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CIGAR-MAKING IN KEY WEST

by  
Rex Shaw

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The making of cigars in Key West began as early as 1831, with the factory on Front Street, between Duval and Fitzpatrick. In 1870, Key West was the world's largest cigar-making factory center. The industry reached its peak in 1890 when over 100 million cigars were produced.

Mr. Shaw comes from a family of cigar makers and workers. Mr. Shaw is now 80 years old and was born in Key West, Florida. He says: "My Daddy was a cigar maker by trade and made cigars all of his life, until he died. My mother was what was called a "pick and packer." In other words, she had a trained eye, picking the different colors and sizes of cigars to pack. They'd lay out 10 to 15 thousand cigars on the tables; she'd pick them out and when they were put in boxes, they'd all look alike. She had two trades--the pick and

pack. There were those who were pickers, and those who were packers, but she did both. I was about 17 years old when I began working in the cigar factory and except for a couple of years in the service, that's been my life's work.

"I received my training at the Key West Havana Cigar Factory (called "The Trust" around Key West). When you learned your trade there, you would always have a job. I liked the trade and this was essential in working there.

"The making of a cigar is very intricate work--also fascinating. There are two types of cigars; one is what is called a short pella type, and the other is the long pella type. The short-pella is when you put your binder down, it's chopped up tobacco in the grinding machine and you do this with one motion with a sense of feeling in your hand--it allows you to pick up just enough tobacco; you put it inside of that binder and fold it over. With the long type, you put your binder on the board and you put the tobacco in your hand, piece by piece until you sense it in your hand that you have the right amount, put it on the board in the binder, roll it over and put it in the press. After you put it in the press about 20 to 30 minutes, then you put the outside wrapper on it and that's the finished product.

"The outside wrapper is very important. There used to be Havana wrappers around Key West, but in later years when we had the Cuban embargo, you couldn't get them so we used San Domingo or Puerto Rico wrappers. The Havana wrappers are so famous because the climatic conditions over there are ideal. We're only 90 miles away but we can't raise it here. Their soil in Cuba is just right for tobacco growing.

"Another interesting thing around the factory was that the daily newspaper was read by a reader. The American papers were read in Spanish, and the Spanish papers were read in English. They not only read newspapers, they read books. The readers were chosen by the factory owners--they also chose the books that could be read. I remember one in particular--it was called "Ala Cuba - Gloria". This was read to us a chapter a day. When the reader would finish, there would be applause and shouting. We also had the famous classics of Don Quixote and others. The reader was paid by the Cuban element unless he interpreted into English. Guess he was paid about 50¢ a week for these services.

"There were some Americans in the cigar-making business, but most of them were Cubans, as the trade was brought over from Cuba. My daddy made the samples for one of the largest mail-order factories in the world--Thompson Bros. He was located here for quite a while, but moved from here to Bartow, Florida and I understand they now work over 300 people doing samples; there are five of them who learned to make samples from my daddy.

"I had four different factories in my day; had a break when I did my stretch in the Navy Yard; then ~~he~~ opened the factory on Fleming and Margaret Street; this was about 1945 and stayed there until I retired. Would you believe there are people in Key West who have lived here all their lives who have never seen a cigar made? There were more independents earlier than now. They got the tobacco from the big packers; Dr. Cobo's father was a big independent tobacco dealer on Duval Street. I used to buy tobacco from him so we had the same tobacco that the big shops used.

"As a rule, a cigar factory has three stories. On the third floor is where they blend the tobaccos. The second floor is where the cigars are made and the strippers (the ones pulling the stems out of the tobacco) are on first floor. The selectors would be on second and they wet the tobacco there to keep it moist over night.

"There are about five small cigar factories around like mine. Willie Bell has one over on Ash Street. We had a lot of trouble getting cigar boxes so we talked Mr. Norberg Thompson into building the boxes for our cigars. It's on Caroline and Margaret Street yet today. You see, we had to get our boxes out of Tampa and there was such a delay in getting them.

"The factories finally left Key West because of so many strikes. They were Cuban Strikes—not American. Many a Monday morning I'd go to work and not know if we'd get through the day...or the week. They would strike about anything. If somebody didn't like the wrappers the factory was putting out, they'd strike. Sometimes some bad wrappers would come in and they'd cost the same as the good ones so we were expected to patch them up and use them as best we could but the Cubans would refuse to work with them. Finally, the cigar-makers in Tampa offered many of them better wages or better working conditions, or something, so many of our cigar workers left the area. Tampa had no unions, but they were offering free land to people who'd come in to work, and also free rent.

"Mr. Phillips had a good little cigar shop—about 100 people working and mostly Americans. Can never remember of any dissensions there; everyone was happy working there.

"I worked in my shop until I was 79 and sold it to a man from North Carolina for \$3000.00. My eyes went kind of bad and thought it was time for me to get out of there. It was so difficult to find help; there are no new cigar people coming into Key West and the older ones don't want to work anymore because they have social security and pensions.

"My trade on Fleming Street consisted of walk-ins off the street and mail orders. Seems anybody I'd sell to once would come back for more so had a lot of steady customers.

*Cabot*

(Interviewed by Amelia Sebo and Mrs. Mary Malone).