

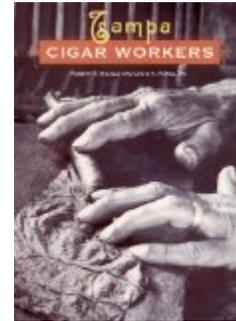
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert P. Ingalls, Louis A. Perez Jr. *Tampa Cigar Workers: A Pictorial History*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003. ix + 233 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2602-2.

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The Rise and Demise of a Working Class Community

“Cigar makers provided me with an inexhaustible source of material,” declared writer Jose Yglesias, a native of Tampa’s Ybor City neighborhood, a few years before his death in the mid-1990s. “In any case, I had to write about them, for I feared that this community, which of necessity had to die out, would be forgotten, a part of America no one would get to know” (p. 228). In many ways Yglesias’s worst fears came true. Ybor City today bears little resemblance to the working class immigrant neighborhood that produced generations of cigar workers. Many of the factories in which Cuban, Spanish, and Italian workers and their descendants labored still stand, and some of the ornate buildings that housed their old social clubs remain. But most of the homes where the men and women who hand-rolled cigars lived are gone, victims of bulldozer-driven “urban renewal” programs of the 1960s. Many of the cigar factories now house an assortment of restaurants, small businesses, and shops that attract throngs of tourists to the old neighborhood.

Historians Robert P. Ingalls and Louis A. Perez Jr. have attempted to resurrect the world of Yglesias’s youth in their popular history, *Tampa Cigar Workers: A Pictorial History*, which chronicles the stories of Ybor City and West Tampa from their founding in the late 1800s to their demise nearly a century later. The authors largely allow the Cuban, Spanish, and Italian workers to tell their stories in their own words, drawing accounts from a variety of contemporary sources, including oral histories and newspapers. They illustrate their book with hundreds of photographs that show daily life in Tampa’s ethnic

neighborhoods and cigar factories.

This is popular history in its truest and finest form. Ingalls and Perez skillfully explore divisions related to class, race, and gender implicitly, leaving out explicit academic debates around these issues. As they explain in the book’s jacket, the authors mostly allow the people who lived in Tampa’s ethnic neighborhoods to “tell their own story, in the language of their day.” Most of the quotations and photographs complement each other well. Accounts of factory life, labor conflict, politics, or social life are accompanied by photographs of workers or residents who seem to stare back through time. The effect is often quite moving.

The book begins with an essay, “The World of Tampa Cigar Workers,” that provides the historical scaffolding required for such an ambitious project. In a mere fourteen pages, Ingalls and Perez provide an overview of the histories of Ybor City and West Tampa that frames the major themes explored in the following chapters. The most “traditional” section of the book, it largely avoids historiographical debates about Tampa’s cigar workers and the American working class in general.

From the introduction, the authors move to the origins of Tampa’s cigar workers and their communities. Photographs show the sandy spaces of Ybor City’s early years, the rows of working class housing that rose on top of them, and workers hunched over tables rolling cigars in factories. The second chapter explores the early political life of the cigar workers, and here the Cuban inde-

pendence movement of the late nineteenth century takes center stage. The dynamic revolutionary Jose Marti spent a great deal of time in Tampa, even announcing the creation of the Cuban Revolutionary Party there. He worked to unify the community, crossing the boundaries of race to appeal to both black and white Cubans. Marti recruited women to the cause and even inspired sympathetic Spanish immigrants to protest the colonial policies of their homeland. Marti and the revolutionary cause muted class differences in the factories, uniting workers and owners against Spanish colonialism.

Subsequent chapters examine life inside the factories; the economic boom of the 1890s; and growing labor strife. Workers describe how they transformed Cuban tobacco into valuable Tampa cigars. As the cigar industry grew after Cuban independence, so did the neighborhoods of Ybor City and West Tampa. Cafes, social clubs, and even a brewery sprang up to satisfy the demands of tobacco workers. Italians found a niche in the retail and service sectors of the communities, opening groceries, dairies, barbershops, and a host of other small businesses.

Ingalls and Perez devote a great deal of time to a discussion of the “lector,” an employee who read international news, labor and radical publications, and political novels to cigar workers in the factory. Reading to a large audience without the benefit of loudspeakers, the lector typically projected his voice across the shop floor from an elevated platform. “The reader was the prince of the factory,” remembered Henry Aparicio, whose father held the job at one operation. “Cigar workers came to work at 6 or 7 o’clock; the reader picked his own time of arrival. When the cigar worker was making \$10 or \$12 a week the reader could make up to \$60 or \$70” (p. 87).

