2018


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Patrick Cosby

No single institution symbolized Ybor City more than the cigar industry. Ybor City had been founded in the 1880s when Vicente Martinez Ybor and Ignacio Haya moved their factories to Tampa. Through the early part of the twentieth century, the cigar industry supported a thriving Latin culture in Ybor City and established Tampa as America's premier cigar manufacturing city. The Great Depression and the Second World War, however, proved to be crucial turning points for the fortunes of the cigar industry. Though many prospered during the war with lucrative government and military contracts, the post-war period saw cigar manufacturers seeking new strategies to combat shifts in lifestyle and consumption patterns.

During the war, the cigar industry boomed as the government purchased large quantities of cigars for the U.S. military. Stanford Newman of Cleveland's Standard Cigar Company, which opened a mechanized factory in Ybor City in 1953, recalled that the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps requisitioned nearly half of all the cigars produced by the Standard Cigar Company while regular retail outlets faced rationing. The government demanded that cigar manufacturers "pack the cigars in huge wooden crates, which were waterproofed by lining them with tarpaper [and] painted with color-coded stripes" to distinguish them as luxuries rather than essential foodstuffs or munitions.

In 1945, Tampa's cigar industry produced 527,886,000 cigars, more than 10 percent of the total number of cigars produced in the entire United States. Though machines had first been introduced in Ybor City during the 1930s, during the war years factories produced primarily high quality, hand-rolled cigars. Only 8,322,575 cigars were of a cheaper, machine-made variety. Contrastingly, Ybor City produced 12,562,450 class D cigars retailing for 8.08 each, 19,787,043 class E cigars for 8.15 each, 6,228,050 class F cigars for 8.20 apiece, and 9,455,280 cigars selling for more than 8.20 each. As the war ended, skilled artisans still dominated Ybor City's labor force.

Along with cigars, the federal government also purchased large quantities of inexpensive, machine-made cigarettes for American GIs. Cigarettes had become so popular with the American troops that many servicemen continued smoking after the war, creating a huge demand for cigarettes, at the expense of other tobacco products such as cigars and chewing tobacco. In September 1946, William Wightman, the Post Commander of the Clearwater, Florida, American Legion Post, even drew up a resolution for state and national legislatures asking for tax-free cigarettes for veterans.

American society at large associated tobacco use almost exclusively with cigarette consumption. Such associations even reached absurd proportions when one pet owner in California preferred that his dog smoke cigarettes rather than consume other forms of tobacco. Butch, the forty-five pound Dalmatian, habitually assaulted people smoking and devoured their tobacco,
“fiery ash and all.” Butch’s owner, Bill Hill, eventually purchased an aluminum cigarette holder and taught the dog to smoke cigarettes. Butch smoked six cigarettes each day, and, Hill added, “the dog also likes beer.”

Unfortunately for the cigar workers of Ybor City, cigars failed to achieve the same levels of post-war popularity. After the war, the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps attempted to return millions of cigars, which the military had stockpiled since 1942, to the Standard Cigar Company. The company’s president refused, however, replying that the cigars had become “so old and dried.” In Ybor City, the Perfecto Garcia and Brothers Cigar Company incinerated a total of 500,000 cigars that had been contracted for sale to the U.S. Navy. The company burned as many as 59,000 high quality long filler cigars in May of 1947. Ostensibly, company executives claimed to be protecting the brand name’s reputation by assuring a high level of quality, though burning the cigars secured one week’s worth of work for 900 of the company’s employees. The Perfecto Garcia and Brothers factory represented one of only four factories operating at full employment in the summer of 1947.

