

MY FIRST BICYCLE

By Angel Rañón

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When I was fourteen years old I got my first bicycle. I had been in the United States since January 1931, having come with my mother Ramona and brother Juan to live with my father Domingo, who had immigrated to Tampa in 1921. The year was 1934 and I was in the 6th grade at Robert E. Lee Elementary School on Michigan Avenue, now Columbus Drive. The country was still recovering from the terrible recession years. It was a necessity that I began earning something to help with the family finances, no matter how little it might be.

Charlie Fernández, the oldest son of my father's first cousin already had a newspaper route delivering Tampa's evening newspaper, The Tampa Daily Times. He was asked to speak with his circulation manager, Mr. Manuel Melendi, and inquire if there were any openings for another carrier. He did as told and the reply was that there was an opening available and I could start at once. I had a problem to resolve before I could start: I didn't have a bicycle.

My mother and I walked to the nearest bicycle shop to buy one if we could afford it. Explaining our financial situation the shop owner showed us the cheapest one available. It would cost us Two Dollars and Fifty Cents. My mother thought that it was a fair price and walked out with it. Unfortunately, it turned out to be overpriced. The bearings that should have been in the steering mechanism were non-existing. It was very difficult to steer when loaded with the newspapers to be delivered.

The route that was given to me was in the poorest neighborhood in the City of Tampa. Most of the streets were unpaved with the sand so loose that it was even difficult for me to even push it, let alone ride it. The area was so poor that I don't believe many houses, if any, had indoor plumbing. The smell sometimes was overwhelming. I believe that I was given that particular route to test me. After a relatively short time, a few weeks at most, my manager realized that I was a keeper and that I could be trusted with a better route. The next one was indeed better. It was in a better neighborhood and had more customers. Mr. Melendi was a hard task master and most of his carriers, about twenty or so, disliked him. He was very nice to me while I worked for him and we became good friends until he passed away. I remember that on Thanksgiving Day he did something for me that I have never forgotten.

I was a School Boy Patrol and as a reward we were given tickets to the annual Plant and Hillsborough High Schools football game by the Peninsular Motor Club. I wanted to see the game. The problem was that it was being played at 3:00 in the afternoon and I would be delivering paper at that time. I spoke to Mr. Melendi and explained my dilemma. He was very sympathetic and arranged to get me the early edition of the paper so I could deliver the papers and see the game too. My opinion of him grew by leaps and bounds.

After delivering the Times for about a year I heard that the Tampa Morning Tribune had larger routes and also had a Sunday paper which meant that I could make a little more money. I went to see Mr. George Moore the district circulation manager to ask about the possibility of acquiring a Tribune route. After a short interview he offered me one with more customers. This was the beginning of a long association. Mr. Moore really looked out for his carriers. By this time my first bicycle was totally useless and something had to be done. My dad and I went to Western Auto Supply to see about buying a new one. After looking at all they had available we chose the cheapest one but to me it looked as good as the more expensive ones. My dad paid the down payment and I paid the balance at the rate of Two Dollars a month. I used that bicycle for three or four years until someone stole it out of our open garage. I discovered it missing one early morning when I went to get it to go deliver my papers. That morning my Dad let me drive his car to make my deliveries. That same day he bought me a new one and paid for it himself. As it turned out that was my last bicycle. After that first time of using my Dad's car he let me use it whenever it was cold or raining. The papers had to be delivered.

My experience with Mr. Moore was similar to that with Mr. Melendi. I worked for Mr. Moore and the Tribune until I graduated from high school. My routes kept getting better and better until I got the one that every carrier coveted. The grand prize was the route that covered downtown Tampa. It was coveted because it had many subscribers but not very many stops. The office buildings might have as many as twenty and all I had to do was leave the papers with the night watchman and he would deliver the papers to the various costumers on different floors. For that service I would give him a free paper. In addition I had two other benefits, most subscribers paid directly to the Tribune so I didn't have to collect and the other was not many received the Sunday paper. Another benefit was that the Sunday papers were so heavy my Dad would let me use his car, otherwise I would have had to make two trips back to the central office to pick-up a second load,

One of the reasons that I eventually got the coveted route was that Mr. Moore wanted me to continue my education and go to college. He told that he would let me keep that route until I finished my university studies. That never happened because when I finished high school I went to work with my father in his construction company. As it turned out that probably was not a bad decision because I remained in the business until I retired, and became its President when my Dad decided that I was ready. Now my youngest son, Carlos is the President and CEO.

In the summer of 1940, the University of Tampa in co-operation with the University of Florida offered some classes that would last most of the summer, five days each week and eight hours a day. My Dad had seen an article in the paper offering these classes and he encouraged me to take them. I did but it represented a problem, I would have no income for the duration of the courses. I went back to Mr. Moore and asked him if he had a route that I could carry for the summer. He arranged to give me one that was small but convenient and would not interfere with my studies. When the classes were over I again left the Tribune and went back to work with my Dad and his partner. I hope that this last paragraph conveys the appreciation that I have for Mr. Moore and all the good things he did for me.