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A CENTENNIAL HISTORY OF YBOR CITY
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FROM THE EDITORS

This special issue of *Tampa Bay History* is devoted entirely to Ybor City which was founded a century ago. Originating as a separate town based on the cigar industry, Ybor City was quickly incorporated into Tampa’s political boundaries, but the immigrant community long remained a city within a city. Prior to the boom sparked by the arrival of the cigar industry in 1886, Tampa had fewer people than either Cedar Key or Key West. The influx of Cuban, Afro-Cuban, Spanish and Italian immigrants put Tampa on the map and made it, in the words of Tony Pizzo, “a cracker town with a Latin accent.”

This centennial history of Ybor City examines why Latins came to Tampa and what impact they had on the area. The articles, personal recollections and photographs that make up this special issue represent the most complete overview of Ybor City’s history currently available in a single volume. Beginning with the story of the founding of Ybor City and Tampa’s cigar industry, the articles cover the evolution of the Cuban and Afro-Cuban communities, the role of local cigarworkers in the struggle for Cuban independence, the growth of immigrant clubs and the nature of strikes by cigarworkers. The issue concludes with the recollections of several Ybor City natives, including Al Lopez, Tony Pizzo and Jose Yglesias, who recall in personal terms what this unique community means to them. Although some of this material has appeared previously, it is reprinted in this collection of primarily original articles to present a lasting record of how Ybor City was viewed at the time of its centennial.

The documented history of Ybor City and Tampa’s cigar industry is far from complete. We trust that this centennial history will encourage others to help fill in the gaps that remain. Readers with roots in Ybor City can assist in this effort. The editors of *Tampa Bay History* would welcome hearing from anyone with pictures or other material related to the history of Ybor City and its residents in order to preserve such items for future generations. In addition, people who lived or worked in Ybor City are encouraged to call or write us about possible interviews based on their memories of the community, especially for the period before World War II.

Readers familiar with *Tampa Bay History* will recognize that this special issue differs in focus and length from our usual format. We hope that doubling the size of the issue will compensate for any narrowing of the subject matter. The next issue will return to the original format and contain articles on Odet Philippe, cowmen in south Florida, and St. Petersburg women at the turn of the century, as well as book reviews, announcements and a photo essay on life along the Gulf coast during World War I.

New readers interested in receiving future issues of *Tampa Bay History* are invited to consult the subscription information on page 176.
The Ybor City office of Burgerts, the family of Tampa photographers responsible for many of the historic photographs used in this issue.

Photograph (c. 1919) courtesy of Florida State Archives.
LATIN ENTREPRENEURS AND THE BIRTH OF YBOR CITY

by L. Glenn Westfall

Tampa in 1880 was a sleepy fishing village with less than 1,000 residents. Located on the Gulf coast, it was relatively isolated from the rest of Florida. A stagecoach line connected the town with Dade City, then known as Tuckertown, but Tampa was most easily reached by water until the railroad arrived. In 1883, Henry Brady Plant initiated construction of the South Florida Railway which originally terminated in Sanford where passengers could make a connection to Tampa by stagecoach. The railroad was instrumental in changing Tampa from a small village into the leading manufacturing center of Florida by 1900.

While Tampa was still in its infancy, Key West had become a leading cigar manufacturing city after the arrival of thousands of Cubans who fled a civil war in 1868. The island community was quickly transformed into a prosperous port city when cigarworkers and manufacturers brought an economic bonanza. Cuban cigars had always enjoyed an enviable reputation among connoisseur smokers throughout the world, but a high tariff on Cuban cigars (but not on tobacco leaf) made the imported cigar too expensive for the average smoker in the United States. After 1868, light-colored Cuban tobacco leaf was shipped in large quantities to Key West, where skilled Cuban artisans hand rolled it into their famous product, known as clear Havana cigars. This soon revolutionized the smoking habits and tastes of Americans. Most of Key West’s cigar manufacturers were Spanish or Cuban natives, and many maintained business offices for worldwide distribution in New York City.

Before a disastrous Key West labor strike in 1885, Latin businessmen residing in New York frequently traveled to Key West for business and pleasure. While some traveled the all-water route down the Atlantic, others preferred to make the journey as far as they could on land. Before Plant’s South Florida Railway was constructed to Tampa, a rail line running terminated at Cedar Key, some 100 miles north of Tampa. Passengers completed the trip to Key West on boats, and some stopped occasionally in Tampa. When the railroad reached Sanford, passengers could shorten the water route to Key West by riding the train to Sanford, taking a tiresome, rough ride by coach to Tampa, where they boarded a steamer to the Keys. However, the railroad line did not connect with Tampa until August 20, 1885. Early visitors to Tampa were impressed with the beauty and serenity of the village.

Three of these visitors, two Cubans and a Spaniard by birth, became responsible for initiating Tampa’s transformation into a thriving community. Bernardino Gargol was a native Cuban who lived in New York where he headed a successful import business. From his Cuban factory, he shipped jellies and preserves made from the tropical guava fruit. Gavino Gutiérrez, a Spaniard by birth and a civil engineer by training, also resided in New York where he was involved in various enterprises, including imports and liquors. The third Latin, Eduardo Manrara, was born in Cuba. He had become acquainted with cigar manufacturer Don Vicente Martinez Ybor in Havana, and later joined the Ybor firm after it opened offices in New York and a factory in Key West.
West. Manrara, twenty-seven years younger than Ybor, was the financial organizer and administrator of the Ybor enterprise. He was placed in charge of the “El Príncipe de Gale” factory in Key West, and he frequently traveled from the New York office to Florida to oversee management and production. Manrara did not like traveling by water since he easily became seasick so he avoided the Atlantic connection to Key West whenever possible. He preferred to go by train to Cedar Key, and from there by boat to Key West. When the Plant railroad was extended to Sanford, Manrara took that route since it shortened the distance he had to travel by water.

While on route to and from Key West, Manrara had the opportunity to become acquainted with Tampa. Allegedly Manrara’s frequent visits led to the belief that guava trees were abundant in Tampa and the surrounding area. When Bernardino Gargol heard these rumors, he envisioned producing guava products in the United States. He decided to visit Tampa and convinced his close friend and associate, Gavino Gutiérrez, to join him on the trip. Since Gargol did not speak English, Gutiérrez was to act as interpreter on the journey.
In the latter part of 1884, the two men came to Tampa in search of guava trees. None of the local residents knew anything about such trees, but they directed the two Latins to a village called Peru, along the banks of the Alafia River, south of Tampa. After a two-hour journey by steamer from Tampa, Gargol and Gutiérrez arrived at Peru, five miles up the mouth of the river, but to their dismay the search was fruitless. Returning to Tampa, they made plans to sail to Key West, but before embarking they decided to look around. They were impressed with the serenity and beauty of the area. Gargol felt that Tampa had great potential as a port, while Gavino, Gutiérrez, an avid lover of the outdoors, was enthralled with the abundant wild game. Gutiérrez was especially impressed and enthusiastically discussed the idea of returning to Tampa, building a residence, a dream which he later fulfilled.

The adventurers departed next for Key West where they proceeded to the house of Don Vicente Martínez Ybor who was entertaining their friend, Ignacio Haya. Haya, founder of the
New York-based firm Sanchez and Haya, frequently visited Key West for both business and pleasure. On this particular occasion, Haya and Ybor were discussing the growing threats of organized cigarworkers whose unions crippled production as strikes became more frequent. Haya was so concerned with labor disruptions that he had already dispatched his associate, Serafin Sanchez, to search for possible locations to open branch factories. Ybor had already been forced to close an unsuccessful venture when cigar production at his “El Coloso” factory in New York was interrupted by strikes. He also confronted labor hostility in Key West, and he, too, wanted to move to a location where labor was not organized. The two factory owners were undoubtedly influenced by other manufacturers who were forming company towns, away from the crowded cities, as a means of accelerating production and limiting union influence. Ybor and Haya had sent inquiries to Galveston, Mobile, and Pensacola, expressing interest in possibly locating in one of those cities. Although he had earlier learned about Tampa from Edward Manrara, Don Vicente had not yet given it serious consideration as a possible location for a branch factory.

When Gutiérrez and Gargol arrived in Key West, they were warmly greeted by Haya and his host, Ybor. Gutiérrez explained their unsuccessful search for guava trees and their discovery of Tampa. Don Vicente again heard Tampa described in glowing details as Gutiérrez chattered endlessly about its primitive beauty, abundant wild game and potential as a port city. The more reserved Gargol reviewed the economic promise of the area, and the conversation soon excited the interests of all four men. They quickly decided that a visit to Tampa was in order. If what Gutiérrez and Gargol said was true, Haya and Ybor envisioned the area as the best choice to open new factories.

The four entrepreneurs boarded the next available ship leaving for Tampa and arrived at dawn the next day. A trip around the area convinced Haya and Ybor that its conditions were ideal for cigar production. The climate was warm, and Tampa was near Cuba so that tobacco could be easily imported. Moreover, the soon-to-be completed Plant railroad would give Tampa a more strategic location for market distribution. Although the town had few local laborers available for cigarmaking, Haya and Ybor did not consider this a serious problem since they believed the location would attract workers. The two manufacturers hoped that in the new surroundings cigarworkers would be happier and that perhaps labor unions would have less influence. Although Haya and Ybor did not plan a company town when they first visited Tampa, they soon decided that such an operation might have certain advantages since this isolated area had plenty of land available and a climate that would make it attractive to Latin workers.

The four men returned to Key West, elated over the visit. After Gutiérrez and Gargol returned to New York, Ybor and Haya again wrote their associates about the potential of Tampa. Manrara was delighted with the letter he received as he had already tried to convince Ybor of the economic potential of Tampa. Manrara had been convinced for several years that a branch factory there would be advantageous to the firm. It held great promise as an excellent business venture, and it would also end his hated voyages to Key West by water.

Haya had also written his associate Serafin Sanchez about Tampa. Sanchez had earlier been told about Tampa by Gutiérrez who explained that plenty of land was available and that “chickens which sold in Key West for seventy-five cents could be bought in Tampa for twenty-five.” Since Sanchez was already scouting for possible factory locations, he added...
Tampa to his itinerary, arriving in mid-July, 1885. After looking over the area, he met with the newly created Tampa Board of Trade and outlined the ways it “could facilitate their enterprise and asked for such cooperation, which the Board assured him would be cordially given.”

Tampans were elated over the possibility of bringing a new industry into the area. The local Tampa paper stated: “The benefits that would inure to Tampa from the establishment of such an industry cannot be too deeply impressed on our citizens. The firm of Sanchez and Haya employs 125 cigar makers and can give employment to any number of little boys and girls as strippers.” (Strippers were the workers who removed the stems from tobacco leaves.) The Board of Trade offered the second floor of Miller and Henderson’s stable for use as a cigar factory rent-free, but Sanchez refused the offer since there were no available workers. Returning to New York, Sanchez wrote Haya and Ybor in Key West and asked them to return to Tampa and begin negotiations for land to build factories and workers’ homes.

By September, 1885, Haya and Ybor were in Tampa for their second visit. After first examining the Bradenton area, Don Vicente selected forty acres northeast of Tampa which had a fresh water well. This tract of land, had been purchased a few months earlier by Captain John T. Lesley, who was a member of the Board of Trade. Other members, including William S. Henderson, Thomas Carruth, and Thomas Spencer, were willing to sell their land, but Ybor was only interested in the Lesley property. Nevertheless, he rejected Lesley’s asking price of $9,000
for the tract, knowing that Lesley had purchased it for $5,000 a few months earlier. Intimating that they might locate their operations in another community, Ybor and Haya left the meeting. Later, as they were walking down Washington Street on their way back to their hotel, they stopped at the store owned by Colonel William Henderson, who had become a friendly acquaintance. When Don Vicente told Henderson about their decision to leave Tampa, the colonel became very alarmed. Ybor’s scare tactic worked. Realizing the economic potential which the cigar industry had for the future of Hillsborough County, Henderson was determined to do everything he could to keep Haya and Ybor in Tampa. He pleaded with the visitors to remain in town a few more days so that the Board of Trade could arrange a way for them to get Lesley’s land at an agreeable price.  

When the board reconvened in an emergency meeting on October 5, 1885, a compromise was worked out. Ybor would pay Lesley’s price of $9,000, but he would receive a subsidy of $4,000 from the board. The Board of Trade also apparently promised to assure labor peace. With the agreement sealed and everyone seemingly satisfied, plans were soon underway to construct Ybor’s cigar factory and town.  

At first, Haya had remained in the background, but he soon purchased land adjacent to Ybor’s and started his own cigar factory. Although Haya was one of the original founders of the cigar industry in what was to be called Ybor City, the honor of naming the new business community went to Ybor.

Ybor did not immediately announce whether he intended to construct a complete company town or simply a pilot factory northeast of Tampa. Judging from the amount of land he purchased, it seems as though he intended to begin a small factory and if it succeeded to expand production. Ybor still maintained his “El Príncipe de Gales” operation in Key West while the first structure was being built on the outskirts of Tampa. He even considered expanding his Key West business by attempting to purchase an extension of land called “La Saline” in Monroe County, but he gave up that idea because the price was too high. The disillusionment over not purchasing the Saline land was minimized by a more catastrophic event. On April 1, 1886, a devastating fire in Key West destroyed many buildings, including Ybor’s factory. Had he been able to purchase the Saline land, perhaps he would have rebuilt in Key West. However, Don Vicente decided to leave the island community and transfer all of his operations to his Tampa site. He was sixty-eight years old when he began building a factory and laying out a town which was to make Tampa one of the leading cities of the South.

Although Ybor did not have an elaborate master plan for Ybor City in the beginning, he quickly developed one. He was influenced by the trend in some American industries for manufacturers to develop their own functional communities. These company towns, constructed to support the operations of a single company, included homes for workers and commercial buildings. George Pullman had established such a town in Illinois, and it served as a model for other businessmen. Although Ybor’s planned community was not on the massive scale of Pullman’s settlement, it was developed with the hope of providing a good living and working environment so that cigarworkers would have fewer grievances against owners. Both Ybor and Haya had purposefully selected land outside the community of Tampa. Characteristic of other company towns, this isolation allowed Haya and Ybor to exercise greater control over the lives
of his workers—primarily Cubans and Spaniards who were later joined by Italians.\textsuperscript{23} Both manufacturers had earlier mentioned that their only problem in moving to Tampa was finding a source of labor. Now they felt that the cost of living, lower than that in large cities and Key West, would induce workers to move to Ybor City.

Ybor hired Gavino Gutiérrez as a civil engineer to survey the land and to oversee construction. Workers and supplies came first from Savannah.\textsuperscript{24} Ybor was so anxious to start that he initiated construction even before he received his $4,000 from the Board of Trade, and work began on October 8, 1885. Land was first cleared so that Gutiérrez and his surveyors could divide the property into plots for sale. Don Vicente quickly added to his original forty acres by purchasing more land from John Lesley, Stephen M. Sparkman, Thomas Spencer, and he also bought land from Gavino Gutiérrez who had secured it earlier. In addition, Ybor purchased an adjoining fifty acres which ran from Tampa Heights to the edge of the Hillsborough Bay.\textsuperscript{25} The first city plan gave numerical designations to streets running north and south; those running east and west were named after states of the union. Later, most streets and avenues were given numbers.\textsuperscript{26} Haya likewise purchased large tracts of land.

\textbf{“Bird’s eye view of the City of Tampa” in about 1892 with the heart of the original city to the left along the Hillsborough River and Ybor City to the right.}

Photograph courtesy of L. Glenn Westfall.
Considerable changes occurred in the original terrain during the development of Ybor City. The northern lands were high, palmetto covered sands, surrounded to the east and west by forests. To the south were swampland marshes which drained into Tampa Bay. Wildlife was abundant, and even after the town was constructed, alligators from the southern marshes sometimes crawled through the streets at night. The marshlands in the area between the bay and Sixth Avenue were one of the earliest problems that needed solving. Thousands of loads of sand and sawdust were brought in, but this landfill operation was only partially successful because of the size of the water-soaked area.

C.F. Purcell, a local building contractor, received the contract to build a three-story wooden cigar factory and houses for fifty workers. Local lumber was used. The structures were set on a foundation of brick pillars which raised them out of the damp, sandy earth, and made them less susceptible to the insects and small rodents which inhabited nearby thickets and swamps.

The construction of the city was viewed as a marvelous undertaking in a local newspaper report.

If a person would visit this place every day there would be something new to see, some new evidence of the substantial growth and development. But when a person goes out there only once in two or three weeks, astonishment meets the eye and it is difficult to understand how much can be done in so short a time. And when one remembers that less than six months ago this site was a forest, the transformation furnishes a matter for interesting consideration. A person cannot fail to be impressed until the idea that the enterprise is backed by immense capital and at the same time is being directed by master minds. Apparently not a single mistake has been made, evidence of business sagacity and worthy ambition abound on every hand. The senior member of this great firm is Mr. V. Martínez Ybor.

With construction of his temporary wooden factory underway, Ybor had a larger, more commodious brick factory begun on the corner of Ninth Avenue and Fourteenth Street. Even before it was completed, the ***Tampa Guardian*** recorded:

The mammoth three story brick cigar factory of Messrs. V. Martínez Ybor and Company is nearing completion; there is not a more substantial structure in the State of Florida. None but the very best material has been used in any part and no expense spared to make it both handsome and convenient. The Company has provided for emergencies and convenience by constructing two flights of stairways from the first to the third floor, besides, a large elevator goes from the bottom to the top. There is a large handsome observatory on the top from which a most magnificent view can be taken, embracing the two cities of Tampa and Ybor, the country on the north and west, and the grandeur of the bay on the east.

The building still stands a century later.

Ignacio Haya was also convinced that Ybor City would be a success when he had purchased ten acres of land adjacent to that owned by Ybor. Haya soon began construction of a cigar
factory and several workers’ homes. His plant was a two-story wooden frame building located between Sixth and Seventh Avenues on Fifteenth Street. Work started at approximately the same time as Ybor’s buildings, and a race began to see whose would be finished first. By the beginning of 1886 both wooden structures were ready, and plans were made to start production the same day. However, circumstances prevented Ybor from opening his factory as planned, and the first cigars in Ybor City were produced by Sanchez and Haya’s “Flor de Sanchez and Haya” factory. Ybor had ordered bales of unstripped tobacco from Key West which caused some delay; Sanchez and Haya used tobacco which already had the stems stripped from it. It was also claimed that Ybor was unable to begin production on March 26, 1886, as anticipated, because the Cuban workers employed in the new “El Principe de Gales” factory refused to work under the newly hired Spanish foreman. Cubans had brought their resentment of Spaniards with them from Key West and Cuba.

As Ybor City grew, its founders carefully planned its expansion so that they could realize profits not only from cigars but also from real estate. On October 15, 1885, Ybor and his associates had formed the Ybor City Land and Improvement Company. Shortly afterwards another land and real estate company was organized by Sanchez and Haya, but Ybor’s company was the larger of the two. Its charter outlined its function as buying, selling and improving real estate. After land companies were formed, construction expanded rapidly. In addition to
building workers’ houses and factories, Ybor and Haya induced other manufacturers to move to Ybor City. By May, 1886, Ybor and his partners had constructed eighty-nine houses, including thirty-three two-story family dwellings. Ybor brought in his own materials, labor and supplies. By the end of the year, he had erected a total of 176 dwellings. These houses were small, built of upright boards and sold from $750 to $900, depending on the location. Each house had two to three rooms, and families shared outside privies. The white-painted picket fences which outlined the properties added a pleasant atmosphere to the streets. The houses were considered superior to worker dwellings in Key West or Havana, and they served as an added inducement to draw workers to Ybor City.

Several serious problems confronted Ybor and his contractors in the development of the city. Besides the marshlands, sewage ran directly into the lowland areas south of Seventh Avenue, polluting much of the potable water. There was only one deep well which supplied water for many people, and it was difficult to carry the water long distances over the sand-covered roads. The Key West population had always been faced with a shortage of water, and so they had resorted to draining rain water from roofs and collecting it in barrels. When workers arrived in Ybor City, they used the same means of collecting water, but they found that the process of straining out thousands of insects from the water barrels was a difficult task. Hand pumps later
provided some water, but mud, sand and pieces of rock had to be filtered out. The marshes were breeding grounds for gnats and mosquitos, and along with an inadequate sewage system, they created a danger to health. Malaria and yellow fever were commonplace, and Ybor brought in a doctor from Cuba to care for his workers. Other physicians soon arrived and organized a social welfare organization called *La Iguala* (The Equal). Workers paid a weekly fee of ten cents for medical care. This was the prelude to several Latin medical centers which immigrants later organized as the population of the community increased.\(^\text{39}\) Although neighboring Tampa had physicians, most of them were unavailable to Ybor City residents. Some refused to treat Latins, or else they closed their offices on Sunday, the only day the cigarworkers had free.

Producing sufficient food was still another problem. The workers were not accustomed to growing their own crops for consumption, and in the first few months residents had to rely upon outside distributions. A Cuban originally imported commodities which were distributed to the settlers.\(^\text{40}\) By the middle of 1886, several grocery stores were in operation, and there were meat markets, ice cream and cold drink emporiums, drug stores and restaurants.\(^\text{41}\)

Transportation within Ybor City was virtually nonexistent at first. Most people traveled by foot since the thick sand made other modes of transportation difficult. According to one early resident, in order to walk from one end of the village to the other, a person had to prepare himself as though he were making a journey across a desert.\(^\text{42}\) Sand was a problem for building contractors since wheels easily bogged down, making it frustrating to transport materials. An attempt to solve this problem was made by paving the main street, Seventh Avenue, with wooden blocks. Sidewalks were also made of wood blocks, but when they were wet they would swell, only to fall back into place when they had dried out. Sawdust, and later oil, was placed on the streets to keep the dust down, but it was not until nearly the beginning of the twentieth century that streets were paved with bricks.\(^\text{43}\)
To light the houses, Ybor first distributed candles. When kerosene lamps became available, he personally distributed them to the workers’ homes. Lighting the cigar factories by artificial light was an impossibility, so large windows were placed on each floor. Laborers started to work early in the morning and remained until sunset to take advantage of the available natural light. On extremely cloudy or rainy days, the workers who sorted tobacco leaves into various qualities according to color were often sent home since they did not have sufficient light to do their jobs.  

Coffee houses, clubs and theatres were important to the Latin culture, and once Ybor’s brick factory was completed, he turned over his original wooden building for use as a theatre. Later it became known as Liceo Cubano and was used as a club for the workers. Given the initial absence of many women in Ybor City, the predominantly male workforce frequented the “Scrub” area of Ybor City, where groups of prostitutes resided. Long lines gathered, particularly on weekends, and the women profited from the influx of immigrant men.

In the first few months of its history, Ybor City developed slowly because of the natural problems encountered in forming a new community, and Haya decided to put up his entire
property for sale. This, in turn, discouraged Ybor, and each man was fearful that the other would leave. According to a later report in the trade journal *Tobacco*, Gutiérrez, an employee of Ybor’s, devised a scheme which worked.

He went to Mr. Haya, and very seriously told him that he had a buyer for all his property. “Who is it?” says Mr. Haya. Mr. Gutiérrez told him that it was Mr. Ybor. “You don’t tell me!” said Mr. Haya; “why if he stays, I’ll stay too.” When Mr. Gutiérrez told Mr. Ybor that afternoon, Mr. Ybor said: “No, no, I don’t want to”; but when it was explained to him he chuckled, and told Mr. Gutiérrez to go with him to Mr. Haya. When Mr. Ybor made the same proposition, Mr. Haya replied that if Mr. Ybor was going to stay he did not want to sell anything but would also stay. They both acknowledged their fear of the other’s leaving. They shook hands, and that night a champagne supper decided the question of their staying. Such was the casting straw which settled the question for Tampa’s prosperity.47

A streetcar, running on narrow-gauge rails and pulled by little steam engines, soon connected Ybor City and Tampa. When Tampa backers of the original project had questioned its probable success, Ybor and Manrara, who felt the railroad was a necessity, bought controlling interest on November 14, 1885. The following April, it was in full operation.48 At first there was no regular schedule, but soon it was running hourly between the communities. The engines were named after prominent ladies of Ybor City: “Fannie,” after Mrs. Ignacio Haya, and “Jennie,” “Mirta” and “Eloise” for Ybor’s daughters.49

With the streetcar in operation, it soon became a popular weekend pastime for the Latins to visit the parks of Tampa, while some Tampa residents enjoyed the foreign atmosphere of the cigar community. Tampans called Ybor City “Little Havana” and delighted in weekend dining at the Latin restaurants. However, there were few cultural contacts between the Latins and the Anglos; most of the time each community remained isolated from the other, preserving their own traditions and cultures. Only the wealthier people engaged in occasional social exchanges.

During the first few years, Ybor City faced the growing pains typical of new settlements. A serious problem was the lack of police which was one of several reasons the leaders of Tampa soon expressed interest in annexing the immigrant community. A small force of guards hired by Ybor and other manufacturers tried to assure order, but the detachment was too small to maintain law and order in a fast-growing community.50 As the new town expanded, the Tampa Board of Trade urged state legislation to extend Tampa’s boundaries to include Ybor City. Ybor strongly opposed annexation, arguing that the municipal laws and taxes of Tampa would hinder his operations. Indeed, he foresaw very few benefits for the Latin community through annexation, especially since his company had already improved the streets, provided lighting and laid the sidewalks.51 In spite of his protestations, Ybor City was incorporated into the City of Tampa, becoming its fourth ward on June 2, 1887. Although Tampa obviously benefited economically from annexation, the *Tampa Tribune* noted that one of the major results was the appearance of Tampa policemen which calmed down the wild frontier town, making it a more respectable place to visit on Sundays.52
Even after annexation, Ybor City retained its ethnic identity and traditions; it was a city within a city. Tampans began to share in the wealth created by immigrant capital and labor as Ýbor and his associates continued to expand their economic interests. The obvious success of the community attracted additional cigar manufacturers who either relocated their operations or opened branch factories. Cuban, Spanish and later Italian immigrants poured into the booming community. By 1890, Tampa and its fourth ward of Ybor City had a total population of almost 6,000, which represented an increase of 760 percent since 1880. The once sleepy coastal village was fast becoming a major urban center as a result of the growth of Ybor City and its cigar industry.53
Cigar manufacturers playing cards in the Cherokee Club, as the El Pasaje was called in 1895. Standing from left to right: Candido M. Ybor (son of Vicente); Auturo and Oscar Manrara (sons of Eduardo); M. Guonod. Seated from left to right: William Kline; Emilio Pons; F.A. Solomonson; and an accountant holding a child.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
1 For a more detailed account of the Key West cigar industry, see L. Glenn Westfall, *Key West, Cigar City, U.S.A.* (Key West, FL: Key West Preservation Board, 1984).


3 Anthony Pizzo, “Gutiérrez Descubre a Tampa,” *Tropico: Revista Mensual Ilustrada al Servicio de Hispano-America*, 9 (March 1955): 115; June Connor, *The Story of Tampa* (Tampa, 1927). Mrs. Connor, an early resident of Ybor City, personally knew several of the prominent Latin manufacturers and worked in the Ybor-Manrara factory as a bookkeeper for a few years. She wrote several articles for local newspapers and tobacco trade journals, and compiled a personal collection of papers donated to the Tampa Public Library. Much of her work was plagiarized by the Federal Writers Project writers. Mrs. Connor wrote under the pseudonym of “Quien Sabe,” which she translated to mean “the one who knows.”

4 Pizzo, “Gutiérrez,” 5; Gavino Gutiérrez is listed in *Trow’s New York Directory* as owner of a liquor distributorship (1875) and as a merchant (1876, 1887 and 1888).


8 Ibid., 17. An August 16, 1893, article in the *Tampa Morning Tribune* is devoted to the tractions of Peru, Florida. It mentions the steamer, “Antique City,” and local sources claimed that this was the same steamer which took Gutiérrez and Gargol to Peru.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 13.

12 *Tobacco Leaf*, July 12, 1895.

13 Minutes of the Tampa Board of Trade, July 15, 1885, Tampa Chamber of Commerce, Tampa.

14 *Tampa Tribune*, July 16, 1885.

15 *Tobacco Leaf*, July 12, 1895.


19 Minutes of the Tampa Board of Trade, October 5, 1885. Although a $4,000 inducement was promised to Ybor, he had a difficult time collecting the money from the Board of Trade, a point of much irritation for the manufacturer. By December 15, 1886, the Board still had a small amount to collect; by the end of the year, lands valued at $3,300 and $700 in cash were paid to the V.M. Ybor and Company. Minutes of the Board of Trade, December 15, 1886.

21 *Tobacco Leaf*, April 3, 1886.


23 “Company Towns” in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*.


25 “Map of Ybor City,” March, 1886, Plat Book 1, Hillsborough County Clerk of the Circuit Court, Tampa, 11.


30 *Tampa Guardian*, May 5, 1886.

31 Ibid., June 9, 1886.


33 Rivero Muñiz, *Los Cubanos en Tampa*, 16.

34 Wells to Sanchez and Haya, December 16, 1886, *Deed Book R*, Hillsborough County Courthouse, Tampa, 256. Sanchez and Haya purchased an additional ten acres of land, substantially increasing the holdings of their Land Company in Ybor City.

35 Articles of Incorporation, the Ybor City Land and Improvement Company, October 10, 1885.


40 Lemos, “Early Days in Ybor City,” 19.

41 *Tampa Guardian*, June 9, 1886.


43 “A History of Ybor City,” 5.


45 Del Rio, *Yo Fui uno de Los Fundadores de Ybor City*, 11.

*Tobacco Leaf*, July 12, 1895.


WPA, “Ybor City, General Description, Latin Populations,” 165.

*Tampa Guardian*, October 27, 1836.

*Florida Senate Journal* (Tallahassee, 1887), 273, 275.

*Tampa Tribune*, October 13, 1887.

CUBANS IN TAMPA:
FROM EXILES TO IMMIGRANTS, 1892-1901*

by Louis A. Pérez, Jr.

The Ten Years War which began in 1868 came to an unheralded end in the interior of Camagüey Province in eastern Cuba. A decade after the “Grito de Yara,” Cubans and Spaniards met in the remote village of Zanjón to put a formal, if only ceremonial, end to the ill-fated struggle for Cuban independence. The Pact of Zanjón in 1878 brought to an end to one cycle of immigration and precipitated the onset of another. The outbreak of hostilities in Cuba in 1868 set into motion the first in a series of population dislocations. Separatists unable to participate in the armed struggle, together with thousands of sympathizers seeking to escape the anticipated wrath of Spanish colonial administration, scattered throughout Europe, Latin America, and the United States. By the end of the first year of armed struggle, some 100,000 Cubans had sought refuge abroad.¹

A peculiar broadcast fixed the distribution of Cuban exiles. A small group of separatists, largely of patrician origins, wealthy, and capable of enjoying a felicitous exile, settled in Europe. Other separatists, consisting in the main of middle class professionals and businessmen, emigrated to New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. A third group, by far the largest, consisted of Cuban workers. Unable to sustain exile without both employment and a dependable source of income, these workers tended to settle in the southeastern portion of the United States, most notably Florida—first Key West and later Tampa.

Political unrest in Cuba unfolded against a larger economic drama. By the middle of the nineteenth century, key sectors of the Cuban economy had become dependent on the North American market. Economic dislocation in the United States reverberated directly, and often with calamitous repercussions, in Cuba. The panic of 1857 in the United States precipitated pressure for higher tariff duties on items manufactured abroad.² During the Civil War, moreover, a succession of laws raised the average rate of tariff on dutiable goods to a high of 40.3 per cent. The effect on the Havana cigar industry was immediate. Panic gripped the manufacturers, and many factories went into bankruptcy and ceased operations.³

The disruption of the Havana factories resulted in a major reorganization of the industry. Several of the more resourceful manufacturers, seeking to penetrate the high tariff wall, relocated their operations in the United States. Since the 1830s, Key West had served as a site of modest cigar manufacturing.⁴ In the 1860s the city provided Cuban manufacturers an ideal setting for the production of cigars. Key West offered easy access to the tobacco regions of western Cuba and the commercial centers of Havana. Moreover, the labor required to produce the much-coveted Havana cigar was readily available. In 1869, as the war in Cuba deepened, the Spanish cigar manufacturer Vicente Martínez Ybor left Havana and established his El Príncipe de Gales factory in Key West.⁵ From this modest start, Key West emerged within a decade as the major

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Almost from its inception, the fate of the cigar industry in the United States was very much linked to developments in Cuba. Repression of Cuban separatists during the Ten Years War contributed to swelling the exile population.⁷ As wartime conditions in Cuba forced Havana cigar factories to close, many unemployed workers migrated to Key West in search of work.

Similarly, the end of the Ten Years War had far-reaching consequences on the Cuban community in Key West. After the Pact of Zanjón, hope for Cuban independence in the foreseeable future waned among all but the most zealous patriots. The pact had released many
exiled separatists of further active commitment to the cause of independence. Nowhere did this express itself more dramatically than among the cigarworkers in Key West. Patriotic ardor after 1878 yielded increasingly to labor militancy.

The emigré cigarworkers in Florida had long been committed to a tradition of militant trade unionism. A heightened sense of class consciousness and a keen political awareness propelled them into the vanguard position of proletarian struggles. The esprit of skilled workers, pioneer trade unionism among cigarworkers, and the central place occupied by the reader, or lector, served to promote a solidarity uncommon among Cuban laborers.8

In the years following the Zanjón Pact, there was a resurgence of militancy among the cigarworkers. New organizations emerged to advance their interests. As early as 1865, a Cuban cigarworker, Saturnino Martínez, founded the weekly newspaper La Aurora.9 A year later, cigarworkers in Havana Province organized a number of associations, including the Workingmen’s Society of San Antonio de Los Baños. In 1878, the workers founded the Worker’s Guild and the Workmen’s Center. That same year, tobacco selectors founded the Society of Selectors. In 1892, cigarmakers organized the first workers convention in Havana.

These activities in Havana had immediate repercussions in Key West. The nearness of the island and the frequency of travel between Cuba and Florida, together with family and work ties, combined to make the world of the cigarworkers on both sides of the Florida Straits a single universe. By the mid-1880s, strikes and work stoppages in the Key West industry had become commonplace. Beset by labor problems, several manufacturers launched a search for a new site for their factories. In 1885, Vicente Martínez Ybor settled on a forty-acre tract of land east of Tampa.10 Other manufacturers followed, and within a year, two new cigar factories commenced production of the Havana cigar in Tampa. In 1889, a prolonged and violent strike in Key West resulted in a number of other manufacturers moving to Tampa. Another strike in 1894 led to the addition of still more factories in Tampa.

The new industry in Ybor City soon came to possess many of the features of the pre-industrial production system. A distinctive Latin quality of paternalism, prevalent throughout the pre-industrial Hispanic world, established the tone of early labor-management relations in Ybor City and West Tampa. Martínez Ybor soon acquired all the characteristics of a benevolent patrón, fully solicitous of the needs of his employees. Newly-constructed homes, subsidized by Martínez Ybor, were made available to workers at modest prices and in interest-free installment plans.11

Reminiscent of the proto-typical Latin American patrón, Martínez Ybor took personal interest in the well-being of his employees, often serving as godfather to workers’ children, making emergency cash advances to needy workers, and sometimes contributing to the funeral expenses of his employees. Social ties further strengthened the relationship between the patrón and his workers. “When Vicente Martínez Ybor sensed restlessness among his employees,” one writer noted, he “would invite the workers to his large home for a picnic.”12 At Christmas time, he dispatched wagons laden with gifts of suckling pigs and pastries for his employees and their families.13
Cigar factories in Tampa were only a few years old when the cause of Cuba Libre revived exiles’ passions. Indeed, the reorganization of the Florida cigar industry occurred almost simultaneously with the resurgence of independence sentiment. Largely inspired by José Martí they provided the initial leadership for independence. Martí introduced into the new drive for independence, moreover, distinctive populist and radical sentiments. New populist crosscurrents stirred separatist ranks. For Martí, Cuba Libre signified not only a nation free of Spanish rule, but also a country from which racism, exploitation, and oppression had been eliminated. No other sector of the exiled patriots was more disposed by temperament and tradition to identify with Martí’s version of Cuba Libre than the Florida cigarworkers.

