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THE CRADLE OF MUTUAL AID: IMMIGRANT
COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES IN YBOR CITY

by Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta

If the cigar factories functioned as the economic heart of Ybor City, mutual aid societies surely served as its soul. The emergence of voluntary associations among immigrants signified an organizing impulse which left its legacy in wooden dance floors, marble edifices and modern hospitals. According to one historian, these institutions represented “both an assertion of group identity and a tentative adjustment to the industrial metropolis.”

Cubans, Spaniards and Italians brought with them traditions of voluntary associations and mutual aid. In the late nineteenth century, an organizing wave swept through Europe, leaving behind thousands of voluntary organizations at village and town levels. These European societies survived the passage to the Americas. In 1887, a group from the Spanish province of Asturias organized an asociacion de beneficencia in Havana. Asturians organized similar societies in other Cuban towns throughout the 1880s. In 1886, members from several of these groups organized El Centro Asturiano in Havana. Cubans drew upon the same patterns of self-help. In 1871, Cuban emigrés in Key West, Florida, founded the San Carlos Club, a mutual aid society based upon similar organizations existing in the homeland. It was no accident, therefore, that the early immigrants in Ybor City looked to ethnic clubs for solutions to the myriad of problems pressing upon them.

Birth of Mutual Aid in Ybor City

To comprehend fully the extraordinary associations that evolved in Ybor City, one must understand the milieu from which they emerged. Ybor City was an instant town. Grafted onto a city which before 1880 boasted scant numbers, Ybor City residents could expect little assistance from Anglo Tampa. A vacuum similarly existed with reference to previous immigrant groups. Whereas in northern urban areas, Italians frequently occupied neighborhoods recently vacated by Germans, Irish or Jews, Ybor City’s Latins encountered a very different situation. Expansion often had to await sufficient housing, but more importantly there were no institutions to minister to newly arrived immigrants, such as charitable agencies. The Catholic Church, which might logically have figured to step into this institutional breach, was despised and rejected.

In addition to the political and cultural traditions imported to Ybor City, the local environment contributed to the character of mutual aid. In late 1885, nature grudgingly yielded to workers clearing the palmettos and draining the swamps that would become Ybor City. For decades Ybor City’s beleaguered inhabitants battled semi-tropical mosquitoes, belligerent alligators and unsanitary conditions. Water plagued the lives of the early inhabitants. Unless one carried buckets of water from Old Government Spring, the crudely dug wells or cisterns which collected rainwater yielded a substance old-timers jokingly defined as “too thick to drink and too thin to plow.” Residents passed drinking water through coffee filters to remove insects and debris. The terrible yellow fever epidemic of 1887, which may have been caused by mosquitoes packed
along with imported Cuban fruit, claimed a number of recent immigrants. “The mortality of all areas at Ybor [City] during the past year,” reported the Tampa Journal in 1890, “has been far in excess of that in Tampa proper.”

The cigar factories, free of dangerous machines, seemed on first impression to be exceedingly safe, but they in fact provided breeding grounds for tuberculosis. Workers spat on the floors or in rare spittoons, which in the warm, moist environment, spread the disease quickly. The necessity of keeping factory windows closed so as to prevent the moist tobacco from drying out added to the unhealthful conditions. “We have to take a collection every week for some consumptive comrade,” observed a cigarmaker in 1917. The social, psychological and linguistic barriers separating Ybor City and Anglo Tampa aggravated the pressing need for medical and health services.

The rise of mutual aid societies in Ybor City was certainly not unique. Such ethnic associations proliferated in urban America. For example, hundreds of Slavic associations arose in Cleveland, while a similar number existed among about such institutions in Ybor City was not the sheer number, but rather the consolidating nature and the encompassing character of five separate societies organized by Spaniards, Cubans and Italians. An overview of Ybor City's five leading immigrant associations shows the extraordinary number of services they provided which made them the center of institutional life outside the cigar factories.

