Army brass was the Tampa Bay Hotel, built by Henry B. Plant.

**ROCKING CHAIR PERIOD**

This disproportionate structure in the middle of a city ankle deep in sand, and where the names of avenues are given to barren spaces of scrubby undergrowth and palmettos and pines hung with funeral moss” (Davis 32), was the setting for the best days of the war called the rocking chair period. This was the time of waiting and it was called the rocking chair period because all the soldiers gathered together to discuss the potentials of the war and just to socialize while rocking rhythmically on the wide sunny verandas of the big hotel. It was a leisurely period of meeting new and old acquaintances and a time to reflect which often isn’t given in war time on the piazzas of the hotel. "A place to meet old friends listen to good music and learn the latest gossip concerning the place in Cuba where the force would land" (Covington 4). But most of all it was a time for the army to shine and polish, to show off. The military group that outshines the rest was of course the cavalry unit called the Rough Riders who stayed in Tampa roughly a week but whose presence lives on.
The Rough Riders were commanded by Colonel Leonard Wood and assisted by the dynamic Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Roosevelt. The regiment was very special in its unusual and wide range of recruits. For instance, there was a Harvard quarterback, world class polo players, some genuine cowboys, a son of a Pawnee chief and maybe a few Democrats. The mascots of the Rough Riders included a mountain lion, an eagle and a dog named "Cuba" (Mormino). Roosevelt's horses were named "Rain in the Face" and "Texas," and all this caused Tampa's inhabitants and all the other soldiers to gaze spellbound at the spectacular cavalrymen. The children tried to imitate them and some of the young men tried to enlist but there were no more places left (Covington 4).

"YELLOW RICE BRIGADE"

One of the most memorable spectacular episodes involving the Rough Riders was "The Charge of the Yellow Rice Brigade," where they drove their glamour, skill, and friends - their horses, through the Las Novedades Restaurant's door. The good-natured owner Mendoza laughed and bought everyone a round of drinks on the house. Roosevelt describes his story in Tampa and the hotel: "Over in Tampa town the huge winter hotel was gay with general officers and their staffs, with women in pretty dresses, with newspaper correspondents by the score, with military attaches of foreign powers and with onlookers of all sorts, but we spent very little time there " (Roosevelt 132). Then on June 7th the future war hero and president along with his troops received orders to report to Port Tampa where the expedition to Cuba was to start the next morning. "The troop-ships were packed tight like sardines with poor rations and sheltering in the intense heat of the Tampa Harbor" (Roosevelt 135). Roosevelt describes these conditions and mentions their only form of amusement often indulged in was bathing over the side, and many men from the Far West had never seen the ocean before.

Thus, this is Tampa, the "cradle of Cuban liberty" (Mormino 114), and because of the war the public became eager to learn about the city known only for cigars. Tampa was criticized heavily for its semitropical horrors such as its rustic wild surroundings including mosquitos and alligators. Roosevelt himself remarked on the "pinecovered sand flats" where everything was in such an inextricable tangle. There was no one to meet them, tell them where to camp, or issue food for 24 hours and Roosevelt commented on the jam and confusion, but then again it's understood because the town and the port, like any of the others, was not prepared for the crowding and many other problems the war brought. Tampa also had semitropical charms like the hotel and many other natural fixtures that attracted the soldiers and others back to live after the war, thus creating a distinct town and culture. During the war Tampa attracted celebrated individuals who were devoted to the Cuban cause and preached to the factory workers. Among these were Jose Gomez Santayo, Ramen Rivero, and the brothers Elgio and Nestor Carbonel who organized movements. The Spanish General Martinez Campas cursed Tampa as "the very heart of the American conspiracy" (Mormino 112).

YBOR CITY ACTIVE

This statement is true; but if Tampa was the heart of the conspiracy, the very soul was in a little section of Tampa by the name of Ybor City. "War might be hell for soldiers
but it was heaven for businessmen" (Mormino 103). The Spanish-American was very profitable for almost all businessmen large and small from Henry B. Plant to the owners and founders of Ybor City. Don Vincente Martinez Ybor, Ignacio Haya, and Gavino Gutierrez recognized Tampa’s potential and financed its development into a cigar community. The three purchased the land and christened it Ybor City and watched the explosion of growth of the city especially during the Spanish-American War.

Ybor City had a variety of ethnic groups but the most prominent were the Cubans who were factory workers before the war, and then during the war many more escaped from Cuba and made their homeland in Ybor City; therefore this was the logical place to go in search of funds and support for "Cuban libre." This is precisely what Jose Marti, Apostle of Cuban Liberty, did making inspiring energetic moving speeches to the Cuban factory workers all over the city. The classic beginnings of one of his speeches is "Para Cuba que sufre la primera palabra" (for Cuba that suffers the first word) (Mormino 100). Marti’s tremendous success inspired nationalism and pride among the Cubans, that many gave a day’s earning or even enlisted to fight for their homeland’s freedom (Dunn 30).

"LA ROSA BLANCA"

Marti was also recognized for his literary works including the poem "La Rosa Blanca." Marti’s influence was so great on the people of the city there still stand many tributes to him. On the front door of Ybor Square is a bronze plaque that reads:

From these steps in the year 1893 Jose Marti, Apostle of Cuban Liberty, asked with eloquent words the Cuban tobacco worker emigres to aid him to win his country’s independence by furnishing men, arms, and money. Many of the workers ex-changed their cigar-making knives for machetes, others gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to the fight against the oppression of the people and to create a Republic of Cuba (Harner 27).

