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## The Charlie Spicola Story

# THE SON OF AN ITALIAN IMMIGRANT TELLS OF BOYHOOD IN YBOR CITY

By DR. ROSE F. SPICOLA



**Joe, Charlie, Angelo and Tommy in 1914. Rosina Spicola kept her son Tommy's hair long for several years, trying to preserve her only daughter, Maria Giuseppa, who died in her teens.**

On March 3, 1900, there was much cause for celebration in the household of Gaetano and Rosina Spicola in Tampa, Florida. A "figlio maschio", Carlo (Charlie), had been born. A male heir was, and still is, highly prized in Sicilian families.

Charlie would witness some amazing changes during the Twentieth Century, a century of tremendous growth. Tampa had a population of about 16,000 people in 1900.

Three fourths of Tampa's population in 1900- was made up of immigrants and a few Afro-Americans. Charlie was born in Ybor City, a multicultural community where a few Anglos dwelled among a large number of Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians, each community striving to maintain a rich cultural heritage while adapting to life in a new country. Because over 3,000 Cubans had settled in Tampa's Ybor City, it was nicknamed "Little Havana". The cigar industry dominated Tampa's economy.

Gaetano and Rosina, the proud parents, had been born in Santo Stefano, Sicily-Gaetano on March 15, 1871 and Rosina on July 21, 1879. Both came to America in their teens, part of a large group of Sicilians who emigrated late in the nineteenth century. Most of Tampa's Italians came from a small group of villages in the mountainous interior of Sicily. The promise of a new world, a new beginning, a promise of wealth untold, had brought these Italians to America. They had heard of "the streets lined with gold". Many planned to come to America, make their fortunes, then return to their native land.

### VOYAGE ACROSS A HARDSHIP

The voyage across the Atlantic was long and full of hardship. Many became ill and died on shipboard. To her grandchildren, Rosina would describe vividly the harsh conditions on the ship where dried lentils and fava



**G. C. Spicola & Sons, 1925. The store on 1907 7th Avenue was designed by M. Leo Elliott, a Tampa architect. Total cost was \$7800**

beans helped them survive. She remembered how frightened she was of the rats running all over the ship.

Gaetano had traveled from New York to Chicago, to St. Louis, and to New Orleans, working at various jobs with the railroads and finally cutting sugar cane in Louisiana for fifty cents a day. When Hamilton Disston decided to open up a sugarcane plantation in St. Cloud, Florida, grandfather came to Florida.

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Gaetano landed in Tampa in 1891, at the age of twenty. At dockside, representatives of the newly established cigar industry were waiting to recruit workers. They convinced him to work for the cigar company for \$2.00 a day, a large sum of money in those days!

### **ROUGH RIDERS ANTICS**

Cigar work, however, soon lost its appeal for Gaetano. He opened up a store near the Fortune Street Bridge, selling groceries of all kinds. He founded the Ybor City Bottling Works, in conjunction with the Florida Brewing Company. Gaetano even invented a bottled drink, which he named Spi-Cola. He made and distributed ice cream and wine along with the soda, and delivered these



**Charlie, Joe, Gaetano, Angelo and Tom Spicola at opening ceremonies dedicating Spicola Hardware Company on June 3, 1953. Gaetano died eight months later.**

goods to merchants in Tampa and West Tampa.

Charlie enjoys telling an amusing story connected with these deliveries during the period of the Rough Riders' encampment in Tampa. Gaetano, with his wagon drawn by a horse, also named "Charlie", was making a delivery when some of Teddy Roosevelt's soldiers set about to remove all the nuts from the wagon wheels. When Gaetano started to drive away, the wheels fell off and dumped the delivery wagon and all the contents on the ground. Fortunately, an officer saw the incident and made the soldiers replace all the nuts, put the wagon back together and pay for all the damages.

Another amusing incident gives credence to tales of the Rough Riders' antics during their short stay in Tampa. Rosina was doing her wash in an old iron pot in back of the store on Fortune Street. A drunken Rough Rider kept jumping his horse over her wash, rousing Rosina to a frenzy. Her brother-in-law, Giarolamo, kept threatening the soldier and finally ran into the house, got

a shotgun loaded with birdshot, and chased the laughing soldier away.

### **'MORE SENSIBLE SUITOR'**

Gaetano sold his interest in the Ybor City Bottling Company, and for a short time was part owner of another bottling company in Ybor City. In 1915 he bought a half interest from Vito Licata, who owned the Moon Saloon on the corner of 17th St. and 7th Avenue.

.At the age of 26, Gaetano was still a bachelor, but a romantic event soon changed that status. His best friend had been planning to marry a young, attractive girl by the name of Rosina Locicero. But when his friend made the error of asking Rosina's father for a small loan, Papa became enraged and threw him out of the house. The door was open for a more sensible suitor, and within three months, Gaetano and Rosina were married on February 21, 1897. Rosina was 17 years old.