Martí made the first of a series of visits to Key West and Tampa in early 1892. He discovered that he had not misplaced his confidence. By the end of the year, during a visit to Tampa, Martí announced the creation of the Cuban Revolutionary party (PRC), dedicated to the winning of Cuban independence. For the next six years, cigarworkers in Tampa labored tirelessly for the cause of Cuban independence. By 1896, the cigarworkers had established forty-one patriotic

Tampa cigarworkers, including several women, posed for the camera in their workshop around the turn of the century. Their dress denoted their status as skilled workers.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa- Hillsborough County Public Library System.
clubs, thirty in Ybor City and eleven in West Tampa. These juntas served as the vital infrastructure of the PRC. Throughout the 1890s they collected funds, promoted separatist elan, and propagandized in their communities. Local juntas, further, co-ordinated support of filibustering expeditions leaving Florida for Cuba. Many cigarworkers made individual contributions at the factory, donating typically one day’s pay on a regular basis.

The organization of cigarworkers into juntas halted all trade union activity. Indeed, for the duration of the war, activities based on class grew increasingly incompatible with activities based on nationalism and were all but formally proscribed by separatist leaders. The PRC leadership frowned on strikes, perceiving work stoppages as a threat to the independence cause. Class was subordinated to nationalism. In February 1896, a threatened strike in Tampa prompted Tomás Estrada Palma, the chief of the New York delegation, to visit Ybor City to urge workers to return to the factories in behalf of Cuba Libre.

The politics of class, moreover, became a secondary concern as both labor and management found themselves inexorably linked on the same side of the independence cause. Many leading cigar manufacturers, including Vicente Martínez Ybor, Domingo Villamil, Teodoro Pérez, and Cecilo Henríquez, publicly identified with Cuban independence. Eduardo Hidalgo Gato, the Key
West cigar magnate and close personal friend of Martí, donated tens of thousands of dollars to the separatist cause.²² Benjamin Guerra, secretary-treasurer of the PRC, owned a cigar factory in Tampa. At the same time, such noted socialist cigarworkers as Carlos Baliño, later one of the founders of the Cuban Communist party, and Diego Vicente Tejera, organizer of the Cuban Socialist party, labored in exile as close collaborators of José Martí.

The end of the war in 1898 had an immediate impact on Cubans in exile. For many, support of the independence movement had defined in very specific terms the nature and function of exile. Peace transformed the meaning of exile. In October 1898, the separatist leadership abolished the Department of Expeditions.²³ In December, the New York delegation announced the dissolution of the PRC, enjoining patriotic juntas in the United States to disband local organizations.

The community of Cuban exiles in Florida, so long singularly preoccupied with the cause of independence, faced an uncertain future. The era of self-imposed exile had come to an end. For many, the opportunity to return to Cuba opened painful choices. The war had allowed many to persuade themselves that exile was a function of political commitment. Indeed, for many Cubans, this conviction accurately reflected the reality of their exile. Many, most notably
professionals, lost little time in returning to Cuba. But others had come to look upon Florida as a permanent home. This was the birthplace of their children and where they owned homes. News of employment difficulties further subdued enthusiasm to return to Cuba. The three-year war for independence had devastated the Cuban countryside and crippled the urban economy. Competition for jobs grew increasingly fierce as the more than 50,000 soldiers left the ranks of the Liberation Army in search of work. In September 1899, the Havana Liga General de Trabajadores published a manifesto denouncing the lack of jobs for those who had labored faithfully abroad for the cause of independence. There seemed little opportunity now for these patriots to return and resume their lives on the island.

The end of the war, further, had the immediate effect of returning to center stage long-deferred class issues. For three years, the cigarworkers had labored under a patriotic injunction against strikes. As the moratorium on labor activity lapsed, increasing attention was given to working conditions. The end of the war also affected cigar manufacturers. Peace in Cuba promised to restore and expand tobacco exports to the United States. The expulsion of Spain, moreover, offered a new field of investment for North American capital. Indeed, the age of the independent immigrant cigar manufacturer was drawing to a close. More than this, a way of life in Ybor City and West Tampa was coming to an end. The pre-industrial, patrón system, personified by the benevolent paternalism of Martínez Ybor succumbed to technology, corporate organization, and
yanqui efficiency. The tobacco conglomerates of the 1890s lost little time in acquiring preponderant control of tobacco fields and factories in Cuba. By 1902, some ninety per cent of the export trade in Havana cigars had passed under the ownership of American trusts. At the same time, many cigar factories in Tampa were acquired by American corporations. Not perhaps without appropriate symbolism, the grand patrón of Ybor City, Vicente Martínez Ybor, died in 1896. In 1899, the Havana-American Company, a consortium of cigar factories in New York, Chicago, and New Orleans, established ownership over a number of Tampa factories. Two years later, the Duke Tobacco Trust made its debut in Tampa, and the Havana-American Company came under control of the American Cigar Company.

New production systems were the inevitable concomitants of the new corporate ownership. Increasingly, the relatively relaxed if not always efficient pace of work in the old factory became subject to a new regimen of efficiency and labor rationalization. Nothing better illustrated the implications of the new economic order descending on the Tampa cigar industry than the weight strike (huelga de la pesa) in 1899. The old Ybor factory instituted a weight system whereby each cigarmaker received a fixed quantity of tobacco with which to produce a specific number of
cigars. Workers protested that the assigned lot of tobacco was inadequate, and they demanded the removal of the scale. The manufacturers’ refusal precipitated a walk-out that received immediate support from cigarworkers in other factories.

The 1899 strike involved crosscurrents and issues of far-reaching significance. First, the 1899 strike represented the first major labor-management confrontation in almost a decade. It further involved a central, if unstated issue. The introduction of the weight system underscored the qualitative nature of the transformation occurring in the cigar industry. The measure represented one of the first efforts to introduce efficiency into the factory. Quite apart from the worker’s claim that the assigned weight imposed an unreasonable quota system, the measure struck at the long-standing if unofficial practice whereby cigarworkers were allowed small quantities of tobacco for their own personal use. A traditional pre-industrial fringe benefit was now being threatened. In the end, the workers were successful. The manufacturers removed the scale. In addition, a uniform level of wages won approval. In the course of negotiations, moreover, the workers secured authority to establish workers’ committees in each factory.

Selectors at the Sanchez-Haya factory, choosing tobacco leaf for use as cigar wrappers.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
The 1899 strike had a galvanizing effect on Tampa cigarmakers. The success of collective action encouraged cigarworkers to formalize the organizational infrastructure emerging from the strike. Long the target of Samuel Gompers and the Cigarmakers International, Cuban workers in Tampa chose instead to establish a union wholly of Cuban origins. The organization of La Sociedad de Torcedores y sus Cercanías, popularly known as La Resistencia, resulted in formal liaison with cigarmakers’ organizations in Cuba. The cigarworkers’ world on both sides of the Florida Straits, shattered by the war for independence, was reunited in 1899. For the next three decades, cigarworkers in Havana and Tampa came to depend on each other for support, funds, and ideas. La Resistencia gave palpable form to the determination of cigarworkers to remain in Tampa and their commitment to defend laboring class interests in their new homeland within the context of the long-standing proletarian traditions.

La Resistencia developed quickly into the cutting edge of the community of immigrant cigarworkers in Tampa. In another successful strike in 1900, La Resistencia outmaneuvered the International Cigarmakers Union for authority to organize the cigarworkers. Nor were strikes organized by La Resistencia wholly confined to working conditions. Union leaders had sufficient insight into political and economic relationships to discern the appropriate pressure points in Tampa’s power structure. In one instance, the destruction of a local bridge connecting Ybor City and West Tampa forced workers to undertake hazardous boat crossings twice daily. In May 1901, La Resistencia threatened a strike to force the manufacturers to pressure city officials to
repair the bridge. “We cannot get what we want by asking for it ourselves,” explained one worker, “so we strike and the manufacturers obtain it for us.”

The third and by far the most dramatic confrontation between management and labor occurred in mid-1901, when La Resistencia challenged manufacturers’ plans to open factory branches outside of Tampa. Perceiving its closed shop under siege, the union threatened a general strike unless the manufacturers met their demands to abandon plans to expand operations. In late July 1901, La Resistencia undertook its most ambitious effort by calling some 5,000 cigarworkers to the streets. The 1901 general strike continued well into the fall. Expression of support for the Tampa cigarworkers came from Key West and Havana. The strike received prominent sympathetic press coverage in the Cuban press. Expressions of solidarity from Havana unions included statements of moral support and funds for the relief of workers and their families.

Widespread support among cigarworkers notwithstanding, the strike came to an unsuccessful and violent climax. Vigilante squads and local police inaugurated systematic harassment of union supporters. Arrested strikers were offered the choice between jail or returning to the factory. A citizen’s committee organized by local businessmen kidnapped several union leaders and forcefully deported them to Honduras. Landlords, in collusion with manufacturers, denied...
La Resistencia failed to survive the four-month strike. The collapse of the union created immediately the opening through which the International Cigarmakers made organizing inroads and ultimately absorbed a good number of immigrant workers. On still another level, the cigarworkers were integrated into another American institution—one more step in the Americanization of the cigarmakers and the conversion of cigarworkers from exiles to immigrants.

The struggle for Cuban independence, stretching intermittently for thirty years had organized the cigarworkers in exile around the cause of Cuba Libre. Except for the period of labor militancy during the mid-1880s, the nadir of the separatist effort, Cuban workers in exile subordinated class interest to national pursuits. The end of the war precipitated a major reorientation of cigarworkers’ attention and energies. With the establishment of peace, the long-cherished expectation of returning to Cuba subsided as workers reconciled themselves to more or less permanence in the United States. New institutions emerged in Tampa to protect and promote the interests of the new immigrants. La Resistancia represented one such response. The establishment in 1899 of the Círculo Cubano (Cuban Club) represented still another expression of the roots sinking into the Tampa soil. Designed to provide a variety of medical, social, and educational services, the Círculo Cubano gave another institutional focal point to the permanent cigarworkers, and the Cigarworkers International after 1901 gave Cubans an additional institutional tie to the United States.

Not that the immigrant cigarworkers severed entirely their ties to Cuba. On the contrary, relationships between both centers of the cigarmakers’ world remained close and mutually reinforcing. Nor did the cigarworkers shed their traditional radicalism. Indeed, the strikes of 1910, 1920, and 1931 offered palpable proof of the persistence of the old world radical tradition.

Cubans were doomed, however, in their struggle to preserve the individuality of their community. The very uniqueness of the settlement, its traditions and its politics, singled it out for extinction. Its very success guaranteed its demise.


2 For a discussion of economic conditions of the period, see George W. Van Vleck, The Panic of 1857 (New York, 1943).


4 For the early antecedents of cigar manufacturing in Key West, see Gerardo Castellanos G., Motivos de Cayo Hueso: contribución a la historia de la emigración revolucionarias-cubanas en los Estados Unidos (Havana, 1935).

5 Manuel Deulofeo, Héroes del destierro. La emigración: notas históricas (Cienfuegos, 1904), 11. For a complete study of Vicente Martínez Ybor, see Glenn Westfall, “Don Vicente Martínez Ybor, the Man and His Empire: The development of the Clear Havana Industry in Cuba and Florida in the Nineteenth Century” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1977).


9 José Antonio Portuondo, ‘La Aurora’ y los comienzos de la prensa y de la organización obrera en Cuba (Havana, 1961), 23-115.


12 Steffy, “Cuban Immigration of Tampa, Florida,” 25.


14 For the best single study of the Cuban exiles and the war for independence, see Juan J.E. Casasus, *La emigración cubana y la independencia de Cuba* (Havana, 1953).


20 See “Colectas del Club 24 de Febrero, desde 25 de agosto de 1895.” Ms., Unión Martí-Maceo, Tampa; photocopy in author’s possession. See also Wen Gálvez, *Tampa: impresiones de emigrado* (Ybor City, 1897), 165-98.

21 *Tampa Tribune*, February 21, 1896.


23 General Emilio Núñez to the Chiefs and Officials of the Department of Expeditions, October 15, 1898, in *Patria*, October 19, 1898.


Interview with Tomás Mayet, February 20, 1973, Tampa. “Because of the individual nature of his work, and his product," Fernando Ortiz wrote, "the cigar-maker always was entitled to his own ‘smokes’ – that is, a certain number of the cigars he made for his personal use. This privilege came to acquire a tangible economic value. The cigar-maker could sell his smokes to a passing customer, and the manufacturer came to regard this as a part of the worker’s wages, paid in kind. The attempt to treat this privilege as a part of the worker’s wages gave rise at times to acrimonious disputes and strikes." Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York, 1970), 86-87. Gloria Jahoda wrote of the old Tampa factories: “The filler was never weighed; that would have been an offense against Latin [sic] honor. It was assumed that no worker took any. He was allowed to smoke as many finished cigars as he cared to. It was a privilege he guarded jealously.” Jahoda, *River of the Golden Ibis*, 219.

Durward Long, “‘La Resistencia’: Tampa’s Immigrant Labor Union,” *Labor History*, VI (Fall 1965), 195-96.

John C. Appel, “The Unionization of Florida Cigarmakers and the Coming of the War with Spain,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XXXVI (February 1956), 47.

See Alberto F. Pedriñán, “Ybor City: las ruinas de lo que fuera una civilización floreciente,” ms., 1975; copy in author’s possession.

Long, “‘La Resistencia,’ ” 202.

See *Diario de la Marina*, September 4, 1901.

The support of Tampa cigarworkers in Cuba may not have been entirely selfless. Some workers held out the hope that cigarworkers in Tampa would deliver a crippling blow to the industry in Tampa, thereby forcing cigar manufacturers out of business. This, many expected, would lead to the revitalization of the industry in Cuba. See Secret Service Report, Police Department of Havana, September 27, 1901, file 193 (letters received), records of the military government of Cuba, in record group 140, National Archives, Washington. See also José Rivero Muñiz, *El movimiento obrero durante la intervención* (Havana, 1961), 28-29, 85-86.

Long, “‘La Resistencia,’ ” 210-11.
THE CRADLE OF MUTUAL AID: IMMIGRANT COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES IN YBOR CITY

by Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta

If the cigar factories functioned as the economic heart of Ybor City, mutual aid societies surely served as its soul. The emergence of voluntary associations among immigrants signified an organizing impulse which left its legacy in wooden dance floors, marble edifices and modern hospitals. According to one historian, these institutions represented “both an assertion of group identity and a tentative adjustment to the industrial metropolis.”

Cubans, Spaniards and Italians brought with them traditions of voluntary associations and mutual aid. In the late nineteenth century, an organizing wave swept through Europe, leaving behind thousands of voluntary organizations at village and town levels. These European societies survived the passage to the Americas. In 1887, a group from the Spanish province of Asturias organized an *asociacion de beneficencia* in Havana. Asturians organized similar societies in other Cuban towns throughout the 1880s. In 1886, members from several of these groups organized El Centro Asturiano in Havana. Cubans drew upon the same patterns of self-help. In 1871, Cuban emigrés in Key West, Florida, founded the San Carlos Club, a mutual aid society based upon similar organizations existing in the homeland. It was no accident, therefore, that the early immigrants in Ybor City looked to ethnic clubs for solutions to the myriad of problems pressing upon them.

Birth of Mutual Aid in Ybor City

To comprehend fully the extraordinary associations that evolved in Ybor City, one must understand the milieu from which they emerged. Ybor City was an instant town. Grafted onto a city which before 1880 boasted scant numbers, Ybor City residents could expect little assistance from Anglo Tampa. A vacuum similarly existed with reference to previous immigrant groups. Whereas in northern urban areas, Italians frequently occupied neighborhoods recently vacated by Germans, Irish or Jews, Ybor City’s Latins encountered a very different situation. Expansion often had to await sufficient housing, but more importantly there were no institutions to minister to newly arrived immigrants, such as charitable agencies. The Catholic Church, which might logically have figured to step into this institutional breach, was despised and rejected.

In addition to the political and cultural traditions imported to Ybor City, the local environment contributed to the character of mutual aid. In late 1885, nature grudgingly yielded to workers clearing the palmettos and draining the swamps that would become Ybor City. For decades Ybor City’s beleaguered inhabitants battled semi-tropical mosquitoes, belligerent alligators and unsanitary conditions. Water plagued the lives of the early inhabitants. Unless one carried buckets of water from Old Government Spring, the crudely dug wells or cisterns which collected rainwater yielded a substance old-timers jokingly defined as “too thick to drink and too thin to plow.” Residents passed drinking water through coffee filters to remove insects and debris. The terrible yellow fever epidemic of 1887, which may have been caused by mosquitoes packed...
along with imported Cuban fruit, claimed a number of recent immigrants. “The mortality of all areas at Ybor [City] during the past year,” reported the Tampa Journal in 1890, “has been far in excess of that in Tampa proper.”

The cigar factories, free of dangerous machines, seemed on first impression to be exceedingly safe, but they in fact provided breeding grounds for tuberculosis. Workers spat on the floors or in rare spittoons, which in the warm, moist environment, spread the disease quickly. The necessity of keeping factory windows closed so as to prevent the moist tobacco from drying out added to the unhealthful conditions. “We have to take a collection every week for some consumptive comrade,” observed a cigarmaker in 1917. The social, psychological and linguistic barriers separating Ybor City and Anglo Tampa aggravated the pressing need for medical and health services.

The rise of mutual aid societies in Ybor City was certainly not unique. Such ethnic associations proliferated in urban America. For example, hundreds of Slavic associations arose in Cleveland, while a similar number existed among those about such institutions in Ybor City was not the sheer number, but rather the consolidating nature and the encompassing character of five separate societies organized by Spaniards, Cubans and Italians. An overview of Ybor City's five leading immigrant associations shows the extraordinary number of services they provided which made them the center of institutional life outside the cigar factories.

**Centro Español**

In April 1891, a small body of artisans and businessmen in Ybor City gathered to discuss an alarming problem, the “anti-social atmosphere prevailing against the Spanish.” Ybor City was becoming increasingly polarized: the Spanish commanded the elite positions in the cigar industry while Cubans occupied the lower economic niches; the Spanish monopolized the Sanchez Haya factory while Cubans dominated the Martinez-Ybor factory. B. M. Balbontin, a pioneer Spaniard, told interviewers in the 1930s that “the Spanish at that time [the 1890s] were persecuted, abhorred, and were the target of Cuban hatred because of the Spanish government in Cuba.” To counteract these conditions, Spaniards resolved to organize a mutual aid club.

The state of Florida issued Centro Español’s charter on September 7, 1891. Ignacio Haya, the cigar manufacturer who donated funds for the first building, also became the first president of Centro Español. Other officers included factory owner Enrique Pendas, as vice president. Pendas, born in Asturias in 1865, had left Spain for Cuba in 1881, later joining his uncle's manufacturing firm in New York City. The Lozano, Pendas and Company had become Ybor City’s third cigar factory in 1889.

Once launched, Centro Español served as an organizational model for future groups. An examination of the constitution of Centro Español allows a glimpse into an immigrant institution’s capacity to adapt. El Casino Español, a similar organization based in Havana, restricted its membership to persons born in Spain. The by-laws of Centro Español in Tampa, however, stipulated that only the president and vice-president need be Spanish-born. For others, the constitution read: “It is required of all applicants that they be Spaniards by birth and by patriotic inclination or that they be loyal to Spain and to its prestige in America.”
Centro Español dovetailed the needs and demands of its diverse clientele. Typical of immigrant aid societies, the club required members to pay twenty-five cents a week in return for social privileges and death and injury benefits. Given the fact that the Spanish community was composed largely of young, single men, the idea of a mutual aid society with congenial social outlets appealed to individuals living in boarding homes.

In 1892, directors organized the Spanish Casino Stock Company in order to promote further recreational and theatrical activity. The society’s original 186 members each pledged stock shares of ten dollars, used to finance a clubhouse at Sixteenth Street and Seventh Avenue. An ornate wooden structure costing $16,000, the finished building contained a theatre, dance hall, cantina and classrooms.9

By 1901, the membership rolls of Centro Español had grown to 926, expanding to 1,886 in 1907 and 2,537 in 1912. The society tolerated a wide spectrum within its membership, including Gallegos (Galicians) and Asturianos from Spain, Criolles (sons born in Cuba), a few Italians, cigar manufacturers, elite artisans, radical cigarmakers and readers. Different classes and ideologies mixed together. “In those days,” reflected Frank Juan, who had been a member of Centro Español for sixty-two of his sixty-four years, “the club was all we had.”10
Leadership, confident that a dynamic Spanish community could sustain and support an ambitious building campaign, embarked on such a program in 1909. In that pivotal year, Centro Español’s 1,773 constituents owed not one cent of indebtedness; hundreds of new applicants awaited formal membership. So many Spaniards from West Tampa (a neighboring city also based on the cigar industry) belonged to Centro Español that the society pledged to build two new magnificent clubhouses, one in Ybor City and the other in the sister cigar city.\(^\text{11}\)

The mutual aid society, bolstered by new streams of immigrants and an expanding second-generation, retained a powerful hold upon the Spanish community through the depression of the 1930s. Membership ebbed and flowed but persistently remained strong, despite the cataclysmic impact wrought by a world war and major strikes. The other great challenge to the vitality of Centro Español was the appearance of a rival Spanish society, Centro Asturiano.\(^\text{12}\)

\textbf{Centro Asturiano}
Founded for essentially social reasons, Centro Español deftly balanced the strong regional loyalties of its Asturian and Galician members. The early society, unified by real and perceived animosities from Anglo Tampa and the colony’s Cuban element, could not retain such loyalties following the conclusion of the Cuban revolution. In particular, the Asturian element had steadfastly urged the society to broaden its collective efforts in the medical arena. Leaders of Centro Español resisted entrance into such an unexplored area because of costs and the “ungovernable and rebellious nature of the Asturians.”

Frequently called “anarchist” by the Galician leadership, a large faction of dissident Spaniards seceded in 1902 to organize Centro Asturiano. The new club became a North American auxiliary of the Centro Asturiano of Havana. By 1900, the renowned Cuban institution already boasted 10,000 members. The international by-laws required a minimum of 300 members, a commitment to donate a percentage of annual dues and a written constitution before granting a charter to the new American affiliate. Pioneering members, of whom sixty-five were still alive in 1936, recalled that enraged leaders from Centro Español—especially the cigar manufacturers—fought
against the creation of a rival and potentially radical society, even to the point of dispatching delegates to Havana to plead against the proposed establishment. The Spanish hierarchy in Cuba disregarded the protests and granted a charter to Centro Asturiano of Tampa on April 1, 1902. According to record books meticulously preserved at the clubhouse, 546 charter members enlisted in the new society.¹⁴

Destined to evolve into the most stable, well financed, and best-preserved clubhouse in Ybor City, Centro Asturiano began with a two-room, wood-frame building at 1410½ Seventh Avenue. In 1907, leaders announced plans to erect a modern facility on the corner of Palm and Nebraska Avenues. Dedicated on January 22, 1909, the $75,000 clubhouse stood unrivaled by Tampa's standards. A 1912 fire completely destroyed the structure, but members resolved to rebuild with an even more ambitious building. In a gesture inconceivable fifteen years earlier, the Cuban Club offered Centro Asturiano the use of its facility—with full membership privileges—during the construction period.¹⁵
The *Tampa Tribune* heralded the new Centro Asturiano, unveiled on May 15, 1914, as “the most beautiful building in the South.” Designed by the talented architectural firm of Bonfoey and Elliot (which came to design all of the other major clubhouses), the structure cost a then staggering $110,000. Dedication ceremonies filled three days, highlighted by original operatic scores, a symphony and endless balls and banquets. The building still sparkles as an architectural gem seventy years later. Its spacious features include a dramatic 1,200 seat theatre, a cantina, ballroom and a well-stocked library.¹⁶

Financially sound, socially progressive and institutionally viable, Centro Asturiano attracted flocks of Spaniards to its protective banner. While the club naturally promoted Asturian culture, at no time did it exclude other Spaniards or Latins. Italians, Cubans and Galicians joined Centro Asturiano because of its facilities, benefits and membership. Economically, the club operated efficiently, as demonstrated by its surplus of $165,000 for the period 1902-1914. Centro Asturiano’s officials established a club bank, whereby members could deposit funds, earning a high interest and at the same time supporting their club. No institution in Ybor City or Tampa

A 1925 view of the Centro Asturiano, one of Ybor City’s leading clubs, which still stands on Nebraska Avenue.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System.
generated the crowds and numbers as could Centro Asturiano. A 1911 picnic at Sulphur Springs attracted 6,000 members, their families and guests, causing the trolley company to press all its cars into service. Six months later, another picnic counted a crowd of 4,500. “Every nationality was represented,” reported the Tribune.\(^7\)

The Latin community fostered an intense appreciation for the theatre since the earliest days of settlement, and the clubs anchored this passion. Un Sección de Declamación, an amateur theatrical troupe, presented plays every Sunday at Centro Español and Centro Asturiano. The advent of “talkies” and the popularity of the movie houses, while drastically curtailing live theatre in much of Florida, actually enlivened the Spanish-language theatre of Ybor City, since many Latin residents spoke little or no English. “In 1935,” observed a student of the Florida theatre, “Ybor City seems to have been the only place in Florida which still maintained a type of resident theatre company.”\(^18\)

During the 1930s, the Centro Asturiano served as a center for one of the more experimental programs in Americana cultural history—the New Deal’s Federal Theatre Project. Under the auspices of the WPA, the club became the only Spanish-language theatre unit in the United States. In addition to the Spanish language stock theatre, the unit included an Italian opera company, staffed by local talent. Headed by Manuel Aparicio, one of the most celebrated lectores (readers) in Tampa, the federally sponsored theatre survived until July 1939. In all, fifteen plays appeared as part of the unit, including the Spanish version of It Can’t Happen Here, bringing a rich feast of theatre which attracted standing-room-only crowds to the club.\(^19\)

The vibrant Spanish-language theatre dramatized the cultural influence of mutual aid societies. From the beginning, groups frequented plays at neighboring club theatres, enhancing the spread of Spanish and Italian language drama. In Ybor City, remembered Jose Yglesias, there “were wonderfully active cultural centers, for those cigarmakers knew how to organize more than trade unions. . . . At the Centro Asturiano we saw zarauelas (musical comedies) performed by local amateurs. When great international performers, like [Enrico] Caruso, came to Tampa, it was cigarmakers who booked them, not the americanos on the other side of Nebraska Avenue.”\(^20\)

Centro Asturiano, like the other clubs, promoted the idea of the supreme Latin male. Women joined auxiliaries, which in reality existed to serve the male members. “These social clubs all had libraries, auditoriums, gyms, dance halls and canteens, where the men gathered in the evenings,” recalled Jose Yglesias. Typically, Latin men ate dinner with their families—although many Spaniards remained single—leaving promptly thereafter for their respective clubs. Spanish men, noted a writer in the 1930s, “see their children only during the evening meal. . . . Anyone who does stay home is considered ‘hen pecked’ and only half a man.” The Spanish canteen hosted spirited card games, but dominoes remained the favorite pastime. Centro Asturiano also erected a bowling alley and gymnasium for its members, who formed athletic teams competing against rival clubs. “In contrast to the Nordic women,” stated an observer, “they [Latin women] do not take part in civic activities.”\(^21\)

Círculo Cubano
During the formative decades of Ybor City, Cubans devoted their collective energies to the unremitting crusade of *Cuba Libre*. Organizational talents funded the revolution with unceasing support, leaving a void in their community-based infrastructure. The end of the war in 1898 signaled a mass return to the homeland, only to discover the disillusionment of an unfulfilled revolution and a society in turmoil. Thousands returned to Tampa, determined to reshape and invigorate their “Little Havana” in Ybor City.

The history of Cuban mutual aid life paralleled the timeline of revolution and reconstitution. The origin of El Círculo Cubano can be traced to the postwar milieu, specifically a recreational society El Club Nacional Cubano, founded October 10, 1899. The welter of labor unrest in 1901 arrested early growth, but membership climbed after the strike to 300 in 1902. In honor of the new Republic of Cuba, the society changed its name in 1902 to El Círculo Cubano. The charter expressed the hope, “To bind all Cuban residents of Tampa into a fraternal group, to offer assistance and help the sick.” The by-laws also prohibited discussion within the society of labor, politics, or religion—surely a much violated provision.22
In 1907, Circulo Cubano erected its first clubhouse on Fourteenth Street and Tenth Avenue. The two-story building cost $18,000 and included most notably a 900 seat theatre. Dedication ceremonies brought out a number of American and Cuban dignitaries. In 1916 the original building burned, spurring the membership, then numbering 2,600, to rebuild with a more lasting monument. Mario Menocal, the President of Cuba, donated $2,000, while individual members pledged extra levies during a bond drive. Completed in 1918, the $60,000 structure featured a spacious theatre, cantina, pharmacy, library and a dancing floor (70 by 100 feet), lavishly decorated by Cuban painters. Imported tile, stained glass windows and marble accentuated this “cathedral for workers,” which still stands.23

Cuban youth, or at least young men, were attracted to the Cuban Club. More than any of the other Latin societies, the Círculo Cubano promoted athletics. In the rear of the club, members built a gymnasium and boxing arena. Leaders also constructed a school which hosted a variety of cultural activities. “I remember as a boy going to the free art classes summer evenings at the Círculo Cubano,” reminisced Jose Yglesias.24
The vicissitudes of the cigar industry affected every club in Ybor City, but none manifested such stark contrasts between good times and bad as the Círculo Cubano. In 1909, membership stood at nearly a thousand, but pitched to 125 by the end of strike-torn 1910. With characteristic vigor and flux, membership revived to 3,225 by 1919, but fell again due to labor unrest to 1,602. Like a phoenix, the club thrived throughout the twenties, cresting at 5,000 in 1930. But in 1935, the aggravation of depression and dispersion saw club rolls decline to 2,492.²⁵

Unión Martí-Maceo

The consuming cause of Cuba Libre before 1898 adopted the issue of racial equality. Jose Martí, during his stays in Ybor City, often spoke to the necessity of a united front, indivisible from racial or political differences. After an incident in which Martí narrowly escaped poisoning by Spanish agents, the Apostle of Cuban Liberty stayed at the Ybor City home of Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso, prominent Afro-Cubans. For her aid to the cause, Paulina has been called the “second mother” to the apostle. The symbol of racial unity helped rally the Cuban Revolution. “White and Negro Cubans lived in harmony,” wrote José Rivero Muñiz, a contemporary observer, “all being admitted without exception to the various revolutionary clubs, none ever protested.” Muñiz later added, “The relations between Cuban whites and Negroes were most cordial and there was no racial discrimination. . . .They were mutually respectful.” José Ramon Sanféliz, an Afro-Cuban, came to Ybor City in 1890 from Havana. In 1899, he became one of the founders of Club Nacional Cubano, which he remembered “as composed of white and black members—a sort of rice with black beans. There was no distinction of race. When the Círculo Cubano was formed, however, the Negroes were left out.”²⁶

The war’s end dashed the revolutionary clubs on the shoals of peace. The period after 1898 brought about a period of reorganization, as Cubans returned to their homes, many to sail back to Ybor City because of the desolation wrought by the war. The decade of the 1890s also resulted in a new era of race relations in the American South, characterized by a proliferation of segregation laws, lynchings and terror.²⁷

Ybor City’s fluid race relations clearly troubled Anglo Tampa. Afro-Cubans worked alongside white immigrants, a custom carried over in the integrated residential patterns of the enclave. “In Ybor City, you’d live with an Italian on one side, a Spaniard and a Cuban on the other side,” recalled eighty-five-year old Alfonso Diaz, an Afro-Cuban born in Havana. Juan Mallea, an Afro-Cuban born on Twelfth Street and Eighth Avenue in 1918, remembered: “The Caltagirones, Scagliones, the Martinos—all these people lived across from us. There was no such thing as a white section and a black section. The only time you encountered discrimination was when you left Ybor.” Anglo Tampa, prodded by a legal riding crop from Tallahassee, pressured Ybor City’s white Cubans to disassociate themselves from the Afro-Cubans, resulting in the organization of separate white and black Cuban societies around the turn-of-the-century. “The government [state and local] told them [Cubans] we could not work together, have a society together, and would have to keep the races apart,” exclaimed Mallea. “That was the law of the country. So we blacks decided to build our own club.”²⁸

Afro-Cubans organized two separate but overlapping societies at the turn of the century. In 1900, they formed La Sociedad de Libre Pensadores de Martí Maceo (Society of the Free
Thinkers of Martí and Maceo), patterned after a similar Cuban organization. The Tampa group’s first president, Bruno Roig, had been a member in the Cuban society. The choice of names revealed the heritage of the revolution: Martí was the voice of Cuban liberty, while Antonio Maceo, a black general, represented the movement in action. Both men died on the battlefield. In 1904, a faction within the Ybor City club founded a new society, La Unión for the purpose of economic and medical benefits. In 1907, the two organizations merged, forming La Unión Marti-Maceo.

By 1907, officers of the club had purchased a lot on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Eleventh Street. Within a year, members embarked on a building campaign. Completed in 1909, the two-story clubhouse is still fondly remembered by veterans of the society. Razed by urban renewal in 1965—the only ethnic clubhouse so taken—the structure housed a theatre for 300, a dance hall and meeting rooms.  

La Unión Marti-Maceo gave a degree of stability to Ybor City’s mobile Afro-Cuban community. The club’s theatre and dance hall sponsored virtually every social and cultural event celebrated by the colony’s members. The club began a school, located next to the facility. “In order to keep our heritage,” explained an elderly member, “we organized a school at night to teach the Spanish language and Cuban history.” Juan Mallea reminisced that the old timers, while encouraging their generation to learn English, would not allow English spoken in the clubhouse. The club’s baseball team, Los Gigantes Cubanos (The Cuban Giants) competed against the other Latin clubs. “You see,” explained Mallea, “the club was the only offering Black Cubans had.”

Unione Italiana

Immigration was a forcing house of change, by which emigrants were recast with new identities. Emigrants left the Magazzolo Valley in Sicily as Stefanesi and Alessandrini, to reemerge in Ybor City as Sicilians and Italians and later Latins. The mutual aid society played handmaiden to this conversion.

Founded in April 1894, L’Unione Italiana originally included 116 Italian and eight Spanish immigrants. The charter stated that the organization’s purpose was “to aid such members of said association as may become sick and to provide for the paying of the burial expenses of such members as may die, and to promote fraternity, charity and social intercourse among its members.” Article Seven declared, “This society is founded exclusively by Italians,” but it permitted “social members of other groups. . .as long as they were of good moral standing and aged between fourteen and fifty.” In a none-too-subtle show of indifference to organized religion, the society’s by-laws set a precedent (still followed) that the annual and monthly meetings of the membership would be held the first Sunday of each month at 10:30 a.m.