**Centro Español**

In April 1891, a small body of artisans and businessmen in Ybor City gathered to discuss an alarming problem, the “anti-social atmosphere prevailing against the Spanish.” Ybor City was becoming increasingly polarized: the Spanish commanded the elite positions in the cigar industry while Cubans occupied the lower economic niches; the Spanish monopolized the Sanchez Haya factory while Cubans dominated the Martinez-Ybor factory. B. M. Balbontin, a pioneer Spaniard, told interviewers in the 1930s that “the Spanish at that time [the 1890s] were persecuted, abhorred, and were the target of Cuban hatred because of the Spanish government in Cuba.” To counteract these conditions, Spaniards resolved to organize a mutual aid club.

The state of Florida issued Centro Español’s charter on September 7, 1891. Ignacio Haya, the cigar manufacturer who donated funds for the first building, also became the first president of Centro Español. Other officers included factory owner Enrique Pendas, as vice president. Pendas, born in Asturias in 1865, had left Spain for Cuba in 1881, later joining his uncle's manufacturing firm in New York City. The Lozano, Pendas and Company had become Ybor City’s third cigar factory in 1889.

Once launched, Centro Español served as an organizational model for future groups. An examination of the constitution of Centro Español allows a glimpse into an immigrant institution’s capacity to adapt. El Casino Español, a similar organization based in Havana, restricted its membership to persons born in Spain. The by-laws of Centro Español in Tampa, however, stipulated that only the president and vice-president need be Spanish-born. For others, the constitution read: “It is required of all applicants that they be Spaniards by birth and by patriotic inclination or that they be loyal to Spain and to its prestige in America.”
Centro Español dovetailed the needs and demands of its diverse clientele. Typical of immigrant aid societies, the club required members to pay twenty-five cents a week in return for social privileges and death and injury benefits. Given the fact that the Spanish community was composed largely of young, single men, the idea of a mutual aid society with congenial social outlets appealed to individuals living in boarding homes.

In 1892, directors organized the Spanish Casino Stock Company in order to promote further recreational and theatrical activity. The society’s original 186 members each pledged stock shares of ten dollars, used to finance a clubhouse at Sixteenth Street and Seventh Avenue. An ornate wooden structure costing $16,000, the finished building contained a theatre, dance hall, cantina and classrooms.9

By 1901, the membership rolls of Centro Español had grown to 926, expanding to 1,886 in 1907 and 2,537 in 1912. The society tolerated a wide spectrum within its membership, including Gallegos (Galicians) and Asturianos from Spain, Criolles (sons born in Cuba), a few Italians, cigar manufacturers, elite artisans, radical cigarmakers and readers. Different classes and ideologies mixed together. “In those days,” reflected Frank Juan, who had been a member of Centro Español for sixty-two of his sixty-four years, “the club was all we had.”10
Leadership, confident that a dynamic Spanish community could sustain and support an ambitious building campaign, embarked on such a program in 1909. In that pivotal year, Centro Español’s 1,773 constituents owed not one cent of indebtedness; hundreds of new applicants awaited formal membership. So many Spaniards from West Tampa (a neighboring city also based on the cigar industry) belonged to Centro Español that the society pledged to build two new magnificent clubhouses, one in Ybor City and the other in the sister cigar city.  

The mutual aid society, bolstered by new streams of immigrants and an expanding second-generation, retained a powerful hold upon the Spanish community through the depression of the 1930s. Membership ebbed and flowed but persistently remained strong, despite the cataclysmic impact wrought by a world war and major strikes. The other great challenge to the vitality of Centro Español was the appearance of a rival Spanish society, Centro Asturiano.  

**Centro Asturiano**
Founded for essentially social reasons, Centro Español deftly balanced the strong regional loyalties of its Asturian and Galician members. The early society, unified by real and perceived animosities from Anglo Tampa and the colony’s Cuban element, could not retain such loyalties following the conclusion of the Cuban revolution. In particular, the Asturian element had steadfastly urged the society to broaden its collective efforts in the medical arena. Leaders of Centro Español resisted entrance into such an unexplored area because of costs and the “ungovernable and rebellious nature of the Asturians.”

