

# Present can't compare to Ybor's storied past

Yet every generation deserves its own music and its own history.

BY GARY R. MORMINO  
*Florida Humanities Council*

In 1977, Ybor City was in steep decline. Few of the original inhabitants of this once-vibrant ethnic community remained. Seventh Avenue was a shadow of the thriving commercial center of years past — and ghost-like at night. But to a young historian, this weathered and wearied enclave was a dreamland.

It was different from any immigrant community I had ever seen. Or smelled. The aromas of fresh Cuban bread emerging from La Segunda Bakery mingled with those of the shredded, savory flank steak called *ropa vieja* (translation: "old clothes") served at the Alvarez Café and the "burnt" scent of dark coffee beans emanating from roasters at the La Naviera Mill. Add to that the fragrant, musty smell of tobacco leaf that wafted through the remaining cigar factories, mixed with the staccato sounds of Spanish and Italian, and you have a very special place.

» See YBOR CITY, 4P



Courtesy of Burgert Brothers Collection, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library

Constructed in the 1890s, El Pasaje features curved brick columns and shaded arcades. The Cuban Club can be seen in the background.

## Perspective

### » YBOR CITY continued from 1P

Despite the obvious economic decline, many buildings lining the brick streets of this historic area just northeast of downtown Tampa remained visually stunning. I returned again and again to gasp at the monumental scale and grandeur of the immigrant ethnic society buildings so lovingly erected by the Cuban, Italian and Spanish residents who established this community beginning in 1886. Monuments to immigrants, these structures suggested the grandeur they once evoked: three- and four-stories tall with opulent theaters and elegant dance floors, marble stairs and cast-iron balustrades.

I couldn't wait to find out more about the people who built them and who lived in the small wooden cottages nestled throughout the neighboring streets. I wanted to know their stories. Many of the immigrants and their elderly children were still alive, I learned. In a race against time, I tracked hundreds down, traveling to their homes and tape-recording their memories. I also found some playing dominos and sipping *café carajillo* or *café corretto* (coffee with brandy) in the arabesque-tiled cantinas of the still-active ethnic society buildings.

As the tapes rolled, tales of struggle and heroism poured forth and patterns and themes emerged. I met an exotic cast of characters that only a novelist could imagine — *boliteros* (numbers runners), *los lectores* (those who read books aloud to workers in the many cigar factories), and *cafeteros* (those who supplied workers with fortifying cups of Cuban coffee). I even met what were called stripper women, *las despalilladoras*, who stripped the tobacco leaves from the stems.

Some of these people stay deep in my memory — like José Vega Díaz. In 1980, my colleague and fellow historian George Pozzetta and I met this 94-year-old cigar maker who had arrived in Ybor City in 1892. He described how he and others supported revolutionary José Martí and his plea to free Cuba from Spanish rule. He recalled a fight in the 1960s when the urban-renewal wrecking ball cut a swath through his beloved Ybor City community.

He and his wife, Blanca, resisted bureaucrats who demanded they vacate their home. Blanca pleaded, "I can't, I can't," on eviction day — and was dead by sunset. He shared many other stories of his life, too, as well as his underlying philosophies. When asked about organized religion, he channeled his favorite author, saying: "You know what Víctor Hugo say? In every town they have a school teacher. The school teacher is the light. But in every town there is someone who — wheeww — try to blow away the light. That is the preachers!"

When Ybor City was founded 130 years ago, its prospects seemed dismal. A company town for the cigar industry, it was a primitive outpost scoured by yellow and typhoid fevers. When I asked Paolo Longo, an immigrant from Sicily, his first memories of Ybor City in 1904, he replied, "Humph!! *Zanzare, e coccodrilli!*" (mosquitoes and alligators!). Yet this community survived epidemics and wars, revolutions and labor strife.

"The cigar industry is to this city what the iron industry is to Pittsburgh," wrote the *Tampa Tribune* in 1897. Millions of cigars — Tampa Nuggets, Hav-A-Tampas, Tampa Girls and many more once-famous brands — ensured prosperity. A Tampa-made cigar became a proper status symbol for the era's growing middle classes.

To grade, de-stem, bunch, and fashion the tobacco leaf into puro Habana cigars, thousands of immigrants from Cuba, Spain and Italy — "Latin" in the local vernacular — created an ethnic oasis in the Deep South, an industrial community in an agrarian

state. More than 100 factories solidified Tampa's reputation as "Cigar City." Alas, only a handful of them still stand.