L’Unione Italiana drew its leadership from the ranks of individuals known as *prominenti*. Bartolomeo Filogamo, the society’s first president, reflected that classic profile. He had left the Old World in 1885 as an early pioneer, settling in New Orleans before arriving in Tampa in 1889, ahead of the major immigrant stream. He quickly exploited the Ybor City economy, as his linguistic and financial talents assisted his elevation to bookkeeper at the Pendas and Alvarez
cigar factory. He befriended the firm’s owner, Enrique Pendas, who pioneered the founding of Centro Español. When an embryonic Italian settlement emerged, Filogamo brought Enrique Pendas and seven other Spaniards into the charter membership of L’Unione Italiana, and he consciously modeled the organization after the Centro Español. Although born in the Sicilian town of Castellammare del Golfo, which was not a major source for Tampa’s Italians, Filogamo was nonetheless tapped by the Sicilians from the Magazzolo Valley to head the new venture. Filogamo’s organizational talents and his connections with the Spanish elite made him an effective first president. Still, the choice of an “outsider” as head of this particular society seems remarkable, given the heavy predominance of Stefanesi and Alessandrini in the early colony. Filogamo guided L’Unione through its first decade, followed by Filippo F. Licata who held the reins of power for the next twenty years, 1906-1924.\(^31\)

From its inception, L’Unione avoided the petty, factional battles which drained the energies of so many other Italian societies in other cities. L’Unione served as a collective umbrella, not only for immigrants and children from the Magazzolo Valley, but also for smaller numbers of other Sicilians and Italians, and even clusters of Spaniards and Cubans, who for economic, marital or other considerations, were drawn to this particular banner.\(^32\)

L’Unione, with its reverence for social custom and its deliverance of mutual aid, quickly came to play a paramount role in Ybor City’s Italian community. In this sense, L’Unione Italiana paralleled its dynamic institutional counterparts, Centro Español, Centro Asturiano, Círculo Cubano and La Unión Marti-Maceo. Judging from institutional records, oral interviews and documentary reports, one estimates that between the 1890s and 1930s, 90 percent of Ybor City’s first-and-second generation men belonged to at least one of these societies. “My father belonged to L’Unione,” boasted Dominic Giunta. “Before he ever bought a loaf of bread, he paid his dues. We grew up appreciating that fact.”\(^33\)

The mutual aid society appealed to the most basic of human instincts. Immigrants, terrified of dying unattended and unnoticed in a strange land, banded together to formalize the rituals of life and death. L’Unione institutionalized Sicilian funeral customs while adapting them to Ybor City. In 1900, the club purchased and dedicated an Italian Cemetery two miles north of Ybor City, at Twenty-sixth Street and Twenty-third Avenue. The cemetery with its imported cypress trees, inset ceramic photographs on gravemarkers, tombstones inscribed in Sicilian and Italian script, bears a near exact resemblance to the hallowed grounds in Sicily it sought to duplicate. In the early years, each club member contributed one dollar to the bereaving family; later, the club provided a $300 death benefit. By 1928, L’Unione, strengthened by increasing numbers of second-generation members, instituted a revised death plan whereby families received $975 in benefits.\(^34\)

Bolstered by steady streams of newcomers and confident of the future, the leadership of L’Unione in 1910 announced plans for a permanent clubhouse. Dedicated on Columbus Day, 1912, the $40,000, three-story structure stood on Seventh Avenue between Seventeenth and Eighteenth Streets. The brick building featured an athletic room and theatre. Paul Longo, one of the few survivors who remembers the original clubhouse, reflected as to its meaning in 1912. “I thought, my God, in Sicilia only the Church and Counts build such a monument.”\(^35\)
The monument, intended to last three generations, stood three years before a fire destroyed everything. Members unhesitatingly pledged to rebuild, across the street at Seventh Avenue and Eighteenth Street. Construction began in April 1917, at a time when Little Italies elsewhere were channeling their community resources into bond drives and Red Cross benefits in support of World War I.

The erection of the new L’Unione signified a profound commitment to Italian communal life in Tampa and an important benchmark in the consolidation of the community. Built in an Italian renaissance style, decorated with classical columns, terra cotta relief, and a profusion of marble, the clubhouse stands as an impressive monument to immigrant achievement. The building included a magnificent theatre with an auditorium and balcony (later converted to a movie theatre), a spacious dance floor, library, cantina, bowling alley and recreational rooms. With furnishings, the building cost $80,000, a considerable sum for the time.

The Italian Club, as social center for the community, performed myriad roles for its members. For Italian men, the cantina served as a sanctuary, a male bastion where a woman never casually entered. Like their Spanish counterparts, Italian men retreated to the club for after-dinner socializing. “We used to come here during the week, all the people who live around here,” remembered Joe Maniscalco. “They come here to the club and play domonoes, briscola, scoppa—until twelve, one o'clock at night! This [club] used to be paradise.”

If the gaming tables of the cantina lured a male clientele, the banner of L’Unione attracted families, especially for group excursions. Picnics, outings and festivals allowed the club to raise impressive amounts of revenue and bring out huge crowds. In 1924, the club enjoyed a mammoth picnic to celebrate a membership drive which successfully enrolled a thousand new recruits. L’Unione’s 1,800 members, with their families, gathered at the farmstead of F.M. Antuono and posed for a photograph which still hangs at the club today.

On Saturday evenings, the polished dance floor of L’Unione came alive. “Talk about dances!” exclaimed Nina Ferlita. “We used to have some of the most beautiful dances. . . .cabaret tables all over the hall. And they would have Cuban music, Italian music.” When the second generation began to fraternize the club, two bands often entertained the crowds, one playing more sedate tunes for the parents; the other performing the more rhythmic rumba and samba for the younger set. “I remember when the Italian Club was built,” reminisced Alfonso Lopez, the son of Spanish immigrants. “It was a nice club. . . .we [Spanish kids] used to go dances there quite a lot as young boys, the Italian Club, also the Centro Español, Centro Asturiano, and the Cuban Club. It was a perfect setup for a young boy, because you could go there and didn’t have to take a date. . . .You could always find some girls that were chaperoned.”

L’Unione transcended the dance floor and domino tables; it inculcated a vigorous cultural life. The library housed a diverse collection of literature, especially strong in its emphasis in working-class and leftist themes. Many of the classic works by Michael Bakunin, Victor Hugo and Peter Kropotkin were available in leather bound editions, reflective of the honored places they occupied in the minds of club members.
L’Unione Italiana, the Italian Club, shown here in 1919, is still in operation.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System.

A vigorous theatre developed at the Italian Club. The auditorium for L’Unione attracted a
number of prominent opera stars. “We had a theatre, a beautiful theatre,” boasted the cigarmaker and opera afficionado Joe Maniscalco. “We used to get the operetti from New York. The locals also formed a theatre to work with them.” Ybor City became a favorite stopping-off spot for stock companies and performers touring Cuba, such as Pasquale Vittore and Maria D’Amore. The bilingual nature of the Italian community permitted L’Unione’s membership the enjoyment of attending the Spanish-language theatre at the other clubs and also of appreciating plays performed in Spanish at L’Unione.41

From the Latin point of view, the clubs served to maintain ethnic identity while seeking minimal integration into the rest of city life. By organizing ethnic variation in Ybor City and West Tampa, they furnished coalescing points for each of the major groups. They confronted the very real needs of everyday life for Latins and provided a sense of community, an identity which drew upon the cultural heritages of each component. Over time, they were perhaps the principal tools of ethnic adaptation in the city, primarily due to their long lives and unusually high degree of community participation and support.

Spaniards and Cubans had participated in and carried to Tampa working models for cooperative medicine. In nineteenth-century Cuba, a number of mutual aid societies had established medical programs and built hospitals for the benefit of their membership. The idea germinated in Ybor City in 1888, when Dr. Guillermo Machado, a Spanish physician, organized La Igual (The Equal). For fifty cents a week, immigrant cigarmakers received free medical care at La Igual’s clinic. Quickly, cigar manufacturers, led by Enrique Pendas, combined enlightened self interest with benevolence, co-opting the idea of contract medicine and broadening it to include all workers. Named El Porvenir (The Future), the plan provided the services of a physician for a fee of one-dollar and twenty-five cents a month. Faced with the alternative of American physicians who could neither speak Spanish nor understand many of the tropical ailments associated with Cuba and the cigar industry, cigarmakers flocked to the new programs. Like-minded societies spun off the conceptual idea of El Porvenir.43

Cooperative Medicine

The most far-reaching and progressive accomplishment achieved by Ybor City’s mutual aid societies occurred not in the theatre or on the picnic grounds, but in the field of cooperative medicine where the immigrant associations anticipated socialized medicine. Indeed, Ybor City residents took care of their own in ways still not duplicated by American standards.

Yellow fever served as the midwife to the birth of cooperative medicine in Ybor City. During the early days, “immigrants were dying like flies,” remembered Fernando Pendos, president of Centro Español. However, Ybor City shared its suffering with countless other industrial-immigrant communities which did not respond with the same outburst of collective energy. The same forces which voiced Ybor City’s labor movement and leftist yearnings, articulated the responses toward collective medicine. The issue of socialized medicine had long been a topic of debate in Spain, Cuba and Italy, and immigrant societies put this doctrine into action in Ybor City.42
The inauguration of Centro Español moved organizational life onto a larger scale. With hundreds and potentially thousands of dues-paying members, leaders realized that such collective strength could build not only elaborate clubhouses, but perhaps large medical clinics, even hospitals. Leadership debated the fiscal prudence of cooperative medicine, arguing not against the efficacy of health benefits, but fearing the economic drain upon the society. In 1901, Centro Español rejected a proposal to build a private hospital, a decision prompting the secession of several hundred Spaniards to organize Centro Asturiano.

In the annals of immigration history, Centro Asturiano proved visionary in its concept of cooperative medicine. In 1903, the society leased the old St. James Hotel on Tampa Street, converting it into a temporary hospital. The membership soon authorized construction of a modern hospital at the corner of Jackson and Ola Streets. Dedicated in April 1905, Centro Asturiano’s Sanatorio may have been the first such hospital constructed by an immigrant group in the United States. Built at a cost of $15,000, the facility ranked among the most modern and best-equipped in Florida. The complex included a pharmacy, X-Ray lab, a modern operating room, beds for sixty patients and a pavilion. The society hired Dr. G.H. Altree to serve as full-time medical director. He supervised a staff of seventeen Cuban and Spanish physicians, nurses and aides.

During the hospital’s first decade, income from Centro Asturiano’s membership fees, canteen receipts and social activities, consistently exceeded expenses from the clubhouse and hospital. During the period prior to 1939, an average of 250 members received hospitalization each year, costing an average of eighteen dollars per patient. Experts estimated that such care at a private hospital would have cost one hundred dollars, thus saving club members and the city of Tampa millions of dollars. For $1.50 per month members received full social and recreational benefits, including complete medical coverage. La Beneficiencia Asturiana permitted family members to enjoy these benefits at a nominal extra fee.

Centro Español, pushed by its rival, unveiled its own equally impressive medical program in 1903. A committee led by President Vicente Guerra, a prominent cigar manufacturer, selected a picturesque site for a hospital on Bayshore Boulevard overlooking Tampa Bay. In February 1906, Centro Español dedicated a three-story Sanatorio, which was then perhaps the most modern facility in the state. In its first thirty years, the hospital treated 7,959 patients, of which 1,623 received operations. To minister to members’ families, La Beneficia Español enabled them to receive the same cradle to grave protection for a small fee.

The completion of the hospitals by Centro Español and Centro Asturiano unquestionably demonstrated the commitment by Ybor City’s Latins to the collective welfare of thousands of families. To appreciate the nature of such a commitment, one must understand that during the period after 1905, Ybor City’s cigarmakers and their families could expect better health services than almost anyone in Tampa. When the Spanish societies completed their institutions in 1906, Tampa’s municipal hospital consisted of a makeshift facility housed in an abandoned courthouse. In 1910, the city completed the two-story Gordon Keller Hospital, but the $24,000, thirty-two bed facility paled in comparison to the modern brick structures built by the Spaniards. Tampa’s black community rightfully dreaded a visit to the Clara Frye Hospital, a two-story frame building with room for only seventeen beds.
The mere existence and increasing popularity of collective medicine among Ybor City’s Latins angered Tampa’s medical community. The Hillsborough County Medical Society (HCMS) battled the concept of contract medicine for a half-century, labeling it “socialistic,” “un-American” and “radical.” The HCMS in particular waged an incessant battle with physicians who wished to serve the Latin societies. The very first amendment of the HCMS’s constitution prohibited its members from participating in contract medical programs. In 1902, the society passed a resolution stating, “any doctor who continued to hold any already accepted contract organized to obtain a fee for less than regulation [was] guilty of unprofessional and unethical conduct.” Shortly thereafter, the organization broadened its condemnation, prohibiting its members from even “consulting” with the medical pariahs. The Committee on Illegal Practitioners published lists of the guilty doctors (later expanded to include nurses).  

Despite the opposition of organized private physicians, collective medicine gained strength, stature and numbers following World War I. When members of Círculo Cubano and L’Unione Italiana considered building separate hospitals, Centro Asturiano and Centro Español permitted
Cubans and Italians to join their sweeping programs of cooperative medicine. Although economic motivations undoubtedly played a role in opening access to these medical plans, the move allowed inter-ethnic cooperation to function at social and economic levels unimaginable two decades earlier.

Collective medical efforts defined new parameters of mutual aid and dependence. The economic benefits generated by thousands of participants allowed the existing hospitals to modernize their facilities. In August 1928, Centro Asturiano dedicated a new $175,000 facility in Ybor City. Centro Español erected a new facility in 1970. The medical programs provided an invigorating stimulus to the entire program structure of the clubs. Since the clubs were the mechanisms by which members gained access to medical services, they retained healthy membership rolls for remarkably long periods of time. Medical privileges accounted for the major reason why Ybor City’s mutual aid societies retained their cohesiveness and strength even after World War II.49

Conclusion

The mutual aid society functioned as a bellwether of ethnic solidarity, generational change and the evolving urban community. The genius of Ybor City’s collective associations was their
ability to adjust to the changing tensions of ethnic group relations, the evolving workplace and waves of newcomers. Immigrant collectives, which began as simple institutions dispensing death and accident benefits, grew into complex networks of insurance, medical care, recreation and culture. Beginning in the 1890s with a few hundred immigrant males, the Cuban, Spanish and Italian societies crested in power and influence in the immediate pre-and post-World War II era, boasting two modern hospitals, five pharmacies, five medical laboratories, seven clubhouses (including West Tampa), and a membership totalling over 20,000 persons.
Ybor City’s mutual aid societies exhibited a high degree of ethnic interaction, economic cooperation and institutional sharing. A wide range of activities drew Cubans, Spaniards and Italians together, ranging from Latin picnics to athletic leagues to shared facilities during moments of mutual distress. Nothing, however, demonstrated more clearly the extraordinary degree of ethnic interaction than the outpouring of collective energies involved in cooperative medicine. Latins responded to problems of medical care with a dignity and dedication unequalled in urban America. That Ybor City’s Spaniards built such facilities dedicated to group health care was remarkable; that they willingly and creatively shared them with Cubans and Italians was even more noteworthy.


4 *El Internationale*, January 26, April 2, 1917.


7 “Life History of Enrique Pendas,” WPA interview; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, March 17, 1926.

8 *Resena Historica de Cencuenta Ahos*, 10; WPA, “History of the Centro Español.”

9 *Tampa Tribune*, June 15, 20, 23, 1892, August 12, 1892.

10 WPA, “Centro Español”; *Tampa Tribune*, October 20, 1983.

11 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, March 25, April 22, May 1, 1909.

12 WPA, “Number of Members in the Centro Español by Year.”

13 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 8, 1902; WPA; “History Facts, Centro Asturiano,” 318.


15 *El Centro Asturiano en Tampa. Inauguración del Edificio Social 15 de Mayo de 1914* (Tampa, 1914), 11-13; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, January 23, 1909, September 9, 1911, October 9, 1912; *Tampa Daily Times*, June 16, 1912.
16 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 15, 17, 1914.

17 Interview with Anthony Muñiz, May 20, 1982, Tampa; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 20, October 4, 1909, April 3, September 18, 23, 1911.


19 Ibid., 154-203.


21 Ibid.; WPA, “Study of the Centro Asturiano.”

22 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, January 31, 1899; WPA, “Number of Members in the Circulo Cubano by Year.”

23 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 15, 1907, May 23, 1909, April 7, 1911, November 17, 1916, May 19, 1917.


28 Interviews with Alfonso Diaz and Juan Mallea, August 15, 1982, Tampa.

29 WPA, “Study of La Union Marti-Maceo Cuban Club for the Colored Race;” interview with Diaz; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, January 2, 1906, September 24, October 4, 1908.


32 *Registro Soci Famigliari, L’Unione*, 5 vols., in Special Collections, University of South Florida Library.

33 Interview with Dominic Giunta, May 5, 1984.

34 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 13, 1983; WPA, “Photographs on Tombstones: A Latin Custom.”

35 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 18, 1910, October 10, 1912; interview with Paul Longo, June 1, 1979, June 30, 1980, July 1, 1980.

36 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 4, 1915, April 18, 1917.

37 Interview with Joe Maniscalco, April 3, 1980.

38 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 13, 1924.
Interview with Nina Ferlita, April 25, 1980; interview with Alfonso Lopez, April 24, 1980.


Interview with Maniscalco; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 25, 1906, January 24, October 4, 1908.

*Tampa Times*, June 8, 1965.


*Tampa Morning Tribune*, February 28, 1904, April 9, 1905; *El Centro Asturiano en Tampa*, 4-7.

WPA, “Centro Asturiano Hospital;” *Tampa Morning Tribune*, December 12, 1926; *El Federal*, May 3, 1902.


If cigars are identified most prominently with Tampa, then baseball runs a close second. The success of Steve Garvey, Lou Piniella, and most recently the young phenomenon, Dwight Gooden, has focused national attention on Tampa’s baseball sandlots. Paving the way for these current heroes of the national pastime was Al Lopez. Enshrined in the Hall of Fame in 1977 after a distinguished major league career of forty-five years as a player and manager, Al Lopez still reigns as Tampa’s “Mr. Baseball.” Lopez belonged to the old school of ballplayers for whom the sport was not merely a livelihood or a business but was a game of youthful energy and relative innocence.

The skills and determination that Al Lopez displayed on major league diamonds grew from his upbringing in Ybor City. Born in 1908, Lopez spent a typical boyhood in Tampa’s Latin Quarter. His family was hard working, close knit and spoke Spanish at home. Not until Al was in the third or fourth grade did he learn to converse in English. In the days before Little League, Lopez developed his baseball proficiency playing for a local social club formed by a barber in Ybor City to compete against another club from West Tampa. At the age of sixteen, Al turned professional and signed a contract with the Tampa “Smokers,” a class “D” minor league team and forerunner of the modern-day “Tarpoms.” From there Al rose to the big leagues where he became a top-fielding catcher for the Brooklyn “Dodgers.” After stints with the Boston “Braves” and Pittsburgh “Pirates,” he hung up his cleats in 1948. During the 1950s, he returned to manage the Cleveland “Indians” and Chicago “White Sox” to American League pennants.

Had it not been for his talent in playing baseball, Al might have settled into a trade as a cigarmaker, like his father before him. Instead, baseball became his education and profession and introduced him to a world outside of Tampa. Although Lopez became “Americanized” and his job took him away from his native city, he has never forgotten his roots and makes his home in Tampa. The following interview provides a glimpse into Al Lopez’s world of Ybor City and its rich baseball tradition.

Interview with Al Lopez

Q: When were you born?

Lopez: Nineteen hundred and eight [1908].

Q: So you’re a native Tampan. But your parents came from...?

Lopez: They were married in Spain, then they went to Cuba, and they had seven kids there. I was the eighth kid. I was born here. In 1906 the cigar industry started booming into Tampa.
They moved from Cuba and settled in Key West and for some reason or another they didn’t like it in Key West. I think it was on account of transportation or something.

Q: Did they follow the tobacco industry, the cigar industry?

Lopez: They were asking for workers to come down to move here. I guess they were offering him some kind of deal or something like that. My dad learned the trade in Cuba. He was what they call a selector. In those days it was all handmade cigars, and my dad had to pick out the leaves. They have these wrappers, they call them, they come in different sizes so naturally you’re not going to give the big size, a real good leaf, to a guy that’s making a cheroot or a small ten-cent cigar or five-cent cigar; so he would have to save that wrapper for the guy that was making the thirty or forty cent cigar. They all had tickets, and they had to come to him. He would select the size and the color and if it was a real good wrapper. A lot of them had a lot of mange, and they tried to keep people away from the mange. And that way they saved money because those wrappers were very expensive, and that was one of the most expensive parts of the tobacco, and that’s the reason they had this trade.

Q: What year did your parents move here?

Lopez: 1906.

Q: He came with his wife and how many children at the time?

Lopez: No, he came by himself first to see how he was going to like it. At that time they were just starting. My mother stayed in Cuba with seven kids and one was just months old. And when he finally sent for us, she came over, was sick all the way in the boat and was lucky that my older sister was already old enough to be able to help her out with the kids, especially the young one.

Q: They took a boat from Cuba to Key West, and then how did they get from Key West to Tampa?

Lopez: The same way. The same boat made a stop in Key West and then to Tampa.

Q: When you were growing up, what kind of expectations do you think your family had about what you would do when you got older?

Lopez: I don’t know. My impression was that being that they were poor, that they never had expectations that I was going to be a college graduate or anything like that, they wanted me to get an education, you know, as far as I could go, and then after that they figured that I was going to have to go to work just like everybody else.

Q: How did your brothers and sisters fare?
Lopez: Well, my oldest sister, she had to leave school to help the family out. There were nine kids at the time. There were a couple of strikes in between in the tobacco industry. They had a couple of real bad strikes here, oh around 1913 I guess, 1912, something like that. And my oldest sister at that time was about fourteen and she had to go to work and then after that my brothers kept on following. She went to the factory, in fact, most of them went to the factory. I guess if I hadn’t been a ball player that I might have ended up in the factory also.

Q: *How popular was baseball in Tampa?*

Lopez: Oh, it was all we could do, there was nothing else. You know we didn’t have radio, TV, nothing like that, we just had to play baseball. We had a playground not too far from where I lived, and we used to go over there and stay there until about, I think the playground closed around 9:00, and we played basketball and what they call now diamond ball. I thought that was great. I was just growing up, and I could see my older brother competing at these type of games, and I wanted to do just as well or better than he did. To tell you the truth, I got interested in baseball in the 1920 World Series and so-and-so was rooting for this club and so-and-so was rooting for that club. It happened so that it was Brooklyn and Cleveland, they played in that World Series that year. I think that kind of started me off, you know, besides my brother. My brother was playing ball also and I started playing ball, and we started forming our own groups, our own baseball teams as kids.

Q: *Could we follow how you started from children playing baseball, the sequence of events that you go through to get to the major leagues? You played in neighborhoods?*

Lopez: There were no organized little leagues in those days. We used to have to form our own clubs. We didn’t have any money or anything like that to buy masks or chest protectors or shin guards. To me that was a joke. I got my nose busted a couple of times getting hit by foul balls, and we didn’t have any masks. We'd just go back to the plate and catch.

Q: *How about balls and bats?*

Lopez: Sometimes everybody would chip in a nickel or a dime or what ever they could to buy one ball, and that’s what we had-one ball, or else we’d put black tape around it after we’d hit for quite a while and play with that. We used to have to build our own diamonds. Any sandlot that we could we’d put a diamond there and we’d play in the neighborhood some place. We played ball between us kids and compete. I moved up, and a barber from Ybor City formed a team, and his wife made the uniforms for us. And there was a barber from West Tampa who made a team, and we had rivalries. And they both married sisters so there was a rivalry, they both thought that they were great managers. And they formed this team, and this guy approached me to come over and play for him.

Q: *So you were being scouted by barbers?*
Lopez: Probably, yeah. Anyway I guess I was getting pretty good because I was in demand a little bit, and this barber asked me if I’d catch for him and I said yeah, sure. You know, this was the first time I was ever going to wear a uniform. I thought this was great. So we ended up with a real good ball club. One guy was from West Tampa and this guy was from Ybor City. They had the darnedest arguments between those two guys because they were trying to beat each other all the time, and we were lucky enough that we were beating them.

Q: At _that_ point, then, there were teams that were being sponsored by local business establishments in Ybor City and West Tampa.

Lopez: Well at that particular time there was already an intersocial league that used to play at McFarland Park in West Tampa, and there was four teams: the Italian club, the Spanish club, the Centro Asturiano, which is another Spanish club, and the Cuban club. There was no small competing. There was quite a rivalry because they were importing Cuban ball players from Cuba and Key West.

Q: _But these weren’t really children._

Lopez: No, no, these were grown-ups. And they drew very well. They used to have those open streetcars in those days, and they would flock on those things and people would be hanging on these streetcars to go all the way from Ybor City to McFarland Park to watch these ballgames.

Q: Now were most of these, the kids that were playing, were they mostly Latin?

Lopez: Mostly, yes. They were mostly Latin kids. There were very few American kids who were born around that area there. I went to school at Ybor School. It’s still there, an elementary school. There was, I would say, five kids who were American kids, that spoke English in the yard. I didn’t learn how to speak, I didn’t talk, I didn’t speak English until I was in about the third or fourth grade. We always spoke Spanish. There was Italian kids that spoke Italian, and we picked up a little Italian.

Q: Did you have many Italian kids on the teams?

Lopez: Oh, yes. There were some Italian kids on the teams. In fact, they had their own team at one time.

Q: Getting back to the Italian Club, the Spanish Club, Centro Asturiano. The ball players on those clubs, did they tend to be of the nationality that the clubs represented?

Lopez: No, no, there were some Cuban fellows that were playing for the Italian Club because they didn't have enough Italian ball players. The Centro Asturiano had a pitcher who was an Italian boy that was good. They didn't care so much, it was just the contact that they could make, I guess.
Q: **Would these clubs be something like semi-pro, in that category?**

Lopez: Yes. They were pretty good clubs, these intersocial league clubs.

Q: **Did they pay the players?**

Lopez: No, they were not supposed to. They probably did under the table, but not on the payroll.

Q: **Did you ever play for one of these clubs?**

Lopez: I was going to play when it busted up. That year I was only, I think fifteen. Somebody asked me if I’d catch for the Cuban club.

In 1959, Lopez won the American League pennant with the Chicago “White Sox.” He is shown here with second base star Nelson Fox.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa Tribune Company.
Q: Why did it bust up? Do you remember?

Lopez: They lost interest in the thing, and they were having a lot of fights between the clubs on account of the way the program was. They didn't like for them to be importing ball players from Cuba and some from Key West, and they thought that they were getting paid because they weren't going to come from Cuba. I think that was the thing, and I think the fans got a little bit tired of it. Well the intersocial league broke up. Some fellows in Ybor City formed a kind of a league of themselves, four clubs. I was surprised. One of the guys that was going to run one of the clubs, came over and asked me. I was going to junior high at the time, George Washington Junior High School, and he asked me if I'd catch for him. He was a pitcher on the team and he was going to run the team. These were grown men, to me they were old guys. They were probably twenty to thirty or something like that, but they were old guys—I was fifteen. My brother was playing on one of the teams, and I said I'd be glad to try out, but I said I don't think I can catch for you guys, or against these fellows. These fellows are grown guys. They said, don't worry about that, we want you to catch. So I played. We played two halves, and we played in the series, and I had a real hot series, everything that I hit just went. There was a Spanish newspaper man who used to write for the local Ybor City paper. He'd write sports, and he wanted me to go out and try out with the Tampa professional team. They called them the “Smokers” at the time, now they're the “Tarpons.” We used to play our games in back of the University of Tampa at Plant Field. That's the only stadium they had at the time. So again I told them, I don't think I can make it, but, I said I'll be glad to go out and try it out. So he said, well I think you can do it, go on out and try it out. So I went out, and he told me to go see a fellow by the name of Doc Nance, who was running the club. He used to be a catcher also on the team. Real nice guy, he's still living.

Q: Were the "Smokers" affiliated with any major league ball club?

Lopez: No, at that time all the clubs were independent. It was like it is now, they're subsidized. The owner was a fellow by the name of Dr. Opre, I think he was a retired doctor, that was in 1925, who had a real estate office. This was during the first boom in Florida, it was a tremendous thing. And he had an office downtown close to the Hillsborough Hotel. I guess he went in to stir up more interest around, and he went into this baseball team, and he was a baseball fan, also. Doc Nance was really the guy that formed the team and ran the whole club. So they asked me to go see Doc Nance, and I went to see Doc Nance. It was at a...there used to be a poolroom and a cigar store on Franklin close to Twiggs and Franklin. I was supposed to meet Doc Nance, I think around five or six o'clock that afternoon. I went over to see him, told him who I was, gave him a slip of paper, and he said, oh yeah, I've been expecting you. He said, how much money do you want? I said Doc I don't know anything about money or contracts or anything like this. At this time I'm sixteen. So he said how about $150.00 a month? I said that's swell, real good. He said fine. So he just gave me a contract for $150.00 a month right there, and I signed it. I don't know if it was legal or not because I was sixteen, but I signed it anyway.

Q: Did you play all year?
Lopez: No, they had two seasons. They had regular seasons that went on in the summertime. Like they have right now, I think their season is over in September. I played two years with them. The first year, I was sixteen when I signed. That year I didn’t hardly catch until the latter part of the season. I started catching some, and we played in the playoffs with St. Petersburg, and I had a good series that year. The following year I was the regular catcher, and then I was drafted by a higher classification of baseball. If you’re not sold you can only play two years in one league, then you’re subject to draft. So the Jacksonville team which had just started the year before drafted me to come up to Jacksonville.

Q: What levels were the teams?

Lopez: The “Tarpons” were class “D,” Jacksonville was “B.”

Q: When you were sixteen and started playing for the “Smokers,” did you have to quit school or could you still go to school?
Lopez: I quit school.

Q: Let’s work back a little bit then. You say that you didn’t speak English until the fourth grade?

Lopez: About the third or fourth grade.

Q: So Spanish was spoken entirely in your house?

Lopez: Yeah, it was spoken in the school yard. You wouldn’t dare speak English in the yard. Those kids would murder you. They thought you were high-hatting them or something like that.

Q: Where did you live? Where was your house?

Lopez: Over in Ybor City, not too far from the school. The school was on 14th and Columbus Drive, and I lived on 12th and 12th. So I lived about four or five blocks from school.

Q: What language did you speak in school in the first, second, and third grades?

Lopez: Spanish. You know, we learned, naturally, whatever we were taught, the alphabet and arithmetic, and we understood. In the third or fourth grades we really started speaking some English, but the rest of the time at home we spoke Spanish, on the yard we spoke Spanish, in the streets we spoke Spanish.

Q: What about the teachers? Were they Latin or were they Anglo?

Lopez: One or two were Spanish or Italian girls, but they spoke English. They wanted you to learn the English language which I thought was correct.

Q: No bilingual education at that time?

Lopez: No, in fact when I went to junior high, some of the kids had a preference between Spanish and Latin, and I wanted to take Spanish because I wanted it really for my own. It was easier for me, but at the same time I wanted to learn it grammatically. But they wouldn’t let us do it. They made the Spanish kids and Latin kids take Latin.

Q: What was your family’s reaction to your quitting school and at sixteen going on to this path of playing baseball?

Lopez: Well I guess they felt, you know, let him have a chance at this thing and if he doesn’t make it, he’s gonna have to go to work. The reason I quit school was to try to play ball, which I was just delighted to be able to do, and they were going to pay me to play ball. I thought that was terrific. And I said if I don't make it in baseball, I’m going to have to go get a job.
Q: Was the school you quit, Hillsborough High School?

Lopez: No. It was Jesuit. It used to be called Sacred Heart. I only played there one year. I went to George Washington, which is on Columbus Drive and still there. The coach at Sacred Heart was a friend of my brother’s who played baseball with him, and he had heard about me. So he asked my brother if I would come over and play for him and I played there one year. There was a little better competition. Sacred Heart was a high school, and where I was at junior high you were just getting junior high competition. I think it just advanced me a little bit by going to Sacred Heart.

Q: Was your family religious in any way that they would be happy that you went to a Catholic school?

Lopez: No. By this time they thought that I had what they called an education already. I was in the tenth grade at this time, and so they thought I had enough education. I guess if I’d insisted or if I’d been a brilliant student or something like that then they’d probably...
Q: **What kind of a student were you?**

Lopez: Just fair. I just tried to get by.

Q: **After you learned to speak English did you still converse with your parents and your friends in Spanish? When would you normally use English during a day?**

Lopez: When I was playing ball, you know, when I went into pro ball. I guess that at the beginning my English was broken English or something. There’s a few words you can notice your accent between Spanish and English. Then I married an Irish girl in New York and that was it, although I spoke to my mother in Spanish all the time.

Q: **So, on a typical day of your life when you were ten years old or eleven years old, you wouldn’t have to speak English at all living here.**

Lopez: No, not here living in Ybor City.

Q: **When you were on the “Smokers,” was the team made up of people drawn from this area?**

Lopez: No, no, they brought them from all over. In fact my first year that I was with the “Smokers” the team was supposed to have two rookies that never played pro ball, and they were supposed to have two classmen—ball players who played higher classification than “D” ball. So what happened was that we came up with some ball players who played within the junior league which was class “B,” and they changed some of the names. One guy changed his name from Schneider to Sneed, and things like that, because they wanted to get away. They wanted to have a good team, which we did. We finally ended up with a good team but they found out that they had too many classmen. We had four instead of two. Two were pitchers and so were the manager and the catcher. So they finally ended up keeping the pitchers. The catcher who was a classman, they let him go, and that’s when I got my break to start catching.

Q: **Did you ever face, would you ever perceive yourself being discriminated because of your ethnic origins.**

Lopez: No, they used to try to, you know like I guess they gave Jackie Robinson or some of those guys a little hard time. They used to call me a Cuban “nigger.” I’m not even Cuban, but they called me a Cuban “nigger” or something like that. But it was just, I thought, part of the game that they try to get under your skin, you know, competition, if you let it bother you same way as if you were up at the plate and they threw, you know, they threw under your chin or something like that to see if you’re going to scare or something like that. You can’t let that bother you.

Q: **Did you have other Latin ball players on the “Smokers”?**
Lopez: Oh, yeah. We had a couple of Cuban boys, and we had a Cuban fellow that lived here in Tampa by the name of Alvarez. He had been with the “Smokers” for six or eight years before I even started. He was a pitcher.

Q: So most of the players then were Anglo, American.

Lopez: Yeah. American players. They brought them in from all over.

Q: How did they get along here in Tampa, a city that had a heavy Latin population?

Lopez: It’s just like every other city. I’ve noticed it in Cleveland. Wherever there’s a heavy population, in Cleveland there’s a Polish or Slavs, that there was a little resentment there, you know, one side against the other side. In Tampa there used to be a little resentment you know against the Latin population here. In Sulphur Springs, for instance. There were signs, “No Latins or dogs allowed to go swimming.” But, they never bothered me. Wherever I went, I don’t know, maybe it’s because I was lucky that I turned out to be a professional ball player or something like that. I was always welcomed and treated real nice and they never bothered me.

Q: But on the team there was no problem... among groups?

Lopez: No.

Q: You said you played in Plant Field with the “Smokers.” How many people would be attracted to a “Smoker” game?

Lopez: Oh, we’d draw. You’d be surprised. We’d draw, you know. At that time the cigarmakers were on what they call piece time. Whatever they made, that’s what they earned. The games started at 3:15, so by 2:30 they would leave the factory and come out and see the ball game. That was the only thing to see, baseball, you know, there was no television or nothing like that. And the people, the cigarmakers, were great. I think that was our greatest draw.