Frequently called “anarchist” by the Galician leadership, a large faction of dissident Spaniards seceded in 1902 to organize Centro Asturiano. The new club became a North American auxiliary of the Centro Asturiano of Havana. By 1900, the renowned Cuban institution already boasted 10,000 members. The international by-laws required a minimum of 300 members, a commitment to donate a percentage of annual dues and a written constitution before granting a charter to the new American affiliate. Pioneering members, of whom sixty-five were still alive in 1936, recalled that enraged leaders from Centro Español—especially the cigar manufacturers—fought
against the creation of a rival and potentially radical society, even to the point of dispatching
delegates to Havana to plead against the proposed establishment. The Spanish hierarchy in Cuba
disregarded the protests and granted a charter to Centro Asturiano of Tampa on April 1, 1902.
According to record books meticulously preserved at the clubhouse, 546 charter members
enlisted in the new society.14

Destined to evolve into the most stable, well financed, and best-preserved clubhouse in Ybor
City, Centro Asturiano began with a two-room, wood-frame building at 1410½ Seventh Avenue.
In 1907, leaders announced plans to erect a modern facility on the corner of Palm and Nebraska
Avenues. Dedicated on January 22, 1909, the $75,000 clubhouse stood unrivaled by Tampa's
standards. A 1912 fire completely destroyed the structure, but members resolved to rebuild with
an even more ambitious building. In a gesture inconceivable fifteen years earlier, the Cuban Club
offered Centro Asturiano the use of its facility—with full membership privileges—during the
construction period.15
The Tampa Tribune heralded the new Centro Asturiano, unveiled on May 15, 1914, as “the most beautiful building in the South.” Designed by the talented architectural firm of Bonfoey and Elliot (which came to design all of the other major clubhouses), the structure cost a then staggering $110,000. Dedication ceremonies filled three days, highlighted by original operatic scores, a symphony and endless balls and banquets. The building still sparkles as an architectural gem seventy years later. Its spacious features include a dramatic 1,200 seat theatre, a cantina, ballroom and a well-stocked library.¹⁶

Financially sound, socially progressive and institutionally viable, Centro Asturiano attracted flocks of Spaniards to its protective banner. While the club naturally promoted Asturian culture, at no time did it exclude other Spaniards or Latins. Italians, Cubans and Galicians joined Centro Asturiano because of its facilities, benefits and membership. Economically, the club operated efficiently, as demonstrated by its surplus of $165,000 for the period 1902-1914. Centro Asturiano’s officials established a club bank, whereby members could deposit funds, earning a high interest and at the same time supporting their club. No institution in Ybor City or Tampa...
generated the crowds and numbers as could Centro Asturiano. A 1911 picnic at Sulphur Springs attracted 6,000 members, their families and guests, causing the trolley company to press all its cars into service. Six months later, another picnic counted a crowd of 4,500. “Every nationality was represented,” reported the Tribune.17

The Latin community fostered an intense appreciation for the theatre since the earliest days of settlement, and the clubs anchored this passion. Un Sección de Declamación, an amateur theatrical troupe, presented plays every Sunday at Centro Español and Centro Asturiano. The advent of “talkies” and the popularity of the movie houses, while drastically curtailing live theatre in much of Florida, actually enlivened the Spanish-language theatre of Ybor City, since many Latin residents spoke little or no English. “In 1935,” observed a student of the Florida theatre, “Ybor City seems to have been the only place in Florida which still maintained a type of resident theatre company.”18

During the 1930s, the Centro Asturiano served as a center for one of the more experimental programs in Americana cultural history—the New Deal’s Federal Theatre Project. Under the auspices of the WPA, the club became the only Spanish-language theatre unit in the United States. In addition to the Spanish language stock theatre, the unit included an Italian opera company, staffed by local talent. Headed by Manuel Aparicio, one of the most celebrated lectores (readers) in Tampa, the federally sponsored theatre survived until July 1939. In all, fifteen plays appeared as part of the unit, including the Spanish version of It Can’t Happen Here, bringing a rich feast of theatre which attracted standing-room-only crowds to the club.19