On December 15, 1897, a daughter was born and named Maria Giuseppa. Then came a procession of boys, Carlo, Angelo, born in Palmetto Beach, July 7, 1902, Joseph, born on September 26, 1905, in Ybor City, and Gaetano (Tom) born on June 20, 1909, also in Ybor City. In all, my grandmother, Rosina, had nine pregnancies, but was able to bring only five to full term. All the babies were delivered by a midwife.

The Spicolas were renting houses, usually shared with another family, for about two dollars a week. Most immigrants were locked into a difficult struggle to make ends meet, and so sharing the homes was an economic necessity (not unlike what many people face in today's economy). When they lived on 6th Avenue, the house had two doors, similar to our duplexes today,

Gaetano and Rosina, with their young family, lived downstairs, and his brother Giarolamo and his family lived upstairs. Eventually Giarolamo moved, and Gaetano took over the entire house.

### **GREAT YBOR CITY FIRE**

On March 1, 1908, when the family was living on 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue, a terrible fire swept Ybor City. Charlie, who was going to be eight years old, still remembers watching the fire burn only one block from where they lived. Fortunately, the wind blew the fire in the opposite direction, and the Spicolas' house was spared. Over 17 square blocks were destroyed, causing property losses of more than one million dollars.

Young Carlo and Angelo attended an Italian school, because their father still had the dream of returning with his family to Santo Stefano. At one time there were about a half dozen Italian schools in Tampa. Carlo did well in school, but freely admits he would have preferred to be with his father, doing more interesting things like selling soda, delivering ice cream and just going places, so he frequently skipped school. He went to school during the morning and then worked for his father in the afternoon. Many times Carlo would accompany his Uncle Giarolamo on his wagon trips. He remembers that each time they stopped his Uncle would buy a half pint of gin. By the time they had made the swing through Palmetto Beach, Ybor City, and West Tampa, Giarolamo could barely stand up! It was a wonder that they got back safely.

Charlie remembers learning to read by reading the Bible in Italian to his grandfather, Carlo, who must have known the Good Book by heart. Whenever Charlie tried to skip a word or phrase the old man

would catch him and make him reread the passage correctly.

One afternoon when Carlo was about eight years old, and riding with his father down Grand Central Avenue in the wagon, Gaetano stopped to light his pipe. Somehow the horse became startled and lunged forward, throwing Carlo off the wagon. Because of the heavy sand in the street, he was not seriously injured, although a wagon wheel went over his leg. His father was very upset, but everything turned out all right and Carlo didn't let the mishap keep him from riding in the wagon.

### **TO AMERICAN SCHOOL**

When Carlo and Angelo were in the upper elementary grades, their father decided to send them to an American school. Perhaps Gaetano realized that they now were in America to stay. Carlo and Angelo both made the transition from the Italian to the American school without failing-to the astonishment of the teachers. Carlo remembers that he spelled words in Italian first, then put them into English. Both he and Angelo attended Gary Elementary School and graduated from the sixth grade.

At Gary, they had their first encounter with "cracker" and "Anglo" prejudices against "Latinos". There were daily fights at school (perhaps better described as wars). The Anglos usually had the advantage in fights at school, where they outnumbered the Latinos. During the weekends, however, when the Anglos came to Ybor City to go to the movies, the tables were turned. The Latino boys got their revenge, beating up the Anglos. Charlie has often said that many of the young boys involved in these fights later became his good friends.

When Carlo and Angelo graduated from Gary Elementary School, they immediately had to go to work full time to help the family financially, so the possibility of further schooling seemed remote. Charlie tells an interesting story about how his younger brother Joe was able to go to college. Joe wanted very much to go to college and become a lawyer, but Gaetano did not feel that he could afford to send him. Carlo and Angelo said that they would work extra hours to earn the money needed, and convinced their father to send their brother Joe to college. Joe finished his law degree in three years and graduated with honors from Stetson College of Law. Later Tom, the youngest, followed in Joe's footsteps and also became a lawyer, graduating from the University of Florida.

### **"CAFE CON LECHE"**

Charlie described growing up in the Spicola household as busy and noisy. There was always "café con leche" with bread for breakfast. The aroma of huge pots of meat soup with potatoes, ribs, and many kinds of homemade pasta filled the house. Gaetano always ate his meat first, his pasta next, and his salad last. There was always homemade vino that grandfather had made himself. Gaetano would cut up fresh peaches or other fruit and put them in his vino, a practice that Charlie continues today.

There were many festive activities in which the family took part. In 1891, the Spanish leaders had organized Centro Espanol, which was the first social and cultural club in Ybor City. L'Unione Italiana was started in 1894; the present building on Seventh Avenue was completed in 1918. Charles remembers enjoying the many festivities at the different clubs, taking part in musical choruses and productions. When Tito

Schipa, the famous singer and entertainer, came to Tampa he visited with the Spicolas, who were then living on Gordon Street in Palmetto Beach.