The cigar factories were home to genuine celebrities and heroes, known as *los lectores* or "readers." The practice of reading aloud to cigar workers began in Cuba and followed the migration routes of *tabaqueros* across the Straits of Florida. A distinct culture surrounded them. The fiercely independent cigar makers, not the factory owners, controlled the process. Workers hired *lectores* to read literature to them while they worked. Some readers sat on chairs, while others preferred elegant pulpits called *tribunas*. Workers secured the right to select the novels that were to be read to them. In a celebrated incident, two workers began quarreling over whether the Victor Hugo novel *Ninety-three* offended the sensibilities of the women workers. The argument spilled outside where a duel was held, resulting in a tragedy that the French author surely would have approved.

Tampa's prosperity largely depended upon the skills of these 10,000 cigar makers. The immigrant laborers were anything but passive, either about their working conditions or political issues; indeed, Ybor City was a hotbed of radical ideas. Angelo Massari recounted how as a young man in Sicily, he became radicalized confronting a conservative Roman Catholic Church and a repressive state. "When in 1902 I landed in Tampa, I found myself in a world of radicals for which I was prepared," he recalled. In Ybor City, anarchists and trade unionists, socialists and communists, battled for primacy.

Massari had left the impoverished Sicily because it was said that young men there had only three options: rebellion, stagnation or emigration. He'd heard that in Tampa, "there is no shortage of anything." Even coffee, someone told him, "they make in a big pot." Massari emigrated and became a prosperous banker.

Consider the inspiring story of Jose Yglesias, arguably Tampa's greatest native-born writer. Yglesias' family came from Galicia, a poor region in Spain. Tales from there and Ybor City enrich his writing. His stories colorfully reflect the political passion of the cigar workers. "People date their

lives from various strikes in Tampa," he recollected. In 1902, his uncle, a reader in a cigar factory, was kidnapped by vigilantes determined to bludgeon the labor movement. When he returned, cigar makers held a one-day strike in tribute.

Latinos may not have won many strikes, but they left a stirring cultural legacy. "Those cigar makers knew how to organize more than trade unions," asserted Yglesias. Nothing speaks more eloquently of their immigrant resolve and dreams than their mutual-aid societies. Rarely in America have immigrants erected ethnic society buildings on such a scale and with such noble purposes as in Ybor City. These were monuments to immigrant dreams: El Centro Asturiano, El Centro Español, El Círculo Cubano, L'Unione Italiana and La Unión Martí-Maceo seemed more like cathedrals to the working classes than ethnic clubhouses.

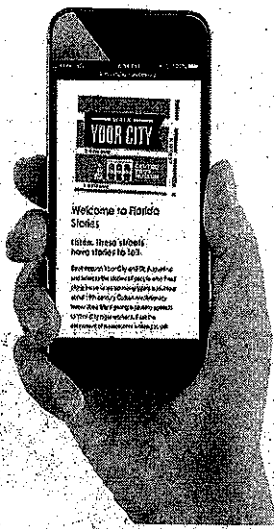
Each of the societies erected impressive theaters, where performances in Spanish and Italian languages occurred weekly. "When great international performers like opera virtuoso Caruso came to Tampa," remarked Yglesias, "it was cigar makers who booked them, not the Americans."

The societies also established modern hospitals and medical clinics to provide collective health care. The Cuban, Spanish and Italian mutual aid societies hired physicians to work at the clubs, clinics and hospitals.

But for all of the charm of the material culture of Ybor City — the wrought-iron balconies, the wooden cigar makers' cottages, and the palatial theaters — it was the survivors' stories that I treasure and remember most fondly. The story told by Manuel Alfonso illustrates the ethnic and racial fluidity within Ybor City. An Afro-Cuban, Alfonso maintained that respect, above all, mattered among neighbors.

"We used to get along good," he remembered. "When my grandmother died in 1923," he reminisced, "she was buried on *Noche Buena* — Christmas Eve — which in Cuban homes always had a big celebration. The only black family on that block was my family, (yet) nobody on that block celebrated *Noche Buena* out of respect for her."

History is never static. The original Ybor City characterized by scarcity



### Stroll through history

You can download a free cultural walking tour of Ybor City to your phone or other device. Written by historian Gary R. Mormino and voiced by actor Chaz Mena, it is produced by the nonprofit Florida Humanities Council. Access it via "Florida Stories" for Android or iOS device. More information at [FloridaStories.org](http://FloridaStories.org).

gave way to the prosperous community of the 1920s. The Great Depression followed, walloping the cigar industries, and in a cruel symmetry, machines replaced hand rollers while radios replaced the readers' voices.