Q: Were you something of a hero with the cigarmakers?

Lopez: I finally got to be. I didn’t notice it because I was just one of the local guys and I lived in that area. I played around the clubs, played dominoes with them, cards and stuff like that, but I guess I was. I don’t know, I never noticed it, I never figured that I was a hero. I just figured that I was damn lucky to be where I got.

Q: Was there any betting on these games?

Lopez: Oh yeah, they bet like hell. They loved to bet. At that time gambling in Tampa was wide open. They had gambling houses, you could go in there, and they had roulette, dice, everything, just wide open. It was during prohibition, you could go to any of those Spanish restaurants. You’d want a bottle, I mean, a drink of Canadian Club. They’d put
the bottle of Canadian Club, you’d help yourself. A bottle of German beer, a dollar for a bottle of beer, right on the counter. It was wide open. And gambling was, and prostitution was controlled which I think would be better right now instead of having it all over the streets the way they have it. It was controlled and you’d never see a prostitute down the street in any place. They had their own sections.

Q: Did you spend most of your social life, your social activities in Ybor City or did you wander to what we call the downtown area now?

Lopez: No, I spent it mostly around Ybor City. I think I had a very fine life, I wish I could do it all over again.

Q: What made it fine?

Lopez: Well, at that time, we had four clubs, social clubs, in Ybor City and everybody knew everybody and they had dances with shows. They had a dance every Saturday night, matinees on Sunday. We got a bunch of us together, we’d go someplace, we’d buy a bottle of whiskey for us, you know, and we’d have a bottle and we’d share it between us, we’d all chip in to buy the bottle. We didn’t have to take a date or nothing like that. You’d go there, and the girls would come with a chaperone, with their own group, sisters or what, and we’d go there and pick out the girls you wanted to dance with. We’d dance with them, take them out, do most anything you wanted to do, take them to a movie, anything that you enjoyed doing. And I thought it was a great life. I think it was very simple. You didn’t have to have any dates or nothing like that, you’d just go there, and if you wanted to take a girl out you’d dance with her and ask her after the dance to go to a matinee. You would end up at the Tampa Theater to see a movie, whoever was playing, with a date. I thought it worked out real good.

Q: Who did the “Smokers” play?

Lopez: They were in the Florida State League. The same way as it is now, but we didn’t go that far. There was Tampa, St. Pete, Lakeland, Sarasota, Orlando, Sanford, just teams like that.

Q: Did you travel by bus?

Lopez: By car mostly.

Q: How did you get to St. Pete before the Gandy Bridge was built in the mid-twenties?

Lopez: You had to go all the way around. That bridge was built in ’23 or ’24, ’24 I think it was. In ’25 we started already using the bridge.

Q: Before the bridge you’d take a car. Give us a route, how would you go?
Lopez: You’d have to go all around Clearwater, Largo, up in through there that way all the way around. It was about sixty miles and a terrible drive.

Q:  *How long a drive would something like that be?*

Lopez: Oh, it must have been, it’d take you, I guess, a couple of hours because the road, they call it Memorial Highway, is still there and it was just a one-lane pavement. If the car was coming from the other direction, you would have to give him half the road. I never will forget that here you’re traveling at forty miles an hour, you were going fast, and you’d see this car coming, you’d have to kind of slow up and then just give him half the road and just keep right on going.

Q:  *Did you get a travel allowance or anything of that type?*

Lopez: Oh, yeah. They gave you meal money and they furnished the car. They rented it or else individuals that had them, they’d furnish transportation. We’d go to Lakeland, we’d stay in Lakeland. It was a tough drive to go from here to Lakeland in those days. You’d go out to what they call Broadway now, and it’d take you through Mango, Seffner, Kissimmee, and then into Orlando, the other side of Lakeland. It was a tough ride.

Q:  *How many people would show up at games when you went on the road?*

Lopez: We’d have 1,000, 1,500 people. But the prices were cheap. They were collecting, $1,000, probably a little more than that. And then they had the program to get by, they made money. And then at the end of the year they might get lucky, and if they break even during the season, they figure that if they sold one player that would be a profit. But I don’t see how they could’ve made money, because it was all day games, you know. There was no night baseball at that time.

Q:  *How much did they charge admission to get into these baseball games with the “Smokers?”*

Lopez: I imagine a dollar, a dollar general admission, maybe the box seats were a dollar and a half or something like that because they did have box seats there at Plant Field. It’s a fairground, you know. It has a half a mile track.

Q:  *There is a picture in the 1920s of what looks like the Washington Senators training in Plant Field.*

Lopez: I trained with them one year. This was right after I signed. In those days the clubs didn’t bring like they do now, ten to twelve catchers in spring training, because they had to have a lot of hitting practice and they have a lot of pitchers that they have to warm up. . .it’s quite a job. But in those days they only brought two or three catchers. The Washington club had three so they wanted a catcher just to catch batting practice and nothing else. They hit by the hour, those guys did. Four or five hours hitting. The year I was there Bucky Harris was the manager.
Q: How many other teams trained in the area at that time.

Lopez: There were quite a lot.

Q: Were the Reds here at that time?

Lopez: The Reds were in Orlando. Washington was in Tampa for oh, I don’t know, fifteen or so years.

Q: What about St. Pete?

Lopez: St. Pete had the Yankees and the Boston Braves. The Boston Braves were there first, and then they brought in the Yankees. At Clearwater was Brooklyn, at Bradenton was the Cardinals, at Sarasota the Giants were there for a little while, and then the Red Sox came in there for quite a while.
Q: **When does this spring training phenomenon really take the shape of an organized enterprise?**

Lopez: I think that the first time that any club came here to Tampa was in 1916, 1914 or 1916. I think the Cubs came down here and stayed at the Tampa Bay Hotel. The Washington club used to stay there, the Cincinnati club used to stay there at the Tampa Bay Hotel, which is Tampa University.

Q: **People in the community, public relations people, chamber of commerce people, did they try to attract clubs here?**

Lopez: Oh, yeah. They were tickled to death to get them here. They finally realized that it was a great help for tourism because at that time there were no dog tracks, no race tracks, and horse tracks, and baseball would draw some tourists out there, would help a lot. I think this has been a great help with the development of the state, baseball. People come down here to see what you got, they like it, well naturally they are going to plan on coming back.

Q: **Did the teams back then, when you were doing the catching, the spring training, did they play organized games like they do now in the spring?**

Lopez: Yeah, same thing. I used to go to, well they used to carry me wherever they went, because I used to catch batting practice for them, and they asked me if I’d go along. Well I remember going to Clearwater the first time I saw the Brooklyn club. They had a guy by the name of Zack Wheat that was a hell of a hitter, and I was really impressed with him. I think Casel Stengel was with them, but I didn’t even know who in the hell Casey Stengel was.

Q: **Now what year did you catch with Washington?**

Lopez: This was 1925.

Q: **You were with the “Smokers” at the same time?**

Lopez: Yeah. In fact, the owner of the Washington club was a man by the name of Clark Griffith. The trainer was a man by the name of Mike Martin. That Washington club, there’s a lot of family in the whole organization, it’s a family thing, and it was that same way. And Mike Martin was very well thought of, he was a trainer. Between him and somebody else, they recommended to Clark Griffith, why don’t we take that kid with us, he loves to play ball, he looks like he could make a catcher. So Griffith says, well if you like him, go ahead. So they found out that I had already signed a contract with the “Smokers” that year, and they went to the “Smokers.” They asked how much you want for that kid? They answered $5,000, no ten I think they wanted. He said are you crazy, he’s never had any baseball experience or nothing. I’ll give you a thousand dollars. So they turned him down. They said no.
As a Brooklyn “Dodger” in 1933, Lopez led National League catchers in fielding and batted .309.

Photograph courtesy of Al Lopez

Q: When you traveled around to places like Sanford, Lakeland, and St. Petersburg, what
Lopez batting for the Boston “Braves,” the major league club he joined in 1935.

Photograph courtesy of Al Lopez.

was life like for you on the road? Here you were a Latin kid. . .

Lopez: Teenager. Luckily that fellow that I was talking about, I roomed with him for three years, a fellow by the name of Alvarez. He was an old man. He was about thirty-two, I think, he was thirty years old or something that. He’d been pitching quite a while, maybe twenty-eight something that. He and I were roommates. He spoke English, but, you know, English, like I did, I guess. We were roommates together. We’d go to kind of at night because they were all day games. Get up in the morning, have your breakfast, and then you go out to the ballpark and play your game. Then that night you come back to the hotel, have your dinner, and then you either go to a movie or something like that.

Q: Were you feeling as you went into organized sports and got away from Tampa, did you see yourself becoming more Americanized?
Lopez: Yes. And I liked it. I liked it. Not that I disliked the Spanish food. I still eat my wife’s *caldo gallego* which she learned to make. I don’t know if you ever had it or not, it’s real good soup. And she makes yellow rice and and Spanish dishes. We used to get up in the morning and just have a pot of coffee and a piece of bread and butter, that’s what we had at home, you know, we were brought up like that. Mostly boiled milk with coffee, style. But then I got to be on the road. We’d eat breakfast, not have lunch, and then eat dinner. At home we used to have coffee and bread and then we’d have a big lunch and then dinner at night, but it’s changed around and it was nice. I think it helped me a lot. . .start changing.

Q: You’ve been here now seventy-two years, what are the biggest changes you see with respect to sports, the kind of early youth you had when you can walk off a sandlot and almost become a major leaguer, with respect to sports and, I guess, with respect to the whole city, and the Latin community within the city?

Lopez: The Latin community is getting more Americanized all around with the exception now that the Cubans are coming in which has given it some more Latin atmosphere. My kid doesn’t speak Spanish, he understands Spanish. He’s married to a Spanish girl, and his kids don’t speak Spanish, which I wish they would. But, I don’t know, it’s easier for them to speak English because they’re brought up in an English neighborhood, an American neighborhood, and the mother speaks English to them. The reason we spoke Spanish is because my mother and dad spoke Spanish, and they spoke Spanish to us all the time. But I think they’re getting away, which I’m sad to see, it’s sad to see because I think it’s a great advantage if you could speak two or three or four languages. I’d like to see my grandson or my granddaughter speak Spanish, or another language.

Q: If it hadn’t been for baseball, do you have any idea what you might have wound up doing?

Lopez: No telling. I’d probably have ended up in the factory with the rest of my brothers. Learning a trade of some kind. I think I’ve been very very lucky. I thank baseball for it.
AFRO-CUBANS IN EXILE: TAMPA, FLORIDA, 1886-1984*

by Susan D. Greenbaum

Afro-Cubans have always comprised a small segment of Cuban exile communities in the United States, representing about 13 percent of Cuban immigrants arriving during the early decades of the century, and some 5 percent of the post-1959 emigration.1 Miami’s Little Havana is more than 99 percent white.2 In writing on the causes for such discrepancies in ethnic patterns of migration from Cuba, Benigno Aguirre offered the following speculation concerning the experiences of Afro-Cubans who have migrated to the United States: “Apparently, the ethnic identity of the Cuban Negro cannot neutralize the greater discrimination that all blacks experience. They lack a sense of community that shelters the ethnic individual from the effects of the larger society.”3 These comments primarily refer to more recent immigrants, whose small numbers and evident alienation from the white Cuban community may well serve to mitigate an identity distinct from black Americans. However, Gerald Poyo has suggested that conditions for Afro-Cuban immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were quite different from those confronted by more recent arrivals.4 Although formal segregation had the predictable effect of driving a wedge between black and white Cubans, he concludes that this also contributed to the development of distinct Afro-Cuban communities. Rather than amalgamating with Afro-Americans, Afro-Cubans often retreated within the confines of their own segregated institutions. In this respect, their response to the double difficulties of being black immigrants is quite consistent with what has been shown in research on other black immigrant groups in the United States.5 In addition, a large share of the early Afro-Cuban immigrants were cigarworkers, whose geographical mobility, Poyo surmises, led to a rather distinctively cosmopolitan community life.6

These general conclusions are well illustrated in the specific historical development of the Afro-Cuban community in Tampa, Florida. La Unión Marti-Maceo is an Afro-Cuban organization in Tampa which was originally established by immigrant cigarworkers at the turn of the century. Since its inception, La Unión Marti-Maceo has formed the basis for an ongoing, multigenerational Afro-Cuban community. The long-term development of this community offers unique insights into the process of Afro-Cuban adjustment to conditions in the United States and factors that have tended to stall incorporation into the larger black population.

This paper is based on an historical community study that is being done in collaboration with members of La Unión Marti-Maceo. The research is still in an early stage. The information is drawn primarily from the manuscript records of La Unión Marti-Maceo, oral history interviews with older club members, census and city directory data, and existing published sources.

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Formation and Early Development of the Afro-Cuban Community in Tampa

During the 1890s Tampa, Florida, was a major center of Cuban exile support for the independence struggle. The cigar industry, established in Tampa in 1886, employed several thousand Cuban workers, many of whom had been refugees of the Ten Years War of 1868-78. José Martí visited Tampa frequently to spur the enthusiasm of this large exile community, whose members had established at least forty-one separate patriotic organizations and widely adopted the practice of “tithing” their wages to supply funds for the cause of Cuba Libre. Afro-Cubans constituted a small minority among the Tampa cigarworkers, but they were of special interest to Martí. Their prominent participation in patriotic activities was a visible indication of racial solidarity among the insurgents, which Martí hoped would contribute to victory and ease the creation of a just society.

For most of the Afro-Cuban patriots, however, the vision of social justice in the new republic remained elusive. Independence changed little in Cuba. For Afro-Cubans who remained in Florida, there was an even more discouraging reality in the making.
Between the inception of the cigar industry and the end of the war in Cuba in 1898, the city of Tampa developed a unique dual character, becoming what has been described as a “cracker village with a Latin accent.” Immigrant cigar-workers accounted for nearly a quarter of the population in 1900. Most were Cuban, but there were also substantial numbers of Spaniards and Italians. The balance of the population consisted primarily of native-born white southerners, sons and daughters of the Confederacy. In addition, native-born blacks accounted for just over 10 percent of the population.

The immigrants lived almost exclusively in Ybor City and West Tampa. These were clearly defined enclaves which surrounded the cigar factories and comprised worlds unto themselves. Within their confines, the Afro-Cubans led lives far different from their Afro-American counterparts in Tampa. Black cigarworkers, virtually all of whom were Cuban, worked side by side with white workers, sharing a comparable wage scale. Black Cubans also lived among white Cubans and the other white immigrants. In sharp contrast to the American sections of Tampa, race relations in the immigrant neighborhoods were reportedly quite harmonious. Indeed, the cigarworkers’ reputation for racial tolerance was often cited as evidence of their radicalism and offered added fuel for nativist antagonisms against all the immigrants.

The end of hostilities in Cuba coincided with a number of developments that altered the insularity of the immigrant communities in Tampa and ultimately resulted in significant changes in relations between the black and white Cubans. Depressed economic conditions in Cuba following independence discouraged many of the Cubans from returning. No longer able to view themselves as temporary exiles, many of the Cubans began to reconcile themselves to permanent residence in Florida. At about the same time, American influences were increasingly penetrating Tampa’s cloistered Latin community. At the turn of the century, control of the cigar factories passed from Cuban and Spanish ownership to the American corporate conglomerates, and immediately production modes and labor practices were transformed. Of added importance for black Cubans was the 1896 Supreme Court decision, Plessy vs. Ferguson, that set forth the doctrine of “separate but equal.” In the wake of this ruling, racial segregation throughout the United States hardened around a multitude of explicit laws and ordinances, and there was a general upsurge of repression and violence against blacks.

One consequence of these changes was that black and white Cubans were increasingly disassociated from each other. Until 1898, Cubans had devoted much of their leisure time and organizational energies to the patriotic clubs, many of which were racially mixed. Patriotic clubs disappeared with the end of the war. In 1899 and 1900, Cubans established two new organizations in Tampa—one white, the other black. Both were mutual aid societies, similar in structure and composition to organizations that had been established earlier by Spanish and Italian immigrants. Although racial segregation in social organizations had also existed in Cuba, the creation of two separate clubs, in place of the previously integrated organizations, suggests that the racial solidarity of Cuba Libre was dissolving under the pressures of post-reconstruction Tampa.

The founders of the Afro-Cuban organization included Ruperto Pedroso and Bruno Roig, both of whom had been active in local Cuban political groups. It was patterned after an organization in Cuba named Antonio Maceo Free Thinkers of Santa Clara, of which Bruno Roig was a member. Antonio Maceo, a black Cuban general, had been killed fighting the Spanish. The name
given to the Tampa club, Society of the Freethinkers of Martí and Maceo, was adapted to include José Martí, the martyred Apostle of Cuban Liberty.

The initial purposes of the club were mainly social, to provide a place “to meet outside the house in a way acceptable to men of dignity.” By the end of 1901, the membership totaled 117, representing approximately one-third of the Afro-Cuban households in Tampa. Activities of the club included parties, informal socializing, a baseball team called the “Cuban Giants” (Los Gigantes Cubanos), and classes for adults and children. A separate Ladies Committee was responsible for organizing socials. In 1904 a group within the membership formed a new organization, La Unión, which was more explicitly oriented toward mutual aid. Members were able to obtain medical care and prescriptions as needed under a system of benefits developed in conjunction with the other ethnic societies in Tampa. The two Afro-Cuban organizations functioned separately but with overlapping memberships until 1907, when they fused into La Unión Martí-Maceo. Within two years construction was completed on a two-story brick clubhouse in Ybor City which included an auditorium, dance hall, and club rooms.

La Unión Martí-Maceo was a multi-purpose institution that, for the Afro-Cubans, became the locus of nearly all organized and informal leisure time activities. It served the same functions that other ethnic societies in Tampa provided their members: economic security, a place to socialize, a point of entry for the newly arrived, and an institutional basis for preserving national
identity and culture. La Unión Martí-Maceo, had the added function of enabling black Cubans to escape some of the problems and indignities to which they were vulnerable on account of their color. The medical benefits were of particular importance in view of the extremely inadequate health care otherwise available to blacks in Tampa at that time. Segregation excluded Afro-Cubans from virtually all forms of public recreation, but within the walls of La Unión Martí-Maceo they were able to construct their own social world. They produced plays, sponsored orators and musicians, purchased recreational equipment, established a library, and maintained a cantina. After work each day, the men gathered at the clubhouse to play dominoes and socialize. Children learned to play musical instruments and were offered classes taught in Spanish. Women took an active although subordinate role in the affairs of the society, and generally attended the club only when there were dances or other formal events.

Within the complex sociopolitical environment of Ybor City and the predominantly white southern community that surrounded it, Afro-Cubans comprised a marginal group. They were a minority within two minorities, representing about 13 percent of the Cuban and just less than 10 percent of the black populations of Tampa. In the local ethnic hierarchy, the Cuban immigrants occupied a position only slightly higher than the blacks, and were themselves subject to discriminatory treatment. Theoretically, the dual identity of the Afro-Cubans should have
offered a bridge between the larger black and Cuban communities. In practice, however, the Afro-Cubans became not a bridge, but an island, encapsulated within their own small group.

The color line was an important factor that divided black from white Cubans, although they continued to live as neighbors and work together in the factories. The two Cuban organizations maintained intermittent communication based on common interests in the affairs of their homeland, but indications of friction and unspecified allusions to conflicts occasionally appear in the minutes of La Unión Martí-Maceo. Both oral and documentary accounts of relations between black and white Cubans are frequently contradictory: one view suggesting that white Cubans keenly perceived the advantages of distancing themselves from their black compatriots, the other emphasizing the extremely lax enforcement of segregation in Ybor City and an ongoing sense of patriotic camaraderie shared by all the Cubans. These discrepancies can be attributed in part to differences in the responses of individuals to the contingencies of Tampa's racial etiquette: some were more easily assimilated- than others. It is nonetheless evident that, although discrimination was less of a problem in Ybor City, black and white Cubans were not treated alike, and they did not regard themselves as comprising a single group. As time passed, racial distinctions between Cubans grew in importance, and the bonds of common national identity weakened.
Relations between black Cubans and black Americans took an opposite course. Initial conditions of almost total estrangement gradually gave way to a partial incorporation. Despite the fact that Florida laws officially assigned them to the same social category, Cuban and American blacks remained generally alien to each other until nearly the end of World War II. Their physical resemblance was superficial in comparison with the differences in language, religion, culture and history that divided them. For the most part, members of the two groups lived in different neighborhoods, adults worked in different jobs and children attended different schools. Afro-Cubans enjoyed marginal advantages not shared by Afro-Americans: they earned higher wages, lived under more relaxed color restrictions, and they had access to the benefits of their organization.

By many accounts, Afro-Cubans tended to maintain actively the distance that already separated them from black Americans. Nearly all of the children attended a Catholic elementary school, which was segregated and mostly Afro-Cuban. Those who attended the public schools were not encouraged to socialize with Americans. Marriage to black Americans was even more strongly discouraged, and girls were especially sheltered from such possibilities. Most important, black Americans did not belong to La Unión Martí-Maceo. In 1915, the state required the organization to eliminate the provision that members be Cuban. In compliance, the members formally voted to permit American blacks to join. However, a majority of those present abstained, and the organization remained effectively closed to Americans until the 1920s. Viewed from the other side, black Americans, and especially teenagers, were often quite hostile to black Cubans, ridiculing their language problems and calling them “black wops.” In short, cultural differences, minimal opportunities for contact, and competitive antagonisms all served to hinder the early formation of social ties between the two groups. These conditions had the further effect of minimizing pressures on the immigrants to assimilate.

Mobility also served to reduce the likelihood of Afro-Cubans assimilating into the local black population. A very large proportion of the Afro-Cuban immigrants between 1888 and 1930 remained in Tampa for a relatively short time, although many returned again. The proximity of Cuba greatly facilitated a pattern of circulatory migration. Many cigarworkers had wives and families still living in Cuba, and steamship travel between the two points was inexpensive. The Immigration Commission report on Tampa cigarworkers in 1911 indicated that nearly half of the Cubans (49.7 percent) had made at least one trip back to the island since their arrival. Oral histories also confirm that travel between Tampa and Cuba was extremely common. So was movement between Tampa and other Cuban communities in the United States, especially Key West. Even among Afro-Cubans who were born and raised in Tampa, frequent contact with people coming directly from Cuba or other emigré establishments established a kind of fluid cosmopolitan community structure, where mobility tended to reinforce rather than diminish a sense of Cuban identity.

Data from city directories and census schedules give some indication of the numerical dimensions of turnover in the local Afro-Cuban population. Of nineteen Afro-Cuban households listed in the 1893 city directory for Tampa, only two reappeared in the 1899 directory, by which time there were 366 Afro-Cuban households listed. Between 1899 and 1900 it appears that virtually all (94 percent) of the Afro-Cubans departed Tampa and were replaced by a comparable, although slightly larger, number of new arrivals. This rather startling level of mobility is
single year may reflect dislocations in Cuba following independence, which could have precipitated large movements in both directions. However, the general pattern seems to have continued into the 1920s: 82 percent of Afro-Cuban households listed in the 1914 directory had not been included in the 1910 census; 91 percent of those listed in the 1914 directory did not reappear ten years later, even though the number of Afro-Cubans listed in 1924 was nearly the same (335 and 376). It should be emphasized that these data need to be interpreted conservatively, because losses due to non-enumerations at either time period in the comparisons would inflate the apparent rates of mobility. Further, it is plausible to assume that Afro-Cubans were likely to have been missed. Nevertheless, the extremely large differences that were observed over relatively short intervals confirm that this was indeed a highly mobile population during this period.

Mobility is also indicated by the changing membership in La Unión Martí-Maceo. Between 1904 and 1926 there were altogether 700 individuals who joined the organization for the first time. Of these, complete information on duration of membership is available for 495 cases. Nearly a third (30 percent) were people who joined once and retained membership for less than a year. Interrupted memberships, those who dropped and rejoined later, were very common: 58 percent had at least one interruption, and 17 percent had joined and dropped four or more times during that period.

All of this turnover might have been chaotic for the organization were it not for the ongoing presence of a core of members whose efforts were sufficient to maintain operations and preserve continuity. It was an arrangement well suited to the needs of a mobile population. La Unión Martí-Maceo served a valuable function for newly arrived Afro-Cubans. There are indications that the existing members assumed an explicit role in helping new immigrants adjust to life in Tampa. A reciprocal benefit of this assistance was that those who later departed contributed to the development of a broad network of Afro-Cuban contacts in other cities who would prove similarly valuable to Tampeños when the cigar industry began to fail in the 1930s.

Effects of the Depression: Contraction and Change

Employment in the cigar factories represented a major economic advantage for Cuban blacks in Tampa, and their shared experiences in the workplace were a principal source of cohesion in the community. In the early period the vast majority of black Cuban men were cigarworkers (84 percent in 1900, 86 percent in 1910). By 1914, however, the proportion had dropped to 76 percent; and by 1924 it was down to 64 percent. The initial decline may have been partially due to reported displacement of black Cuban men by Italian women, large numbers of whom were entering the factories as apprentices during that period. The later decrease also reflects the introduction of mechanization during the 1920s, which resulted in large layoffs in many of the factories. This trend was rapidly followed and deeply intensified by the depression.

The effects of the widespread layoffs registered unevenly on black and white cigarworkers. Certainly all groups in the industry confronted sobering prospects in seeking new employment in other sectors of Tampa’s depressed economy. There was a chasmal discrepancy, however, between cigarworker wages and those conventionally paid to unskilled black workers in Tampa, even in good times. This relatively greater deprivation, together with a general lack of
employment for blacks at all levels, induced many to join in what became a large scale migration of Afro-Cubans out of Tampa. Although scarcely novel for a generally mobile population, this was different because there was no accompanying migration of Afro-Cubans into the city that would balance their departure. The result was an unparalleled contraction in the size of the local Afro-Cuban community.

Between 1930 and 1940, the foreign-born black population of Tampa declined by more than half (from 631 to 311). Given that the younger native-born members of the Afro-Cuban community were disproportionately involved in the migration, this is regarded as a conservative estimate of the magnitude of the departure. The principal destinations were New York and Philadelphia, where there were established centers of Cuban settlement and cigarmaking.

Families and individuals departed daily in an unceremonious exodus. Entrepreneurs in Ybor City moved quickly to meet the sudden demand for transportation out of Tampa. Large automobiles, especially Cadillacs and Packards, were pressed into service-crammed with passengers who paid $10 each for a one-way trip north. The loss of so many members initially created a depressing atmosphere within La Unión Martí-Maceo and posed new difficulties in maintaining the solvency of the organization. Although balances in the treasury had always been precariously low, in the 1930s deficits were regularly recorded. The membership size had remained fairly stable at about 200 since 1910. In 1930 it dropped to 107, and by the following year had declined to 58. Modest gains were recorded in subsequent years, but membership rarely exceeded 100.

Several factors prevented the collapse of La Unión Martí-Maceo. The mortgage on the building had been paid, eliminating one of the major costs of operation. Revenues accrued from the rent on two small houses owned by the society and, more importantly, from frequent rental of the facility to other organizations. Deficits were made up by periodic special fundraising events.

There were at least two substantial grants of assistance from the Cuban government which aided the survival of the organization during this period. Officers of La Unión Martí-Maceo had from the very beginning maintained communications with government officials in Havana. They regarded their organization as officially Cuban, rather than American. The by-laws contained a provision that, should the club dissolve, the assets were to be turned over to the Cuban government. During times of financial adversity, the officers had intermittently appealed to Havana for assistance, usually without success. In turn, the club periodically sent donations to Cuba for such things as hurricane disaster relief, victims of the 1918 flu epidemic, and a monument to José Martí. In 1943, they requested a $30,000 loan, $5,000 of which they eventually received from the Ramón Grau San Martín government. In 1956, the government of Fulgencio Batista sent them an additional $10,000 needed for major repairs to the building. In a related gesture that same year, Batista offered to pay the costs of restoration on the former house of Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso, two of the founders of Martí-Maceo. This was to be part of a monument to Martí in what was once the Pedrosos’ back yard. As it turned out, the largesse of Batista’s assistance was not matched by the results. The Pedroso house was destroyed in a fire of unknown causes before any work was completed. Although successfully undertaken, the repairs to the Martí-Maceo building were for naught, for within ten years urban renewal condemned and demolished the structure.
Frequent rental of the dance hall and cantina to black American organizations was the major factor sustaining the organization through the depression. These revenues measurably compensated for the loss of income due to reduced membership, and the rental transactions served to promote increased communication between black Cubans and black Americans. La Unión Martí-Maceo had the largest and best equipped dance hall facility available to blacks in all of Tampa. It was the only place where large social affairs could be held, and it was particularly suited for black entertainers who were making the circuit. For the most part, black Cubans did not attend the dances and parties that were held by black Americans in the Martí-Maceo hall. However, such luminaries as Cab Calloway and Chic Webb were often sufficient to lure the second-generation Cubans who were beginning to appreciate a different kind of music.

Assimilationist Pressures in the Second Generation

The 1930s and 1940s witnessed changes that promoted more interaction and perceptions of common interests between black Cubans and black Americans. Cuban children more often attended the public junior high and high schools, where they came into contact with black Americans at a stage in life cycle when romances as well as friendships were likely to occur. By
1940, growth in the overall size of the black population, coupled with the sharp decline in the number of black Cubans rendered them a very small minority-less than 3 percent of the black population. Due to the small size of their group, Afro-Cubans found it increasingly difficult to sponsor separate activities.

Afro-Cuban teenagers were especially affected by the almost total decline in organized activities at La Unión Martí-Maceo. When the city opened a recreation center for black youths in 1950, many Afro-Cuban parents were reluctant to permit their children to participate. As an alternative, several adult members of Martí-Maceo established what was called the “Pan American Club.” The activities of the club were similar to those of Afro-Cuban youth in the previous generation: they organized plays, pageants and dances. A major difference, however, was that many black American teenagers were also involved, and a black American was president of the club. This was a practical solution to the numbers problem, but it also represented a deliberate attempt to lessen the distance that had long existed between the two groups.

Residential proximity served to remove additional barriers between black Cubans and black Americans. With the closing of most cigar factories and deterioration in the surrounding houses, the immigrant neighborhoods began to change. Many of the white ex-cigarworkers moved to new neighborhoods, and the houses they vacated were increasingly occupied by black Americans. Between 1950 and 1960, the black population in one section of Ybor City shifted from 3 percent to 29 percent. Most Afro-Cubans remained. Their mobility was affected by the same restrictions that confined nearly all blacks to the inner city neighborhoods.

Within this changing urban environment, neighborly sociability combined with a growing understanding that all black Tampans shared a common struggle against racism and segregation. An Afro-Cuban lawyer, whose father had long been a principal figure in La Unión Martí-Maceo, was one of the leading local NAACP activists during the 1960s. Although many Afro-Cubans, and especially the elderly, remained reticent about involvement in American political issues, almost all approved of the civil rights movement. For many, Martin Luther King, Jr., joined the pantheon of heroes along with Martí and Maceo.

While Fidel Castro was assuming similar heroic dimensions for many blacks in Cuba, his triumph inspired far less fervor among Afro-Cubans in Tampa. Most perceived little continuity between the revolutionary involvements of their grandparents and the contemporary struggle in Cuba. The major effect of the political changes in Cuba came in the form of travel restrictions, which substantially reduced the flow of communication between Cubans in Tampa and friends and relatives still living on the island. The trade embargo stopped shipments of Cuban tobacco and dealt one more blow to the Tampa cigar industry. These changes, along with the increasing political enmity of the United States toward Cuba, added further impetus to the process of assimilation.

**Crisis and Revitalization**

Ybor City’s industrial obsolescence and delining housing stock made the area a prime target for the urban renewal bulldozers that rolled into Tampa in the early 1960s. Although the core of
Ybor City remains, vast sections of housing and commercial properties were cleared. Many Afro-Cubans were displaced from their houses, and several lost businesses. However, urban renewal’s major broadside against the Afro-Cubans came with the demolition of the Martí-Maceo building in 1965. Of the five ethnic societies with buildings in Ybor City, Martí-Maceo was the only one to suffer this fate. On the morning of the demolition, a small group gathered on the sidewalk to witness the event. The wreckers proceeded with their work in some discomfort as they watched one old man fall slowly to his knees with tears in his eyes. This was indeed a solemn and discouraging moment, and in the weeks that followed there was, for the first time, serious talk of disbanding.42

Those favoring perseverance ultimately won the debate, and the club purchased another building. It was less commodious, but still within Ybor City, situated across the street from the site of the Pedroso house where the founders of Martí-Maceo had first assembled in 1900.

Despite these efforts, during the 1960s the official membership of Martí-Maceo had dropped below fifty. Organized activities ceased altogether. A dwindling group of older men gathered each day in the new hall to play dominoes and stalwartly refused to let go of what they had labored so long to create. Their patience was rewarded. Within a few years, a curious demographic convergence resuscitated the club, more than doubling the membership and bringing a return of banquets, dances and other formal activities.

The young adults who had left Tampa and travelled north during the 1930s began reaching retirement age in the early 1970s. The general ascendance of the Sunbelt, together with Florida’s reputation as a felicitous retirement setting, helped persuade many to return to Tampa. A more focused persuasion came from personal communication, which had been maintained through the years between many of the Afro-Cubans who left and those who had remained in Tampa. From this came offers of assistance in relocating, along with assurances that conditions in the South really had changed.

Many returning Afro-Cubans had also remained in contact with each other while they were living in New York. The migrants initially formed a kind of satellite community, which for many included participation in an organization similar to La Unión Martí-Maceo. This was called the Cuban Club and was located at Prospect Avenue and 162nd Street. One of the returnees had been an officer in this club for many years. For his family and many others it seemed quite natural to reestablish membership in La Unión Martí-Maceo.43

La Unión Martí-Maceo grew steadily through the 1970s. The current membership of 107 includes twenty-nine who are return migrants. The current president is a returnee. Emigration from Cuba after 1959 and during the Mariel boatlift of 1980 also had an impact, but of far less importance: seven current members arrived between 1959 and 1979. Another four were part of the Mariel exodus of 1980. Although diversity in the origins of members is consistent with the earlier composition of the club, new dimensions of complexity have been added. A significant minority (seven) are white Cubans, and a comparable number (nine) are black Americans.44

Rental of the facility to other, mostly black American, organizations remains the major source of revenue that sustains La Unión Martí-Maceo. However, increasingly regular activities are
arranged for the benefit of the members, and there has been discussion of expanding the building
and possibly reinstituting medical insurance.

Largely as a function of these renewed activities, Afro-Cuban ethnicity in Tampa has enjoyed a noticeable revitalization. The research that is presently underway on the history of the community is one expression of this phenomenon. Additionally, the research reveals an innovative response on the part of the community to contemporary conditions threatening the existence of La Unión Martí-Maceo.

The project was begun at the initiative of officers in La Unión Martí-Maceo in an effort to draw increased public attention to the history of the Afro-Cuban community. Specifically, the information that is being collected is intended to balance and extend existing historical accounts of Ybor City, which pay scant attention to Afro-Cubans. In recent years city officials have launched a serious new attempt to redevelop Ybor City into a tourist-oriented Latin Quarter. Members of La Unión Martí-Maceo are justifiably concerned that such efforts will have effects similar to urban renewal. They alone among the ethnic societies in Ybor City lack the protective embrace of historic status for their building, because they alone were forced to move into newer quarters that do not qualify.\footnote{45} Without that status to safeguard their building against future demolition, they are seeking to secure their position by clearly establishing the historical role of Afro-Cubans in helping to shape Ybor City’s cultural ambience. This they feel can best be accomplished by actively enhancing local awareness of the history of their community. Afro-Cubans in Tampa have long maintained a low visibility, partly in a deliberate effort to avoid problems. This is no longer adaptive, however. For reasons that are both sentimental and pragmatic, there is now a strong desire to see the accomplishments of their parents and grandparents recounted and preserved. In this way perhaps the institution that they established some eighty years ago can also be preserved to meet the changing needs of the next generation of Afro-Cubans in Tampa.

