

THE LOST CITY

BY MARILYN ESPERANTE FIGUEROA



Gilbert Bernardo



George Lopez

Top: Ramón Bernardo stands in front of the family business, Bernardo's Service Station. Above: Manuel "Baby Ray" Lopez, left (holding a loaf of Cuban bread), and his father Antonio outside of the Buena Vista Hotel in 1942.

Imagine going to visit the neighborhood you grew up in and it's not there! Not one single house, grocery store, bakery or church – everything gone! In a panic, you rush to your house and then your grandparents' house and all you find are empty lots full of sand and rocks. Your mind races back to a time of big family dinners, especially around the holidays. You think of the playground where you and your friends played stickball and Bernardo's Grocery Store and Garage where you would hang out, drink Coke, and chew on penny bubble gum. The city you remember no longer exists. If you grew up in Roberts City, then this is your story.

To help understand what happened, let's go back to when Roberts City began. In Armando Mendez's book *Ciudad de Cigars: West Tampa* we learn:

In 1893 West Tampa business leaders were busy seeking new manufacturers to entice to the area. In January 1893, George Benjamin and Phillip Collins successfully lured brothers Julius and Ernest Ellinger to move their operations from Key West to West Tampa. The Ellinger Company was the second largest manufacturer of Havana cigars in the United States, and it took an offer of sixty building lots and \$5,000 cash for Collins and Benjamin to persuade the Ellingers to move.

The Ellingers built their factory – the first brick building in West Tampa – on the corner of Green Street and Garcia Avenue. They then constructed small cottages near the factory for over 400 cigar workers and it became known as “Ellinger City”, or as the residents called it, *El Barrio de Elinche*. It was bordered by the Hillsborough River on the north and east, North Boulevard on the west and Cass Street on the south.

Ellinger & Co. operated as a cigar-producing factory but fell on hard times after the death of Julius Ellinger in 1902. After merging with another company, its operations moved to Ybor City. The original brick building sat empty until 1909 when the firm of J. W. Roberts & Son opened their own cigar factory. Soon thereafter, residents began calling their neighborhood “Roberts City”. Around that time the Garcia Avenue Bridge was built, providing quick access across the Hillsborough River.

In his book *Bridging the Gap* Robert W. Saunders, Sr., talks about growing up in Roberts City. “My family had neighbors from a variety of ethnic groups, including Cuban and Italian, as well as Black and Caucasian families. Local children played together, ate in each other’s homes, fought each other, and protected each other. On the other hand, Florida’s segregation laws and traditions did keep us from attending the same schools, eating in the same restaurants and even drinking from the same water fountains.”

As the city grew, numerous businesses opened to support the needs of its residents. They included S. Conte Grocery Store where you could buy your groceries for the week and La Popular Bakery where you

could purchase fresh baked Cuban bread – hot out of the oven. Then there was Latteri’s Poultry Market where customers could stop in to pick out a plump, live chicken for that evening’s dinner and hand it to the butcher to take for a walk! This was the day-to-day life in this small community.

The icon business of the city was the Buena Vista Hotel which stood tall on the southeast corner of LaSalle Street and Garcia Avenue. This beautiful hotel was the focal point of the city, complete with a swimming pool and health club used by many of the cigar workers after a long, hard day of work. The hotel also had an outdoor patio where dances were held.

There was also a boxing gym that drew crowds depending on what famous boxer was working out at the time. Professional boxers like Chino Alvarez, Carl (Red) Guggino, Tony Lopez “Half-Pint”, Joe Ficarotta, Max Baer, or the Leto brothers (Tony and Jimmy) could be seen getting ready for their next bout. An outdoor boxing ring was also located at Market and LaSalle Streets. This ring attracted local amateur boxers who

could make good money going a few rounds with one another. Boxing was a major form of entertainment in Roberts City and fights were a popular pastime.

So what happened to Roberts City? Why does it not exist any longer? Simply put, it was destroyed! Not by fire or a natural disaster, but by something far worse – Urban Renewal. This ugly monster began its annihilation of Roberts City in the early 1960s. Large areas of Tampa were being wiped clean of homes and businesses to make way for what was called at the time “progress”. Roberts City became one of its victims.



