

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

An Ibis laughs,

White-feathered, free

As a strange flock clammers 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's 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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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