The author wishes to express appreciation to Enrique Cordero, graduate student in Anthropology at the University of South Florida, for his valuable contribution to this research.


\footnote{2} Aguirre, “Migration of Cuban Social Races,” 114.

\footnote{3} Ibid., 115.


\footnote{6} Poyo, “Cuban Communities,” 29.

8 Steffy, “Cuban Immigration to Tampa,” 47-49. During Martí’s visits to Tampa he made a point to visit the homes of Cornelio Brito, Bruno Roig, and Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso, Afro-Cubans who actively involved in the patriotic effort. Martí reportedly had an especially close relationship with the Pedrosos. The first speech Martí gave in Tampa included a lengthy exhortation for racial solidarity and tolerance. See also José Rivero Muñiz, The Ybor City Story (Los Cubanos en Tampa), translated by Eustasio Fernandez and Henry Beltran, (Tampa: S.N., 1976), 134; Sylvia Griñan, “The Cuban Negro in Tampa, Florida” (1950), unpublished manuscript in possession of author, 27.


13 Pérez, “Cubans in Tampa.”

14 Ibid., 136.


17 Minutes of Meeting, October 26, 1900, Book #36, La Unión Martí-Maceo Records, Special Collections, University of South Florida Library, Tampa.

18 Membership Lists and Registries, 1901, Book #102, ibid.

19 Long, “Co-operative Medicine Program.”

20 Arthur Raper, “A Study of Negro Life in Tampa” (Sponsored by the Tampa Urban League, the Tampa Welfare League, and the Tampa YMCA, 1927), 15-26. Copy available in Special Collections, University of South Florida Library, Tampa. This very thorough and well executed report documents wide discrepancies between the medical facilities and staff serving the black and white populations of Tampa. It also includes statistics on health status, reporting for example that the black infant mortality rate was double that of whites. In contrast, members of Martí-Maceo had access to unlimited prescriptions, clinic visits, and hospitalization when needed. The benefits also included compensation for wages lost due to illness. See also Griñan, “The Cuban Negro,” 28.

21 Twelfth United States Census: 1900, Microfilm Records of Manuscript Census Schedules for Hillsborough County, University of South Florida Library. Of 3,533 Cuban-born, 540 were black or mulatto; of 8,485 blacks and mulattos, 791 were Cuban-born or the children of Cuban parents. Thirteenth United States Census, 1900, Microfilm Records of Manuscript Census Schedules for Hillsborough County. Of 7,027 Cuban-born, 900 were black or mulatto; of 16,442 blacks and mulattos, 1,472 were Cuban-born or the children of Cuban parents.

22 Long, “Making of Modern Tampa,” 342; Middelton, “Ethnicity in Tampa.” Oral history accounts indicate that Cubans of any color were not allowed in certain neighborhoods or to use certain public facilities. Reportedly, many local establishments formerly posted signs to the effect that “dogs, niggers, and Latins” were not welcome.
23 Minutes of Meeting, October 17, 1916, Book #102, Martí-Maceo Records; interview with Juan Mallea, May 17, 1984, Tampa, Florida.

24 Interview with Manuel Alfonso, June 4, 1984, Tampa, Florida.


26 In 1900, there were 791 Afro-Cuban individuals residing in a total of 406 separate household units (*Twelfth United States Census: 1900*, Manuscript Schedules). The mobility data reported in this paragraph were derived through successive comparisons of the names of persons listed in Tampa city directories or Hillsborough County manuscript census schedules in the following years: 1893, 1899, 1900, 1910, 1914, and 1924. Afro-Cubans were identified in city directories on the basis of Spanish surname combined with an asterisk (*), the latter symbol indicating the resident was black. In the census schedules, racial designations along with country of birth were used to identify Afro-Cubans. The mobility rates of the Afro-Cubans population for the intervals between the above years were determined by identifying the number of households listed at both time periods subtracted from the total number in the base period. Identifications were based on similarity of surname, given name, middle initial (when available), marital status, and occupation.

27 Minutes of Meeting, October 5, 1922, Book #155, Martí-Maceo Records. During this meeting, the board of directors voted to print circulars for distribution to newly arrived immigrants explaining the purposes of the organization and inviting them to come and obtain advice about getting settled.

28 These percentages were derived from frequency counts of occupations listed for Afro-Cuban males in the 1900 and 1910 Hillsborough County manuscript census schedules, and Tampa city directories for 1914 and 1924.


30 In the late 1920s, cigarworkers regularly earned about $40.00 per week, compared with earnings of $9.00 per week by black municipal workers and 8 cents per hour by dockworkers who unloaded banana boats. Interview with Joaquin Maldonado, July 10, 1984, Tampa, Florida; interview with Juan Mallea; Raper, “Negro Life in Tampa,” 43.


32 Of those Afro-Cubans interviewed, nearly all estimated that considerably more than half of the Afro-Cubans in Tampa left during the 1930s.

33 Miscellaneous Papers, Folio #161, Items #18, #19, #20, #30, Martí-Maceo Records.

34 Guillermo Pujol to Juan Casellas, April 27, 1943, ibid.; interview Juan García.

35 Mark Scheinbaum, ed., *José Marti Park: The Story of Cuban Property in Tampa* (Tampa: University of South Florida Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, 1976), 5-6, copy in Special Collections, University of South Florida Library.


37 *Sixteenth Census of the United States*, 151.


39 Interview with Manuel Alfonso.

41 Within the Afro-Cuban community there were individuals who actively supported and aided Castro’s forces. However, La Unión Martí-Maceo maintained an official position of neutrality and refused to permit Castro to speak in the Martí-Maceo auditorium when he visited Tampa in the mid-1950s. It can perhaps be surmised that Batista’s financial assistance to the club mitigated potential opposition among Afro-Cubans in Tampa. Interview with Manuel Alfonso; interview with Juan García.

42 Interview with Manuel Alfonso.

43 Interview with Joaquín Maldonado.

44 Information on current membership status supplied by Juan Mallea, President of La Unión Martí-Maceo.

45 Ybor City has been designated as a federal “Historic Preservation District.” Buildings within its boundaries that have been determined to be architecturally significant or contributing to the historic character of the area are subject to strict protections against destruction or alteration. All the original buildings of the ethnic societies in Ybor City are included as significant structures, except for that of La Unión Martí-Maceo which lost its original building to Urban Renewal. The present structure is neither old enough nor regarded as sufficiently important from an architectural standpoint to warrant protection under Historic Preservation guidelines.
On the evening of February 10, 1897, Cuban workers in Ybor City gathered at Manuel Granado’s barbershop “to deal with issues of great interest related to the publication of ‘La Doctrina de Martí’ of New York.” Elected to chair the meeting was Guillermo Sorondo, a former anarchist organizer and head of the governing body of the Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC) in Port Tampa. Also attending the gathering were Sandalio Romaelle and José García Ramirez, veteran labor organizers in Florida’s Cuban emigré centers. A resolution quickly passed calling on the Tampa community to contribute to the financially troubled newspaper *Doctrina de Martí*, “because it faithfully interprets the doctrines of our beloved teacher [José Martí].” “Without our help,” the resolution noted, “the publication risks succumbing at the precise moment when it can offer even greater services to the revolution.”

Since July 1896, *La Doctrina* had been edited in New York by Rafael Serra, an Afro-Cuban activist who had worked closely with José Martí in the continuing struggle to free their homeland from Spanish rule. Serra had helped keep alive Martí’s popular vision of the Cuban independence struggle. Largely inspired by Cuban working class communities in the United States, this vision had been incorporated by Martí into the ideology of the movement to separate Cuba from Spain. With Martí’s departure to Cuba and subsequent death on the battlefield in 1895, the emigré political leadership in New York had fallen to individuals apparently little concerned with the daily lives and material conditions of Cuban workers exiled in the United States. Martí’s newspaper, *Patria*, had ceased to be the ideological inspiration it once had been, prompting Serra to establish *La Doctrina*. “From the extreme left of the Separatist Party,” the newspaper declared its intention to back the independence war, but it would also work to “ensure that the rights of the people are real and not fictitious: That is Our Task.” Throughout its existence *La Doctrina* reminded Cubans of Martí’s broad nationalist vision that included a commitment to social justice and racial harmony.

The enthusiasm of Tampa’s Cuban exiles for *La Doctrina* during 1897 was consistent with that Cuban community’s activist traditions. From its inception in 1886, Ybor City’s multiracial and working class Cuban community revealed a deep commitment to two goals: an independent Cuban republic and social justice. While in practice these goals often conflicted, they were in theory compatible, and they became elements of the world view of Cuban cigarworkers. Few studies of Tampa’s Cubans have highlighted the importance of this dual commitment to José Martí’s revolutionary movement. Traditional treatments of Martí suggest that his 1891 visit to Ybor City resulted exclusively from his reputation as a nationalist orator and propagandist, but a closer look at the local exile community suggests a broader interest. While Martí’s nationalist oratory was obviously important, indeed crucial, his concern for socio-economic issues and their relationship to the independence movement were at least of equal interest to Cuban leaders in Tampa.
The decision to invite Martí to Tampa in December, 1891, gave the New York-based activist the opportunity he needed to emerge as a separatist leader for all Cuban exiles in the United States. Indeed, the Tampa invitation led to a similar request from Key West. Although Martí’s emergence as the leader of the separatist movement in exile seems natural enough given his obvious oratorical and charismatic qualities, it actually conflicted with conventional wisdom within Florida’s emigré communities, especially in Key West. As far as most Cuban political leaders in Florida were concerned, Martí’s political credentials were slim indeed. Many angrily remembered his challenge of Maximo Gomez’ leadership in 1884 and blamed him for the failure of that revolutionary effort. Others simply viewed him as a talented intellectual useful to the revolution as an orator and propagandist, but not as the movement’s primary leader. Only individuals of the experience and military caliber of Gomez, Antonio Maceo, and Calixto García were considered worthy to lead the separatist revolution. It is doubtful that the political leadership in Key West would have ever taken the initiative to invite Martí to Florida.\(^5\)

However, leaders in Tampa were quite different from those in Key West. Many Cubans in Key West were traditional patriot activists from the 1870s, some even from the 1850s. Although popular among Florida cigarworkers, veteran activists, such as José Francisco Lamadriz, Fernando Figueredo and José Dolores Poyo, were committed exclusively to the independence struggle. They had seen emigrés working at cross purposes destroy separatist efforts between the 1850s and 1880s, and they opposed all activities that divided emigré opinion. This included political divisions, such as those provoked by Martí in 1884, and social conflicts, which they insisted had to be resolved through discussions and compromise.\(^6\) The Tampa leadership, on the other hand, represented a new generation of Cubans who had risen to prominence not as patriot activists, but as labor advocates and organizers influenced by socialism and anarchism. While they supported fervently the independence ideal, they were equally dedicated to improving the material conditions in the rapidly growing industrial communities. Unlike the Key West leaders who feared that social activism would dilute emigré commitment to Cuban separatism, Tampa leadership applauded all efforts by labor to defend its interests.

Many of the early Cuban leaders in Ybor City, including Ramon Rivero, Carlos Balino and Ramon Rubiera, had emerged from the labor struggles in Key West and New York during the early 1880s. In 1886 they moved to Ybor City and took the lead in organizing their compatriots. A socialist, Rivero became lector (reader) in the Martínez Ybor factory and edited a

\[\text{Jose Martí, from} \text{Ambito de Martí by Guillermo Zendegui.}\]
newsweekly, *La Revista de Florida*. While Key West’s Spanish language newspaper *El Yara* was primarily a nationalist organ, *La Revista* took on a decidedly socioeconomic focus. Its highly activist staff included well known radical labor activists such as Francisco Segura, José I. Izaguirre and Enrique Creci. During 1889, *La Revista* declared: “The banner of socialism is our banner: It means: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. It means equality, and the recovery of honor.” It added, “There is not one among us who is not a convinced socialist, visionary men, who understand the times, and we prepare as one body to assure the future following the only road our conscience allows.”

Another important community leader who focused on labor issues during the late 1880s was Nestor Carbonell. A veteran of the Ten Years War, Carbonell owned a bookstore in Ybor City and lent his support to socialist ideas. Writing in New York’s *El Porvenir* during 1890, Carbonell noted, “We are socialists. . .we accept socialism in principle, because it is a beautiful doctrine that tends to strengthen the interest of society.”

For most Cubans in Tampa, socialism probably represented only a vaguely defined commitment to justice, equality, and dignity, but its influence on community leaders was significant. Prior to the mid-1880s, Cuban separatist thought had addressed only the political
question of Cuban independence, and it implicitly embraced nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism as the appropriate socioeconomic model for a free Cuba. The economic boom in Florida’s cigar trade during the final third of the century, with its associated labor-management battles, prompted many to raise questions regarding the fundamental nature of the separatist movement. Some questioned the very need for such a political focus, while others simply demanded a more socially relevant movement. By the late 1880s, debates in Florida’s Cuban communities seemed to suggest that a basic incompatibility existed between nationalism and labor activism. Key West’s El Yara and Havana’s anarchist newspaper, El Productor, engaged in bitter exchanges. El Yara accused the anarchist organ of supporting Spanish power in Cuba through its condemnation of nationalist activism, while El Productor charged that the patriot weekly was nothing but a vehicle through which the cigar manufacturers diverted workers’ attention from their economic concerns. In Key West the traditional patriot community leaders backed El Yara. In Tampa, nationalist activism declined during 1888-1889 as the debates raged. La Revista de Florida declared its solidarity with the workers’ movement, and Rivero travelled to Havana to meet with the anarchist publishers of El Productor. Some patriot leaders in Tampa criticized Rivero for ignoring separatism and, as lector in the Martínez Ybor factor, for refusing to read El Yara. However, during a bitter strike in Key West during late 1889, Cubans in Ybor City received as heroes anarchist organizers deported from that city.

While Cubans in Tampa made common cause with anarchists in Havana, they were not in principle opposed to political activism. Rivero and Carbonell remained committed to Cuban independence, but their views probably paralleled those of one activist who wrote to El Productor. “I am Cuban and I want Independence,” he noted. “Those of us with separatist ideas, when the opportune moment arrives will struggle on the battle fields with arms in hand for the triumph of our idea, but while we are in the shop, we are, before anything else, workers, imitating the bourgeoisie who place their bourgeoisie interests before their patriotism.” Thus, some people perceived a basic contradiction between nationalism and labor activism, and during the final years of the 1880s workers and labor leaders in Tampa effectively abandoned separatist activism in favor of labor militancy. An exclusively nationalist appeal was no longer sufficient to attract popular support to the separatist movement. Tampa leaders wanted a separatist ideology dedicated both to Cuban Independence and to aspirations and economic concerns of the working class.

Despite the social conflicts of the late 1880s, fundamental commitment to separatism in Tampa became evident in late 1890 when the community began to reorganize politically. During the previous two years, New York and Key West had established new patriotic organizations in response to changing conditions in Cuba. Indeed, conflicts between labor and patriot activists in Key West diminished as oppression against anarchist and other labor leaders in Havana increased, convincing many in the emigré centers that revolutionary change could never be achieved under the Spanish regime. Leaders in Tampa agreed and established the Liga Patriotica Cubana during December 1890 and Los Independientes de Tampa and Club Ignacio Agramonte the following May. Moreover, Rivero began to criticize anarchist publicists who spoke against the independence movement, and the Club Ignacio Agramonte approved a resolution prohibiting its membership from joining anarchist organizations. Cuban activists concluded that the political movement would have to take precedence over social activism until after independence.
Emigré unity remained elusive, however. In theory the communities understood the importance of working together. In fact, little cooperation existed. The conflicts of the 1880s had created divisions and distrust. The Key West leaders continued to resent Martí, by now the undisputed rebel leader in New York. Tampa support of Havana anarchist attacks on Key West’s nationalist leaders during 1888 and 1889 had left bitter feelings. Furthermore, a basic economic rivalry in the cigar trade placed Key West and Tampa in competition. With the rapid rise of Ybor City’s cigar industry, Key West’s patriot leadership feared that the most militantly nationalist of the exile communities would be destroyed. Without Key West, they thought, the independence cause would slowly die.

While these barriers to separatist unity in exile seemed insuperable, Tampa was in fact uniquely prepared to initiate a process of reconciliation among emigrés by late 1891. The social activist background of the Tampa leadership made it receptive to a new separatist message advanced in New York by José Martí. Key West leaders considered Martí a timid revolutionary and proceeded to organize a rebel movement on their own. But for Cubans in Tampa Martí represented a new generation with a broader vision of what the separatist movement could become.

Since the early 1880s, Martí had emphatically called on his compatriots to address the social divisions that plagued supporters of Cuban separation from Spain. He was particularly vocal regarding racial concerns, and with the outbreak of the labor conflicts in Florida after 1886 he also spoke to tensions in class relations among Cubans. He alluded to the issue in the separatist program of 1887. The program stressed the importance of unity, but it also revealed Martí’s recognition that the traditional political divisions among emigrés were now further complicated by class differences. Article four warned that rebel interests could no longer be controlled exclusively by Cuba’s dominant classes and race if broad participation was expected. While the program did not elaborate, during the next several years Martí made evident his fundamental commitment to a revolutionary movement based on honest, harmonious class relations, racial equality, and overall social justice.

Tampa leaders were no doubt captivated by Martí’s interest in a separatist ideal relevant to the expatriot working class, especially cigarworkers. No one in Florida doubted that Martí’s priority was the independence movement, but community leaders with labor organizing backgrounds and a new commitment to the patriot cause—saw him as a leader capable of fusing nationalist and working class aspirations. Not surprisingly, then, Tampa leaders took the initiative to invite Martí to Florida in November 1891.

Hoping to generate nationalist enthusiasm in Ybor City, Nestor Carbonell suggested that the Club Ignacio Agramonte announce its intention to hold a patriot event and invite Martí. The successful visit surpassed all expectations. Not only did it serve to stimulate patriot enthusiasm in the community, but it initiated a process of political and social unity around a separatist ideology sensitive to Florida’s Cuban working class.

Workers greeted Martí with enthusiasm in the cigar factories of Ybor City where he first spoke. They also filled the Liceo Cubano when he delivered his formal speech. In addition to generating patriot fervor, he demonstrated his sensitivity to the social concerns so important to
Florida’s Cubans. He emphasized that emigré unity had to be based on the mutual interests of the various political and economic groups. “Let us join together, Cubans, in this cause, with all, and for all,” he declared. “Or the republic has as its base the full character of each of its sons. . . or the republic is not worth our women’s tears or one drop of our brave warrior’s blood.” “Let us unite, before anything else, in this faith,” Martí continued, “Let us close the way to a republic which is not prepared through methods worthy of man’s dignity to promote the welfare and prosperity of all Cubans.” In concluding Martí asserted, “Let us place around the star, of the new flag, this formula of triumphant love: ‘With all, and for the benefit of all.’”\textsuperscript{17}

Martí’s desire to include all Cubans in defining and directing the independence movement and the future republic was a welcome message in Tampa. Moreover, cigarworkers were impressed by his desire to institutionalize these ideas through a political party designed to unite the emigré centers. The “Tampa Resolutions” were approved at a mass meeting and laid the groundwork for a new party, the Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC), which ultimately sparked the successful struggle for independence. The resolutions called not only for cooperation among rebel centers, but also stressed that the new revolutionary organization “should not work directly for the actual or future predominance of any class.” Rather, the goal was the creation of a just and open republic, one in territory, in rights, in work, and in cordiality, created with all and for the benefit of all.”\textsuperscript{18} The charter of the PRC, possibly written in Tampa but approved in Key West the following month, also addressed social issues. Article four called for a new and democratic
society “capable of overcoming through real work and a balance of social forces, the inherent dangers of liberty in a society created for slavery.”

Martí demonstrated an extraordinary ability to mobilize the Tampa community, as evidenced by the four thousand people who escorted him to the train depot on his departure to New York. Martí’s oratorical style was attractive, but more fundamental was the popular appeal of his message. Indeed, Key West workers almost immediately organized a committee to invite Martí to their community. Whether or not the traditional patriot leadership on the island participated in the decision to invite him is not clear, but El Yara did publish the formal invitation. While many of the Key West leaders were perhaps reluctant to invite him, they understood that Martí had captured the imagination of the Florida communities. They may have had little choice but to agree, or they may have been genuinely attracted to Martí. Not since Gomez and Maceo had visited Key West in the mid-1880s had the community expressed such enthusiasm for the separatist cause. In any case, Martí arrived on the Key in December 1891 and completed the organization of the PRC. He not only elicited the enthusiasm of the workers, but even initiated the task of winning over the Key’s patriot leadership.

The establishment of the PRC was only the beginning of worker influence on the new revolutionary movement. Activism throughout the state solidified the revolutionary party during 1892 and 1893, attracting to the movement those elements still skeptical of Martí and his ideas. During April 1892, Martí was elected to head the PRC by the local governing bodies, the Cuerpos de Consejo. Two months later he made a second triumphant visit to the Florida communities.

This second trip accomplished two very important goals. First, Martí managed to obtain a definitive statement of support from the military veterans who were central to any revolutionary movement. Even after the formation of the PRC in January, many remained withdrawn, but during early July, General Carlos Roloff, a Polish veteran of the Ten Years War, arrived to meet formally with Florida's veteran leadership. They then met with Martí in Key West and issued a statement declaring their confidence in the PRC and its leaders. With this in hand, Martí succeeded during the next year in obtaining the support of his old rivals Gomez and Maceo.

With political unity among emigrés now accomplished, the PRC leadership turned to solidifying popular support. On July 18, 1892, Martí, Roloff, Poyo, Rivero, and another military veteran, Serafin Sánchez, arrived in Tampa from Key West and initiated three days of popular celebrations the likes of which had never before been seen in the city. A patriotic banquet on the day of their arrival was followed the next two days by non-stop activities in the factories, political clubs, and the community in general.

On the afternoon of the 19th the delegation from Key West visited the cigar factories of Pons, Fernandez y Sabby, Sanchez y Haya, and Martínez Ybor. After dinner they attended general meetings of the black community’s Liga Cubana de Instrucción and the Club Ignacio Agramonte. The next day, morning visits to individual homes was followed by another afternoon of factory visits. Greetings at the factories were unanimously enthusiastic. At the Martínez Ybor establishment the large multitude made it difficult to enter. “Women and señoritas, Spaniards, Americans, Italians, Mexicans...the whole community was there, united, compact, cheering the
precursors of liberty,” according to one reporter. When the delegation finally managed to penetrate the crowd and enter the building, they received an explosion of applause and “vivas” which was followed by the Cuban band’s rendition of “the Hymn of Bayamo” and numerous speeches.

The delegation was symbolic of the PRC’s diverse but unified constituency. Speakers represented almost every emigré group or interest: Poyo and Juan Arnao, the traditional emigré political leaders; Roloff and Sanchez, the military veterans; Rivero and Rubiera, Cuban labor activists; Joaquin Granados and Cornielio Brito, the black community; and José Pérez Molina and Silverio Gomez, the Spanish anarchist community. Pérez and Gomez declared that while they had no other flag but the “red” one, they and those who thought like them were for the emancipation of humanity and, as such, supported Cuban independence. (By the end of 1892, the cause also attracted most Cuban anarchists, including Enrique Creci, Enrique Messonier, Sandalio Romaele, Francisco Segura, and Guillermo Sorondo.) At each factory, of course, Martí was the featured speaker and it was behind his vision of a popular nationalist struggle that these diverse groups gathered. After the speeches the delegation was invited to partake of candies, beers and cigars. “Please forgive us if we do not offer you something better,” noted one young worker pointing to his heart, “but what is lacking on that table you will find here.”

Late that afternoon the community gathered at the Circulo de Trabajadores from where some 1,500 persons set out in a procession across town to the Liceo Cubano. As Patria’s correspondent noted, the march demonstrated “the unity of the oppressed, of the disinherited, of all free men.” That evening so many attended the mass meeting at the Liceo that at Martí’s suggestion the assembly was held outdoors. Chairs were placed on the street and “standards, flags, and other emblems among the multitude presented a beautiful panorama clearly illuminated by our electric lights.” The correspondent described the scene with obvious emotion. “Spaniards and Cubans, glorious military figures and prominent emigrés, distinguished journalists and eminent public men, whites and blacks, poor and rich, all spoke on that memorable night with accents of truth.” The gathering reflected the fusion of Cuban nationalism and social awareness that served as the foundation for the PRC. According to the newspaper reporter, the meeting was more than a patriotic celebration; it was for “complete emancipation.” “There the cosmopolitans [anarchists], the socialists, the independents, all in Tampa who support the cause of progress . . .fraternized. . .to serve the cause of liberty, which is the cause of all humanity.” On the following morning the delegation set off for Ocala and St. Augustine to spread the ideas reaffirmed in Tampa.23

Tampa remained committed to the PRC throughout its existence. The city’s three affiliated clubs grew to fifteen by 1896, and the city had three local Cubanos de Consejo: in Ybor City, Port Tampa, and West Tampa. Leaders with strong labor activist backgrounds—Rivero and Sorondo—headed the first two councils.24 Furthermore, while labor activists continued to insist that manufacturers not exploit and abuse their workers, they counseled compromise for the benefit of the independence cause. In fact, despite occasional labor disputes, manufacturers and workers both contributed to the PRC. The cigar workers in all the Florida communities instituted the Dia de la Patria to provide the movement with a day’s wages each month, or often each week. Tampa also became a center of expeditionary activity after the outbreak of the independence war in early 1895. The PRC’s Department of Expeditions established its headquarters in
Tampa under Emilio Nuñez and Fernando Figueredo, longtime exiles and veterans of the Ten Years War. During 1896 and 1897 expeditions organized in Tampa departed from Cedar Key, and other locations on Florida’s west coast between the Suwanee and Caloosahatchee Rivers.25

Cubans in Tampa were important to the emigré revolutionary effort and central to the achievement of unity. Key West was the most important separatist center by the early 1890s, but it had been closed to Martí. Indeed, unity became a possibility partially because of the action of Tampa cigarmakers. Although Martí’s revolutionary experience could not compare with Gomez, Maceo and other veterans of the Ten Years War, Tampa leaders valued Martí’s interest in promoting the concerns of all Cuban workers including blacks. Once in Florida, Martí demonstrated not only his interest in creating a broader separatist ideology that included a social dimension, but he also emphasized his full dedication to organizing a new rebellion on the island in cooperation with the traditional rebel leaders.

From Tampa Martí had spoken to all Cubans. His extraordinary ability to fuse nationalist and social concerns in such a manner as not to alienate any important socioeconomic sector led to the mobilization of most Cubans behind a new, popular separatist vision institutionalized in the PRC. In the midst of the labor-management strains of the final decade of the century, Martí’s call for class and racial harmony as well as social justice was reassuring to a managerial class faced
with an increasingly radical labor movement in Florida. Most significantly, however, the enthusiasm generated by Tampa cigarworkers spread to Key West and provided Martí with the opportunity to meet directly with the traditional patriot leadership and convince them of his capacity to lead the new rebel movement. The intervention of Tampa cigarworkers gave Martí the chance he needed to prove himself in Florida.

The cigar factory at Sixteenth Street and Columbus Drive has long been an Ybor City landmark due to its distinctive clock tower. The building currently houses the Standard Cigar Company which produces Cuesta-Rey cigars.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
1 La Doctrina de Martí (New York), February 15, 1897. Granado and Sorondo were prominent members of Tampa’s black Cuban community.

2 For additional information on Serra see Pedro N. Gonzales Veranés, La personalidad de Rafael Serra y sus relaciones con Martí (Havana: La Veronica, 1943) and Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, Rafael Serra y Montalvo: Obrero incansable de nuestra independencia (Havana: Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1975).

3 La Doctrina de Martí, July 25, 1896. For an interesting discussion of the PRC leadership in New York after Martí’s departure, see Louis A. Pérez, Jr., Cuba Between Empires, 1878-1902 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983).


5 Martí’s conflicts with the veteran political leaders are traced in Jorge Ibarra, José Martí: Dirigente político e ideólogo revolucionario (Havana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 1980), 61-87, 116-123 and Gerald E. Poyo, “Cuban Emigré Communities in the United States and the Independence of their Homeland, 1852-1895 (Gainesville: University of Florida unpublished dissertation, 1983), 190-199.

6 Cuban emigré separatist ideological development from 1852 through 1885 is traced in Poyo, “Cuban Emigré Communities.”

7 El Productor (Havana), November 1, 1888, April 13, 1890. Information on Rivero is included in Rivero Muñiz, “Los cubanos en Tampa.” For an interesting discussion of Creci see Olga Cabrera, “Enrique Creci: un patriota obrero,” Santiago, 36 (December 1979).

8 El Porvenir, July 28, 1889.

9 El Porvenir (New York), April 2, 1890.


12 El Productor, June 8, 1890.

13 Information on political organizing activities in Florida during 1889-1891 are included in the following sources: Deulofeu, Heroes del destierro; Gerardo Castellanos García, Motivos de Cayo Hueso (Havana: URAR, García y Cia, 1935), 165-67; Juan J. E. Casasús, La emigración cubana y la independencia de la patria (Havana: Editorial Lex, 1953), 200-203; Rivero Muñiz, “Los cubanos en Tampa,” 29-30, 43-50; “Libro de Actas. Liga Patriotica Cubana, Tampa.” Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Donativos y Remisíones, Legajos fuera de caja 139, no. 3, see entries for July 26 and August 18, 1891.
14 Before Martí arrived in Florida, the Key West community had already initiated conspiratorial activities in Cuba through its Convención Cubana. See Raoul Alpízar Poyo, Cayo Hueso y José Dolores Poyo: Dos símbolos pátrios (Havana: Imprenta P. Fernandez, 1947), 74-78.


16 For details on Martí’s socioeconomic ideas see John Kirk, José Martí: Mentor of the Cuban Nation (Gainesville: University of Florida Presses, 1983); José Cantón Navarro, Algunas ideas de José Martí en relación con la clase obrera y el socialismo (Havana: Editorial Política, 1981); Ariel Hidalgo, Orígenes del movimiento obrero y del pensamiento socialista en Cuba (Havana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1976); and Gerald E. Poyo, José Martí, Architect of Social Unity: Class Tensions in the Cuban Emigré Communities of the United States, 1887-1895 (Gainesville: University of Florida Center for Latin American Studies, Occasional Paper #5, October 1984).

17 Martí, Obras completas, IV, 270-271, 279.

18 Martí, Obras completas, I, 271-274.

19 Martí, Obras completas, I, 281. A notarized document in the Cuban National Archive signed by Manuel García Ramírez declares that the secret statutes of the PRC were written by Martí, Rivero, and the García Ramírez brothers (Manuel, José, & Juan) during this visit. ANC, Donativos, Caja 519, no. 3.

20 This figure is given by Rivero, “Los cubanos en Tampa,” 63.

21 For a narrative of Martí’s visit to Key West, see Castellanos, Motivos de Cayo Hueso, and Deulofeu, Heroes del destierro.

22 Patria (New York), July 16, September 3, 1892.

23 Ibid., July 30, August 6, 1892.

24 Ibid., July 20, 1895; December 23, 1896; Rivero Muñiz, “Los cubanos en Tampa,” 87-89.

The history of Ybor City and Tampa is reflected in seemingly endless numbers of cigar labels produced as advertisements for the once thriving “clear Havana” industry. Thousands of unused labels stacked on warehouse shelves, stored in attics or filed in cases and forgotten in the basements of lithographic companies represent a wealth of encyclopedic information on personages, cultural scenes and historic events.

Since cigar labels both attracted new customers and maintained old ones, no expense was considered too great in order to advertise properly and promote sales. The chromolithographic application of several colors to labels opened new vistas in appealing advertisements. The chromolithographic printing process which had originated in Germany was transformed into a full-scale process for American advertisement art by the mid-1870s. From six to as many as twenty-two colors were placed on one label. Embossment added an even more refined touch with a three dimensional effect. This involved placing the label on a mold of the desired design, then applying thirty to forty tons of pressure to the paper with huge presses. Another exquisite touch was produced on finely detailed illustrations of coins, medals or titles by sprinkling silver, gold or bronze dust over carefully applied shellac on the areas where a metallic look was desired. The entire process to produce a cigar label was extremely expensive, ranging from $2,000 to $6,000 for a new label.

Lithographic companies received specific descriptions of labels they were to produce, and often sent the artist to the factory owner to discuss the details. Although numerous pre-1900 labels were printed in Germany or Cuba, after the turn of the century, several firms based in New York, such as Consolidated Lithographic Company, American Lithographic Company and the popular firm of George Schlegel, hired German craftsmen and produced a majority of the labels used by Tampa’s clear Havana manufacturers. Factory owners often contracted production of several labels in a constant attempt to lure the general smoking public to their brand. Poor sales resulted from either poor quality tobacco or unappealing labels. The trial and error process to find a popular label led to thousands of different designs and topics. Successful labels were used for decades. Sometimes manufacturers sold popular brands with a legal title similar to that of a real estate document; the more popular the label, the higher the price.

The domestic clear Havana industry used popular Spanish themes or topics in cigar label advertisements. Indeed, smokers came to associate any subject even vaguely Spanish with famous clear Havana cigars. Some companies took advantage of this and used Spanish-sounding names even though their cigars were produced entirely from domestic tobacco. The dozens of cigar factories in Ybor City produced hundreds of different brands, each with its own label. Many of these reflected Tampa themes and scenes since the city was widely known as the biggest producer of clear Havana cigars.

With the advent of the depression of the 1930s, the artistic talents of both cigarmakers and lithographers suddenly became too expensive to compete profitably with cigarettes or
machine-made cigars. Tampa was still known as a cigar city, but its output was made mostly by machines, not by hand. Moreover, label titles, such as “Think,” “Call Again,” “Tampa Elite,” and “The City of Tampa,” were increasingly printed by a less expensive photolithographic process. In March, 1933, at the depth of the depression, *Fortune* magazine noted the demise of the hand-rolled cigar industry and its elaborate use of romantic and noble Spanish topics. “A maker no longer wants the loveliest bosom in Old Castle,” *Fortune* observed. “He wants a snappy emblem and a name no hick can forget. And it’s a different business.”

It was, as the article stated, “a different business.” Above all, it displaced hand craftsmen. Tampa cigarmakers either found employment in other Tampa businesses or moved to the North, where some were hired by cigar companies using machines, if employment was available. By the mid-1930s, Tampa could no longer claim the title as the clear Havana capital of the world. However, a record of the city’s achievement remains in the cigar label art which illustrates the significance of Spanish culture in Tampa, the State of Florida, and the entire cigar industry of the United States.
Cigar labels first began with an artist’s sketch of the label which was then used to determine the colors. This is an extremely rare item since it was often discarded. Once the colors were determined, the artist prepared separate lithographic stones which were etched for each color.

The final product of the artist’s rendering of the label for Tampa Fancy portrays two fighting cocks, representing a favorite pastime of Cubans. The brand was owned by Fernando Hermanos & Company which originated in New Orleans and moved to Tampa at the turn of the century.
When Vicente Martínez Ybor departed Spain for Cuba in 1832, the enterprising fourteen-year-old quickly became involved in the emerging cigar industry. By 1853, he had consolidated small workshop production of cigars into a large Havana factory. His early brand *El Príncipe de Gales*, remained his most popular brand of cigars throughout his manufacturing career which extended to Key West, New York City and Ybor City.