J. W. Roberts & Son Cigar Co., 1954

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“It was destroyed! Not by fire or a natural disaster, but by something far worse – Urban Renewal.”



Roberts City Grocers

Men toting cans of paint used their paintbrushes to place a death mark on the outside walls. URX stood for "Urban Renewal Removal". The newly built Interstate 275 cut through the city. Unfortunately, both projects occurred with the blessings of many.

The Bernardos were one of Roberts City's well-known families. Gilbert Bernardo grew up playing with the other kids in his neighborhood, and enjoyed hanging out at his family's store. His grandparents, Ramón and Emilia Bernardo, had moved to Roberts City in the early 1900s from Asturias, Spain. Gilbert's father Ramón was one of their seven children. Gilbert was so affected by what happened to his neighborhood as a result of urban renewal that he had to express himself in writing. The following excerpt is full of the emotion he experienced at the time:

First the houses were bought up and families moved out. With no houses and no people, there was no one to support the neighborhood businesses. So, for the most part, the businesses

failed...I remember the ghost town appearance of the neighborhood, no people, but dogs and cats in packs, as pets had been abandoned. Animal Control quickly rounded up the dogs, but did nothing about the cats. I recall cats frantically trying to scale power poles to catch a bird that had lighted on the wire. Such was the hunger. I would go across the river and get buckets of fish heads from the fish market and just dump them in the fields. Cats would rush from all over, grab a fish head, and race to some far corner to devour their prize. Slowly the cats, too, disappeared. Then all was silent.



The Bernardo family, from left, Manuel, Ramón, Tony, Nick and Joe

Gilbert Bernardo

The memory of Roberts City lives on in the minds and hearts of those who once lived in this thriving city by the river. One such person is George "Yoye" Lopez. Lopez has spent a great deal of time at his home in Seffner documenting memories of growing up in Roberts City. I had read about George's passion for preserving the memory of Robert's City in an old *Tampa Tribune* article. It spoke of the reunions

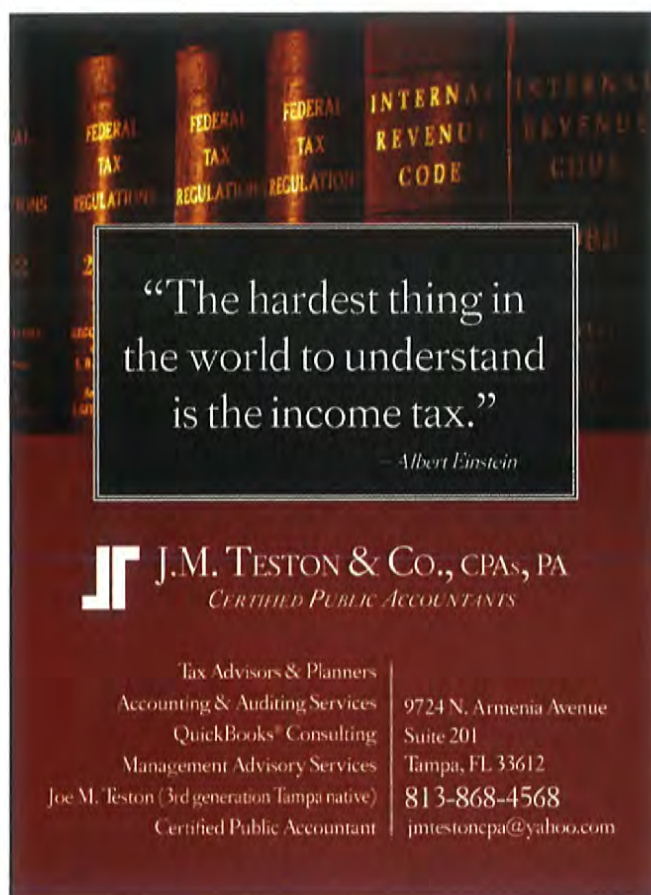
George and a group of friends from Roberts City would hold to reminisce about their neighborhood. The article,

written in 1968, was about their third annual reunion with 1,500 people showing up at the American Legion Hall at Macfarlane Park. These large reunions have ceased, but George and his buddies still get together at El Gallo de Oro Restaurant every Monday and Friday to stay in touch and have *café con leche*. I knew I had to contact George to find out more about Roberts City.