The vibrant Spanish-language theatre dramatized the cultural influence of mutual aid societies. From the beginning, groups frequented plays at neighboring club theatres, enhancing the spread of Spanish and Italian language drama. In Ybor City, remembered Jose Yglesias, there “were wonderfully active cultural centers, for those cigarmakers knew how to organize more than trade unions. . . .At the Centro Asturiano we saw zarauelas (musical comedies) performed by local amateurs. When great international performers, like [Enrico] Caruso, came to Tampa, it was cigarmakers who booked them, not the americanos on the other side of Nebraska Avenue.”20

Centro Asturiano, like the other clubs, promoted the idea of the supreme Latin male. Women joined auxiliaries, which in reality existed to serve the male members. “These social clubs all had libraries, auditoriums, gyms, dance halls and canteens, where the men gathered in the evenings,” recalled Jose Yglesias. Typically, Latin men ate dinner with their families—although many Spaniards remained single—leaving promptly thereafter for their respective clubs. Spanish men, noted a writer in the 1930s, “see their children only during the evening meal. . . .Anyone who does stay home is considered ‘hen pecked’ and only half a man.” The Spanish canteen hosted spirited card games, but dominos remained the favorite pastime. Centro Asturiano also erected a bowling alley and gymnasium for its members, who formed athletic teams competing against rival clubs. “In contrast to the Nordic women,” stated an observer, “they [Latin women] do not take part in civic activities.”21

Círculo Cubano
During the formative decades of Ybor City, Cubans devoted their collective energies to the unremitting crusade of *Cuba Libre*. Organizational talents funded the revolution with unceasing support, leaving a void in their community-based infrastructure. The end of the war in 1898 signaled a mass return to the homeland, only to discover the disillusionment of an unfulfilled revolution and a society in turmoil. Thousands returned to Tampa, determined to reshape and invigorate their “Little Havana” in Ybor City.

The history of Cuban mutual aid life paralleled the timeline of revolution and reconstitution. The origin of El Círculo Cubano can be traced to the postwar milieu, specifically a recreational society El Club Nacional Cubano, founded October 10, 1899. The welter of labor unrest in 1901 arrested early growth, but membership climbed after the strike to 300 in 1902. In honor of the new Republic of Cuba, the society changed its name in 1902 to El Círculo Cubano. The charter expressed the hope, “To bind all Cuban residents of Tampa into a fraternal group, to offer assistance and help the sick.” The by-laws also prohibited discussion within the society of labor, politics, or religion—surely a much violated provision.22
In 1907, Circulo Cubano erected its first clubhouse on Fourteenth Street and Tenth Avenue. The two-story building cost $18,000 and included most notably a 900 seat theatre. Dedication ceremonies brought out a number of American and Cuban dignitaries. In 1916 the original building burned, spurring the membership, then numbering 2,600, to rebuild with a more lasting monument. Mario Menocal, the President of Cuba, donated $2,000, while individual members pledged extra levies during a bond drive. Completed in 1918, the $60,000 structure featured a spacious theatre, cantina, pharmacy, library and a dancing floor (70 by 100 feet), lavishly decorated by Cuban painters. Imported tile, stained glass windows and marble accentuated this “cathedral for workers,” which still stands.

Cuban youth, or at least young men, were attracted to the Cuban Club. More than any of the other Latin societies, the Círculo Cubano promoted athletics. In the rear of the club, members built a gymnasium and boxing arena. Leaders also constructed a school which hosted a variety of cultural activities. “I remember as a boy going to the free art classes summer evenings at the Círculo Cubano,” reminisced Jose Yglesias.

