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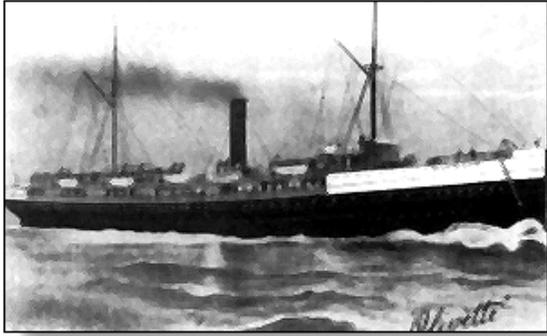
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# The *Olivette* and *Mascotte* of the Plant Steamship Line

By ARSENIO M. SANCHEZ



**Olivette**

A rise in population in Tampa from 750 in 1880 to 5,000 in 1887 was caused by two breakthroughs -- the arrival of Henry B. Plant's railroad in 1884, providing a cross-state link to the North, and the coming of the cigar industry in 1886, that initiated a tremendous economic development which totally transformed Tampa from a sleeping fishing village to a thriving industrial port city.<sup>1</sup>

The Plant Steamship Company's steamers *Mascotte* and *Olivette* began docking at Port Tampa in June, 1888. Prior to that time they had to anchor in Hillsborough Bay, cargoes and passengers being carried to and from the ship on smaller steamers. The *Olivette* was a 250-foot ship built under the supervision of Capt. James McKay, Jr., in Philadelphia and launched February 16, 1887. Captain McKay brought the vessel in April 29, 1887 [to Tampa] and thereafter served as her master. Incidentally the *Olivette* and

*Mascotte* were reportedly named by Plant after operas he liked.<sup>2</sup>

The Plant Investment Co. began its marvelous development of the West Coast with Henry Bradley Plant determined to outdo Flagler on the East Coast, and of course, the rivalry was beneficial for Florida.

To meet the growing demand for steamer accommodations between Port Tampa and Havana, Henry Plant in March, 1892 put both the *Olivette* and *Mascotte* on the run for full time, each making two trips per week.<sup>3</sup>

During the war for Cuban independence from Spain, there was an embargo imposed by Gen. Weyler on exportation of goods, mainly tobacco on Cuban ships. "In an attempt to stop the flow of money and munitions from Tampa, the Spanish General "Butcher" Weyler early in 1896 declared an embargo on tobacco exports from Cuba to the United States, hoping to force the cigar factories to shut down."<sup>4</sup> Ten days were granted in which to get supplies, and every available ship chartered immediately.

... Vincent Martinez Ybor and other leading manufacturers rose to the emergency and persuaded H. B. Plant to send the *Olivette* and *Mascotte* to Havana before the embargo deadline and bring back enough tobacco to keep their factories running. The ships brought in tremendous cargoes, with even their staterooms being piled high with Havana leaf. The cigar industry was saved.<sup>5</sup>



**Mascotte**

Survivors from the *Maine* were brought home on the *Olivette* on March 28, 1898. A large crowd went to Port Tampa to greet them. On April 17th, the *Mascotte* brought more than 900 refugees from Cuba. She also brought back wounded soldiers after the Spanish-American War started.<sup>6</sup>

The steamships *Olivette* and *Mascotte* covered the run between Port Tampa and Havana for twenty-five years, before the *Olivette* was wrecked and went ashore near Havana on Friday, January 7, 1918 during a storm. It was a complete loss.<sup>7</sup>

The cigar manufacturers experienced difficulties in the transportation line, after the loss of the *Olivette*. Her place had been

taken by an older and much smaller ship between Tampa and Key West only, making it necessary to transfer all freight and passengers at Key West to the steamer *Miami*, which made the run between Key West and Havana. This caused much delay and annoyance.<sup>8</sup>

In October 1927, the Plant Steamship Co. was making only one tobacco shipment a week from Cuba arriving in Tampa on Wednesday. The cigar factories were seriously inconvenienced by the lack of service, for they not only had to wait a whole week between shipments, but when it all came on one ship, the government tobacco examiners, the customs house and the customs house brokers were all rushed in



Tampa City Seal, reprinted by permission of the City of Tampa

an effort to take care of this supply of tobacco. The best they could do was to get through within three to four days after the ship arrived.

As a result of a protest made by Val M. Antuono, maker of C. H. S. Cigars, through the traffic department of the Tampa Board of Trade, cigar manufacturers of Tampa were able to receive two shipments of tobacco a week from Havana instead of one.

In March 1927, the picture of a ship with the name *Mascotte* on the seal of the City of Tampa was questioned. The seal of the City of Tampa, was considered the most widely known municipal seal in the world. City Clerk William E. Duncan said the seal was wrong and should be changed. Every cigar box made in Tampa since 1895 had borne an imprint of Tampa's seal, and Duncan said it must be admitted there was an awful lot of erroneous information spread over the world.

The *Mascotte* once was a ship of some importance plying between Port Tampa and

Havana. Tampa as a port was of no importance at that time, but the citizens of the community had dreams of the day when Tampa would have a port, and especially of the day when the *Mascotte* would steam up the channel to dock in Tampa.

That time never came. Time passed, and with the succeeding years Tampa became a port, but the *Mascotte* became old and worm-eaten, roach-ridden and green with age. She gave way to more pretentious ships, and all City Clerk Duncan knew, had ended her existence on unfriendly rocks. What he objected to was that the ship depicted on the bottom of every cigar box made in the City of Tampa -- and that meant about 10,000,000 boxes every year -- was a ship that never had anything to do with the City of Tampa.

Moreover, the ship on the seal of Tampa is pictured as a sailing ship, when in reality the *Mascotte* was a steamship.

Although the old city clerk whose name appeared on the cigar boxes had gone to his maker, the man who was responsible for the idea was still the most active leader in Tampa's cigar industry. He was Henry L. Leiman, of the Tampa Box Co. In Mr. Leiman's office hung the letter of authority to use the seal, obtained from the Tampa City Council in 1895.<sup>9</sup>

Following the death of Henry Plant, the holdings of the Plant Investment Co. at Port Tampa were purchased by the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad and affiliates.

The steamship lines started by Plant were acquired by the P & O Steamship Company which operated the steamers *Cuba* and *Governor Cobb* between Port Tampa and Havana until World War II.<sup>10</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, July 2, 1987

<sup>2</sup> Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa: A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg, 1950), 186-187

<sup>3</sup> *The Tobacco Leaf*, March 9, 1892

<sup>4</sup> Grismer, *Tampa*, 206.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>7</sup> *U. S. Tobacco Journal*, January 10, 1918

<sup>8</sup> *The Tobacco Leaf*, March 7, 1918

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, March 19, 1927

<sup>10</sup> Grismer, *Tampa*, 302.

*All photographs are from the Arsenio M. Sanchez Collection.*