I found George's number and called him. We spent a great deal of time talking over the telephone that day, with George speaking about the neighborhood he remembered with so much passion and love. We set up a meeting the following Monday morning at El Gallo to meet and talk. I arrived right at 10:30 a.m. and the place was crowded with all the tables occupied. I looked around, wondering how I was going to find George since I didn't know what he looked like. I saw a large table of six men and thought this might be George's friends that he called "The Roberts City Boys". I walked over and asked if they knew George Lopez. One of them said, "Yeah, we know George – why are you looking for him?" I introduced myself and told them I was meeting George to talk about Roberts City. One of them pointed to the chair at the corner of the table and said, "George is next door having a hair cut; sit down right there in that seat – that's where George sits". With that, they continued on with the conversation I had interrupted. "You don't know what you are talking about," one said to another across the table. "Oh, I don't know what I'm talking about, huh? What do you know? Nothing – absolutely nothing", he quipped back. This banter continued back and forth between all of them and when it had subsided a bit, one said, "Can I buy you a cup of *café con leche*?" "Yes, thank you, that would be nice," I said. Then the taunting and teasing continued at the table.



Roberts City Boys outside of the El Gallo de Oro Restaurant in 2005. (from left sitting) Orlando Salinero, Ernest Rodriguez, Richard Sanchez, Armando Castillo, Rico Olivera, Emilio Espinola, Tony Castellana, Joe Dario. (from left standing) Lou Matassini and George Lopez



"The hardest thing in the world to understand is the income tax."
— Albert Einstein

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REMEMBER

ROBERTS CITY

Buena Vista Hotel	J. W. Roberts & Son Cigar Factory
Tomassino Grocery Store	Matassini Fish Market
Bernardo Grocery Store & Garage	Latteri Poultry Market
Big Cigar Company	Butter Krust
Desoto Battery	Bretton Pharmacy
Ray Williams Funeral Home	Hunt Poultry Market
Carver Theatre	Atlantic Marble and Tile
Agliano Fruit Stand	Juan Garcia Cigar Factory
Tampa Linen	La Prinsa Café
Paradise Café	E. Dominguez Wholesalers
Fonte Cleaners	Saunders Funeral Home
ABC Café	Ice House
Harry's Cookies	Roberts City Garage
Happy Tony	Guggina Grocery
Billy Moore	Clara Frye Hospital
Brisa	Sanchez Ship Repair
La Popular Bakery	Ice Plant
F. Garcia and Brothers Cigar Factory	Stadium Inn
S. Conte Grocery Store	Gusmano Filling Station
Guida Grocery Store	Lores Grocery
Papia Grocery Store	Fernandez Sandwich Shop
Cardinale Grocery Store	Buckeye Cigar Businesses:
La Cooperativa Grocery Store	Mistretta, Blas- Rodriguez and Salaniro
North Boulevard Baptist Church	and others...
Cagnina Grocery Store	
F. Garcia & Brothers Cigar Factory	

As I sat there drinking my cup of hot coffee, I realized that these "Roberts City Boys" have been around each other since they were youngsters, so picking on one another was something they had been doing for years. I could picture them playing in a makeshift baseball field in Roberts City with one yelling out, "Bet you can't hit this curve ball..." "Oh yeah? Just shut up and throw the darn ball!"

When George finally arrived around 11 a.m., "the boys" were getting up to move to their table outside. I later discovered they move to the outside table because that's when the restaurant's lunch crowd starts arriving and, by that time, they are finished with their *café con leche* and Cuban bread. George and I talked for a bit outside but we decided a quiet meeting at his home later that next week would be better. That way he could show me all the information he had collected about Roberts City. I said goodbye to the guys and a couple of them waved, but the others were too focused on the new battle that had begun. As I walked away, I realized that these old friends have a genuine respect and love for one another and they show it with their teasing.