At its peak during the 1920s the Círculo Cubano boasted its own boxing arena.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.
The vicissitudes of the cigar industry affected every club in Ybor City, but none manifested such stark contrasts between good times and bad as the Círculo Cubano. In 1909, membership stood at nearly a thousand, but pitched to 125 by the end of strike-torn 1910. With characteristic vigor and flux, membership revived to 3,225 by 1919, but fell again due to labor unrest to 1,602. Like a phoenix, the club thrived throughout the twenties, cresting at 5,000 in 1930. But in 1935, the aggravation of depression and dispersion saw club rolls decline to 2,492.

**Unión Martí-Maceo**

The consuming cause of *Cuba Libre* before 1898 adopted the issue of racial equality. José Martí, during his stays in Ybor City, often spoke to the necessity of a united front, indivisible from racial or political differences. After an incident in which Martí narrowly escaped poisoning by Spanish agents, the Apostle of Cuban Liberty stayed at the Ybor City home of Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso, prominent Afro-Cubans. For her aid to the cause, Paulina has been called the “second mother” to the apostle. The symbol of racial unity helped rally the Cuban Revolution. “White and Negro Cubans lived in harmony,” wrote José Rivero Muñiz, a contemporary observer, “all being admitted without exception to the various revolutionary clubs, none ever protested.” Muñiz later added, “The relations between Cuban whites and Negroes were most cordial and there was no racial discrimination. . . .They were mutually respectful.” José Ramon Sanféliz, an Afro-Cuban, came to Ybor City in 1890 from Havana. In 1899, he became one of the founders of Club Nacional Cubano, which he remembered “as composed of white and black members—a sort of rice with black beans. There was no distinction of race. When the Círculo Cubano was formed, however, the Negroes were left out.”

The war’s end dashed the revolutionary clubs on the shoals of peace. The period after 1898 brought about a period of reorganization, as Cubans returned to their homes, many to sail back to Ybor City because of the desolation wrought by the war. The decade of the 1890s also resulted in a new era of race relations in the American South, characterized by a proliferation of segregation laws, lynchings and terror.

Ybor City’s fluid race relations clearly troubled Anglo Tampa. Afro-Cubans worked alongside white immigrants, a custom carried over in the integrated residential patterns of the enclave. “In Ybor City, you’d live with an Italian on one side, a Spaniard and a Cuban on the other side,” recalled eighty-five-year old Alfonso Diaz, an Afro-Cuban born in Havana. Juan Mallea, an Afro-Cuban born on Twelfth Street and Eighth Avenue in 1918, remembered: “The Caltagirones, Scagliones, the Martinos—all these people lived across from us. There was no such thing as a white section and a black section. The only time you encountered discrimination was when you left Ybor.” Anglo Tampa, prodded by a legal riding crop from Tallahassee, pressured Ybor City’s white Cubans to dissociate themselves from the Afro-Cubans, resulting in the organization of separate white and black Cuban societies around the turn-of-the-century. “The government [state and local] told them [Cubans] we could not work together, have a society together, and would have to keep the races apart,” exclaimed Mallea. “That was the law of the country. So we blacks decided to build our own club.”

Afro-Cubans organized two separate but overlapping societies at the turn of the century. In 1900, they formed La Sociedad de Libre Pensadores de Martí Maceo (Society of the Free
Thinkers of Martí and Maceo), patterned after a similar Cuban organization. The Tampa group’s first president, Bruno Roig, had been a member in the Cuban society. The choice of names revealed the heritage of the revolution: Martí was the voice of Cuban liberty, while Antonio Maceo, a black general, represented the movement in action. Both men died on the battlefield. In 1904, a faction within the Ybor City club founded a new society, La Unión for the purpose of economic and medical benefits. In 1907, the two organizations merged, forming La Unión Martí-Maceo.

By 1907, officers of the club had purchased a lot on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Eleventh Street. Within a year, members embarked on a building campaign. Completed in 1909, the two-story clubhouse is still fondly remembered by veterans of the society. Razed by urban renewal in 1965—the only ethnic clubhouse so taken—the structure housed a theatre for 300, a dance hall and meeting rooms.

