

Tampa's Latin Community finds Davis Islands

by Rodney Kite-Powell
Curator, Tampa Bay History Center

While taking the family history of a Latin couple living in Ybor City in 1939, Stetson Kennedy learned that some people viewed Davis Islands as a different, even unattainable place to live. Kennedy quoted a conversation between Amanda and Enrique, a middle aged couple he was visiting while with the Federal Writers' Project. Kennedy and his wife took the Ybor City couple on a drive through Tampa and the Tampeños talked to the writer about the city. “‘This is Davis Island,’ says Amanda. ‘This is where all the millionaires and rich people live. It’s very pretty in the daytime but we can’t see much now.’”

Amanda and Enrique represented the old-guard of Ybor City. Enrique was a cigar maker, making him a member of a dying profession. Historians Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta assert, “by 1935 cigars no longer supplied economic prosperity to Ybor City.” Mormino and Pozzetta pointed out that Latins were slow to move away from the enclave. The authors examined 1,000 Latin names, randomly selected from the 1935 Tampa city directory, and found that “fully ninty-seven percent of Tampa’s Latins resided in Ybor City or West Tampa.” Further examination of selected streets in Hyde Park and Seminole Heights showed little “Latin intrusion into those residential areas.”

The same statistics from Hyde Park and Seminole Heights generally applied to Davis Islands in the mid 1930s. Only two Latin surnames appear among the 101 homeowners listed on Davis Islands in the 1936 Tampa city directory, which is actually a reduction by two from the 1931 directory, where four out of 92 homeowners have Latin surnames. This began to change in the late 1940s, when the entire Islands experienced a second land boom. Among the hundreds of

new residents of the neighborhood were Latins who formerly called Ybor City and West Tampa home. Mormino and Pozzetta documented this exodus from the long-standing Latin communities and observed that World War II “served as the great watershed” where “Ybor City’s youth and men volunteered in droves for the American cause, and for the first time in the colony’s history large numbers of second-generation ethnics left the old neighborhood.”

Miguel and Grace Díaz arrived on Davis Islands in 1946, moving from their home on Columbus Drive shortly after the conclusion of World War II. Miguel, the president of Tampa Crown Distributing, a large liquor distribution company, and his wife were among the first Ybor Latins to move onto Davis Islands after the war, buying a home at 464 West Davis Boulevard. Their daughter Anna, with her husband Charles Perez Jr., also decided to live on the Islands, staying with her parents while their home (456 West Davis Boulevard) neared completion.

Lawrence and Gloria Hernandez moved onto Davis Islands at about the same time as the Diaz family. The Hernandezs were the proprietors of one of Ybor City’s most famous and enduring symbols of the Latin Quarter’s heritage – The Columbia Restaurant. Another member of the Hernandez family, Adela, and her husband Cesar Gonzmart, also called Davis Islands home.

Another young couple to move to Davis Islands were Anthony and Josephine Pizzo. Like the Diazs and the Gonzmarts, the Pizzos were part of a new generation of Ybor Latins. The Pizzos, who both graduated from Florida colleges, moved to a new home on Lucerne on the Islands in 1950 from an apartment on Twenty-second Avenue in the South Ybor City/Palmetto Beach area. Anthony, who served briefly (and state-side) in the army during World War II, worked as the sales manager for Tampa Wholesale Liquor, and Josephine taught at Philip Shore Elementary School, located in their former neighborhood.

Other new arrivals to the Islands included the vice president of Ybor City's King-Greco Hardware, Dick A. Greco Jr. and his wife, Dana. Greco, who would become mayor of Tampa in 1967 and again in 1995, related that he and his wife first moved into "new apartments on Danube that a friend of mine built" in 1960. By 1961 the young couple lived in a house on Luzon. "One of the reasons I liked living on Davis Islands was that you could move up without moving too far." The Grecos' experience on the Islands demonstrate this masterfully. They went from an apartment on Danube to a 1,700 square foot home on Luzon to a 2,600 square foot home, located on Ladoga, within a nine year period.

It appears that, by the 1950s, the Latin families on Davis Islands attained what seemed only a dream for Amanda and Enrique and many other Ybor City residents of a previous generation. Latins were not the only group to "discover" Davis Islands during this era. Residential construction blossomed everywhere, encouraged by the huge numbers of people moving to Tampa, and Florida, after World War II.