As a tribute to the namesake of Ybor City, the V. Martínez Ybor’s Sons Company produced a brand of cigars in honor of their father in 1902, six years after his death.
Ignacio Haya, a cigar manufacturer from New York City and close friend of Martínez Ybor, was co-founder of the cigar city. He won a close race with Ybor to produce the first cigar in Ybor City and won the prestigious title of Factory No. 1. His first factory was a wooden structure, later replaced by this brick building at the corner of Fourteenth Avenue and Seventeenth Street in Ybor City.
The Shakespeare brand of cigars, produced in the early 1870s, was purchased by the Sanchez & Haya Company and used as one of its leading brands in the very early 1900s. It was not uncommon for manufacturers to purchase popular brand names which were frequently bought and sold to the highest bidder.
The romantic scenery of a Cuban tobacco plantation was the subject of this label, illustrating to the consumer that the best Tampa cigars were made with tobacco from Cuba.

TACUSCO was the label of the Tampa Segar Company which was owned by members of the Wholesale Druggists’ Association of the United States. The organization, formed in 1912, hoped to enter the lucrative cigar industry and sell its cigars in drug stores throughout the nation. The label portrays an unknown individual in the center, with a scene of Tampa on the left and Cuba to the right.
The use of a Spanish theme to connote quality cigars was illustrated in this romantic setting of a cigar smoker and his lady. The label was produced by the B.C. & Ca. Company of Tampa. It was a label from the late teens or very early 1920s.

The name of a popular Cuban revolutionary was used in naming this Tampa cigar factory which was established in 1910 but which was in business for only a few years. It also produced the cigar label brands *Our Commander* and *Fastido*. 
A former superintendent of Martínez Ybor’s El Príncipe de Gales factory, A. Ramirez, formed his own cigar factory in the early 1900s. He used the name of the famous author Jules Verne as his leading brand of cigars. It was appropriate to honor the writer who had immortalized the town of Tampa as the launching site for a rocket to the moon in his 1865 book, *From the Earth to the Moon*.

Argüelles Lopez & Brothers produced *El Tipo* at their Ybor City factory on the corner of Twenty-first Street and Fifteenth Avenue. According to a 1902 article in *Tobacco Leaf*, this label “depicts the form of a beautiful woman who is said to be a representative type of Spanish beauty. The embellishments are artistically drawn and delightfully colored, the name standing out in gold letters above the whole.” The firm was founded in New York in 1888 and opened a factory in Tampa in 1895.
The Palma del Mundo Cigar Company which originated in the early 1920s used snob appeal to lure smokers by producing a brand of cigars which appealed to elitism. The *Prince of Tampa* portrayed an unknown aristocratic-looking individual with the “Mascot” as a symbol of the famous Tampa name associated with good smokes.
Another Palma del Mundo brand shows “the Prince of Tampa” holding the city’s banner, surrounded by scenes of Cuba.
The Palmo del Mundo Company produced a brand designed to appeal to elite smokers. The label featured the seal of the City of Tampa.
The brand *El Puerto de Tampa* used a stock label common to the industry. Stock labels allowed space for manufacturers to place their names while using the same background design. These were frequently employed by firms which did not wish to pay the high price for designing their own distinctive label.
Donna Tampa is an example of a popular stock label. Numerous Donna Tampa labels have been discovered with various factory names on them.

The Ybor City Cigar Company was one of the few manufacturers to use the name of Tampa’s immigrant community for a cigar brand. This is a more recent label produced in the post-1950 era. Its more simplistic design is typical of the photolithographic labels which were cheaper to produce and less detailed than the pre-1930 labels.
The term “clear Havanas” refers to cigars produced specifically from Cuban tobacco. Although the tobacco was grown in the western part of the island, the name “Havana” was associated with all Cuban cigars since it was in the city that the first Cuban cigar factories emerged. “Domestic clear Havanas” refers to those cigars equal to those made in Cuba, the location of their production (the United States) being the only difference.


Oral interview with George Schlegel III of Stamford, Connecticut, June 28,1980. Mr. Schlegel is a third generation printer whose family began their business in 1841. They were one of the most popular printers of Tampa’s cigar labels.

“The cigar industry is to this city what the iron industry is to Pittsburgh,” the Tampa Tribune observed in 1896. The production of handmade cigars dominated Tampa’s economy for fifty years after the first plant opened in 1886. Cigar manufacturers originally went to Tampa in search of labor peace which they equated with the absence of strikes or any other disruption of production by cigarworkers. Employers failed to find this elusive tranquility, but they did gain powerful allies among Tampa businessmen who for almost fifty years used vigilante violence in an effort to repress militant cigarworkers.

Spanish cigar manufacturers had first fled Cuba in the 1860s when their industry was disrupted by the Ten Year’s War for Cuban independence. Driven from Cuba, a number of manufacturers were attracted to the United States by tariff laws which placed high duties on finished cigars but not on tobacco leaf. Seeking access to the North American market, immigrant capitalists found a haven in Key West, Florida, which was close to the necessary supplies of clear Havana tobacco and skilled labor. However, after the spread of unions and a wave of strikes in the 1880s, several Key West manufacturers relocated in Tampa which provided cash subsidies and the promise of labor peace.

Vincente Martínez Ybor, the first cigar manufacturer to make the move, was lured by the Tampa Board of Trade. Organized by the community’s business and professional elite in 1885, the board agreed to raise $4,000 to subsidize Martínez Ybor’s purchase of a $9,000 tract of land just outside Tampa’s city limit. Martínez Ybor quickly built a factory and housing for Cuban and Spanish cigarworkers who in 1886 began production of the fine, handmade cigars that put Tampa on the map. Ybor City, originally a separate municipality, was annexed by Tampa in 1887, but it remained a company town dominated by the cigar industry.

The production of cigars ignited a spectacular boom in Tampa. A sleepy town of 720 people in 1880, the city had almost 6,000 people ten years later. Tampa’s growth was fueled by outside capital and immigrant labor that ultimately transformed the city into the world’s largest producer of handrolled cigars made from imported clear Havana tobacco. By 1910, Tampa was turning out one million cigars a day, and its 10,000 cigarworkers represented over half the community’s entire labor force.

Cigarworkers and their families made Tampa a vibrant, ethnically diverse community. The immigrants who flocked to the city’s cigar industry were at first Cuban and Spanish-born, but they were soon joined by a large number of Italians. In 1910, when almost half the city’s population was first or second-generation immigrants, the cigar industry’s labor force was 41 percent Cuban, 23 percent Spanish and 19 percent Italian.
Despite their diverse backgrounds, cigarworkers shared a strong sense of class consciousness that was often found among highly skilled workers. Many immigrants arrived in Tampa with a heightened political awareness. Cuban cigarworkers, whether they came from Key West or Havana, had a tradition of militant trade unionism that had put them in the forefront of labor and political struggles. Anarchism attracted many Spanish workers who took to the streets of Tampa to celebrate May Day in 1891. Although Italian immigrants were generally less radical when they arrived in Tampa, a number of them came from a section of Sicily that had experienced a wave of peasant uprisings led by socialists in the early 1890s. One Italian later recalled, “When in 1902 I landed in Tampa, I found myself in a world of radicals for which I was prepared.”

The world of Tampa radicals was extensive and lively. Immigrants formed local clubs and discussion groups that were devoted to an array of socialist and anarchist causes. Meetings in places like Ybor City’s Italian Socialist Hall attracted large crowds who heard lectures by national and international luminaries such as Eugene Debs, Bill Haywood and Errico Malatesta, an exiled anarchist. Tampa’s immigrant community also supported a number of radical newspapers that were published locally in Spanish, Italian and English. Titles like *El Internacional* and *La Voce Dello Schiavo* (“The Voice of the Slave”) give a sense of the papers’ orientation. The *Tampa Citizen*, published by local unions during and after World War I, announced on its masthead that it was “PUBLISHED IN THE INTEREST OF THE WORKING CLASS OF TAMPA.” The local correspondent for a manufacturers’ journal complained in 1919 that “the average cigarmaker here is well-posted and deeply impressed with the radical movement in the United States.”

The best reflection of the sentiments of immigrant cigarworkers was the institution of the lector, or reader. Paid by the cigarmakers to read while they performed their silent handwork, the lector sat on an elevated platform and read material chosen by the workers who voted for what they wanted to hear. The selections ranged from daily newspapers to European novels, but whether from *El Internacional* or *Les Miserables*, the texts featured heavy doses of radical thought. As a former reader later reminisced, “The lecture [reading] was itself a veritable system of education dealing with a variety of subjects, including politics, labor, literature, and international relations.” Confirmation of this statement came from Tampa’s leading anarchist who was a cigarmaker by the age of fourteen. “Oh, I cannot tell you how important [readers] were, how much they taught us. Especially an illiterate boy like me. To them we owe particularly our sense of the class struggle.”

Their sense of class struggle drove cigarworkers to defend their rights and to resist their bosses. The editor of *El Internacional* bragged in 1921 that Tampa cigarworkers were guilty of “the terrible crime of being consciously workers who are always trying to defend their rights and never submit to the false cajolery of the cigar manufacturers.” At the same time, a director of the Tampa Cigar Manufacturers’ Association charged that cigarworkers were led by “irresponsible agitators who array class against class and teach them that all employers are oppressors of labor and natural enemies of the workers.” As late as 1939, a study of Tampa’s cigar industry contended that the Latin cigarmaker had “a tendency to take things pertaining to his work or his art, as he thinks of it, very seriously, which frequently leads to his making a major issue out of a very trivial occurrence.”
Worker militancy led to frequent interruptions of production. These ranged from brief walkouts by a few dozen workers in a single factory to industry-wide strikes by 10,000 cigarworkers who closed down Tampa factories for months at a time. Strikes by Tampa’s cigarworkers rarely focused on the bread-and-butter issues of wages and hours. Instead, cigarworkers engaged in prolonged battles over issues related to control of the workplace. In fact, these struggles can be classified as “control strikes,” the term used by historian David Montgomery to describe “the efforts by workers to establish collective control over their conditions of work.” In strikes between 1887 and 1931, Tampa cigarworkers typically walked off the job in disputes related to the control of foremen, union recognition and defense of work rules. Explaining the nature of the ongoing power struggle with employers, the editor of the cigarworkers’ local union newspaper asserted in the midst of the 1910 strike, “The Union is convinced that the only way to make the manufacturers respect it is through a display of its power, consequently it will use power as long as it be necessary, until the total ruin of the manufacturers’ capital be the final outcome.” Factory owners saw the conflict in similar terms according to Tobacco Leaf, a trade journal, which reported: “The battle which has been going on in Tampa for the past fifteen weeks was not, truthfully speaking, a strike, as the word is accepted. . .It was a struggle. . .on the part of a clique
of excitable and irresponsible cigarmakers...to install the workman in the place of the employer.”

In their struggles with manufacturers, cigarworkers could bring enormous leverage to bear. Their skills and extraordinary sense of solidarity meant that striking workers were not easily replaced. In fact, they usually did not even bother to set up picket lines. Tampa cigarworkers were also part of a larger community that encompassed Key West and Havana where strikers could find financial and moral support. In some cases, highly mobile cigarworkers could also secure temporary employment in other cities while on strike in Tampa.

However, cigar manufacturers could also shift production to branch factories in other cities. This not only reduced the economic impact of strikes, but it also aroused concern among Tampa businessmen who feared that factories might permanently leave Tampa, as they had earlier left Key West due to labor troubles. Speaking for the local business community that depended on the cigar industry, the *Tampa Tribune* declared during an 1899 walkout, “Tampa can afford to lose cigarmakers. Tampa cannot afford to lose cigar factories...Every influence, every sympathy of the people of Tampa should be with the factories.” In line with this view, Tampa’s business and professional elite consistently intervened in cigar strikes on the side of employers. This outside intervention took a variety of forms, including mediation efforts, but it relied heavily on vigilante violence organized and led by prominent Tampans. The use of illegal coercion by the local establishment often shifted the balance of power in the cigar industry to assure the defeat of workers during strikes.

The pattern of antilabor violence emerged in 1887, as a result of the first prolonged disruption of Tampa’s budding cigar industry. With Cuban workers organizing to “struggle against ‘bossim’ as well as against the monopolies of the wealthy class of the world,” a strike over the firing of a popular foreman led Spanish factory owners to complain to the Board of Trade about “interference and attempted intimidation [by] a few Cuban outlaws now in Tampa.” Responding to an appeal for assistance, the Board of Trade adopted a resolution formally pledging to cigar manufacturers that the board “will guarantee them full support and protection for their lives and property by every legitimate means.”

Leading businessmen immediately made it clear that “legitimate means” included vigilante methods. At a public meeting called by the Board of Trade, prominent Tampans drew up a list of eleven Cuban “suspects” and appointed a Committee of Fifteen, “composed of the best and most responsible business men,” to run the alleged trouble-makers out of town. The vigilance committee was chaired by General Joseph B. Wall, a state senator and vice president of the Board of Trade, who had been disbarred in federal court five years earlier for leading a Tampa mob that had lynched a white transient for attempted rape.

In addition to expelling the so-called “agitators” in 1887, the Committee of Fifteen formally warned cigarworkers against any further disruption of Tampa’s main industry. A note read in English and Spanish in each of the factories announced: “We are here as the representatives of the good people of this community to say that we intend to have order, peace and quiet prevail in our midst, and we give this notice that all disturbers and agitators must leave at once without further notice.” In justification of “our action as a community,” a local newspaper editor who
served as secretary of the Committee of Fifteen declared, “We are an order-loving people, and do not propose that any band of outlaws and desperadoes shall come into our midst and disturb our peace, order and business prosperity.”

Similar economic concerns led Tampa businessmen to form vigilance committees during subsequent strikes. In 1892, the Board of Trade organized a “Committee of Twenty-five” to police a cigar strike after the *Tampa Tribune* warned about “the damage the general business interests of the city would sustain” if the walkout continued. Explaining the supposed cause of labor disputes, the *Tribune* argued that when Cuban and Spanish workers were “subjected to the devilish influence of even one unprincipled socialist, communist or anarchist, they are transformed into little less than madmen.” Therefore, the newspaper noted a local disposition to force “the anarchists to leave the place and the state, and if they do not go when ordered then the danger would come, as some favor swinging their carcasses at a rope’s end.” The threatened violence did not occur in 1892, but a spokesman for cigar manufacturers bragged that at least one strike leader left Tampa one week following formation of the vigilance committee. Moreover, the strike collapsed soon after the vigilantes, again led by General Joseph B. Wall, took to the streets.
After 1892, Cuban cigarworkers focused their organizing efforts on the struggle to free their homeland from Spanish rule. Once this was accomplished in 1898, immigrant workers again confronted employers over work-related issues. A brief strike in 1899 produced a complete victory for Tampa workers who won removal of scales that several employers had introduced to weigh the tobacco for each cigar. Strikers also gained a uniform scale of wages for all different sizes of cigars. The 1899 strike was unusual both because cigarworkers won all their demands and because Tampa businessmen failed to intervene. The quick victory showed that employers were willing to accept workers’ demands if increased costs could be passed along to consumers and if they did not involve union recognition.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the setback encouraged increased cooperation among employers. In the midst of the 1899 strike, the largest factory owners formed the Tampa Cigar Manufacturers’ Association “for protection against this labor trouble.” Despite continued competition for markets, manufacturers generally cooperated thereafter in the “group handling of labor relations.”¹⁵ Centralization of the industry also enhanced the power of employers. In 1901, three of Tampa’s largest factories, including Ybor’s original firm, were purchased by the American Tobacco Company, a trust owned by the Duke family that had already achieved a monopoly in the manufacture of most other tobacco products including cigarettes and snuff. The trust managed to
gain control of less than one-sixth of the nation’s cigar industry which was still largely nonmechanized and decentralized with thousands of separate companies. However, the so-called “trust factories” employed about 20 percent of Tampa’s cigarworkers, and the American Tobacco Company’s widely publicized opposition to unions undoubtedly stiffened the resolve of independent manufacturers to resist collective bargaining.\(^16\)

During the twentieth century, the biggest strikes in Tampa’s cigar industry occurred at approximately ten-year intervals in 1901, 1910, 1920 and 1931. Under the leadership of several different unions, each of these upheavals halted the local production of cigars and crippled the city’s economy which depended heavily on the wages of cigarworkers. In 1901, immigrant workers demonstrated their commitment to militant trade unionism when they walked out in support of “La Resistencia,” a local union whose declared purpose was “to resist the exploitation of labor by capital.” In a typical editorial, the radical union’s weekly newspaper, La Federación, explained, “The organization of labor that is not planted squarely on the class struggle can develop only in one direction the direction of a buffer for the capitalist class.” The 1901 strike was precipitated by the attempt of La Resistencia to win the union shop for its more than 4,500 members who made up 90 percent of the industry’s labor force in Tampa. The largest manufacturers responded that “we will not open our factories until we can control and run our business to suit ourselves.” Given its strength, La Resistencia promised a peaceful strike, and its leaders called on “the business men of Tampa, if they cannot help us, to at least occupy neutral ground.”\(^17\)

The strike proceeded peacefully, but Tampa businessmen did not remain neutral. Warnings of vigilante action circulated widely. The Tampa correspondent for a tobacco trade magazine reported at the end of the first week of the strike, “there is a strong probability that if things don’t change pretty soon, Judge Lynch will take a hand-not to hang anyone, but a few leaders may find it expedient to change the base of their operation.” With local businesses “becoming seriously affected by the strike,” the Tampa Tribune soon announced that an end was in sight as a result of a plan that had been “very carefully considered and arranged, and by people who have the welfare of the city at heart.”\(^18\)

In fact, at that moment an armed Citizens’ Committee was kidnapping thirteen strike leaders who were then loaded on a chartered boat and shipped to the deserted coast of Honduras. The Resistencia men were left with the warning, “Be seen again in Tampa, and it means death.” The anonymous vigilantes issued a statement explaining their purpose was to remove “anarchists and professional labor agitators” who were trying “to destroy this prosperous city.” The deportation committee successfully concealed the identity of its members, but the Tampa Tribune claimed, “The very best business sentiment of the city actuated and executed the step.” On the question of possible legal objections, the newspaper concluded, “No well-intentioned citizen is disposed to grumble over the banishment of the Resistencia leaders, because public policy, in some cases, must rise superior to strict legality.” Approval of vigilante methods came from newspaper editors around the state including one who observed, “Tampa is largely a law unto itself and has probably hit upon the only way to effectually hold its foreign labor element in check.”\(^19\)

However, the “forced deportation” did not break the strike. La Resistencia members immediately replaced the missing men and pledged to fight on. A local Italian-language paper
declared defiantly, “The bourgeoisie of Tampa are not accomplishing anything else but injecting in the minds and souls of the workers a most tenacious and long lasting resistance.” Many strikers may have felt this way, but continued resistance also brought more vigilante violence. 20

Convinced that agitators were behind the walkout, the anonymous Citizens’ Committee focused its attacks on strike leaders. Two weeks after the first expulsion, vigilantes ordered another seventeen leaders, including an editor of La Federación, to leave town. In announcing the forced departure of two more Resistencia men, a manufacturers’ journal confided that “the deportations will only cease when the strike is settled, or when every cigarmaker who is addicted to the speechmaking habit has departed.” When the absence of several editors failed to prevent La Federación from appearing, members of the Citizens’ Committee raided its office and dismantled its press which they carted away. The vigilantes also destroyed La Resistencia’s soup kitchens which had fed strikers. Finally, the armed Citizens’ Committee protected strikebreakers who gradually returned to the factories. Four months into the strike, almost half the cigarmakers were back at their benches, and La Resistencia called an end to the walkout. The radical union never recovered from the defeat, and it soon were unwelcome in Tampa if they were organizing cigarworkers. In 1903, CMIU representatives from outside Florida received threatening notes after arriving in Tampa. James Wood, an organizer who apparently took too much time leaving town, was shot on his way out of the state and lost an arm as a result. Wood could not identify the attackers, but the CMIU branded the assault “a cowardly and criminal attempt on the part of the trust and other non-union manufacturers to prevent the organization of the workers in the South.” 24

While Tampa’s cigar industry steadily expanded, the condition of employees deteriorated. In the absence of effective organization, cigarworkers could not enforce wage scales, and pay varied widely from factory to factory. Employers also abused the apprenticeship system to hire cheaper workers. When the CMIU mounted an organizing drive in 1909, workers poured into the AFL union which soon had over 7,000 members in Tampa. The CMIU’s cautious international president, George W. Perkins, tempered his elation with a plea to Tampa workers to avoid “hasty or ill-advised strikes” and to “be guided by fearless and conservative leaders.” Perkins also reminded national CMIU officials that in Tampa “the ‘Citizens’ Committee’ were [sic] ever ready to back the employers in any effort to stifle the growth of unionism.” 25

Perkins’ worst fears were realized in 1910, when workers waged an unsuccessful six-month strike for the union shop. Although Perkins officially supported the walkout, he later complained that it occurred after Tampa’s CMIU leadership passed “into the hands of the so-called radicals, and the ‘fireworks’ commenced.” 26

The fireworks included a campaign of vigilante violence against workers. The walkout by 10,000 cigarworkers was peaceful for more than a month, when suddenly a bookkeeper at one of the factories was shot and critically injured by bullets that reportedly came from a crowd of strikers. Two Italians, who were not cigarworkers, were soon arrested for the crime. Within hours the two men were lynched by a well organized gang of twenty to thirty vigilantes who seized the prisoners while two guards were transferring them from one jail to another.
Although the lynchers were never identified, the *Tampa Tribune* claimed that the summary punishment of “the hired assassins” demonstrated that “the people who have built up this city and who have protected its interests and its welfare in the past are not be found wanting at this critical juncture.” A tobacco trade journal declared bluntly, “The recent ‘neck-tie party’ . . . suggests that the citizenship of Tampa are at last fully aroused to the fact that the commercial interest of the city is in jeopardy.” Support for this view of the lynching as establishment violence came from an Italian vice consul who investigated the double murder. After a visit to Tampa, he concluded that “the lynching itself was not the outcome of a temporary outburst of popular anger, but was rather planned, by some citizens of West Tampa with the tacit assent of a few police officers, and all with the intention of teaching an awful lesson to the strikers of the cigar factories.”

There was no doubt who perpetrated the vigilante violence that followed. After an arsonist reportedly destroyed a cigar factory, “the best citizens of Tampa” organized a formal Citizens’ Committee that was headed by Colonel Hugh C. Macfarlane, a former prosecutor and the developer of West Tampa, an adjacent municipality also dominated by the cigar industry. Over 400 business and professional men publicly affixed their names to a set of resolutions pledging that the Citizens’ Committee would protect cigar manufacturers “to the fullest extent possible,” because the industry “furnishes approximately sixty-five percent of the total income of the city and makes a basis for several other millions of dollars being paid in wages annually.”

The Citizens’ Committee took the law into its own hands in an attempt to break the strike. When manufacturers officially reopened the cigar factories that had been closed for more than two months, over 200 businessmen armed themselves with Winchesters and began patrolling the streets. Their announced purpose was to prevent interference with cigarmakers wishing to return to work, but vigilante squads committed a number of illegal acts in an effort to force strikers back to their jobs. Members of the Citizens’ Committee raided a union meeting at West Tampa’s Labor Temple, ordered strikers to leave the hall, nailed the door shut and left a sign reading, “This Place is Closed For All Time.” The Tampa correspondent for the manufacturers’ organ *Tobacco Leaf* reported that the actions of the Citizens’ Committee demonstrated “to the disturbing element that the men who own property and have a regard for the interest of the city propose to take care of the destinies of the city, even if it becomes necessary to handle a few undesirables without gloves.” One of the “undesirables” targeted by the vigilantes was a CMIU
organizer from Chicago who was ordered to leave town by a delegation from the Citizens’ Committee that included the publisher of the Tampa Tribune. The crackdown by vigilantes brought only a few hundred strikebreakers into the factories, but it produced a flood of protests from union leaders. The CMIU’s local newspaper, *El Internacional*, condemned the Citizens’ Committee as “the Cossacks of Tampa” who were motivated by “the craving for money that has caused a number of heartless, innoble [sic] citizens to disregard Freedom, Justice. . .and even the Constitution of their own country.” Editorials like this led to the arrest of *El Internacional*’s editor on conspiracy charges. When this did not stop publication of the union newspaper, members of the Citizens’ Committee smashed its press and beat up a printer.

After six months, local unions finally gave up the fight for recognition. Although the vigilantes’ back-to-work movement had failed to attract many strikebreakers, it had encouraged a hard line by cigar manufacturers who refused even to talk with union representatives. In a war of attrition, the union locals ultimately exhausted their funds and called for a return to work when they could no longer pay strike benefits.

Ten years later Tampa cigar workers again struck in an attempt to win the union shop, and they had to deal with yet another antiunion Citizens’ Committee. Appointed by the Board of Trade, the 1920 Citizens’ Committee was charged with enforcing a board resolution which supported the open shop and called upon “all good citizens” to prevent “intimidation, threats, boycotts, or acts of lawlessness.” The leadership of the committee reflected its ties with previous vigilante groups. The committee’s chairman, a bank president, had been a member of the 1910 Citizens’ Committee, as had the two other spokesmen mentioned in the press who were another bank president and a vice president of the city’s largest department store. The latter was also a brother of Donald Brenham McKay, the owner/editor of the *Tampa Times*, who had just completed three terms as mayor of Tampa and who had himself played a leading role in the vigilance committees of 1892, 1901 and 1910.

The presence of federal mediators inhibited businessmen from engaging in overt violence in 1920, but the Citizens’ Committee mounted a campaign of intimidation. Toward the end of the ten-month strike, soon after the only reported altercation between strikers and strikebreakers, a “representative committee of fifty leading business men” visited union headquarters and, according to a tobacco journal, “in a pointed talk gave these agitators and radicals to clearly understand that this useless strike had to end.” In addition, “representatives of Tampa’s best citizenship” warned Sol Sontheimer, an International Union organizer from Chicago, that “he would be held personally responsible for the future conduct of the strike and of the agitators.” The CMIU charged that “the drastic action of the Citizens’ Committee. . .in plain English [was] a warning to Sontheimer to get out of the city.” He remained, but the strike eventually collapsed after the union ran out of money and the factories successfully recruited strikebreakers under the protective arm of the Citizens’ Committee.

The next significant display of worker discontent came in 1931. With rising unemployment and falling wage rates, cigarworkers rejected the conservative CMIU, and over 5,000 of them poured into the Tobacco Workers Industrial Union, which was an affiliate of the Trade Union
Unity League of the Communist Party. During 1931, Tampa cigarworkers engaged in a variety of radical demonstrations, including a celebration of the anniversary of the Russian revolution, which sparked a crackdown by both public officials and vigilantes. One party organizer was kidnapped and flogged by unknown assailants. When disputes between employees and resulted in a brief strike, followed by a lockout, leading Tampans formed a “secret committee of 25
outstanding citizens” who, according to the *Tampa Tribune*, had “the sole purpose of driving out the communists, whether they are communists freshly arrived or long here.”

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Backed by a sweeping federal court injunction which outlawed the Communist cigarworkers’ union, the citizens’ Committee endorsed a reopening of the factories on terms set by manufacturers. These included preservation of the open shop, nonrecognition of any union and permanent removal of the readers. Manufacturers ended “the privilege of reading” because they charged, “All of the trouble is originating from the readers’ stand where fiery Communistic translations from anarchistic publications have been constantly poured into the workers.” The unnamed chairman of the Citizens’ Committee bragged that his group operated “with the full cooperation and cognizance of the law enforcing bodies, and its every action has been and will be strictly lawful.” However, the mere formation of another Citizens’ Committee carried with it the threat of vigilante violence. As a local newspaper emphasized, radical union leaders scattered when “it dawned upon them that the citizens of Tampa were taking a drastic hand. In many quarters there was the recollection of another citizens’ committee that served in a strike many years ago.” Workers who heeded the warning and returned to their jobs undoubtedly remembered the lessons of previous strikes.35

One lesson was that establishment violence against workers went unpunished. No one in Tampa was ever arrested or indicted, let alone punished, for taking the law into his own hands against striking cigarworkers. Indeed, local law enforcement officials either cooperated openly with the vigilantes or conveniently disappeared when Citizens’ Committees took action. However, police immediately moved against workers who engaged in isolated acts of violence, and they often arrested nonviolent strikers for a variety of alleged crimes, such as conspiracy and vagrancy. Noting this “anomaly,” *El Internacional* pointed out during the 1910 strike: “The explanation of the whole thing is that the law in Tampa is like a funnel: the larger end of which is of equal dimensions to the Roman Coliseum and the smaller end with a diameter like a lady’s ring. The larger entrance is for the manufacturers, citizens and officers of the law, the smaller for the working people.” In a similar vein, local union leaders complained, “The city and county government are absolutely at the beck and call of the noble ‘Citizens’ Committee,’ and the governor has refused to intervene.” The same could have been said of the federal government which never took action against antilabor vigilantes, despite repeated appeals from cigarworkers

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*The cigar manufacturers’ view of the 1920 Tampa strike, as depicted by a cartoonist in *Tobacco Leaf*, a trade journal published in New York City.*
and their unions. The fact that most immigrant cigarworkers could not (or did not) vote undoubtedly contributed to the unequal justice they received at the hands of elected officials.  

Federal intervention ultimately encouraged union recognition for Tampa cigarworkers, but it came too late to be of much help to men and women in a dying industry. The depression of the 1930s decimated Tampa’s cigar business. As demand for luxury cigars fell sharply, manufacturers around the country shifted to increased production of cheap cigars that could be made by machine and sold for as little as five cents each. Despite growing unemployment, Tampa’s proud cigarmakers resisted change by defending wage scales and traditional work practices that made it difficult for their products to compete with cigars turned out by new methods in other cities. Under these pressures, some Tampa manufacturers went out of business, and others relocated their operations, including the “trust factories” owned by the American Tobacco Company which employed over 10 percent of Tampa’s cigarworkers until they moved to New Jersey in 1932. Plant closings and removals eliminated 4,000 jobs in Tampa during the 1930s. Blaming cigarworkers for some of the unemployment, a bewildered federal official observed that employers “could not meet the demands made upon them by the Latin workers of Tampa who are bound hand and foot by beautiful traditions and who prize workmanship above money.”
Facing the threat of extinction, most of Tampa’s remaining manufacturers agreed to union recognition and collective bargaining fostered by New Deal legislation. With the aid of a federal mediator, employers signed a three-year agreement in 1933 that recognized the Cigar Makers’ International Union in return for a no-strike pledge from workers. Explaining the new approach, a former head of Tampa’s Cigar Manufacturers’ Association declared, “We have to consider the workers if we want to survive.” Neither collective bargaining nor the economic crisis eliminated strikes by militant workers who continued to defend their rights, but changes in the industry did end the use of vigilante violence to break strikes. After 1933, Tampa businessmen relied on federal mediators and arbitrators to resolve labor disputes in the declining cigar industry.38

Vigilante violence thrived for almost fifty years in Tampa, but its precise impact is difficult to measure, especially since it was frequently used in tandem with other repressive measures such as arrests and court injunctions. At the very least, however, violence against cigarworkers prevented them from winning union recognition until 1933. Even though by 1920 Tampa had more unionized cigarworkers than any city in the country, they could not achieve the official recognition that was common in other cigarmaking centers, such as Boston and New York,
where antilabor violence did not occur. Despite the short-term success of vigilante businessmen in breaking strikes, they certainly failed to crush militancy among Tampa’s cigarworkers. As a leader of the 1901 strike declared when workers returned to the factories in apparent defeat, “They have vanquished us but not convinced US.”

Cigar manufacturing required less skilled workers as machines became more common in Tampa during the 1930s.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.
Machines run largely by women dominated Tampa’s cigar industry by the 1950s.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
On this page, we have a list of sources cited in the text. Each source is referenced with a number that corresponds to a citation in the body of the text. Here is a breakdown of the sources:


3. Tampa Board of Trade Minutes of Meeting, July 15, October 5, 1885, Tampa Chamber of Commerce, Tampa, Florida; Tampa Journal, December 29,1886; Minutes of Tampa City Council Meeting, July 15, 1887, Tampa City Clerk’s Office.


10. *Tampa Journal*, February 2,1887; Tampa Board of Trade Minutes of Meeting, March 8,1887.


13. *Tampa Tribune*, August 26, September 8, 1892; *Tobacco Leaf*, September 14, 1892.


17. Durward Long, “‘La Resistencia’: Tampa’s Immigrant Labor Union,” *Labor History*, 6 (Fall 1965),193-213; Federación, December 14,1900; *Tobacco Leaf*, August 7, 1901; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, July 25,1901.


23 Tampa Morning Tribune, August 21, 27, October 6, November 24, 1901; Tobacco Leaf, September 4, 25, 1901; Tobacco, September 20, 1901.

24 D. G. Sanford to Samuel Gompers, April 1, 1903, American Federation of Labor Records: The Samuel Gompers Era (microfilm ed., 1979), reel 36; Cigar Makers’ Official Journal, April 15, 1903 (hereinafter cited as CMOJ).


26 CMOJ, March 15, 1911.


28 Tampa Morning Tribune, October 5, 1910.

29 Ibid., October 16, December 7, 1910; Tobacco Leaf, October 27, 1910.

30 El Internacional, October 21, 1910, January 20, 1911.

31 CMOJ, February 15, 1911.

32 Minutes of the Board of Governors of the Tampa Board of Trade, July 26, 1920.


35 Tampa Morning Tribune, November 27, December 5, 13, 1931.

36 El Internacional, November 11, 1910; CMOJ, November 15, 1910.

37 Campbell, Cigar Industry of Tampa, 46-47, 53, 59-61; Thomas M. Finn to H.L. Kerwin, September 27, 1935, file 182/295C, Records of FMCS.

38 Thomas M. Finn to H.L. Kerwin, December 20, 1933, file 182/295, Records of FMCS; Minutes of Conference between Cigar Manufacturers’ Committee and Workers' Committee, May 25, 1935, file 185/295B, ibid.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, increased tobacco imports revived the historico-economic nexus between Cuba and Florida. In Key West, Tampa, Ocala, and Jacksonville cigar factories opened to process Havana tobacco. Thousands of Cubans arrived in Florida to work and most of them established themselves permanently.

The labor milieu from which cigar workers emerged defined the essential quality of the Cuban community in Florida. A highly developed proletarian consciousness and a long tradition of trade union militancy accompanied the Cuban tobacco workers to the United States. In Florida that tradition flourished. In the 1890s, cigar makers provided the crucial margin of support for Cuba’s independence struggle. During the early decades of the twentieth century, Tampa workers embraced a variety of radical ideologies, including communism, anarchism and syndicalism. The Cuban proletarian community existed precariously in an adversary relationship with its host society. Strikes, walk-outs, lock-outs, and, inevitably, violence characterized labor-management relations in the Tampa cigar industry.

The reader or lector in the cigar factories often served as a disseminator of the proletarian tradition. The idea of reading (lectura) to illiterates or to workers busily engaged in their activities had existed in the early nineteenth century primarily among prisoners in Cuban jails. By mid-century, the lectura had begun to appear in the Cuban cigar factories. Under the auspices of the cigar workers, the lectura expanded its scope to include the reading of the proletarian press, translation of foreign novels, and, in general, the promotion of labor causes. Almost immediately, management became suspicious and hostile, and controversy surrounded the institution.