La Unión Martí-Maceo gave a degree of stability to Ybor City’s mobile Afro-Cuban community. The club’s theatre and dance hall sponsored virtually every social and cultural event celebrated by the colony’s members. The club began a school, located next to the facility. “In order to keep our heritage,” explained an elderly member, “we organized a school at night to teach the Spanish language and Cuban history.” Juan Mallea reminisced that the old timers, while encouraging their generation to learn English, would not allow English spoken in the clubhouse. The club’s baseball team, Los Gigantes Cubanos (The Cuban Giants) competed against the other Latin clubs. “You see,” explained Mallea, “the club was the only offering Black Cubans had.”

Unione Italiana

Immigration was a forcing house of change, by which emigrants were recast with new identities. Emigrants left the Magazzolo Valley in Sicily as Stefanesi and Alessandrini, to reemerge in Ybor City as Sicilians and Italians and later Latins. The mutual aid society played handmaiden to this conversion.

Founded in April 1894, L’Unione Italiana originally included 116 Italian and eight Spanish immigrants. The charter stated that the organization’s purpose was “to aid such members of said association as may become sick and to provide for the paying of the burial expenses of such members as may die, and to promote fraternity, charity and social intercourse among its members.” Article Seven declared, “This society is founded exclusively by Italians,” but it permitted “social members of other groups. . .as long as they were of good moral standing and aged between fourteen and fifty.” In a none-too-subtle show of indifference to organized religion, the society’s by-laws set a precedent (still followed) that the annual and monthly meetings of the membership would be held the first Sunday of each month at 10:30 a.m.

L’Unione Italiana drew its leadership from the ranks of individuals known as prominenti. Bartolomeo Filogamo, the society’s first president, reflected that classic profile. He had left the Old World in 1885 as an early pioneer, settling in New Orleans before arriving in Tampa in 1889, ahead of the major immigrant stream. He quickly exploited the Ybor City economy, as his linguistic and financial talents assisted his elevation to bookkeeper at the Pendas and Alvarez
cigar factory. He befriended the firm’s owner, Enrique Pendas, who pioneered the founding of Centro Español. When an embryonic Italian settlement emerged, Filogamo brought Enrique Pendas and seven other Spaniards into the charter membership of L’Unione Italiana, and he consciously modeled the organization after the Centro Español. Although born in the Sicilian town of Castellammare del Golfo, which was not a major source for Tampa’s Italians, Filogamo was nonetheless tapped by the Sicilians from the Magazzolo Valley to head the new venture. Filogamo’s organizational talents and his connections with the Spanish elite made him an effective first president. Still, the choice of an “outsider” as head of this particular society seems remarkable, given the heavy predominance of Stefanesi and Alessandrini in the early colony. Filogamo guided L’Unione through its first decade, followed by Filippo F. Licata who held the reins of power for the next twenty years, 1906-1924.31

From its inception, L’Unione avoided the petty, factional battles which drained the energies of so many other Italian societies in other cities. L’Unione served as a collective umbrella, not only for immigrants and children from the Magazzolo Valley, but also for smaller numbers of other Sicilians and Italians, and even clusters of Spaniards and Cubans, who for economic, marital or other considerations, were drawn to this particular banner.32

L’Unione, with its reverence for social custom and its deliverance of mutual aid, quickly came to play a paramount role in Ybor City’s Italian community. In this sense, L’Unione Italiana paralleled its dynamic institutional counterparts, Centro Español, Centro Asturiano, Círculo Cubano and La Unión Martí-Maceo. Judging from institutional records, oral interviews and documentary reports, one estimates that between the 1890s and 1930s, 90 percent of Ybor City’s first- and second-generation men belonged to at least one of these societies. “My father belonged to L’Unione,” boasted Dominic Giunta. “Before he ever bought a loaf of bread, he paid his dues. We grew up appreciating that fact.”33