The family would drive to the east side of the bay to catch crab and stingray. The stingray was cut into small pieces and fried. Gaetano, who could be very stubborn, always had to be driven on these expeditions, since he absolutely refused to learn to drive an automobile.

Of all the family, Charlie had the greatest appetite and ate the most, but he didn't seem to gain any weight. His father became concerned, and took him to many doctors in Ybor City to see what the problem was; he even tried a Seminole Indian doctor, who prescribed sunflower seeds. Charlie had to raid the icebox, or he would have starved to death on a diet of sunflower seeds.

### **A FAMILY TRAGEDY**

Tom recalls how he wanted a tricycle but his father said he could not afford one. Tom was really surprised when his two brothers, Charlie and Angelo made him one, and gave it to him for Christmas!

Tragedy struck the Spicola household in 1913. Maria Giuseppa (Josephine), Rosina's only daughter, contracted typhoid fever. Soon Charlie, Angelo, and Joe also became ill. Josephine appeared to recover and diligently helped her mother care for the boys, but became ill again and died, at just fifteen and a half years of age. From that loss, Rosina never really recovered; she never forgot that her only daughter, trying to help care for her younger brothers, gave up her own life. In an attempt to preserve her memory of her daughter, Rosina had Tom, the youngest child, wear his hair in long

curls for several years after Josephine's death.

The Spicola boys enjoyed going to Sunset Beach, in Beach Park, with their friends. They loved swimming. Here again, prejudice ran against them; the Anglo boys objected to the Latinos and Jews, and ran them off the beach. The Spicola boys started going to the Gulf beaches. For many years afterward, and to this very day, all of the Spicolos enjoyed taking their families to Pass-A-Grille, Indian Rocks and Clearwater beaches. They would rent beach cottages and stay the whole summer, the men commuting back and forth to work.

I remember the "expeditions" to Pass-A-Grille very well. A huge beach house was rented because there would be many relatives coming. At times, the family goat was also taken so that we could have fresh milk. There were also rods and reels, crab nets, buckets, and swimming gear for everyone. We stayed almost all summer, so we would get very tanned. Mother loved to fish, and was always having to be dragged in from the docks, where she was trying to catch a large snapper or grouper, to prepare supper. Gaetano wanted his pasta promptly at 6:00 P.M. each evening. In those days, the bays and Gulf waters were teeming with fish and shellfish. We caught snook, snapper, grouper, blue crabs, clams, stone crabs, oysters and scallops.

### **DELICIOUS COQUINA SOUP**

One of the special dishes we had was coquina soup. All of the children would help dig up the small, beautiful, multi-toned coquinas, which were burrowed in the sand at the edge of the Gulf waters. We rinsed them over and over, until all the sand was washed away. The coquinas were then boiled in water until the shells popped open.

Mother would add tomatoes, onion, pepper, basil, and garlic to the broth, and serve it with noodles; it was delicious!

Charlie worked hard at a number of different jobs, and also helped his father at the saloon. Then he got a steady job at Diaz's garage on 8th Avenue and 15th Street, pumping gas and changing tires. He worked there one year. One day, Mr. Garcia from the cigar factory asked Charlie to gas him up. He wanted to tip Charlie \$.25 (a lot of money in those days), but Charlie refused the tip. Later, his boss, Mr. Diaz, told him always to accept a tip when one was offered. Father said he never forgot that lesson in courtesy.

When the Prohibition Amendment went into effect, Gaetano had to close the Moon Saloon. He and Licata sold all the liquor they could. Gaetano poured much of the liquor and wine into wooden casks and buried them. Alas! When he went to dig them up later, he discovered it had all seeped into the ground.

### **BEGIN HARDWARE STORE**

Actually, prohibition was the turning point in Charlie's life. Forced to look around for another way of earning a livelihood, Gaetano cast his eyes on a hardware store owned by Vitali Cagnina, at 1815 Seventh Avenue, in the heart of Ybor City. Cagnina had lost interest in his store and wanted to get rid of it.

He asked his sons, Charlie and Angelo, if they wanted to invest in the store. Gaetano had \$5,000 in cash. Charlie had \$600 and Angelo had \$400, which he had saved from his work in a tin shop. Grandfather also informed them that they would have to do all the work at the hardware store.

Charlie and Angelo decided that they could do it. On April 15, 1919, Gaetano and his two sons bought the hardware store for \$5,458 and named it G.C. Spicola & Sons. It was a bold and courageous step. It also turned out to be a timely decision. Tampa was beginning its journey toward becoming a modern city. There were electric lights, a sewage system, paved streets, sidewalks, and a trolley system. The pioneer days were long behind. The Florida Boom of 1920-1925 was not far away.

There are now 66 years of Charlie's life invested in the hardware store. The promise of a new world did come true for this son born to Italian immigrants.