World War II emptied Ybor City of young men, who wanted to prove to Uncle Sam that they were more American than Americanos. When G.I. José and Giuseppina came home, they wanted little to do with aging wooden *casitas* (small houses) or a cigar industry that had cratered. By the 1950s, African-Americans constituted a majority of Ybor's residents. Third-generation businesses closed. The Columbia Restaurant, a landmark Spanish restaurant that dates from 1905, and Ybor Square, small shops and antique dealers inside the original V.M. Ybor factory, stood as sentinels on opposite ends of the enclave.

The 1960s shook Ybor City to and from its foundations. Interstate 4 dissected the enclave and in a classic case of intended and unintended consequences, the Great Society's efforts at social engineering failed miserably when urban renewal simply leveled hundreds of homes and businesses,

leaving vacant blocks or new buildings that jarred the senses.

In the 1980s and '90s, young Tampeños found Ybor City a hothouse for artist studios and counterculture bookstores. Guavaween, a raunchy Halloween parade down Seventh Avenue, perfectly fit Ybor's new sensibilities. The city of Tampa and developers built parking garages and a shopping complex, Centro Ybor, to boost the struggling enclave, hoping a festive marketplace would bring back crowds. Now, early in the 21st century, raucous bars, tattoo parlors, and musical venues define the newest iteration of Ybor City. The Church of Scientology moved into Ybor Square.

To be honest, I prefer the old Ybor City. I miss the elderly immigrants who quoted Victor Hugo and recounted the great strike of 1910. I miss the imperious Spanish waiters who had served patrons for decades at Spanish Park and Los Novedades, masters who effortlessly deboned a broiled pompino with only a knife and fork. Former Florida Gov. Bob Martínez once told me that his father worked as a waiter at the Columbia Restaurant and won a bet that he could take the food and drink orders for a party of 60 and never write anything down.

I mourn for an Ybor City that we lost long ago. So much of modern Florida is a recurring story of loss and lamentation: crystal springs despoiled by development, century-old orange groves replaced by condominiums, and kitschy tourist attractions taken over by mega theme parks. Florida is never static.

In 1980, Angelina Comescone, aghast at the current generation, recalled nostalgically, "In the evenings our parents would take us walking. We would sing as loud as we could, Italian, Spanish, and American songs." She lamented, "Nobody walks anymore. Nobody sings anymore."