The cigar industry faced particularly difficult times in 1947. A prolonged slump had struck the industry in January and was predicted to last at least through November. Through the first fiscal quarter of 1947, the production of all classes of high quality cigars had decreased significantly from production levels in 1946. Production of class D cigars decreased from 48,500,000 in 1946 to 41,000,000 in 1947. Class E cigars fell from 62,000,000 to 33,400,000, class F from 14,000,000 to only 3,700,000. The highest class of cigars, class G cigars worth more than $.20 each, were reduced from a 1946 level of 30,000,000 to 19,250,000 in 1947. Only the production of inexpensive,
machine-made class C cigars increased, from 23,000,000 in 1946 to 25,200,000 in 1947. The cigar industry slump in 1947 forced many companies to lay off many of the older, skilled cigar workers. Between December 1, 1946, and April of 1947, 5,561 cigar workers claimed state unemployment benefits from the Florida Industrial Commission's claims division. From the state agency, unemployed workers received $15 per week for sixteen weeks. By July, nearly 1,800 cigar workers had exhausted their eligibility for government assistance. Additionally, 2,000 to 3,000 cigar workers who had lost their jobs in 1946 still lacked permanent employment and few job prospects appeared for the foreseeable future.

As unemployment figures mounted for the cigar industry, city and state government officials began searching for ways to alleviate the pressure on Ybor City's workers. Few anticipated that the cigar industry would recover on its own. Projections indicated that the industry would have needed to produce and sell at least eighty percent of the sales totals from 1946, a heroic feat that would have required "a decided increase in demand." Additionally, cigar companies increasingly sought to increase the production levels of only the more marketable, lower class cigars that were made by machines rather than the hand-rolled cigars made by skilled workers. Such efforts sustained the cigar companies but failed to assist thousands of unemployed cigar workers. A Florida Industrial Commission report predicted that Ybor City would face a serious employment crisis "if the transition from hand-made to machine cigars results in any further substantial lay off of cigar workers."

One observer concluded that the unemployment situation in 1947 might have been more severe than in 1940, when 15,126 people were unemployed in Tampa, though 7,655 of those received government assistance through various New Deal government-funded projects. In an effort the confront the unemployment crisis, Tampa Mayor Curtis Hixon and city officials hoped to attract new industries to the area using the large, unemployed, skilled labor force as an enticement. However, most cigar workers had only worked in the cigar industry and would require expensive retraining to begin working in other industries. Additionally, 33 percent of the unemployed workers were older than 50 years of age and 40 percent had worked in the cigar industry for more than 25 years. Only 11 percent were younger than 30 years old. Though the city of Tampa attracted some new industries, particularly shipping industries, manufacturing companies would have had to address the issue of an aging, narrowly skilled labor force when contemplating an expensive move to Tampa or Ybor City.

By 1951, the cigar industry employed only 5,000 workers. Before mechanized production systems came to Ybor City, the industry had supported 12,072 workers in 1929. Ybor City's cigar companies could maintain a near monopoly on the highest classes of cigars because the costs associated with producing them by hand prohibited new companies from pursuing that consumer segment of the cigar market. The market for such high quality cigars remained small and unpredictable, however, and many companies chose to stabilize their profits by producing larger quantities of inexpensive cigars using machinery rather than expensive, skilled cigar workers. In the same amount of time that it would have taken a worker to roll 100 cigars by hand, a machine could produce as

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Both men and women are shown rolling cigars by hand in a factory. (Photograph courtesy Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.)

many as 1,589 lower class cigars.

Increased mechanization helped Ybor City's cigar manufacturers maintain high output levels. According to one veteran reporter, however, the departure of two factories, the Regensburg and La Primadora Factories, in early 1951 was "proof to the Cigar City that all [was] not well." Combined, the two factory closures left 750 workers unemployed. The La Primadora factory at 2408 17th St. had been operating in Ybor City for more than 50 years and had been one of the city's four largest cigar factories, employing 480 cigar makers. The company planned to move its factory to Coplay, Pennsylvania, in order to be closer to markets in the northeast, though company official Henry M. Hafer claimed that the company also decided to move because they wanted "to make cigars under modern methods."

By 1953, one cigar company actually decided to relocate their operations to Ybor City. The Standard Cigar Company opened in June 1953. The factory, however, focused on producing machine-made cigars. More than 800 unemployed cigar makers, many former employees of the Regensburg factory that had closed in 1951, sought jobs in the new Standard factory. All of the job applicants were fifty years old or older, and many were in their eighties. Unfortunately, almost none could operate a machine.