The lectura arrived in Florida without any significant modification in function. Readers continued to disseminate news from a variety of labor presses, they translated the local English-language daily and entertained the workers with weekly installments of current novels. By the 1890s, however, the lector began to emerge as a powerful voice of Cuban independence sentiment. In addition to their other responsibilities, the lectores assumed the task of spreading separatist propaganda, appealing for funds, and calling for volunteers to take up arms in the cause of Cuban independence. Since the lectores were the major readers and interpreters of news they were in a position to influence and mold the attitudes and thinking of the workers in the factories. Even after the war and with Cuban independence a fact, the lectores continued in their influential role. By the early 1900s, labor militancy began to find expression in the lectores’ reading materials. As the radical press and social protest novels increased in popularity among the workers, management in Tampa singled out the lectura as the major source of labor agitation. Between the early 1900s and the 1920s, the fate of the lectura remained contingent on the
outcome of periodic confrontations between labor and management. Finally, in December 1931, after several weeks of strife, the cigar manufacturers, supported by city and county authorities and vigilante groups, announced the decision to abolish the lectura: “Heretofore the manufacturers have, through agreement with the workers, permitted the reading of matters of general news value, educational or instructive, but the abuse of this privilege through the reading of anarchistic propaganda has caused the manufacturers to immediately withdraw the privilege of reading any matter whatsoever.” A strike of cigar workers as a result of the manufacturers’ edict received the support of virtually every business in Ybor City and West Tampa. The general strike of 1931, however, did not weaken the resolve of management. They realized the dangers of unchecked lectores and they stood resolute. When the factories reopened in early December 1931 the lectura had been abolished.

Abelardo Gutiérrez Díaz was one of the thousands of young men who had emigrated from Spain to America at the turn of the century to avoid military service in the Spanish colonial wars in Africa. After residing several years in Cuba, Sr. Gutiérrez Díaz arrived in Tampa to earn a living as a lector, a trade he had acquired in Havana. By the late 1920s, Don Abelardo’s reading skills enabled him to join what was to be the last generation of Tampa lectores. Sr. Gutiérrez Díaz’s reminiscences result from an oral history interview taped in Tampa on February 19, 1974.
Shortly after the Spanish transcription, Abelardo Gutiérrez Díaz passed away at the age of eighty-one. The following has been edited and translated from the original Spanish copy.⁹

I served as a *lector* during the late 1920s and early 1930s. We continued in Tampa the system that had accompanied the cigar industry from Cuba. Most *lectores* came from the ranks of the cigar workers themselves. Periodically try-outs were scheduled to recruit new *lectores*. I went to one such trial, in 1926 I believe, at the urging of my wife. I passed and I was accepted. From that time on, I worked in several of the cigar factories as a *lector*. Almost all the *lectores* were Cuban or Spanish; I myself am Spanish. The cigar workers had an enormous potential for education, even when they could not read. The *lectura* was itself a veritable system of education dealing with a variety of subjects, including politics, labor, literature, and international relations.

We had four daily shifts (*turnos*). One was used to read national news stories. Another was devoted to international political developments. The third concerned itself entirely with news from the proletariat press. And, lastly, the novel.

In the morning the day’s reading started with national news, usually Spanish translations of the English-language press. Responsibility for these translations rested on one man, most commonly a senior *lector* with facility in English. He would then make copies and distribute them among the *lectores*. After reading the Spanish translation of national news, we read news from Cuban dailies, such as *Diario de la Marina*.¹⁰ Cuban newspapers arrived in Tampa regularly throughout this period.

International labor news was drawn from a variety of sources. Proletariat newspapers, however, came largely from Spain and Italy. These were partisan newspapers; some were anarchist, others were communist. All were read. There really was not much radicalism among the workers during the time I served as a *lector*. To be honest, I frankly did not like to read anarchist and communist publications. I did not fully understand these systems and cared less for the ideas expounded. The workers, however, asked that they be read. And, of course, regardless of the *lector*’s personal feeling, one simply could not read what he wanted. One was paid to read materials demanded by the cigar workers, not judge them.

And then the novel. The novel was also chosen by the cigar workers. There was a vote. Four or five novels by different authors would be submitted to a vote; the novel winning the largest number of votes determined the book selected for the *lectura*. The novel was read in installments, some twenty or thirty minutes per daily session. Every day a section would be read until the novel was completed. At that time, another election would determine the next novel.

Almost all the novels chosen were by Spanish authors like Armando Palacio Valdés¹¹ and Pérez Galdós.¹² Zola also enjoyed enormous popularity among the workers. At the beginning, almost all the novels involved serious themes, usually labor-related subjects—that was a time when the factories were made up almost entirely of men. Afterwards, during the late 1920s, women entered the factories in increasing numbers. And through the very force of the women’s vote, we began to read more romantic novels and material treating the dashing adventurers.
There were at least as many lectores as there were factories. No, usually more, for some served as substitutes to cover for those who were taken ill or for some other reason failed to appear at his factory. I had two factories in which to read. One was very large. I could not cover all the periods and thus read only the translations. At the other one, a smaller factory, I read the news and the novel.

The lector during the period in which I read did not have the benefit of a loud-speaker system. It was all through the strength of one’s voice (fuerzo de grito). In one factory, such as the Martínez Ybor factory which contained some 300 cigar workers, one had to read loud enough to be heard by everyone. It was an enormous effort. One enterprising lector, seeking to improve the system and thereby make his life easier, introduced into the factory a loudspeaker. But the lector’s voice through the megaphone annoyed the majority of workers; it was too metallic, they complained. In deference to the workers’ protest, the lector abandoned the loudspeaker.

The cigar workers paid the lector a quota. Invariably, it amounted to approximately twenty-five cents weekly. That’s all. Our weekly wage depended on the number of cigar workers. Usually
our pay ranged somewhere between $35.00 to $45.00 a week. Almost all the cigar workers paid regularly without incident. Obviously a situation in which a 300-man factory had only twelve paying workers would have been intolerable. The president of the lectura, charged with distributing the lectores and selecting the materials for the day, was entrusted with the responsibility of keeping order and making certain everyone paid his weekly allowance. Not everyone was obliged to contribute. Everyone who understood Spanish, however, was asked to pay. It once happened that an old man in one of the factories in which I read refused to pay. I approached the president and informed him of the problem. “Look,” I said, “so and so does not want to pay, What do you want to do?” The president interviewed the old man and learned that it all stemmed from the Cuban war for independence. Apparently the Spanish had mistreated him during the 1890s; since that time, he had a hatred of all Spaniards. And since I was a Spaniard, he vowed he would not pay to hear a Spaniard read the news. And there it rested. Because of his advanced age nothing was ever done, in spite of pressure to dismiss him from the factory. Otherwise, all workers paid us regularly without problems,

Since one of the requirements necessary to become a lector involved literary skills, almost all lectores had received some form of formal education. But perhaps as important, one had to read with feeling (leer con sentido). More than anything else, one had to act out his material. Take the
novel, for example. One had to interpret. The lector had to be something of an actor. He had to breathe life into his protagonists. The old lady—the old man: when they argued, when they yelled. All that. You know, it was not all that easy.

And quite naturally, there were favorite lectores. Some lectores were sought after more than others. There was often competition among factories to secure the service of a particularly gifted lector. Those who had the theatrical flair, who portrayed the protagonists with style and drama—these men were typically the most popular. There was one case of a lector who did not have a powerful voice, but who was a tremendous performer. He was an artist - today he would have been a film star.

And there were difficulties and bad times. Because we read and disseminated the labor press, we incurred the hostility of the factory owners. We were accused of making communist propaganda. That simply was not true. The cigar worker paid, and one had to read precisely what the cigar workers wanted. Management did not approve of this system. It was at the height of one of these controversies that they abolished the lectura. They removed the platform on which we sat. At this point, the workers took to the streets. The mayor personally inquired into the nature of the problem. We informed him we wanted the lectura restored. We were informed that management would reinstate the lectura only if the material read to the workers was approved beforehand by the owners. And naturally, since it was not the factory owners who paid out wages—it was the factory—we could not accept; similarly, the workers rejected a system in which management selected the materials presented. The lectura ended in 1931. After the strike, many lectores returned to the factories as cigar workers. And I, with a compatriot, opened up a little café in Ybor.

1 For the Cuban antecedents see Garpar M. Jorge García Galló, El tabaquero cubano (Havana, 1936).

2 John C. Appel, “The Unionization of Florida Cigar-makers and the Coming of the War With Spain,” Hispanic American Historical Review, XXXVI (February 1956), 38-49.


5 Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez et al., Historio de la nación cubana, 10 vols. (Havana, 1952), VII, 249-52.


7 Ramón Tapia, “Diary of a Tampa Man in a Cigar Factory,” unpublished manuscript, photocopy, Florida Collection, University of South Florida Library, Tampa.

8 Tampa Morning Tribune, November 27,1931.

9 A special acknowledgement is extended to Ms. Sarah Cipollone whose assistance with transcriptions between 1973 and 1974 contributed to the progress of the University of South Florida Oral History Project.

10 Diario de la Marina was a Havana daily, particularly popular with the Spanish expatriate community in Cuba.
Armando Palacio Valdés (1853-1938) was an author of no particular world view who excelled in a literature of light entertainment.

Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920) wrote some eighty books recreating life in nineteenth-century Spain and analyzing many of the social problems of the period.

Sr. Gutiérrez may have been referring to a speech given to the strikers by former Mayor Perry G. Wall: “Now, I have no doubt the question of permitting you to have men read to you in the factories may be adjusted. I think it is a splendid thing to have someone to read to you while you work, but I do think the literature should be passed on by a competent authority. The shows we see in theaters have to be approved. The books we read must be approved. It is part of the duty of the government to teach, in schools and after the people have left the schools.” See the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 30, 1931.
TONY PIZZO’S YBOR CITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH TONY PIZZO

The name Tony Pizzo is so synonymous with the history of Tampa that when producers at WUSF searched for a title of their ten-part documentary of the city, they eventually arrived at the obvious: *Tony Pizzo’s Tampa*. The author of *Tampa Town: Cracker Village with a Latin Accent* (1968), Pizzo was recently presented with an Award of Merit by the American Association of State and Local History for his yeoman efforts to preserve the heritage of the Tampa Bay area.

The grandson of Sicilian immigrants, Tony was born September 22, 1912, on the corner of 8th Avenue and 18th Street in Ybor City. His parents, Paul Pizzo and Rosalia Pizzolato ran a thriving grocery store, an institution which has managed to endure the urban “renewal” of Ybor City. That Ybor City still boasts a bodega is a credit to the indefatigable Pizzo, who at times worked single-handedly to preserve the embattled enclave, which was once the greatest Latin colony in the South.

In his efforts to revitalize Ybor City, Pizzo became increasingly fascinated with the rich heritage of the Tampa Bay area. To promote and popularize the past, he became founder and first president of the Tampa Historical Society, the Ybor City Rotary Club, and the Pan American Commission. A grateful city named him Outstanding Citizen in 1956; he has also been decorated by both the Italian and Cuban governments.

Today, Tony maintains a furious pace of research and writing, despite holding down an executive position with Tampa Wholesale Liquor, the House of Midulla. Tony and his gracious wife, the former Josephine Acosta, reside on Davis Island where they track the fortunes of their two sons: Tony, a physician, and Paul, an attorney.

**Interview with Tony Pizzo**

Q. **Tony, why don’t you tell our readers the moment, or period, that you first acquired an historical interest in Tampa.**

Pizzo: It happened around 1949. We had organized the Ybor City Rotary Club, and we became very closely affiliated with the Havana Rotary Club—we made trips back and forth—and finally some of the Cubans were wondering why so many Cubans were going to Miami for their vacations instead of Tampa as they did for years. After World War II the S.S. *Cuba* that plied between Tampa and Havana twice a week was taken off the run. We had real close ties with Cuba. After World War II the airlines began promoting Miami as a summer vacation paradise, and the Cubans began to discover the glitter of Miami Beach. A *Time* magazine story reported at that time that Cuban tourism was worth $34 million to the Miami area, and we became very aware and disappointed in the shift of Cuban visitors from Tampa to Miami. On one of our trips we met a newspaper man who said to me, “You know, Tampa really means a lot to us because it’s the cradle of Cuban Liberty.” And, of course, we were amazed. Here we were born and raised in Tampa, and
how little we knew about our history. He started telling us about José Martí organizing
the revolutionary party here, that the message to start the revolution went out concealed
in a Tampa cigar, and how the cigarmakers gave a day’s pay each week to help the cause.
And we thought, boy, if Tampa and Ybor City are that important, maybe we could put up
historical markers as an attraction for Cuban tourism. I broached the subject with a
Rotarian of Havana whose name is “Fifi” Bock—he’s still living; he’s in Miami now.
His father was one of the big Cuban cigar tycoons of the 1890s; they were well-to-do and
an outstanding family. Mr. Bock at the time was the director of the Military Institutes of
Cuba. He volunteered to make the historical markers at the military foundry and put them
all over Ybor City. He said, “All you need to do is the research and write them up.” We
were beside ourselves—what a fantastic deal! So I took it upon myself to find out as
much as I could, and I started to interview oldtimers, Cubans who were in their 80’s and
90’s. What I learned from them was unbelievable—that we had such a rich history. Then
I started meeting historians in Havana, and one of the friends whom I really admired very
much was José Rivero Muñiz. He had written many books—he wrote Conquistadors En
La Florida, and Los Cubanos En Tampa, which I cherish!

Q. What was Ybor City like in in 1948 when you set out on your projects?

Pizzo: Well, let’s say it was still intact. The people had not moved out of Ybor City. The people
were still there. . . but things were beginning to change. After the war the economy began
to prosper, and the younger Latins, better educated and prepared for life, began to look
towards new horizons. Then something happened in the early 1950s that started the downfall of Ybor City as we knew it, the colorful colony of Spaniards Cubans and Italians. Near the downtown area there existed a small area known as “the Scrub.” That area is the site of today’s Central Park Village, a housing project occupied by blacks.

“The Scrub” was a world of its own. No one ventured into that quarter. Only those who lived there frequented the place. There were no paved streets. The houses were placed at random—thrown together in an incomprehensible maze. The frame houses dated to the 1880s; they were weather beaten, shabby, and literally uninhabitable. It was probably the worst slum area in the state. I remember a news story referring to “the Scrub” as a cesspool in the heart of town. It was a frightful place forgotten by time.

“The Scrub” started as a small Negro settlement which surrounded a lumber mill near Oaklawn Cemetery. Tampa was a village then, its northern fringe extended to LaFayette Street (Kennedy Boulevard). The Negro settlement got its name from the scrub palmettoes which covered the area. Some of the first blacks to inhabit “the Scrub” came from the Bahamas. When many of the lumber mills in the interior began to close down in the 1890s, many of the black lumberjacks drifted into the quarters. This is how Tampa’s first black community emerged.

When Ybor City was established in 1886, two miles to the east of Tampa, the black community found itself in the middle of a wilderness sandwiched between the Cracker village of Tampa on the one side and the Latin village on the other. In time Tampa and Ybor City began to grow in all directions and “the Scrub” remained in the center, a lost and forgotten world.

When a movement was starting for the clearing of “the Scrub” I remember Curtis Hixon, then mayor, telling me while flying to Havana, “we must do something to better the living conditions of our black people.”

So when these people were displaced, where were they to go? Ybor City was the logical area. Many of the Latins were beginning to build new homes in other areas. Real estate agents grasped a golden opportunity and began selling Ybor City houses to the blacks who had nowhere to go. These agents gouged the black man, selling houses for more than double their worth. Many of the Ybor City houses were very old and in dire need of repair. The Latin section was classified as a blighted area. Many of the younger Latins had become Americanized—had been to war and were educated. They began to leave—it wasn’t that they didn’t like Ybor City—it was a question of economy. How could you build a new home in an area that was decaying? And we saw what had happened to several people who built beautiful homes there. To give you a good example, Dr. Santiago Paniello built a magnificent yellow brick home on 14th Avenue and 16th Street. He was a good friend of mine. I asked Dr. Paniello, “Dr., why did you build this beautiful home right here in the middle of Ybor City?” He said, “I made my money here; these are my people. I want to live amongst them.” Later, his children finished college, and they wanted to live in a better area. And so this is what was happening. The real estate people went to the blacks who were selling their houses to the federal government,
and induced them to buy old houses in Ybor City. The old Ybor City dwellings were selling for $7,000 to $10,000—houses that weren’t worth $1,500.

Q. **Up to that time were many blacks living in Ybor City?**

Pizzo: There were very few blacks living in Ybor City. The majority were blacks from Cuba, who were different from American blacks. To begin with, they were highly educated, not only in formal schooling, but also they were highly trained cigarmakers. They worked next to the white cigarmakers and lived, in the white neighborhoods; they were mixed. And there was a lot of respect, one for the other. And the Cubans had their own clubs, their own baseball teams. . .and there was no discrimination between the Latin whites and the Cuban blacks. They lived together, they worked together. . .there were many fast friendships between blacks and whites. My father had an elderly Cuban tenant. When they became too old to work, we fed them. When they died my father paid for their funeral. Remember, those were the days before welfare.

Q. **How did the Cuban blacks and the American blacks get along once this transition took place?**

Pizzo: Well to begin with, there was a barrier there. Most of the Cuban blacks didn’t speak English. So that kept them separate, and also the Cuban blacks were a lot better educated than the American blacks. They just didn’t mix that well. The Cuban blacks associated more with the Latins in Ybor City, and there was a good bond of friendship among them. So it was a real different situation.

Q. **Could anything have been done to prevent what you called the demise of Ybor City, even once the black migration took place to Ybor City?**

Pizzo: Well, actually to go in sequence, after the blacks moved to Ybor City the Federal Urban Renewal Act was passed. Florida could not take advantage of this legislation because a state court decision declared the act unconstitutional. Daytona Beach had instituted a test case, but the lower court ruled against her. The City of Tampa decided to test the constitutionality of the act before the State Supreme Court. The case was prepared by Cody Fowler, one of Tampa’s most eminent attorneys, with the assistance of Milo Smith, a young up-and-coming city planner.

The petition was for the approval of the Maryland Avenue redevelopment in Ybor City. The main thrust of the petition was to show the importance in preserving and redeveloping the historic aspect of the area. Milo Smith asked me if I could prepare an historical map showing the historic sites, events, and buildings in Ybor City. I still have this “historic” map. Because of the dynamic history of Ybor City the Supreme Court decided in favor of Cody Fowler and Milo Smith. Ybor City made it possible for cities in Florida to participate in the use of urban renewal funds.

The first urban renewal project cleared the area from the Union Station to 7th Avenue. Today, this area is the site of a large complex of attractive apartments housing blacks.
The second urban renewal project was the downtown riverfront. That area on Ashley between LaFayette and Cass Streets where the convention center and the city library are located was a series of warehouses with railroad tracks on Ashley as well as a railroad yard along the river bank.

The third and final urban clearance was part of the Ybor City section bordering from 7th Avenue to Interstate 4 on the north and from Nebraska Avenue to 22nd Street on the east. From Ybor City the exodus was to Tampa Heights. Urban renewal was meant to enhance living conditions of the cities, the plan covered only the material things; human feelings and the people’s well-being were totally ignored. So because of cold blooded governmental programs the Latins and blacks of Tampa have been forced to scatter to the four winds. Shifting people without regard to their feelings has been criminal. What they should have done was to take a block at a time, rebuild and have the people keep their properties and let them stay. We could have had beautiful small homes in Ybor City and many happy people. Today there still is a lot of nostalgia for Ybor City; people are still dreaming of the old days. They wish that somehow they could have stayed there. And so urban renewal just went in there and in one shot cleaned everything out. A lot of the great buildings that should have been preserved were destroyed. There were very beautiful brick buildings that are irreplaceable.

Q. Do you remember any specific incidents?

Pizzo. Yes, the No. 4 Fire Station. We were going to turn the fire station into a museum, and before we knew it the bureaucrats worked up a fast deal and in twenty-four hours it was bulldozed into dust. The junior college wanted the land, and a fast shuffle was pulled. Other very valuable brick buildings were also destroyed. Today Hillsborough Community College owns about fifty empty acres in Ybor City—off the tax rolls. Another good example is the time we tried to preserve four flat-top concrete houses which had served from the very early days of the founding of Ybor City as homes for Cuban cigarmakers. These buildings were the only examples found in Tampa that were typical of Spanish colonial period architecture found in Cuba. They were located on 14th Street and 12th Avenue.

We had a very forceful campaign going to save the four houses. We had the full cooperation of the press, and organizations and citizens had voluntarily pledged more than a thousand dollars to save them. These unique buildings were destroyed without regret by an agency which claimed that the buildings were in the way of the redesigned street pattern through Ybor City. That Fire Station No. 4 was a real sad thing. So we made a second choice, and the museum is now housed in the Ferlita bakery building. Then on 15th Street and 9th Avenue we had two beautiful brick buildings, with a lot of wrought iron. They just tore those down—it was pitiful and disgusting.

Q. Now, whom should we blame? Should we blame faceless bureaucrats in Washington, or Tampa people?
Pizzo: Of course it goes to every level. It started in Congress because the law was formulated—ill-formulated, let’s put it that way. They had no regard for humanity. If a blighted area needed to be razed, that’s all it spelled out. It had to go. It didn’t take into account historic buildings, it didn’t take into account the welfare of the poor, or anything. They just paid everybody off and you’d find yourself another house. They displaced people indiscriminately, which was wrong. Congress passed the law, and all the way down to the local level there were axes to grind. They tore down buildings because it was to their advantage. The more buildings they tore down, I imagine, the more money they were able to get. They wanted to prolong the project. On the local level a lot of people had no feeling for our city. They were actually, in my book, unconcerned about the community’s welfare. They conducted the business of the bureaucracy, without feeling for the history or the future of our community. I fought like a one-man fire department trying to preserve things. The El Pasaje building, for example. It had a beautiful balcony the entire length of the second floor, and one day I saw it was gone. I went to see the owners. Mrs. Avanell, the owner, said “We didn’t want it to fall, and we’ve got it in the back of the yard.” Well,
anyway, she said they were going to replace it. It was never replaced. To me, that’s one of the most historic buildings next to the Tampa Bay Hotel. El Pasaje is the second most historic building in Tampa. The destruction of the old courthouse was a blunder, but that’s another story.

In 1950 we had a $50 million bond issue to clear the riverfront of unsightly warehouses and build a convention center. The Ybor City Rotary Club called a meeting of leading citizens of the community. We had an evening meeting, and a nice dinner at the Columbia Restaurant. We broached the subject that out of the $50 million, we wanted $1 million earmarked for Ybor City. And we got the $1 million. The city fathers and all of the community leaders agreed that something should be done to preserve Tampa’s Latin quarter. So we had a million dollars earmarked for Ybor City. We came up with a plan to build a Latin plaza and redo all of 7th Avenue, and really try to revive it. Well, what happened was we had an election year coming up, and the city representatives who were running for reelection didn’t want to increase taxes or the budget. Things became so involved with public meetings that Ybor City became a pawn. So they dipped into the $1 million fund, the measly $1 million out of the $50 million, and took $600,000. They took the easy way out and Ybor City was sacrificed because they were afraid that the people would vote against them. This is true history. In the following election Nick Nuccio, a proponent of the Latin plaza project lost to Julian Lane, and we went to see the new mayor, and we said, “Let’s put the $400,000 into Ybor City.” Julian Lane agreed with us and he beautified 7th Avenue and built a mall. So out of the $400,000 not only was 7th Avenue beautified as it is today, but also the old original lampposts that were there were torn down during the Curtis Hixon administration, and they were given to schools, to the TB hospital—they were scattered all over. We fought to keep the lampposts, but would you believe that the Ybor City Chamber of Commerce wanted the new type of lamps and actually asked the city to take them out. So when Mayor Lane decided to beautify 7th Avenue he hired Milo Smith to work on the plans. One day I got a call from Milo. He said, “Tony, we want to put up fountains, and we want to put the old lampposts back. Where can we find one to make a mold?” I said, “Well, I think you can get one at the Orange Grove Grammar School. They’ll lend you one, I am sure.” Well, to make a long story short, in redoing all of 7th Avenue the City had to pay $1,000 for each lamppost, which, you know, were no longer the originals. So that was another lost cause that was victorious in the end.

Q. What period saw the greatest amount of property removal and housing removal in Ybor City?

Pizzo: It was the 1960s. I think it was the middle 60’s when everything went to pot. But I want to go back to the historical markers. So I went to Cuba. I had finished my research and found that José Martí came here in 1891; he made about seventeen trips to Tampa. The basis of the Cuban Revolutionary Party was drafted right here in Ybor City. The Cuban Revolutionary Party was ratified at the Liceo Cubano on 13th Street and 7th Avenue. That’s where José Martí made two of his most famous speeches. The speeches were called “Para Cube Que Sufré” and “Los Pinos Nuevos.” The Cuban volunteers were trained here. At any rate, I found that we had taken a tremendous part in the liberation of
Cuba. There was a hotel on 9th Avenue at 16th Street which today is the site of the labor temple. The hotel called Victoria—it was a stopping place for rebels who came in to be trained in Ybor City and then clandestinely were sent to Cuba to fight.

You cannot write about the Cuban revolution without mentioning Ybor City. The workers in the factories, and that included Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians, gave one day’s pay to the cause of Cuban liberty. They called that “el día de la Patria.” Many of these events were mentioned on markers. The first marker was erected in front of the Ybor factory. It is a beautiful stone put up by the Ybor City Rotary Club. I think it was in 1949. That was the first one. And of course when Castro took over our project became paralyzed. We never were able to get any markers out of Cuba. All of our friends left Cuba for the States. By this time it had become a very personal project to me because I had done all of the research. At that time there was a foundry on the Hillsborough River near the site of Interstate 75. I talked to the owner, and he said “Tony, I’ll make those markers for $75 apiece.” I went out and raised the money. I went to about twenty-five major corporations and nobody turned me down. So I was able to raise the money and
had the plaques put up. We made it an official project of the Ybor City Rotary Club. I didn’t want to do it as an individual. The city cooperated in putting up the markers. The markers were made at $75 apiece, but after the first ten markers were made the price went up to $100. So we paid $100. Later they went to $150. Today they’re being made in Ohio at a cost of $450.00 a plaque. And we’re still putting up markers. I guess I personally have been involved in putting up more than forty historical markers not only in Ybor City but all over Tampa.

Q. **Who’s the most interesting character you’ve ever interviewed?**

Pizzo: I talked to a man whose name was Tinner, a native of Tampa. When I talked to him in the 1940s, he was in his 80’s. I’ll never forget it. One evening, we were sitting on a curbstone, and he was telling me the story of the Spanish-American War. All about the saloons, and how wild they were, and the soldiers.

And, of course, I used to visit D. B. McKay a lot. He died in the early 50’s when he was ninety-four years old. He was probably, in my book, the greatest native citizen in Tampa history. He was a courageous man, a very talented man. He served as mayor of Tampa for several terms and made many contributions in the growth of Tampa. In his later years he published the “Pioneer Florida” column in the Sunday *Tampa Tribune*. Because of him much valuable information has been preserved. I came across a story in the *Tribune* dated 1887. During the yellow fever epidemic McKay was running a rival newspaper. He was a very young man then. The *Tribune* reported that you could shoot a shotgun down the street, and not hit anybody. The village was deserted. Everybody had taken off into the woods. People thought they were safer in the woods, and everybody left town, except young McKay. The Tribune complimented McKay for staying in town through the epidemic to get the paper out.

Q. **From your conversations with those pioneers, would Tampa have been a good place to live in the 1870s or 80s?**

Pizzo: Well, in the 1870s Tampa was really in the doldrums. Things were bad, Tampa had shrunk in population. The 1870s were probably the worst years. There was nothing going on here; it was an isolated community. Progress was at a standstill. But the people who lived here seemed to have enjoyed it. There was a lot of game, and fishing was excellent. It was quiet. The weather was beautiful. There were those who really loved it. And there were those who didn’t see much prosperity for the future. We had an influx in the 1870s of people from the state of Nebraska. I never could figure out what brought them from Nebraska to Tampa.

Q. **Is that how Nebraska Avenue was named?**

Pizzo: That probably had something to do with it because they started developing orange groves along Nebraska Avenue. From 7th Avenue to Columbus Drive, Nebraska Avenue was a dirt road with orange groves on both sides. It was an interesting time in Tampa; for instance most of downtown Tampa was covered with orange groves. The foundation of
the Tampa Bay Hotel was packed with shells from a mound which was located at Bullfrog Creek. So a large part of the Indian mound is right under the Tampa Bay Hotel today. They used to bring the shells in barrels loaded on barges. One of the barges capsized right by the Tampa Bay Hotel and all the shells went into the river. They had an awful time getting the shells all out of there. Also, when they started developing the downtown area after 1891, some of the orange trees were transplanted on the grounds of the Tampa Bay Hotel. The same thing happened in Ybor City. The area near 13th Avenue and Columbus Drive in the 1890s was known as “Morey Heights.” Mr. Morey was a real estate developer. From Columbus Drive on out, everything was a wilderness in those days. When Mr. Morey surveyed his grove for home sites he had some of the orange trees transplanted on Bayshore Boulevard at the site of the Centro Español Hospital. And until recently, when the hospital was torn down—another tragic loss, if you remember that hospital, its architecture—a lot of orange trees were still there.

Q. What do you say when someone says “progress”? How do you answer?

Pizzo: I believe in progress and I believe that some changes have to be made. But I think there’s a limitation. You take, for example, the Latin clubs today. The new generation is no longer interested in their functions. You know, the Latin clubs started a mutual aid society, and they served a tremendous purpose. Latin people are very proud—they never got on the welfare rolls, no one from Ybor City would go on the welfare rolls. The clubs took care of them. In other words, the Italians took care of the Italians, and the Spaniards and Cubans did the same thing. The clubs rendered other services. The buildings served as a meeting place, schools were conducted there, a fine library was found in every clubhouse. The young found recreation in the reading room, the card room and in the cantina. Entertainment was available for all ages in theatres and ballrooms. Yes, the Latin clubs were gems; they served the early immigrants fantastically well.

Q. What do you see as your finest historical accomplishment?

Pizzo: Well, I’m very proud that I had a vital role in organizing the Tampa Historical Society. The results are gratifying. We have members, especially descendants of many old pioneer
families who built the city, and to them it was a question of “why haven’t we done this before?” Among the more than 500 members are some of the most prominent families, as well as members from all walks of life. This, naturally, gives me a great deal of pleasure. Just recently we obtained the Peter O. Knight house as our headquarters. The Tampa Junior League was very instrumental in obtaining the Knight house. Those young ladies do fabulous things for Tampa. We also have received financial assistance from individuals who have shown their affection for our community throughout the years. The Tampa Historical Society has been a blessing to Tampa, and I’m proud of the part I played in organizing it.

I am also very pleased to have served as president of the José Martí Park Committee. I never will forget an elderly Negro man, a Cuban Negro, coming to me and pointing to the old shack and saying, “That’s where José Martí lived. That’s where the Negro woman, Paulina Pedroso, had her boarding house. And when they tried to poison Martí, she said, ‘you’d better live here. . .this is going to be your headquarters and my husband is going to be your bodyguard.’” When I heard all of this, I did some investigation to make sure that the old gentleman was right. And so I went before the Rotary Club, and we formed a committee to preserve the building—but the building was too far gone. If we could not save the house, we wanted to do something with the historic area. We made many trips to

The hospital of the Centro Español which was constructed on Bayshore Boulevard in 1904.

Photograph from Centro Español de Tampa by Victoriano Manteiga.
Cuba seeking help with this project. We were offered lumber by Cuban companies, and money by Cuban patriots who believed that something should be done. Cuban newspaper writers started coming to Tampa, and stories were being written about the house. The Martí house became the most publicized preservation project through the fifties with stores in Cuba and Tampa. Finally, on one of our trips we saw President Batista. The committee was composed of Mayor Curtis Hixon, Doyle Carlton, the former governor of Florida, Earl Mullen, director of the Pan-American Commission, Tony Grimaldi, and Johnny Diaz. We have a photograph taken with Batista, the president of Cuba, at the meeting. He pledged to give us money. And he said “I will give you $25,000. Batista sent architects from Cuba to inspect the old frame house. The building was filled with termites. It was so far gone that you really would have had to rebuild it. It couldn't be preserved.

So they said, “Why don't we make a little park?” And they came up with plans—I have them—the original plans of what the park was supposed to look like. Anyway, on our second trip Batista definitely pledged the money, and he said, “We’ll send you the money.” So we waited about two or three months and nothing happened. And in the meantime the building caught fire, and the fire department saved it.

So we took a picture of the building, partially burned, and sent it to Cuba. Every newspaper in Cuba ran stories and the picture of the house: “José Martí's house to be razed. . .The partially burnt historic house will not be preserved.” And things got so hot in Cuba over that picture that, believe it or not, President Batista called a special session of Congress, and the money was appropriated for the house. When the money arrived here it was sent to the Cuban Consul. He formed his own committee, changed the plans, and the park was established. Of course I raised hell, and we were included in the committee. At any rate we can proudly claim all the credit for the creation of the José Martí Park.

Q. **The Irish character, Mr. Dooley, said he didn’t like historians because they only study what nations died of. He’d like to know what they lived of. Let’s talk about what you remember as the vibrant signs of Ybor City.**

Pizzo: Well, as I was growing up as a child, I was born in 1912, most of the generations before mine were immigrants. So I was in an environment that was so different from, say, twenty years later after my generation started coming into its own. It was a different world. Everyone spoke Italian or Spanish, and they were all oriented to their clubs. The club was the “mecca.” The whole soul of Italian life was the Italian club and the activities of the Italian club. It was the same with the Spanish clubs and the Cuban club. But those clubs had other things going: they had beautiful libraries, foreign newspapers, and classical books. I remember one particular newspaper, *Il Corriere d'America* published in New York. The Italian club had regular weekly dances in its beautiful ballroom. The theatre showed movies and vaudeville shows. There was so much going on—the whole social focus was on the clubs. Some of the activities in the summertime were picnics out in the countryside. All the clubs had picnics, and they were very enjoyable. Rocky Point, Ballast Point, and DeSoto Park in Palmetto Beach were very popular sites. Picnics were held on the Alafia River and at Bullfrog Creek. They were very happy times. When one
of the clubs gave a picnic, people of different nationalities attended. 7th Avenue was a vibrant main drag; it probably surpassed Franklin Street at one time. The best shops on in Tampa were on 7th Avenue. Payday in the factories was on Saturday, so you can imagine thousands of cigarmakers getting their pay, going home and taking a bath, putting on their best finery, and walking up and down 7th Avenue. The shops stayed open on Saturday until 11:00. That’s the reason Saturday night dances in the Latin Clubs started after the shops closed at 11:00 P.M. That custom has come down to this day.

Q. Would you find an Anglo on 7th Avenue in 1930?

Pizzo: Well, you used to find them on Saturday morning. Hillsborough County was very rural until the 1940s. Ybor City was a very fine shopping center. And the “crackers,” what we called the “country people,” came to shop. They used to have caravans of wagons loaded with families. They came only Saturday morning and went shopping all up and down 7th Avenue. In the afternoon they would go back home; they had quite a way to travel. And in the evenings the Latins flooded 7th Avenue. Saturdays were busy and fun days on 7th Avenue.

Q. Were there any ethnic distinctions that you might see on the avenue? For instance, were Italians dressed the same way as the Cubans, and the Cubans like the Spaniards?
Pizzo: No, they all dressed more or less the same. They did all their shopping in the same stores, and the same styles were being followed American styles. On Saturday nights the restaurants would be crowded. It wasn’t like today where you have two or three restaurants. In those days you had two or three restaurants or cafés on every block. They had pastries and served coffee in the old Cuban style, and hot chocolate. You know, they used to boil the milk, and they used one pot for hot milk and a coffee pot for coffee. The waiter would come along and say “obsouro (dark), medium, or black” and he would pour the coffee according to your desire.