There Is also In Ybor City a park called the Park of the Friends of Jose Marti which is a salute to Cuba’s great liberator. The site is on the grounds of the family that gave refuge to Marti when Spanish assassins were pursuing him. There was also an attempt on Marti’s life by the Spanish people living In Ybor City who tried to poison him because of their anger at his presence and success.

"Ybor City is Tampa’s Spanish India ... What a colorful, screaming shrill turbulent world" (Mormino 96). Ybor City was, during the war, a chiaroscuro of hope and despair filled with new fortunes being made and tragic endings being reached. The community exuded romance and realism, an offering of sweetened cafe con leche and acrid cigar smoke a Tampa version of bread and roses" (Mormino 96). The romance and realism is provided by the colorful ethnic groups with their "tantalizingly" different customs and their unique "folkway" which is called "Latin." The Latin culture is composed of the Cubans, Spaniards, Italians, and a few Black Cubans, but the Cubans were the most numerous groups whose numbers reached over 3,000 in the city by the year 1900. This vast majority is due to many factors, such as the proximity of the island to Florida making immigration short, easy, and inexpensive. The Tribune even complained that the Cubans "come and go like blackbirds" (Mormino 98). Also because of the Cuban victorious end of the Spanish-American War many Cubans
returned to their homeland only to be disillusioned by the economic chaos and political embitterment instead of independence. Thus the Cubans returned to Tampa and were glad to get back to using their extraordinary talents into building a community which was their new home and the home of many generations of descendants.

**STILL CULTURAL CITY**

Ybor City . . . "A world within a city" is still the geographical and cultural center of Tampa today (Alvarez 4). Forgotten for years, Ybor City began to draw in people such as artists who are starting revitalization for the brick town. It recently celebrated its centennial or 100 year anniversary with its unique treasures and gifts overflowing. The artists opened galleries such as the Florida Center for Contemporary Art and the J. Lazzara Gallery (Alvarez 4). There are countless little specialty shops for browsers in search of rare and unique styles of art. These items include pottery, jewelry, air-brushed quilts, sculptures, and many other exquisite crafts to delight tourists. Other exclusive stores found in Ybor City are the clothing stores which have old-fashioned antique clothing to fun fashions, and even just plain weird! The established ones include: La France, Reminscence, and Uptown Treads and the name gives away what kind of clothing or "threads" (Alvarez 4).

The other cultural element and perhaps the most enjoyable element of Ybor City is the food. A restaurant already mentioned earlier, the Las Novedades, was of course famous for the Spanish (Cuban) dish arroz con pollo (rice with chicken) which many Floridians try to imitate but for some reason it just doesn’t taste the same. The rice is yellow from saffron and garnished with olives, green peas, and other delectables (Harrier 21). Another famous restaurant is the Columbia founded in 1905, which is one of Tampa’s principal tourist attractions. Decorated very elaborately with Spanish tiles, with Spanish entertainment including strolling violinists, and with the tremendous food, it makes for a romantic meal with elements of the past flair alive and unmatched anywhere. But don’t forget about the little eating cafes and shops like J.D.’s sandwich shop and many others which feature the Cuban sandwich (Harning 23). "Tampa’s Latin Loaf,” Cuban bread, was an invention of Juan Mori who was forced to convert the shape to make it more practical for the shortages during the war. Thus, Cuban bread was a child born of the revolution for Cuban freedom. Mori returned to Tampa with his own recipe for Cuban bread called Pan-cubano which is still popular to this day (Mormino 122). "Cuban bread is like no other loaf in the world. It is leavened with emotion, flavored with tradition, and eaten with a large helping of nostalgia." Many people have expressed pleasure in the taste of this bread from the famous Teddy Roosevelt (Covington 4) to Florida’s own governor Bob Graham (Alvarez 4).

**ASTOUNDING EFFECTS**

In conclusion, the Spanish-American War had astounding effects on the U.S., especially Florida, Tampa, and Ybor City. Listed they are: it enriched Tampa’s coffers, ended the Cuban revolution and renewed their commitment to building an immigrant community. Nationally, the war healed the wounds of the civil war uniting the nation and it fueled Roosevelt’s rise to the presidency. Internationally, America was in the position of world authority.
Also locally, Tampa’s role as an international center increased proportionally and Tampa was transformed into the "Queen City of the Gulf braced for the 20th century" (Mormino 128). But more important, this war left Florida with a heritage worthy of pride for all native Floridians and Tampans or descendants of the freedom fighters. It is a subject that has interested tourists and historians indefinitely. As long as people can walk through the brick streets of Ybor City visiting restaurants and cigar factories and looking at the University of Tampa, the former Tampa Bay Hotel, the past still lives combined with the present skyscrapers; and it is still easy to see the old soldiers rocking on the verandas of the hotel, the magnificent Rough Riders displaying their skills, and the eloquent Jose Marti inciting the Cuban workers into a frenzy of emotion and loyalty. This is the true spirit of Tampa for Americans everywhere alive eternally for all generations to believe in and experience for themselves.

**FOOTNOTES**


Dunn, Hampton. Senior Vice President of AAA Peninsula Motor Club. April 5, 1986. Tampa, FL. (Interview)


