

# 18 Rolling the Leaf in Florida

## Smoking Start

**C**igarettes were first made from tiny pieces of tobacco swept up from the cigarmakers' floor. Some workers took those tobacco leftovers home and rolled them in paper—and made cigarettes. Tobacco companies began selling pocket-sized bags of tobacco so people could roll their own cigarettes. Then, in 1881, James Buchanan Duke worked on a cigarette-making machine that could turn out 200 cigarettes a minute. Duke's special talent was in marketing. He spent a lot of money advertising cigarettes, and it paid off. By 1889 he was selling more than 800 million cigarettes a year. A year later the five largest tobacco companies joined to form a trust called the American Tobacco Company. "Buck" Duke was president. He was just getting started.



**Gentlemen often smoked outside, or at clubs; many people thought it improper to smoke around the house or where ladies were present.**

It was in 1886 (the same year Sam Gompers founded the A.F. of L.) that Don Vincente Martinez Ybor (say EE-bor) opened a tobacco factory in a section of Tampa that was to be called Ybor City.

Florida—with its hot, humid climate—was the perfect place for rolling cigars. The humidity kept the tobacco leaf soft and pliable. Ybor soon helped make Tampa the cigar capital of the world. By 1900, Tampa had an annual tobacco payroll of almost \$2 million.

In those days, cigar smoking was popular, especially among men. It wasn't until the second half of the 20th century that people discovered that cigars and cigarettes are deadly and cancer-causing (although in 1604, King James I of England called smoking "loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, and dangerous to the lungs"). But in the 19th century, cigars were a big business. And the very best cigars were made from Cuban tobacco. Something about the soil and weather in Cuba seemed to produce a superior leaf. However, Cuba had placed a tax on its cigars, and that made them expensive in the U.S.

Some businesspeople decided to ship Cuban tobacco leaves to Florida, offer jobs to Cuban workers, and make the cigars in this country. They would be just like Cuban cigars, but American-made and much less costly.

So that was what they did. They began in Key West, an island off



the tip of the Florida peninsula; but things didn't go smoothly in Key West. There were labor strikes, a hurricane, two bad fires, and no railroad (it came to Key West later, over a long causeway and bridge).

Ybor and some other manufacturers decided to move halfway up the west coast of Florida, to a sleepy port town named Tampa. It had about 1,000 residents and a railroad; it soon became a "boom town." Workers came from Cuba, Spain, Italy, Germany, and Romania. Twelve thousand of them were soon working in some 200 cigar factories. They created an industrial community and an immigrant city—and both were unusual in the Deep South. There was something even more unusual: men and women, blacks and whites, Christians and Jews all worked together around the cigar tables.

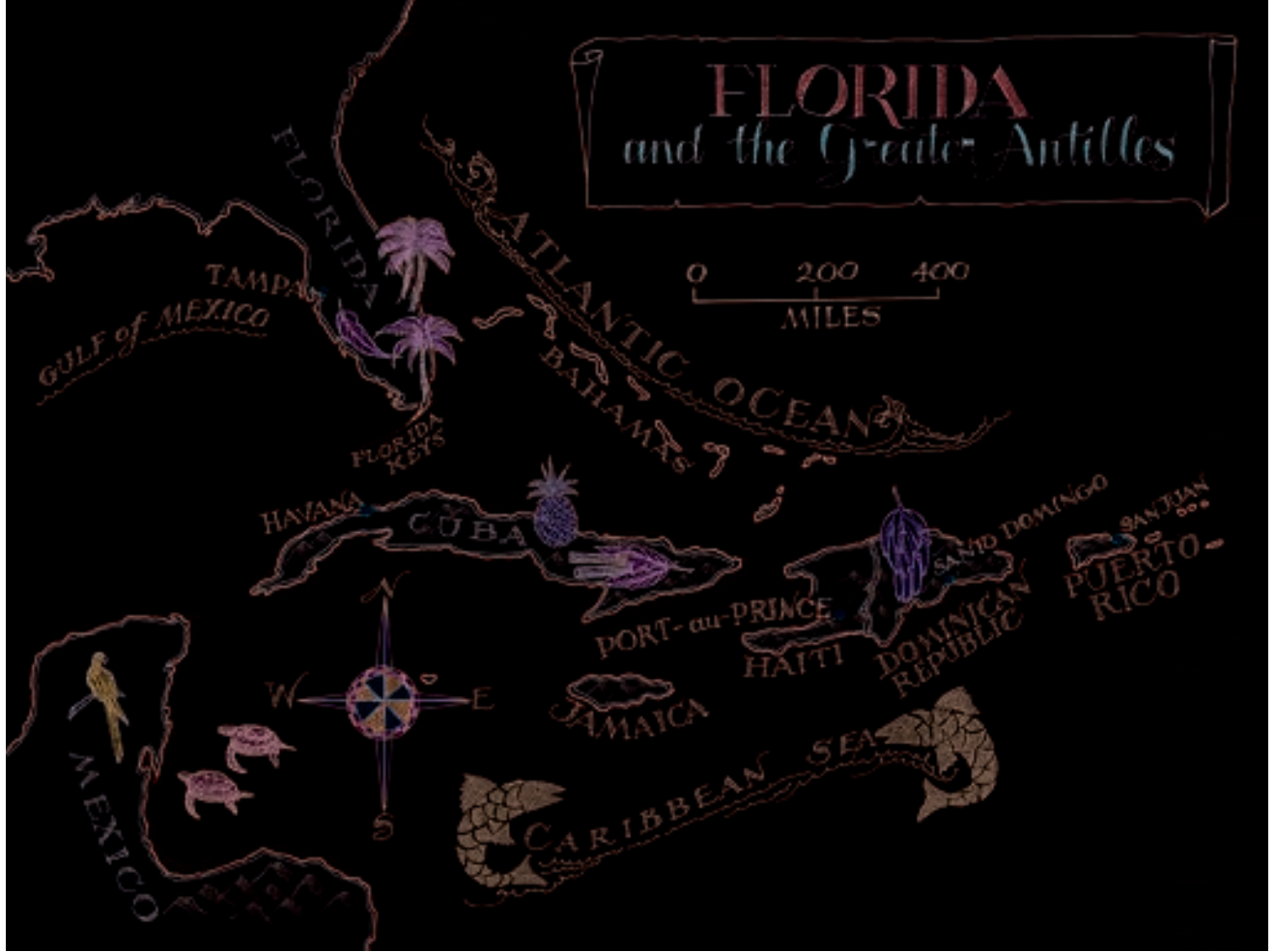
The Spaniards considered themselves the aristocrats and usually got the best jobs. Most of the Italian workers came from Sicily and were very poor, but willing to work hard to get ahead—and many did. The Cubans were agitating for a free Cuba (Cuba was a colony of Spain). Sometimes these different people argued fiercely—usually about politics—but, mostly, they lived and worked together with dignity and good will.