While workers suffered unemployment as machines replaced them in the factories, the cigar industry as a whole, along with other tobacco products, faced additional challenges during the early 1950s. Consumer demand for tobacco products declined as the public became aware of the health risks associated with tobacco use. Even cigarettes suffered a 6.4 percent decline in consumption over the two-year period from 1953-1954. The cigarette industry responded by reintroducing filter tip cigarettes that presumably trapped nicotine and tar from the cigarette smoke. In 1952, 1.5 percent of cigarettes contained filters. By 1956, 30 percent contained filters and by 1958 that percentage had jumped to 46 percent of all cigarettes. Cigarette advertisements from the early 1950s promoted supposed scientific proof that filtered cigarettes were safe and mild. The Lucky Strike brand claimed that "scientific tests prove Lucky Strike is the mildest of six major brands," while Camel surveyed 113,597 people and concluded that "More Doctors Smoke Camels Than Any Other Cigarette." The Herbert Tareyton brand offered cork tip filters for "discriminating people."
By 1955, Winston cigarettes boasted a new, exclusive filter that “works so effectively, yet lets the full rich tobacco flavor come right through.” Unlike cigarettes, which could be profitable in milder forms, cigars depended upon a full, rich flavor. While cigarette manufacturers developed filters that offered some protection against health risks, yet still provided full tobacco flavor, cigar makers found few answers to public health concerns. As advertisers competed to establish which cigarette brands were mildest or most innovative, a 1951 newspaper advertisement invited people “to smoke HAV-A-TAMPA cigars – or any other Good Tampa made cigar [italics in original].”

The ability to use filters on cigarettes enabled cigarette manufacturers to weather the small storm caused by the growing public awareness of tobacco’s health risks and contributed to the further dominance of cigarettes over cigars in the American marketplace. Ybor City’s cigar manufacturers responded to the decreasing market share by lowering production costs through further mechanization and by focusing their efforts on producing greater quantities of inexpensive, lower class cigars. In 1955, cigar officials contemplated using a new type of binder that “made it possible to use damaged tobacco rather than just whole leaves.” Though few thought the new innovation would become dominant in Ybor City since it could not be used to make higher-class cigars, cigar companies demonstrated a willingness to explore new technologies to decrease costs and increase efficiency at the expense of quality.

With the shift to mechanized production, Ybor City’s cigar factories produced approximately two million cigars daily by 1960. The skilled, Latin cigar maker, however, had become a dying breed. In 1955 the Tampa Jaycees held a contest to find the oldest employed cigar worker in Ybor City. The Latin cigar workers and the cultural identity they contributed to the community in Ybor City would soon be gone, with no one to replace them. As the older generation of skilled cigar workers aged and the industry became increasingly mechanized, many young Latins returning to Ybor City after World War II sought opportunities outside of the declining cigar industry and outside of the boundaries of Ybor City.

On the eve of the Cuban Revolution, and the United States embargo that would severely limit the supply of tobacco from the island, Ybor City’s cigar industry had already changed drastically in the decade and a half
Cigar manufacturing required fewer skilled workers as machines became more common in Tampa during the 1930s. Women are the only workers shown in this 1950s photograph of cigars being machine made. (Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.)

that followed World War II. Cigar companies had shifted from hand-rolled cigars to mechanized production, forcing older, skilled cigar makers into unemployment lines and forcing a younger generation of Latinos to explore new industries and jobs outside Ybor City with its rich history and traditions. While Ybor City had once supported a thriving Latin culture centered on cigar manufacturing, residents of the neighborhood fled to new careers, new homes and new lifestyles in suburbia, leaving Ybor City vulnerable to bulldozers and the ravages of urban renewal. Although a new Ybor City may rise, the era of skilled artisans hand-rolling cigars in Ybor’s brick factories came to an end.

ENDNOTES

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4. “Ask Tax-Free Cigarettes For Veterans,” Tampa Morning Tribune, 8 September 1946.
10. Holmes Alexander, “3000 Jobless Cigar Workers


16. Ibid.


20. Ibid., 82-91.


23. Ibid., 5 June 1951.


27. *Tampa Daily Times*.