Q. Was the Columbia Restaurant always a jewel of Ybor City?

Pizzo: The Columbia Restaurant was opened in 1903. It opened up as a saloon, a little café, and in time it became the gem of Spanish restaurants. They had a bar, which is still there; they served pastries, coffee, and short orders. It was a regular coffee shop, a bistro or a cantina, if you want to call it that. What made 22nd Street in the early days really very popular was its location, an important crossroads. 22nd Street was called Livingston
Avenue in those days. And the 22nd street corner became the gathering place for farmers in the morning. That’s where they traded, along 7th Avenue and 22nd Street. They’d come in with their wagons and trade produce. You see, we had a lot of peddlers in the early days, Italian peddlers who peddled vegetables and fruit. They started arriving at about 4:00 in the morning, and before long there were hundreds of wagons. The cracker farmers brought their product and sold them to the peddlers. 22nd Street was a very active corner for many, many years.

Q. **Tell us about your courtship patterns on 7th Avenue. What would young people do on Saturday night?**

Pizzo: When my generation came along—this is hard to believe, but in my generation in high school, if we dated a Latin girl, we had to have a chaperone. The mother would usually go along. Dating started at high school age so we had to take the mothers to the movies with us, or to dances; we’d take the old ladies. I remember going to dances at the Centro Español, which were really the plush dances of the period. And you’d see sitting along the walls the Spanish ladies, and some Italians, with their daughters. And that’s the way it was until I went to college.

Q. **Did Italians seem stricter, or less strict, than the Cuban girls?**

Pizzo: Of the three Latin groups in Ybor City, the Italians were the strictest. The Cubans were the least strict. The Spaniards weren’t as strict as the Italians, but they still had a very strong feeling, like the Italians, for their daughters to marry their own kind. One of the reasons was the fact that most Spaniards held key positions at high salaries in the cigar factories. The Spaniards were the upper strata of Ybor City society. But the Italians were coming along and intermarriage started. In the early days the Italians got pretty rough at times when a daughter wanted to marry a Spaniard or a Cuban. I’ve heard of incidents where a Spaniard or Cuban who was courting an Italian girl was intimidated with an order to leave town, and he did. And they did mean business—it was that bad. And there were occasions when Italian fathers, after their daughters married a Cuban or a Spaniard, never talked to their daughters again.

Q. **Do you care to talk about bolita?**

Pizzo: Bolita came very early with the cigar industry. You know, one of the stipulations Mr. Ybor made the Board of Trade when he came here to establish his company town was the fact that his workers had to have gambling. He knew the cigarmakers. He knew their likes and dislikes. The Cubans weren’t good churchgoers. They all wore religious medals, and they believed in God. But when it came to going to church, they weren’t that good. That was pretty true of most of the Latins in Ybor City. But there’s a reason for all that. Anyway, when Mr. Ybor came he said to the city fathers: “Remember, this community is going to be hiding in the woods by itself. And I want you to know that I know the Anglo Saxon spirit of church on Sunday and no gambling.” The Board of Trade was so anxious to get the cigar industry that it said: “Well, they’re going to be all by themselves out in the country in their little community out there, let them do what they
want. If they want to gamble, let them have gambling.” But a little later on the Tampa villagers were raising an eyebrow with what was happening in its little sister village of Ybor City. Saloons were opened on Sunday and gambling dens with games of faro, dice, and roulette were in full sway. There also was cock fighting. So the churches of the little town of Tampa started opening up little branches out there, and they called them “missions.” Their mission: to christianize the Latins.

Q.  Didn’t you once as a youngster see bolita thrown? Weren’t you a newsboy and you happened to wander into a plush gambling house?

Pizzo: Yes, the Tribune wrote a story about bolita, and I was interviewed. You see, when I was going to grammar school I would sell the Tampa Times until the evening up and down 7th Avenue. In those days we had all those big green streetcars, and I’d ride between 22nd Street to 14th Street up and down, until I got rid of my last newspaper. and in those days there were several casinos in Ybor City. The best known were the Lido and the Imperial. The most plush of these casinos or gambling houses was the Lido on 14th Street and it was run by Rafael Reina. I described to the Tribune what I saw when I walked in there selling my newspapers. It was a regular Las Vegas type of casino. It was very plush, full of people, well-dressed, and the women were wearing minks, and there was bolita throwing going on. Bolita started back in the early part of the century here. It was introduced by a man they called El Gallego—he was a Spaniard.

Q.  You had mentioned earlier that there was a reason why Ybor City was anti-clerical, not very religious. Would you elaborate?

Pizzo: The Spaniards, as well as the Italians, came from little villages of their respective countries. The clergy in those villages were the rulers. From what I have read and heard, the clergy would cater to the well-to-do, and the poor, the peasant, the tiller of the soil was treated as a third-rate human being. The Church should have treated every individual equally. It isn’t like our church here in America. It was very provincial, and the priests played their politics. Those who had nothing (and later became immigrants in Ybor City) resented the treatment. I’ll give you a good example. If you read Mr. Angelo Massari’s
book he related how as a young boy he went to church for confession. The priest sat at
the head of the altar like he was the king of Santo Stefano (Sicily). Everybody had to
stand in line for confession but when a Don of the community or any of the well-to-do,
the prominenti, would come in they would go straight to the priest without standing in
line for their turns. Mr. Massari said that this preferential treatment of the well-to-do
turned him away from the church. These are the types of resentments people brought with
them. That’s true of the Spaniards, because they had the same situation. The clergy just
ruled the roost. When the Catholic Church was organized, the Spaniards were probably
the best churchgoers, and the Italians were second, the Cubans third. In most cases only
the women and children went to church; the men just didn’t. The Italians were the hardest
group to get together. When the church was organized in Ybor City in 1890 a priest was
brought in from out West because he spoke Italian. They felt with all these Italians here
they should have an Italian priest. His main task was to get the Italians to become
churchgoers. He fared poorly at his assignment. In the early twenties, however, an Italian
church was organized and located in the Italian community on 8th Avenue and 23rd
Street. I became an altar boy at that church. That church was still in existence until a few
years ago.

Q. In conclusion, please sum up your thoughts about Tampa.

Pizzo: Well, I think that Tampa is a unique community because it has always been cosmopolitan
from its very beginning. It started as a fort, and people came and settled near the fort.
Before the arrival of the Americans, Cuban and Spanish fishermen were living along the
shores of Tampa Bay. In 1848, a severe hurricane nearly wiped out Fort Brooke and the
small Tampa settlement. The boom created by the rebuilding of the fort attracted quite a
number of people from St. Augustine. In those days peninsular Florida was bare of any
settlements with the exception of St. Augustine and New Smyrna. Attracted to Tampa
were a number of descendants of the Italian settlers who came to establish New Smyrna
in 1767. They spoke Spanish and English, and began to grow roots in the Tampa
community, so from the very beginning Tampa was a polyglot of nationalities.

Tampa was destined to become an important city because its geographical location at
the mouth of the Hillsborough River at the head of Tampa Bay made it a logical harbor.
From the beginning it was the hub of commerce for the region of the central west coast of
the peninsula. Its proximity to Latin America was the main reason the community
became a railhead in 1883. In turn, the coming of the railroad attracted Messrs. Ybor and
Haya with their important cigar factories to create their company town, Ybor City. The
cigar industry launched Tampa into existence as a viable, progressive, and successful
community. The railroad also spurred Tampa’s economy by encouraging the
establishment of several fishing companies, lumber mills, and truck farming.

Tampa’s destiny was to succeed. At times progress was at a standstill, or moved along
slowly, but it always forged ahead. Tampa has been blessed through the years with
dynamic community leaders, and a bit of luck also played a part from time to time. We
have attained an enviable position as a city, but we have paid a dear price because of the
rapid growth, the clumsy planning for the future. Our bay is no longer the fisherman’s
paradise. Our mangroves have disappeared, and the pollution infesting our once clean air has dimmed the rays of the famous Florida sun.

Every morning Davis Islanders are reminded of the poison they breathe by merely looking at the industrial dust covering their cars. Some of our palm trees have died from this foul air. It’s sad.

I am not a pessimist and have never been. I think Tampa has a fantastic future. Look at what has happened in the last few years. The downtown area and Seddon Island are on the verge of a fabulous redevelopment. We will not be able to recognize downtown Tampa a few years from now.
WOMEN IN YBOR CITY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH A WOMAN CIGARWORKER

by Nancy A. Hewitt

As early as 1886, a Tampa Guardian reporter visiting one of the recently opened Ybor City factories noted that “many women work at stripping” the stem from the tobacco leaf, a job that required speed but little training. By the 1890s, many Cuban and Spanish women had gained access to more skilled positions, joining their countrymen at the benches to make bunches around which cigarmakers rolled a wrapper leaf. The daughters of early immigrants and their more recently arrived Italian neighbors entered small “buckeye” shops to learn the cigar trade. It was only after 1930, however, as a result of automation and war, that the cigar factories were converted from the dominion of highly skilled immigrant men to the domicile of their less skilled wives and daughters.

In most industries and in most cities, the transition from a male to a female labor force pitted men with skill, craft traditions, union strength, and high wages against women with speed, availability, no union tradition, and low salary demands. In Ybor City, however, women and men did not battle each other across the cigar benches. While fewer women than men held highly skilled jobs and virtually none held the most prestigious positions as lectores and selectores, women comprised up to one-quarter of all hand rollers in some early factories, and they struck alongside men for better wages and union recognition. Cuban women in particular shared craft traditions with their male kin. As automation transformed cigarmaking into a less skilled and predominantly female occupation, both men and women trained in the techniques of making fine cigars lamented the loss of the old ways.

Still women’s experiences of cigar work did differ from those of their male peers. Men had public arenas outside the factory in which to congregate and socialize. Women generally did not. Male cigarmakers were renowned for their political activism within and outside the factory. For single women it was considered improper to join with men in such efforts; for married women domestic cares made such participation extremely difficult. To men, cigarmaking was their work. To women, work was much more broadly defined, and paid labor was only one element in the strategy for family survival and mobility.

Both the craft tradition shared with men and the experiences specific to women are reflected in the reminiscences of Mrs. Dolores Rio. She was born Dolores Patiño in West Tampa in 1909. Her father was a Spanish-born bunchmaker trained in Cuban factories who worked for Sanchez y Haya before opening his own small shop. Her mother, born in Key West of Cuban parents, bore eight children of which Dolores was the oldest. In 1923, at age fourteen, Dolores Patiño entered the cigar trade. She learned to work as a bunchmaker, a hand roller, and a machine operator, jobs she combined with marriage and the care of three children. When she ended her fifty-one year career in 1974, Dolores Rio became the first cigarmaker in Tampa to retire with a pension.
The oral history presented here is based on three separate conversations with Mrs. Rio, and it provides merely a glimpse into a much richer tale of her life and the lives of her sister cigarworkers.

**Interview with Dolores Rio**

Q: *Mrs. Rio, did you learn to make cigars in a buckeye shop?*

Rio: No, I went to the factory, Sanchez y Haya. I was fourteen years old when I started there.

Q: *How did you get your first job?*

Rio: I went over there [to Sanchez y Haya] to learn to make cigars, and I was working with someone teaching me, helping me. But in two weeks, the old man who was the foreman there (I think he like me or something, he always called me “Lolita”), he says, “You’re going to earn money.” My father worked there and my aunt, so he says, “How would you like to learn bunches? You make bunches and your aunt rolls.” I say okay, if you want, I’ll do it. So, the first pay check I got, I never forget——$3.25. I went “AYYY,” and I took it home to my mother. Then the old man says, “Do you want to learn to work by hand?” I say yes, I want to learn. So he says, “Go to your father in the afternoon.” So I used to go and make by hand bunches for my father so he can make more cigars. Then one day, I was so scared, but I didn’t say no. He says, “Hey, I’m going to make you a bunchmaker. You’re going to make bunches for two rollers.” It’s different making for two. Everytime they finish one more, you got to have another ready.

Q: *Were many women bunchmakers?*

Rio: Women *always* worked at the factory doing the stripping, putting bands on, bunching for two rollers. But the women who made bunches were afraid to do this for two men. You know, they were embarrassed, standing between these two men. They look up at you, yell at you that you’re too slow, make jokes. But they had different rooms for the strippers and the packers, just all women.

Q: *Were there more Cuban women who became bunchmakers and rollers?*

Rio: Way back, at the beginning, it was only men. Then they start like they do now. They don’t want the women. The only thing the woman could do in the factory was to strip the tobacco
leaves. Italian women were strippers too. Italian, Cuban, Spanish, they all try to get on as rollers because they all want to make more money.

Q: Did you get to be friends with the women you worked with?

Rio: You had to be friendly. I talk if I have a chance sometimes, but if I have fast rollers, I have to be fast. But I talk, and if I don’t, I hear everybody else talk. That’s why they used to say, the cigarmakers, they know everything. You know, we had the man who came to read to us. We paid for that, but the man comes and reads the papers from every part. And then we all discuss it. There they read to you, and you heard things from all parts of the country.

Q: Do you remember any strikes during your first years in the factory?

Rio: Yes, they were going to start holding our paychecks back one week, they said. We went on strike; we don’t want it. Then they say okay, how about just two days, so we say okay and go back. Of course, then later they go to three days and four, and finally they get their week anyways.
Q: How did your family survive when your father was on strike for several months?

Rio: When I was born they had a ten-month strike. My father went to Key West. Then he was taking too long so my mother, she didn’t say nothing, she pack everything up and there we went. My sister and my brother were born there. And they brought me back here when I was five.

Q: Starting in 1930, with the Depression, times must have been hard again.

Rio: Yes and they had another big strike then. They start accusing most of the cigarworkers of being comunistas. I tell you one thing, I see many things that have changed in the unions today, but still I say, work with the union, work with the union. Otherwise it’s going to be worse.

Q: Did you make a lot less money during the Depression?

Rio: Oh yes, everyone was making less. We were on a limit. You know it’s piece work, but they put you on limit. We only work three days or whatever. They keep on working, but they earn less. But it's better to earn less than to be in the streets.

Q: When did you get married and how did you meet your husband?

Rio: He came one night to visit my family. My mother and his mother, way, way, back were relatives. She came to see my mother and brought three of her sons, and one was my husband [Francisco Rio]. We didn’t marry right away. I met him in November 1929, and we were married on September 30, 1930.

Q: Then when you got pregnant, did you quit work?

Rio: Oh, I worked until six, seven months before I had Sylvia. And then I left because they fired me. Around Christmas they fire many people because they have Christmas orders all done. With Gloria, I worked until the last day because then I was working in a little factory.

Q: Then how soon after the baby did you go back to work?

Rio: As soon as they gave me the chance. When my daughter Gloria was born, after fifteen days I was back again in the buckeye. . . . It was forty days when I go back to work. They call me. I say I cannot lose the chance. I got to work. I need the money.

Q: And did your mother take care of the children then?

Rio: Oh yes, she took care of them. My mother, she took care of children of women who worked in the factories, three or four at a time. And when I marry and have children, my mother takes care of them too.

Q: What other kinds of work did your mother do?
Rio: Ybor City, it was like the frontier. Husbands say their wives don’t work, but women always work. Like my mother, she raised eight children. Grandma and two cousins also lived in the house. We got a duplex, there were so many people. . . . Laundry, so much laundry. And cooking, of course. She even kept a vegetable garden to help out. . . . Yes, and in the buckeye, the *chinchala*.

Q: *So she worked in your father’s buckeye?*

Rio: Well, he wouldn’t say so. She just “helped out.” But she worked there a lot, especially in slow times or when workers were hard to get.

Q: *When did the kind of work you did in the factory start changing? Was it during the Depression?*

Rio: Yes, then they start pulling everything down. But it starts because they are putting in machines, taking the skill away. People start taking up other trades.

Q: *When did you change over to machines?*

Rio: It was in 1950. The machines make more cigars and make them cheaper. At the beginning I didn’t like it. I was afraid. Then the man told me, “This [hand work] is going down. Don’t tell nobody but go to some machine and see how it works.” Then pretty soon, he says, “Okay, Monday you go on the machine.”

Q: *Do you think it was harder for older men and women to shift to the machines?*

Rio: Oh yes, some of them couldn’t make it because they were so used to doing it right, and not going fast. And they cannot go as fast as the machine.

Q: *So all the fine craft work was gone after the machines came in?*

Rio: At the machines, you have to be fast, fast. To make 5,000 cigars a day, the machines run, really run.

Q: Given all the changes you experienced as a cigarworker, what did you like best about your job?

Rio: Cigars, well, the only thing I can tell you is because I make money. It’s the only way I can make money. There was no other way. . . . That’s all I know so I had to like it.
Ybor City is not a place where time has stood still, but a town ravaged by time and lost social struggles. This doesn’t mean there is nothing to celebrate about the special contributions this Latino community has made to Floridian and Cuban history—indeed, there are many more than the article suggests—but if it was inevitable that its special ambiente die out, the truth about it must not.

Let me say it right out—Ybor City was a radical, trade-union town. Sr. Martínez Ybor began a cigarmaking industry there in the 1880’s to get away from the labor problems that plagued him in Havana. He found an equally humid climate in Tampa (necessary then to cigarmaking), but he

* This essay originally appeared in August, 1977, as “a letter in response to a galling view of Ybor City” published by the magazine Nuestro.
made the mistake of hiring the same skilled workers from Cuba. The short trip across the Gulf of Mexico did not serve as ideological fumigation: even before his factory officially opened, his workers went on strike. For this reason, a New York colleague whom Martínez Ybor had persuaded to build a factory there got the credit for first producing habanos and not the man for whom that ward of Tampa was named.

The workers who settled the swampy area that Tampa officials turned over to the cigar manufacturers were not only Cuban. They were also Spanish and Sicilian. A typical Ybor City Tampan of my generation (I am 57) has, like me, a mother of Cuban parentage and a father from Galicia, uncles from Asturias and Cuba, and at least one cousin or sister or brother married to a Sicilian. In Ybor City there is a Círculo Cubano and a Centro Español and a Centro Asturiano and Sociedad Italiana. They were wonderfully active cultural centers, for those cigarmakers knew how to organize more than trade unions, and two of them also built hospitals for their members, the best in Tampa at the time. All of them maintained a staff of doctors who served the
members at no cost other than the monthly dues, and the American Medical Association bitterly fought these practices. The societies had to import most of their doctors, but there was one *americano* who fought the AMA ban, a marvelous surgeon named Dr. Winton whose first name, *que Dios me perdone*, I can’t remember now.

These social clubs all had libraries, auditoriums, gyms, dance halls, and canteens where the men gathered in the evening. At the Centro Asturiano we saw *zarzuelas* performed by local amateurs. When great international performers, like Caruso, came to Tampa, it was the cigarmakers who booked them, not the *americanos* on the other side of Nebraska Avenue. Saturday nights young people (properly chaperoned) went from one dance to another at the four social clubs. I remember as a boy going to a free art class summer evenings at the Circulo Cubano. All the clubs were organized and run by the cigarmakers. All their officers and committees were democratically elected, and no one was paid for his troubles.

(There was a fifth club—the Martí-Maceo—and its formation is, perhaps, the worst example of the compromises Ybor City felt were necessary with the mores and laws of Florida. The members of this club were, in the main, black Cubans whom Jim Crow kept out of the others. They worked side by side with whites in the cigar factories and they were sometimes surreptitiously accepted as members of the Círculo Cubano, but they could not attend social functions at any or be hospitalized at the Español and Asturiano.)

What gave those Latins that kind of *conciencia*? Most will tell you that it was the result of an innovation that Ybor City cigarmakers can claim as their own—the readers in the factories. They thought of it, not the factory owners. Each worker paid about 25¢ a week to hire an experienced *lector* to read to them during four hours of the working day. Two hours of newspapers and periodicals, two hours of a novel or non-fiction. The workers voted not only for the reader to be hired but also for the book to be read. Many of them may well have been functional illiterates, but they were well read in the great literature of the Spanish language and in authors like Dickens, Tolstoy, Zola, and Balzac.

They kept alive the Cuban revolutionary tradition (José Martí gave some of his most important political speeches there) and also the Spanish and Italian anarchist ones. Anarchist newspapers were read by the *lectores* until the United States entered the First World War. After the Bolshevik revolution, Communist papers were read, too, including the New York *Daily Worker*, which the *lector* translated at sight. Today there would be grants from many a foundation to help a community with so original and effective a program for adult education; but in Ybor City the readers irked the factory owners and, during the Depression, they summarily did away with them. The cigarmakers went on strike. Ever heard of workers anywhere striking for culture?

Of course, Ybor City workers were used to going on strike. With their own contributions they had built a Labor Temple where they could organize without endangering their social clubs. The American trade-union movement (the AFL) would not support them, but the Havana cigarmakers sent over contributions, just as the Ybor City ones collected money for their Havana brothers when they went on strike. They marked the passage of time in Ybor City by some of the biggest walkouts: the twelve-month strike of 1910, the ten-month strike of 1920. But although they held out and fought hard, they never won a strike. It could not be otherwise—they were a
The Depression hit a luxury industry like Ybor City’s hard, and the new generations were being weaned away. With the second World War the industry rallied, and it did well, too, in the postwar years. Although the readers were no longer in the factories, there was still political struggle; during the Spanish Civil War the town was almost, one might say, on a war footing to help the Republic. In the postwar period, the factory owners did finally negotiate with their CIO representatives, but in the days of Joe McCarthy the radical leaders were blacklisted—nothing new for Ybor City: there had always been blacklists after a strike.

The final blow came with the revolution in Cuba. You could not make first-rate cigars without tobacco from the Vuelta Abajo area of Pinar del Rio. That’s that. And our embargo cut it off. Most Latins in Ybor City were fidelistas, and they did not hold it against “el caballo” that the end had come. For the old-timers the embargo was further proof of the barbarity of
The “crackers” with hair on their teeth who once broke up their union meetings and called them “Cuban niggers.” The new Cuban exiles were for them new indeed—they were counterrevolutionary. And that (although no stranger will hear this from them) makes them untrustworthy. They remember reactionaries who denounced them to the FBI and with impunity, like that of the old nightriders, flung buckets of red paint at their homes.

I thought your readers should know some of the history and thoughts of those women and men in the photographs in the photo-essay. Those old men playing dominoes well know what Ybor City was like. The reason the sign in the window of a bar, so well caught by the photographer, says it closes at 10 p.m. is that in the last 15 years many have been mugged on the way home and no one now lingers on dear old Seventh Avenue when the sun goes down. If the photographer had moved his camera one block away, we could have seen, in some cases, the empty fields high with weeds where once stood the clapboard houses in which they lived, bulldozed now, awaiting new real-estate entrepreneurs. The moral: we Latins are not necessarily of a piece.
“I arrived in Tampa in August, 1912,” the old Cuban mused. “A strike among cigarworkers in Havana forced me to leave Cuba in search of work elsewhere.”

José de la Cruz paused to reflect pensively on these long dormant memories of his youth. Another puff of his long dark cigar seemed to stir further thoughts. “I came to Tampa in search of work.” Don José continued. “I arrived in Ybor City in the middle of a torrential rain storm. The streets were paved with mud—not gold,” he commented wryly. “All I remember,” he resumed, “was the mud, the heat, and the mosquitos. And that night, my first night in Tampa, I vowed I would return to Cuba within the year.”

José de la Cruz never returned.

Only his success at longevity offered Don José this unexpected if only modest, access to posterity. We sat together sipping café con leche, the tape recorder indiscriminately absorbing all sounds about us. Only later, when listening alone to the recording, did I become aware of the long pauses of silences that allowed distant street sounds to claim undisputed possession of the tape. Strange. Those pauses were not apparent at the time. During our conversation my thoughts were arrested by Don José’s features. Thin sculptured lines formed right angles with the deep furrows on his forehead. Sagging folds stretched some of the finer lines, creating the deceptive impression of facial pockets of youth. Palpable evidence, I thought, of his claim to be “around 83.”

I was in awe in the presence of my host, conscious of being in the presence of history. A participant in the 1919-1920 strike, an organizer of the 1931 strike, Don José recalled, now almost without emotion, the proletarian passions of the 1920’s and the 1930’s. A philosophical detachment characterized his reminiscences—not neutrality, just detachment. The well of scorn for “los dueños” (the cigar manufacturers) remained at the level it had stood almost forty years earlier; scorn for the “craca” remained possessed of its original vigor.** He played the difficult dual role of participant and chronicler with great sensitivity, almost as if age had given meaning to youth and both were making themselves manifest for the first time.

At some point in the second hour (I remember changing the sixty-minute tape cassette), a long silence came between us as Don José sent a billow of shapeless gray-white smoke rising to the ceiling. Moments passed as he proceeded to chase the lingering smoke away with half-hearted pendulum swings of an arm heavy with age. I remember being conscious of this pause, thinking that our conversation had perhaps come to an unannounced end. “We won, you know,” Don José

* This article appeared originally in *South Eastern Latin Americanist*, June, 1978.

**”Craca” is dialect for “cracker” which, in turn, is generally held to be synonymous with a poor, Southern white.
resumed—at the time I thought without warning. I later would discover on the tape that his silence was broken first by a portentous clearing of the throat. “I know what history is going to say,” he continued, now with a hitherto unrevealed conviction behind his voice, “but I want you to know that it is not so.” The use of the personal pronoun alerted me to the secret truth to which I was about to be made privy. “We were not beaten. We have never surrendered.”

I mused on these closing words and recalled the final passage in Jose Yglesias’ partly autobiographical novel set in Ybor City, The Truth About Them: "Tell them anything they want to hear—they do not have to know your thoughts. That is the way we have always survived."

That was 1974. I heard a few weeks ago that Don José had passed away. The news of his death had an unsettling effect on me. I don’t know how many days I passed transfixed on Don José’s death. Something of a personal loss, I felt. This and more. The passing of José de la Cruz signified a much greater loss. Soon all the cigarworkers would be gone. Who would be left to tell the story of Ybor City?
The need to listen again to the tapes of my conversation with Don José seemed not only natural but obligatory. To mourn his death by reliving his life. . . . Maybe his family would like the tapes, I thought, as the recording of our discussion began.

The passing of three years had a remarkable impact on the meaning of that conversation. José de la Cruz spoke some fundamental truths. I didn’t know this at the time. Succeeding conversations with old cigarworkers corroborated Don José’s history of Ybor City. Ironic, I thought, the history of Ybor City could never be written because it would never reveal itself in any form other than cigarworkers’ recollections. The intervening years have served to heighten a private, perhaps even a smug, appreciation of Don José’s prescience. History, Don José understood, never embraces more than a small part of reality.

My best intentions proved ill-matched to the inertia of my procrastination. For almost a year I had wanted to sip café con leche again with Don José. I had many questions to ask him. Some new ones were in order. A few old ones were in need of clarification. What would the old cigarworker have thought of the recent surge of interest in Ybor City. After the interstate highway paved a good part of it and after urban renewal reduced much of what remained to rubble and mounds of broken red brick, Ybor City now was the object of historical preservation. He would have appreciated the irony.

Like the Phoenix rising out of the ashes, Ybor City is reborn. Ethnic is in. Ybor City is chic. Born-again Ybor City is cleansed, purged of all original sin associated with immigrant radicalism, labor militancy, and social protest. The cigarworkers “liked the American way of life,” a tourist tract assures unsuspecting visitors to a local cigar factory. Odd, I thought, the first time I read those words. Who constructed that reality? Could it be that the history of Ybor City
would be written without attention to the truths of the cigarworkers? The final—and supreme—irony. Of course, José de la Cruz knew what history would say—he knew who would write it.

My search for an understanding of the meaning of Ybor City has never really moved much beyond Don Jose’s enigmatic sentence, “We won, you know.” I did not at the time have sufficient presence of mind to say “No, I don’t know” or to ask who won what.

Someday, soon, Ybor City will be without cigarworkers, hollowed of its essence, and sold to the highest bidder. Falsehoods of unknown origins will appear to drive out persisting truths. Cigarworkers “liked the American way of life. . .” It has already started.

Inscrutable wrinkled faces guard the secrets of Ybor City. Octogenarian domino players tacitly conspire to keep the past among themselves. The triumph is in the secret. Everyday, the same walk to the Centro, a bit of coffee, then some dominos. Everyday. Coffee and dominos. There reside the secrets of Ybor City.

At no time are people so sedulously careful to keep their trifling appointments, attend to their ordinary occupations, and thus put a commonplace aspect on life, as when conscious of some secret that if suspected would make them look monstrous in the general eye.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne
ANNOUNCEMENTS

YBOR CITY STATE MUSEUM

Located in the historic building that once housed the Ferlita Bakery, the Ybor City State Museum features colorful exhibits which tell the history of Tampa’s immigrant community and its cigar industry. Administered by the Florida Department of Natural Resources, Division of Recreation and Parks, the museum is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The entrance fee is 25 cents per person, with children under 6 admitted free.

For further information, write or phone: Ybor City State Museum, 1818 9th Avenue, Tampa, Florida, 33605; 813-247-6323.

YBOR CITY MUSEUM SOCIETY

The Ybor City Museum Society was established in 1982 as a non-profit membership organization to provide support for the Ybor City State Museum and preserve the traditions and heritage of Ybor City. The society was part of a community effort to develop Ybor City Preservation Park, a turn-of-the-century streetscape of original cigarworkers’ houses, located adjacent to the Ybor City State Museum. The society’s headquarters and a museum shop will be maintained in this park. The group currently serves as the umbrella organization for the Ybor City Centennial Committee. The museum society also publishes a quarterly newsletter and holds an annual membership party.

For additional information, write Ybor City Museum Society, P.O. Box 5421, Tampa, Florida, 33675.
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COVER: Tampa cigar labels. See photo essay, page 106.
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JACKIE WATSON .................................................. Pioneer Florida Museum
"I was born in No. Calzada del Gerro, Havana, Cuba, on May 30th, 1870. Both my parents were Cubans... I attended this school until I was 13 years of age. At 14 my father placed me in a cigar factory in Havana in order to learn the trade of cigar-maker.

"Shortly after I had completely mastered the cigar trade, my uncle, Gonzalo Pérez Guzman, brought me to Tampa with him. This was in the year 1888 when I was 18 years of age. The following day after my arrival, I was already working at the factory of Mr. Vicente Martínez Ybor.

"I was married on Monday, November 18, 1889, when I was eighteen years of age. My wife had come originally from Key West. She worked at this factory for some 30 years, and afterwards worked 18 years at different other factories in Tampa, or a total of 48 years. I, myself, worked for something like 32 years at the cigar factories." "Life History of Fernando Lemos," by WPA Federal Writers' Project [c. 1936].
ECHOES OF YBOR CITY

"I was born of Spanish parents in the little town of Guanabacoa, in the province of Havana, Cuba early in the year 1865. As a visitor to Havana well knows, this town is only a few miles distant from the Capital of Cuba.

"My father was a cigar-maker, and I followed in his footsteps. Here I learned the first rudiments in cigar making. When I was twenty-one years of age I decided to try my fortune in the United States. I arrived in Key West with my parents in the year 1886. It was during this year and subsequent years that the cigar industry in Key West was leaving for Tampa, so in the year 1889, I came to Tampa, leaving three brothers and three sisters in Key West. I came here with the purpose of settling, but I remained only a few months due to the poor sanitary conditions of Ybor City, and the many diseases running rampant here. I returned to Key West and went to work with Julius Ellinger.

"In the year 1893 Julius Ellinger was preparing to leave for Tampa, and among the cigarmakers he selected to bring to Tampa it fell to the lot of my father and myself. In that same year we arrived in Tampa. Later my father sent for the family and we remained here definitely. From that year to the present I have always lived in Ybor City." "Life History of Domingo Gimesta," by WPA Federal Writers’ Project [c. 1936].
ECHOES OF YBOR CITY

"The people of Ybor City are orphans, not only of father and mother, but of everything in life. They cannot find work at the cigar factories because of the machines. If the government would place a tax of $5,000 on each machine, the manufacturers would soon have to discontinue them, and there would be work for those that are still left here.

"Under present conditions the people of Ybor City have no other alternative but to leave for New York City. Here they get only 50¢ a week for the maintenance of a whole family, and the single person is not given any relief whatever. In New York City they are given a home, groceries, coal to warm themselves in winter, and electric lights. Here they are not given anything." "Life History of John Cacciatore," by WPA Federal Writers Project. [c. 1936].
ECHOES OF YBOR CITY

"When the manufacturers and cigar-makers arrived in Tampa, they found nothing but a stinking hole with swamps and pestilence everywhere. When we first arrived here, what little we found, in what was called Tampa, could not even be called a village. We made not only what Tampa is today, but the whole state of Florida. There were only a very few thousand souls in all the State. We gave it life and placed it on the map of the United States. This state owes everything to us." "Life History of Enrique Pendas," by WPA Federal Writers’ Project. [c. 1936].
ECHOES OF YBOR CITY

"A perplexing problem socially and economically is presented by the large number of unemployed Latins in Tampa, according to civic authorities. Almost 90% of them are cigar workers. They are untrained in other vocations and few of them are fitted either physically or by education for any other work.

"Excepting the younger generation who have attended the public schools, few Latins are able to speak or understand the English language. A majority have been born and reared here, but they have been indifferent to Americanization influence and have kept so closely to themselves that they have made little attempt to learn English.

"Due to lack of employment it is said that between 2,500 and 3,000 cigar workers have left Ybor City and West Tampa in the past three years. Most of them went to New York and some returned to Cuba, but it is estimated that at least 3,000 are still idle in Tampa.

"Many of them have been employed on WPA work, but a majority are too frail physically for manual labor to which they are usually assigned because of their lack of training and their inability to speak or understand English. Accustomed to the light and sedentary work of cigar making, in which only the fingers are used, they have difficulty in handling tools or performing the simplest tasks in manual work.

"Their leaders point pathetically to this situation and ask, 'What is to be done with our unemployed cigar workers?'" "Seeing Tampa," by WPA Federal Writers’ Project [c. 1936].
ECHOES OF YBOR CITY

"Latins are politically-minded. From the days of 1890, when they supported the revolutionists that freed Cuba, through the later revolution that displaced Machada, and the sending of funds to the Loyalist party in Spain, they are as intensely interested in politics in their native lands as in affairs at home.

"Even the poorest has a favorite coffee house, restaurant, or private club in which to spend evenings in search of discussion and recreation. The colony's national club buildings rank well in architecture and equipment. Most of these clubs originated as societies of mutual aid to members in sickness and financial distress. About 75 per cent of all Latins belong to one or another of these orders, dues being as low as 20¢ a week. The leading clubs maintain their own hospitals for members. The cultural, philanthropic, and social activities of the Italian, Spanish, and Cuban clubs have been important factors in the community's development." "Ybor City, Tampa's Latin Colony," by WPA Federal Writers Project [c. 1936].
ECHOES OF YBOR CITY

"A stranger in Ybor City, especially at night, is reminded of a city of Old Spain or in Havana. The tinkle of guitars and click of castanets are heard in cafes amid the voluptuous music of native dances. Dark-eyed señoritas in lace mantillas peep from latticed windows and flirt shyly behind their fans. Native vendors hawk their strange wares in the musical tongues of Seville or Venice. On all sides are the dazzle, the bright colors, gay laughter and picturesque street scenes typical of cities of Southern Europe." "Seeing Tampa," by WPA Federal Writer's Project [c. 1936].