Ybor City was a planned, company town. Workers could buy their homes from the cigar company, if they wished. (The wooden houses were small and pleasant with high ceilings, front porches,

**Mario Sanchez, the native Key Wester who painted this picture of a Key West cigar factory, was the son of the reader in his picture.**

**In 1883** Oscar Hammerstein patents a cigar-rolling machine. Like many Americans, he is versatile. Hammerstein is known as an opera impresario, which means he puts together opera productions. In the 20th century, his grandson will become famous writing the lyrics for American musical comedies.

# FLORIDA and the Greater Antilles



**“In those days** we grew up together,” Hipólito Arenas, an Afro-Cuban, reminisced about Ybor City. “Your color did not matter—your family and their moral character did.” That may have been true in Ybor City (where 791 Afro-Cubans lived in 1900); it wasn’t true in most of Florida, where color did matter. But in the cigar capital, with its fervor for Cuban revolution, there was also a fervor for righteousness. “White and Negro Cubans lived in harmony,” wrote José Rivero Muñiz, “all being admitted without exception to the various revolutionary clubs, none ever protested....There was no racial discrimination.”

backyard gardens, and outhouses.) Ybor’s big, redbrick cigar factory had tall windows and stairs of wrought iron. Mutual-aid societies took care of most people in Ybor City. The societies provided medical care, burial insurance, and a place for parties and socializing. Each national group had its own society and its own society building. The Italians had a three-story building with marble columns in front. Inside were a theater, a bowling alley, a library, meeting rooms, and a big dance floor. (The building still stands today.) Stores and restaurants in the city were owned by individuals, not by the factory owners (as they were in many northern manufacturing towns).

If you walked down the redbrick streets in Ybor City and sniffed the air, you’d smell the aromas of Cuban and Italian breads, roasted Cuban coffee, and pungent tobacco. There was plenty to do—actors even came from Spain to put on plays. The town’s trilingual newspaper (it is still published) had articles in Spanish, English, and Italian. But it was Spanish culture that dominated.



Most of the workers spoke Spanish (and if they didn't, they soon learned that language). In the cigar factories the reader, who was called a *lector*, read in Spanish as workers rolled the fat cigars. It was a prestige job. The lectors were paid by the workers and made more money than any of the cigarmakers. They auditioned for the job, which means they had to try out the way an actor auditions for a play. Sometimes a committee of cigarmakers told them what to read. Usually that included the latest news and good books. The cigarmakers became very knowledgeable. While they rolled cigars they held discussions. They kept up with politics and, since many were Cuban, they worried and even got involved with what was happening in Cuba. A freedom movement was brewing on that island (more on that in chapter 29).



The pleasant, redbrick cigar factory that Don Vicente Martinez Ybor built in Tampa, Florida.

## A Hero for All the Americas



José Martí

**J**osé Martí was cut out to be a hero. He was both a poet and a man of action. He cared passionately about freedom and he dedicated his life to the cause of Cuba Libre (“free Cuba”).

When he wrote essays and poems, he did it with a style that was vivid and clear and filled with beautiful images—and that was at a time when most Spanish writers were using stilted, pretentious language. He was a *modernista* (a modern writer) before the 20th century began. Martí

is considered one of the greatest of Latin America’s writers.

But it was politics and revolution that consumed most of his energy. At 16 he was arrested and kicked out of Cuba. He went off to Spain, studied, and earned a master’s degree and a law degree. After that he lived and worked in Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, and the United States (mostly in New York City). He wrote for American magazines (articles on Emerson and Whitman as well as politics) and for Spanish publications. Martí said he was a citizen of the Americas.

**W**hen he appeared in Ybor City (as he did several times)

and spoke on the iron steps in front of the Ybor cigar factory, his listeners were electrified. He was a man everyone admired (except for those who wanted to keep Cuba Spanish). Usually, in Ybor City, Martí stayed at the home of Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso, who were Afro-Cubans. Martí said Paulina was his “second mother.” The lectors were sure to read whatever Martí wrote; he called their platforms “pulpits of liberty.”

**S**o when José Martí died in 1895 at age 42, on a battlefield in Cuba, people wept and called him a martyr and a great hero. Seven years later, Cuba became independent.