



The Earliest Florida Brew

Brewing in Tampa

TAMPA'S BREWING PAST

While Tampa can boast the oldest brewery in Florida, the story of Tampa's beer does not start the same way as every other spot in Florida. Like so much else about Tampa, beer started with a convergence of factors: a perfect storm of place, idea, men in motion, and financiers. History begins with a trickle of water coming up from the ground, feeding a spring in a thirsty area. This spring would be called Government Spring because it would come to slake the thirst of Fort Brooke, the command post on Tampa Bay and the seed that would sprout the City of Tampa. Here is where the story of Tampa's rich brewing history begins, with the most crucial of beer ingredients: water.

Origins

The Seminole Indian Wars were the first occasions that brought eminent military men to the Tampa area. Commanders the likes of Winfield Scott and Zachary Taylor, among other generals known

to history, met at the spring with their men to plan their strategy. Since the founding of Fort Brooke, the whole of the property belonged to the United States government. Ownership of the spring would remain in government hands until 1882 when President Chester A. Arthur deeded the land to one of Tampa's founding families.

In 1886, the first cigar manufacturers moved into the Tampa area. The spring would then become part of "Mr. Ybor's City," as it was called in those days. In 1896, the same men with the keen business sense to bring cigars and labor to Tampa from Key West and Havana forged a new business for that same labor force.

Beer Begins to Flow

In 1896, the articles of incorporation of The Ybor City Brewing Company were filed with Tampa City Hall. The visionary founder, a former bookkeeper at the V. M. Ybor Cigar Company, had worked his way up from the lower echelon of the cigar company through the trust and friendship of Mr. Ybor. This man, Eduardo Manrara, had helped Ybor move his factory and his workers from Cuba to Key West and then voiced admiration for the climate of Tampa, one factor in the placement of Ybor's factory in what would come to be called Ybor City. Manrara was fifty-four years old when he organized the Florida Brewing Company, having already lived in Florida for eleven years and taken over the V. M. Ybor Cigar Company due to Ybor's failing health.

During the time when the idea of the brewery was being passed around and permits were being obtained, there was one notable force in the city of Tampa that fought the brewery's construction. More than those who sought to ban alcohol, the big breweries—Pabst Brewing, Schlitz Brewing, and Anheuser Busch Breweries—watched the new brewery with great concern. In the 1880s, Tampa was a town coming into its own, and many enterprising individuals had sought to increase their wealth by opening a saloon, a place

where men could go to enjoy a quenching beverage and an intoxicatingly good time. As competition grew and the number of saloons increased, so did the costs associated with running saloons, including state fees and licenses. Saloons fought desperately to retain customers and pay their bills, but as the bills went up and the customers seemed to go elsewhere, the saloon owners sought relief anywhere they could find it. Pabst Brewing, Schlitz Brewing, and Anheuser-Busch Brewing spent untold thousands of dollars marketing in Tampa, tapping their coffers and pouring money out to saloons in exchange for exclusivity (a practice that is currently illegal and still alleged). They would pay a saloon owner's mortgage payments and licensing fees, essentially owning the saloon, but leaving the owner's name on the sign as a mere formality. Representatives of the big breweries knew who ran Ybor City and where the loyalties of the beer-consuming public would go when a brewery associated with their employer opened. They also recognized the considerable capital that came with the Ybor name, so resistance ultimately amounted to little in a town that bore Ybor's name and company. The large breweries never forgot Tampa, however. Though the Tampa foothold gained by the Saint Louis Breweries was washed out with the advent of the Florida Brewing Company, the companies would return in the mid-twentieth century; the rivalry would renew itself then, and the outcome would change the course of history for both companies.

When opening the brewery, Manrara and his associates had four major advantages. First was the sense of noblesse oblige that Ybor had toward all of his workers from the beginning of his cigar factories. In Ybor factories and across the cigar industry, it was considered acceptable practice for cigar rollers to take home a certain amount of their finished product as gratuity. Ybor was known for his strong dislike of organized labor and preference for one-on-one dealings with all of his employees. Ybor would throw parties annually for his workers on his palatial estate in Tampa and regularly

provided for his workers in other ways. Second was Ybor's ownership of virtually every office in town. When Ybor founded his namesake town, he created, owned, or ran not just the cigar houses but also most of the other companies associated with the town, from the land development company to the fire insurance company. Hundreds of Ybor employees were housed in small shacks during the pioneer days of Florida history and were fiercely loyal. These men were not going to travel long distances for a libation, so the brewery essentially had a captive audience for its product. Third, the brewery had a direct well to Government Spring, which could deliver up to three hundred gallons per minute of the highest quality water. The final leg up that the brewery had before it even began brewing was Ybor's ties to other states and Cuba. The brewery was beginning as Ybor was declining, and the enterprises that Manrara assumed would all benefit from the ties that Ybor had created during his lifetime. Having established offices in Key West, Cuba, New York, and Tampa, Ybor had built relationships that proved invaluable to the Florida Brewing Company, especially as the brewery shipped massive amounts of beer to Cuba (more than any other brewery in America by 1900). The brewery was not just built from bricks and stones but by people and relationships, and all those close ties made the brewery a great idea before it even began.

