

Memories

Financial burdens force close of Centro Espanol clubhouse

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The card player shot up from his chair raising hell about the way somebody else was playing. The other players sat quietly as he blew off steam and returned to his seat. The game resumed.

Ramon Alonso, 83-year-old retired fisherman, painter and cigar-worker, watched from three tables away in the clubhouse cantina of the Centro Espanol de Tampa.

"I sit here and entertain myself listening to that racket," said the man wearing a straw summer hat.

"But there's no gunfire," interjected an amused Robert Vergara, sharing Alonso's table.

Joking aside, they and several others among the 40 or so men drinking coffee or beer and socializing in the cantina this past Wednesday morning wondered about the future.

Some had frequented the cantina for more than 60 years, dropping in every day of the week. Reaching back into their memories, they saw themselves as children in the same place, buying ice cream or watching their fathers play at the tables.

But times have changed and the cantina is losing money, draining the Centro Espanol which faces other financial burdens.

Wednesday the clubhouse patrons reacted with regret to the impending sale of the 1912 landmark by the Centro, which is regarded as one of the first health maintenance organizations in the nation.

The closing on the \$500,000 purchase of the two-story red brick building at 1536 E. Seventh Ave. has been set for Oct. 12, smack in the middle of Tampa's Hispanic Heritage Week.

While parties, picnics, dances and banquets honor the city's Latin culture and roots, the Centro Espa-

nol will be preparing to dispose of the wooden chairs and tables used by the descendants of the first Ybor Citians.

The clicking of dominoes no longer will be heard by pedestrians on the sidewalk on Seventh when the cantina doors swing open.

No more club dances in the ornate ballroom upstairs.

Purchasers William E. Field and Carol Vigderman plan to restore the mammoth structure, reopen its 700-seat theater and establish several restaurants, including a sidewalk cafe. The building is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Officials of the Centro Espanol, which now has about 5,200 members, say they will use money from the sale of the Ybor building and other club properties they've sold to build a new center on Tampa's west side. Decisions on selling the buildings have been based on votes by the membership.

Besides offering a cantina, picnics and dances, the Centro at the new center will have athletic facilities in hopes of attracting younger members to the society.

Formed in 1891, the Centro Espanol provided medical, social and educational services, recreational facilities and burial plots in return for dues regularly paid by the immigrants who settled in Ybor.

The Centro and other Latin clubs in Tampa have performed vital functions for many years. However, their influence has been diminished by the proliferation of group insurance, changes in lifestyles and other factors.

Until the new center is built, the cantina patrons may frequent other clubhouses in Ybor, particularly the Centro Asturiano on Nebraska Avenue, according to interviews with nine patrons who commented on the clubhouse sale.



Tribune art by JERRY LUNDWALL

Centro

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"I don't feel happy about it, but we can't continue losing money," said retired electrical worker Jose Fernandez, 82, who's been a Centro member more than 60 years.

Deck painter Louis Saa, who at 44 considers himself a youngster when he's in the cantina, predicted the building's sale will cause some heart attacks among the old-timers "because they love this place too much."

"I know these people," said Saa's companion Tony Cruz, 48, a grass company manager who said he patronizes the cantina but is not a member. "All they have to do is go from home to here and from here to home." Anybody bent on selling the place "might as well bring in a machine gun and kill them all," Cruz said.

Outside the clubhouse, Charlie

Garcia, who claimed a more than 50-year Centro membership, pointed at the building and said, "That belongs to us. I think we should keep it."

The cantina loses more money than it makes and the clubhouse is expensive to maintain, according to Centro officials. In addition, they said, the Centro Espanol has had to pay large medical claims submitted by its members hospitalized at the Centro Espanol Memorial Hospital, 4801 N. Howard Ave. New memberships for the hospitalization plan now are limited to persons younger than 35.

Many cantina patrons are not Centro members and many club members already patronize the Centro Asturiano cantina that is well kept and air conditioned, said Peter V. Garcia, first vice president of the Centro Espanol.

Circulo Cubano (Cuban Club) President Frank Valdez is offering to reopen the cantina in his club's

majestic building for displaced Centro Espanol patrons. The 800-member Cuban Club closed its cantina a year ago because it didn't have enough business, he said.

Beset by a shortage of money and the need for improvement, the Cuban Club has been the scene of stormy membership meetings in which Valdez fought off moves by some factions to sell the building.

Valdez, 62, suffered a heart attack at one meeting.

"The members who wanted it to be sold aren't members anymore," he said.

Valdez vowed to maintain the clubhouse "as long as there is blood in me and I can keep on going."

Centro Asturiano President Joseph Baamonde said his organization wants to improve its clubhouse and increase its membership of about 4,000.

Baamonde said he would like to negotiate with the Centro Espanol for the two clubs to share the Astu-

riano clubhouse and possibly become one club down the road.

Centro executive Garcia noted consultants' studies on merging the clubs and their respective hospitals in the past showed the idea as economically unfeasible.

L'Unione Italiana (Italian Club) President Vince LoScalzo said, "Our roots go down in history so far back I don't think it's fair to our ancestors who founded these clubs to sell them for money because of hardship."

"It's a constant battle for us to survive," said the president of the club with about 900 members. He cited the financial burdens of operating and restoring the clubhouse and paying club members' medical claims.

Garcia agreed with LoScalzo about the Spanish club leaving its birthplace, but he said the organization does not have the money it would take to continue operating the clubhouse.