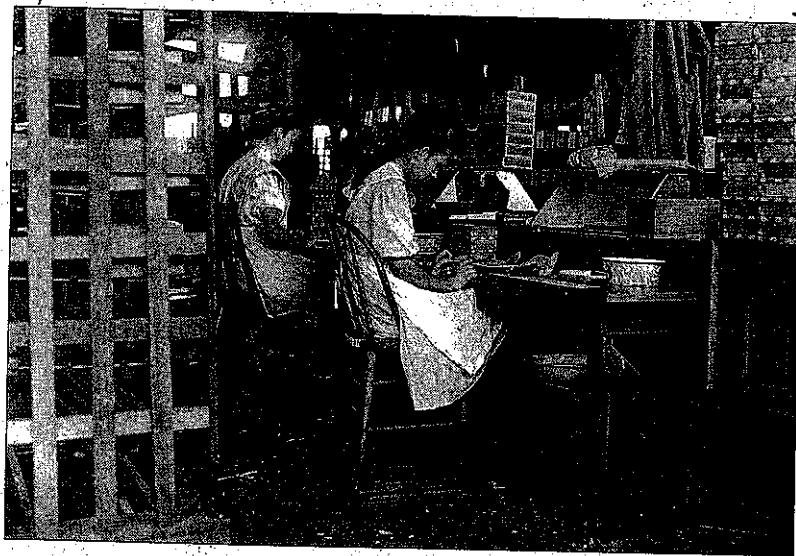
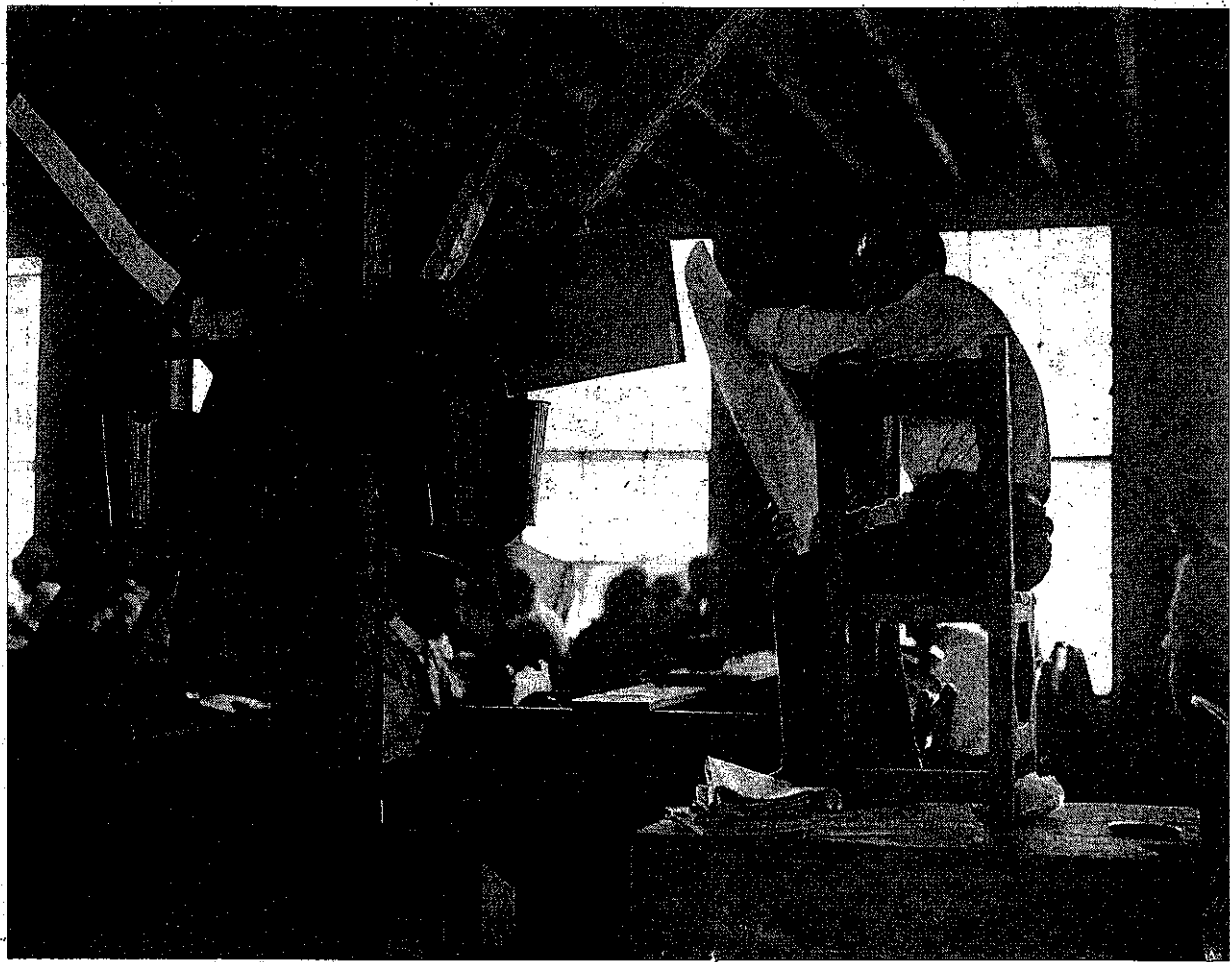
And yet, as a historian, I know that every generation deserves its own music and its own Ybor City.

*Gary R. Mormino, scholar in residence at the Florida Humanities Council, co-authored "The Immigrant World of Ybor City" in 1987 with George Pozzetta. This article by Mormino, recipient of the 2015 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, appears in the latest issue of FORUM magazine (FloridaHumanities.org).*



Courtesy of Burgert Brothers Collection, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library

**The cantina of El Centro Español in Ybor City in the 1930s. The cantinas bustled with domino players and card games, as well as countless cups of café con leche, café carajillo or café corretto (coffee with brandy).**



Photos courtesy of Library of Congress

**ABOVE:** In 1909, Lewis Hine brought his camera to Tampa to document child labor. His photograph of two young women working at an Ybor City factory caused controversy and resulted in national child labor legislation.

**LEFT:** One of the features of the cigar factory was a reader, sharing books and newspapers at the top of his voice all day long. This is all the education many of these workers received. He was paid by them and they got to select what he read.