

EPIC OF THE CITY OF TAMPA
BY JAMES E. TOKLEY, SR., POET LAUREATE
TAMPA

An Ibis laughs,

White-feathered, free

As a strange flock clambers on his shore

He stares, intent, amusedly

At what he's never seen before.

He rouses sleepy Manatee

Who moans in terror, who, but he,

Who in turn, lets Alligator know

Who snaps in response, "It is not so!"

But on the side of caution, and as a friend,

Old Alligator approaches Man

And tries to tell the Timucuan

And Calaloosa what the Ibis found.

But Mankind's words were cruel and sore.

They mocked old 'gator's bellowing cries

And warned him if he said much more,

They'd threaten to poke out both his eyes

So that he could not see the moon

That swung like a lemure through the black lagoon
How dare a reptile that was known
To ambush children on their way home
Or to gobble whatever he could see
To cite ghost ships, wings wide as trees/ &
With bow-leg'd birds whose Ibis faces
Certainly must have come from some nonsense place!

Therefore, in 1542,
No Timucuan, nor Calaloosa saw or knew
What madness was about to start
In the middle of a swampland's muskeg heart
Which would beat in the future to the pulse of a land
Reshaped by footprints in the sand.

(But let me not get ahead of myself
For, the grey fox – wily, brown-eyed elf –
Had also spied this curious crew
With scabby shins and flat-soled shoes
Then saw what almost took his breath:
A creature whose face was dark as Death. . .
Not bronze like the brawny Timucuan

But black like a morning with no sun
Yet, a creature – who talked like a duck, through his nose, –
Yelled, “Ethteban!” and the dark face rose
To tower above the lighter fiend who gave
An order to the one who was his slave!)

For, the swamp fox hid to see it all
As Estevanico answered the call
Of Narvaez who bid him make
The first step that a man would take
Who was not brown on a Tampa shore
Luring Ponce de Leon all the more
Like a faded moth to a purloin'd flame
Of eternal nonsense, myth and shame

But the place called “Tan-pa” by the Timucuan,
Which meant “land of smelly waters” by the brave Cal’oosa
clan,
Was christened by Conquistadors, henceforth, it would
be known
as Espiritu Tampa, Florida, a sacred New World home, / a land
Of hammerheads and cormorants

Of coral snakes and ducks that danced
On water like the Savior did:
A secret mallard ducks kept hid.
Yet, someday, great steamships would sail
From the sleepy waters of that beach
As tall as trees and long as whales
Whose ports of call would prove to reach
The cities of a world that had learned to say
The name of a sleepy New World Bay!
 Yet, once again, I've strayed too soon
Too far away under distant moon
In time, I'll speak prosperity
But for now, I return to sawgrass leaves,
And old oak trees with rattlesnake bark
Bobcats screaming in the dark
A thousand denizens who called home
This place, which had yet, to become full-grown.

At first, a trickle, then a stream
Of Old World beards with their New World schemes
A lust for gold by any means
That might be met by sail or shoe
Or bloodshed, given the slightest cue
Yes, fortune was a constant dream
In this newfound wilderness of green/ and
Indescribable beauty lain
In the midst of disillusion, death and pain.

Yet, in time, another Native Breed
Called Seminole, would plant its seed
Where cypress, fringed in mistletoe,
Is a dancer swaying lithe and slow.

And Seminole braves would fight to be
Lords of the swampland, proud and free
And runaway slaves would become their friends
In a mutual allegiance to the bitter end,
So, the Seminoles' numbers alas, would swell
To contend the lost Tribe of Isra-el!

Here, Osceola and Cher-to-Cher
Would live beside the great swamp bear
Whose love for berries and honeycomb
Could rival Osceola's own!/ That's
Chief Osceola who in fact
Loved Cher-to-Cher though she was black
With eyes as brown as a white-tailed doe's
She would live with her husband and their love would grow
Until one day, white slavers came
To drag her back to yoke and shame.
But from their cruelty sprang a war
That would spread from the swamp to the placid shore
Of Tampa Bay where it would end with a question mark
For, both victor and the vanquished would remain in the dark.

But the legend of the Seminoles
was just one book in a story told
and retold well, by Tampa-sons
who spun their yarns with sweat and guns
And by Tampa daughters who gave birth

To a woodland paradise on earth
That would in time, beget a line
Of statesmen, forthright and refined.

So, brave Seminoles had their say
As the Timucuan had done, then went their way
As the land they tended as their own
Was proven once again, to have been on loan.
Then was ceded to Americans who would save
The best parts of Tampa for tobacco and slaves
Young James McKay would buy him a boat
For a while, the finest ship afloat
“Mascote,” he called it, that would deal
in tobacco and goods by paddle wheel
But when the war to free all slaves
Touched Tampa Bay, good Captain McKay
And all his ships were put on hold
‘till the war was done and Tampa was told
That slavery in our land was a dream
Of the South that had run out of steam,
But McKay who one day would be mayor

Of the City by the Bay, saw brighter fair.

For, the end of the war was intertwined
With cigar smoke to pass the time
From Cuba, cigar makers came
Where a man, Ybor, would make his fame
Worldwide he would as lips would kiss
His sweet cigars in a foggy mist
And James McKay, on an ocean's pitch
Would sail his ships, which would make him rich!