I arrived at George's home in the early afternoon. He and his wife live in a beautiful wooded area in Seffner just outside of Tampa. George invited me in and directed me to the kitchen table. We spoke awhile and then, with his baseball cap tipped backwards he leaned back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and said, "Before we talk further, I want you to read this." He handed me ten pages of handwritten notes that were titled, "Robert (sic) City 4/1/05". Then he got up and went into the other room, leaving me alone. So, here I was left with an assigned task – which I gladly accepted – and I began to read.

My name is George Lopez. I was born in Robert City (sic) in 1928 – 806 Laurel St., 1 block west of the La Popular Bakery. There were 12 in my family; 2 died before I was born. My father's name was Antonio Lopez (cigar maker), born in Cuba. Mother was born in Key West, Guillermina Delgado (housewife)...

He wrote about the mixture of immigrant families who had come to the United States looking for a better way of life and who had settled in Roberts City. As I read, I was amazed by how much George remembered.

"Where Roberts City once stood are Blake High School, Presbyterian Village, Tampa Preparatory School and Julian B. Lane Riverfront Park."

He had listed families who lived in his neighborhood - Bernardo, Conte, Dario, Darrigo, Salinero, Cardosa, Papia, Flores, Fonte, Castellano, Contreras, Cardinale, Espinola, Matassini, Sanchez, and Carbajal. I recognized many of the names of "the boys" he had introduced me to at El Gallo de Oro. George wrote about all the good memories and the active community that had existed in Roberts City. His descriptions took me on a mental journey to this part of Tampa that I knew so little about.

When I finished reading, George came back into the room and said, "Alright, so now you read what I had to say, and you know about Roberts City". He then pulled out a sheet of paper on which he had drawn a makeshift map. Lines intersected one another showing the names of streets: Short Main, Main, Green, Laurel, LaSalle, Nassau, Arch, Grace, Cypress, Cass, and Garcia Avenue. A corresponding list of stores, cafés, service stations, barbershops, cigar factories and other businesses were numbered, indicating their location on the map. George explained that the landscape is significantly different today with most of the streets still there, but no longer running as far as they once did.

Standing where Roberts City once stood are Blake High School, Presbyterian Village, Tampa Preparatory School and Julian B. Lane Riverfront Park. The Boys and Girls Club was recently built on the corner of North Boulevard and Arch Street. George told me that the city is working on putting a plaque at this location to honor Roberts City.

George next pulled out an old picture album filled with photographs of men in their World War II uniforms. He has collected a number of pictures of men from Roberts City who served their country bravely.

As he turned each page, he would tell me a little bit of history about each serviceman - his name, where he lived in Roberts City, what his parents did for a living or some story he remembered. George later told me there were two guys that didn't make it back home - Nick Matassini and Oscar Ramos.



*The only reminder of Roberts City,
a fire hydrant.*

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Time passed quickly as George shared his stories with me, but it was now time to head back to Tampa before the traffic got bad. I thanked George for spending the afternoon with me and we agreed we would stay in touch. Before I left, George handed me a copy of his writing and said he wanted me to keep it. I knew I wasn't the first person to receive a copy, and I surely would not be the last. George's mission has been and always will be to educate as many people as he can about his beloved Roberts City.

On the drive home from Seffner I decided to detour through where the city once stood. I drove down North Boulevard and looked left and right trying to get a feel for what was once there. I tried to remember how George had drawn the intersecting streets and I slowed down to read the street signs, trying to imagine how they all ran together. I had driven down this street many times before but today sadness overcame me. I thought about one of the last questions I asked George. I wanted to know if there was anything left of Roberts City. He paused for a minute, looked down and then back at me with a soft smile and said, "Only a fire hydrant."

Special thanks to George Lopez and Gilbert Bernardo who provided valuable information and photographs for this article. I also want to thank all the "Roberts City Boys" for all the mornings of café con leche at El Gallo de Oro Restaurant.