From its early days, the Florida Brewing Company was illustrative of the period from which it came and the resourcefulness of its owners. With his cofounders E. W. Codington, Hugo Schwaub, and A. C. Moore, Eduardo Manrara started Florida's first brewery with two hundred thousand dollars capital stock. The brewery building was to be a technological marvel for its era, one that would spare little expense in production and construction during its sixty-plus years in operation, including continuous operation during the era of Prohibition. The brewery had a capacity of 30,000 beer barrels, in an era when the nation's largest brewers were brewing up to 800,000 beer barrels in Milwaukee and colder states. Unlike na-

tional breweries, Manrara and his associates did this with a lager beer (a beer that requires cold temperatures to ferment) in the southernmost state of the Union without the aid of Mother Nature. Lagers had drawbacks: lagers take longer to ferment raw materials into drinkable beer (the term *lager* comes from the German word “to store”), and most inconvenient of all in Florida, especially in a Florida where electrical infrastructure was still being developed, lagers must ferment at constant cold temperatures. After all, the reason these men came to Tampa was for the heat and humidity’s aid in handling tobacco, not the cold seasons for beer brewing. This brewery stood, determined to succeed, despite Florida’s unfavorable brewing weather.

When it opened on February 15, 1897, the Florida Brewing Company threw a grand party, the likes of which the city had not seen. For this celebration the brewery placed an ad on the front page of the local paper inviting “White or black, rich or poor” to come by for a day of merriment that included food, music, and beer. The opening celebration saw a landmark crowd descend upon the brewery, or so the food consumption would indicate. At the end of the day, twenty carcasses of barbecued beef, several barrels of pickles, and an estimated four hundred barrels of lager were consumed. With the exception of one person—a cigar worker who was struck on the head with a heavy ceramic beer mug after mistakenly drinking an ice plant worker’s beer and was killed in the scuffle—the opening festivities were enjoyed by all present.

To say that the brewery operated on a grand scale would be an understatement. In an appraisal of the holdings of the Ybor Company written when V. M. Ybor died, the brewery was said to be fireproof (an assessment that would prove false) as well as constructed based on the Castle Brewery of South Africa. On the adjoining two acres, the company ran a \$25,000 bottling works and a twenty-four-ton per day ice plant. The brewery operated cutting-edge machinery and De La Verne refrigerating machines to keep the brew-

ery's cellars at a constant thirty-two degrees. From the first breath it drew, the brewery could produce two hundred barrels of beer per day, which if run overtime, could be increased to three hundred barrels. The brewery lowered some of its delivery costs by building a spur of the railroad directly to the property, and Manrara is quoted as saying that once the brewery could sell twenty barrels per day (at least one-tenth of capacity when the building opened), that any other monies would be profit. The appraiser recognized the fact that Ybor was diversely invested in virtually every aspect of the town and stated that there was not enough money in all of Tampa to convert the Ybor holdings into cash. The assessor then went further to make the boldest statement in the appraisal:

The consequence of [owning so much of the town] is, to make all of these investments however diverse in their character, intimately dependent upon the activity and success of the factory. . . . Should the factory cease operations, real estate in Ybor City would shrink wonderfully in value, how much is impossible to predict . . . of the local investments, not one, except possibly the brewery in some future time, but would be seriously crippled.

In other words, the Florida Brewing Company was the only business of Ybor's that was not dependent solely on the cigar industry for its success or failure.

The dizzying growth that the Florida Brewing Company experienced before the twentieth century began is a testament to the thirsty people of Tampa and the tenacity of the brewery's owners. Aside from a few fires from which the brewery quickly recovered, the early years of the Florida Brewing Company were marked by expansion. The company proved to be like a mythological hydra: whenever a structure or machine burned, the company would swiftly replace it with something larger and more efficient. New machines were added, new buildings built, and new distribution was opened to Florida Brewing's beers.