But McKay was not the only one
To find a niche and make it done,
A veteran of the Civil War
Who'd come to Tampa, once before,
Decided he would come again
And this time, he would bring a train!
Old Henry Plant, he had a dream –
Of a hissing, spewing, iron machine
With wheels that ground like teeth to grit
In a nightmare when one turns and twists
Then wakes to a scream with eyes of flame

T'was a railroad that would bear his name
Yet, in case the world could not hear well
He built himself a grand hotel
On the banks of the winding Hillsborough
That let both prince and pauper know
That Henry Plant had come to Town
A place where Paradise could be found.

Indeed, a rumor for all to see
Was a fountain of youth by an old oak tree
With rattlesnake bark and roots like toes
Of an old man dressed in tattered clothes
Folks paid a quarter just to see
What sent poor Ponce to eternity.

Yet, Henry Plant with his thousand lights
Electric gleaming in the night
And his iron horses that would bring
A discovery of Tampa by queens and kings/ and
Men like Churchill and Roosevelt
Who would sit on the veranda in the sweltering
Tampa sun as they sought to kill

Time while in wait for San Juan Hill

On an isle where scheming Spaniards had

Destroyed an American ironclad.

These were the years when Tampa seized

Momentum to rise up off its knees,

To stand and stride as if it knew

What future it was racing to!

In Ybor City, every street

Kept steady pace to Latin feet,

And Italian-Sicilian well-made shoes

While African Americans brought the Blues

Of the Southland mixed with an African past

And together this melting bowl would last

Until this day, with the finest brand

Of cigars made in any land or any time

Mankind has choked or dreamed in the midst

of cigar smoke.

But the African Americans who had built

Henry Plant's hotel and under the wilting,

unforgiving Tampa sun

Had unloaded the ships of McKay's Cuban run,
And who picked the oranges and what grew
From a vine or a bush, barefoot or shoed,
Who minded the children who were not their own,
They, too, withheld a secret that was theirs alone.
Call it Central Avenue
Or call it a Promise that was overdue
A place where the promissory note
of freedom and equality was known to float
like perfume down a Tampa street
Where strutted in unison aching feet
That wore Brogans the day before
But Stacey Adams shoes were what pharaohs wore
And Sunday, Black knees knelt to pray
For the courage to face a future day
Wherein the spirit of a Southern town
Would redeem itself as the walls came down!
Oh, children of a future time
If you ask the Past what is on its mind
And it tells you, then would you believe

Or continue to think its words deceive/ you
When it tells you about those times
Of bolito games, high-life, and crime
Of unmarked graves along a road, /who
If it could speak, it would explode
Like a garden blossoming unfound dead
Who were planted along a city road instead.

Then came World Wars One and Two
MacDill by the beach was a place that grew
From a hide-away where lovers spooned
To where B-27's navigated by the moon.

And a city that once heard Bobcats scream
Now thrilled to the howl of war machines
And tractor trailers as they sailed
With treasures once reserved for rail
And railroads pulled into Union Station
Packed with passengers' expectations
Of a place where they could make
A future life with few mistakes.

And a forest grew, concrete and steel

With trees that rose a mountain-high
And through asphalt fields of roses rolled
Iron beasts with hooves of rubber wheels
Yet, the trees no longer had the bark
Of rattle snakes, but had eyes that sparkled
In a noonday Tampa sun
Ten million eyes that blinked as one!

The denizens of this New-day wood
Supplanted the swamp-fox, who if he could,
Would have asked quite plaintively, how his feet
Might successfully cross an asphalt street.
And in that space where used to stalk
The wide wings of the Broad-Winged Hawk,
An eagle flies whose feathered wings
Are sharp as the swords of warrior kings
And who screams in the sky at the top of its voice
To return to Tampa a landing choice.

Yet, the City that we know
Is more than concrete, glass, and steel
Is more than a place where wide streets flow

Like rivers rushing brakes and wheels
Instead, it is a place where sleep
At the end of a day, commands its keep
A patchwork of communities
Where a house is its own sovereignty
And if a stranger ventured near
He'd say good folk resided here
Good neighbors who were not afraid
To be at peace with the lives they've made
Though downtown skylines can be seen,
They don't obstruct the grassroots dreams
Of backyard folks who enjoy the view
Of Tampa skies and barbecue!// and
 At night, a possum comes to play
Along the streets beside the Bay
Black snake decides he'll also keep
Late evenings when t'is safe to creep
And feral cats who once belonged
To someone sing a feline song
A blues song only for those ears

That tremble to a tune no person can hear!
The alligator hears it all
And beckons to the Ibis whose laughing call
Alerts poor manatee once again
That the flowering of Tampa has yet to end.

The horizon floats a rainbow sign
In the South to Cuba where once more a find
Of friendship looms like a morning sun
For, the 21st Century has just begun
With all the promises it conveys
Like Spanish galleons riding on a Westerly wave
And though the future is not known
Except by the Architect alone,
This much I know and promise you
Our future is based on what we do
And how we treat the least of us
Whose hearts and health are in our trust.
Though our buildings reach to scrape the sky
And our eagles copy angels' cries
What shall indeed, propel this place

To greatness is its love for the human race!

We watch, in truth, impending night
At the end of day that has burned as bright
As the lightsome gleam of a baby's smile
A light well-seen from across the miles
From the tallest peak to the smallest shoe
Our city bids the day adieu
And opens its eyes from a kindred spark
To become a diamond in the dark!

An Ibis laughs and tells his friends,
“This place called Tampa is a tale without an end.”
And I believe him. / So, I'll save
The end of this story for another day
For, I am like a wilderness bird.
The love for my city is in my words!

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