The middle of the book examines a series of strikes from the mid-1890s to the onset of World War I. Though the Cigar Makers International Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor, worked to attract Tampa hand rollers to its ranks, the locally based “La Resistencia” union won the hearts of most workers. Steeped in radical Cuban political traditions, the local organization took strong stands on working conditions, pushed for uniform prices for all cigars, and opposed owners’ efforts to reorganize the production process. A general strike, called in 1901 to push for a closed shop in Tampa’s cigar factories, failed under the weight of employer intransigence and vigilante violence. La Resistencia was banished from the factories. By the eve of World War I, employers had won important victories in determining the organization and pace of work. They introduced molds

and reorganized production so that teams instead of individual workers produced cigars.

The next three chapters delve more deeply into the social world of the cigar rollers. Workers voices and photographs describe the magnificent mutual aid societies and social halls built during the early decades of the twentieth century. Ingalls and Perez also devote attention to athletic competition, gambling, and other forms of recreation enjoyed by cigar workers, as well as the vibrant cafe culture that flourished in Ybor City.

Labor militancy and political radicalism take center stage in the ninth chapter, “Battles of the Twenties and Thirties.” The Cuban and Spanish communities of Tampa strongly supported the Republic during the Spanish Civil War, and communists made an appearance during this era as well. Factory owners, fearful of the influence of radical lectores in their shops, sought to drive them from the industry. The readers survived a strike in 1921, but were eliminated after a bitter walkout a decade later. These victories, along with the massive economic changes of the Depression and New Deal eras, allowed owners to begin to mechanize their factories. In the early 1930s, managers introduced cigar-making machines which began to replace hand rollers.

Ingalls and Perez end their book with a moving examination of how deindustrialization and urban renewal led to the destruction of major sections of Ybor City and West Tampa in the decades after World War II. Following the war, machines came into wide use in most factories, and the number of cigar workers declined from 13,000 to about 5,500 by the mid-1950s. By contrast, production more than doubled to 700 million cigars a year. The final blow came in the wake of the revolution that saw Fidel Castro’s government come to power in Cuba. Many in Ybor City supported the revolution, but it provoked a boycott of Cuban tobacco by the American government in the early 1960s. In the Dominican Republic, cigar companies found a new source of tobacco and low-wage labor that finished off what remained of Tampa’s industry. Meanwhile, immigrant communities were bisected by interstate highways, and younger residents, many of them World War II veterans, moved to the suburbs in increasing numbers.

City and community leaders debated the fates of Ybor City and West Tampa in the years that followed. Jim Walter, the Tampa-based housing and energy conglomerate, pushed to transform Ybor City into a kind of ethnic Disney World. The company developed a proposal for a Spanish-style walled city that would feature “bloodless

bullfights” (p. 219). The company predicted \$20 million in annual revenues for investors, profits that would rival other Florida tourist destinations. The scheme was scrapped and city planners opted for bulldozers instead, leveling most of the old homes that had housed generations of workers. By the end of the 1960s, photographs illustrate how urban renewal transformed Ybor City into a land of open, sandy lots reminiscent of its earliest days. Ingalls and Perez take a relatively dim view of the new tourist center that has grown on the ruins of the old neighborhood. “This born-again Ybor City is cleansed, purged of all original sin associated with immigrant radicalism, labor militancy, and social protest,” the authors conclude (p. 14).

Though *Tampa Cigar Workers: A Pictorial History* is a moving and well-constructed book, it is not without faults. While the authors include interesting discussions

of race relations within the context of other issues, this topic probably deserved its own chapter. Tampa’s cigar workers, after all, were part of a multi-ethnic and multi-racial society that existed within a region obsessed with categorizing people along bi-racial lines. The racial hierarchies that existed among the Cuban majority, in particular, needed more examination, as did the way that white and black Cubans responded to the pressures of living in the Jim Crow South.

Regardless, Ingalls and Perez have given us a book that is well worth reading and pondering. *Tampa Cigar Workers: A Pictorial History* introduces readers to the important communities in which thousands of immigrant workers and their offspring lived. In producing this book, the authors have succeeded preserving some of the world that their friend Jose Yglesias worried would be lost forever.

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