The mutual aid society appealed to the most basic of human instincts. Immigrants, terrified of dying unattended and unnoticed in a strange land, banded together to formalize the rituals of life and death. L’Unione institutionalized Sicilian funeral customs while adapting them to Ybor City. In 1900, the club purchased and dedicated an Italian Cemetery two miles north of Ybor City, at Twenty-sixth Street and Twenty-third Avenue. The cemetery with its imported cypress trees, inset ceramic photographs on gravemarkers, tombstones inscribed in Sicilian and Italian script, bears a near exact resemblance to the hallowed grounds in Sicily it sought to duplicate. In the early years, each club member contributed one dollar to the bereaving family; later, the club provided a $300 death benefit. By 1928, L’Unione, strengthened by increasing numbers of second-generation members, instituted a revised death plan whereby families received $975 in benefits.34

Bolstered by steady streams of newcomers and confident of the future, the leadership of L’Unione in 1910 announced plans for a permanent clubhouse. Dedicated on Columbus Day, 1912, the $40,000, three-story structure stood on Seventh Avenue between Seventeenth and Eighteenth Streets. The brick building featured an athletic room and theatre. Paul Longo, one of the few survivors who remembers the original clubhouse, reflected as to its meaning in 1912. “I thought, my God, in Sicilia only the Church and Counts build such a monument.”35
The monument, intended to last three generations, stood three years before a fire destroyed everything. Members unhesitatingly pledged to rebuild, across the street at Seventh Avenue and Eighteenth Street. Construction began in April 1917, at a time when Little Italies elsewhere were channeling their community resources into bond drives and Red Cross benefits in support of World War I.

The erection of the new L’Unione signified a profound commitment to Italian communal life in Tampa and an important benchmark in the consolidation of the community. Built in an Italian renaissance style, decorated with classical columns, terra cotta relief, and a profusion of marble, the clubhouse stands as an impressive monument to immigrant achievement. The building included a magnificent theatre with an auditorium and balcony (later converted to a movie theatre), a spacious dance floor, library, cantina, bowling alley and recreational rooms. With furnishings, the building cost $80,000, a considerable sum for the time.36

The Italian Club, as social center for the community, performed myriad roles for its members. For Italian men, the cantina served as a sanctuary, a male bastion where a woman never casually entered. Like their Spanish counterparts, Italian men retreated to the club for after-dinner socializing. “We used to come here during the week, all the people who live around here,” remembered Joe Maniscalco. “They come here to the club and play domonoes, briscola, scoppa—until twelve, one o'clock at night! This [club] used to be paradise.”37

If the gaming tables of the cantina lured a male clientele, the banner of L’Unione attracted families, especially for group excursions. Picnics, outings and festivals allowed the club to raise impressive amounts of revenue and bring out huge crowds. In 1924, the club enjoyed a mammoth picnic to celebrate a membership drive which successfully enrolled a thousand new recruits. L’Unione’s 1,800 members, with their families, gathered at the farmstead of F.M. Antuono and posed for a photograph which still hangs at the club today.38

On Saturday evenings, the polished dance floor of L’Unione came alive. “Talk about dances!” exclaimed Nina Ferlita. “We used to have some of the most beautiful dances. . . .cabaret tables all over the hall. And they would have Cuban music, Italian music.” When the second generation began to fraternize the club, two bands often entertained the crowds, one playing more sedate tunes for the parents; the other performing the more rhythmic rumba and samba for the younger set. “I remember when the Italian Club was built,” reminisced Alfonso Lopez, the son of Spanish immigrants. “It was a nice club. . . .we [Spanish kids] used to go dances there quite a lot as young boys, the Italian Club, also the Centro Español, Centro Asturiano, and the Cuban Club. It was a perfect setup for a young boy, because you could go there and didn’t have to take a date. . . .You could always find some girls that were chaperoned.”39

L’Unione transcended the dance floor and domino tables; it inculcated a vigorous cultural life. The library housed a diverse collection of literature, especially strong in its emphasis in working-class and leftist themes. Many of the classic works by Michael Bakunin, Victor Hugo and Peter Kropotkin were available in leather bound editions, reflective of the honored places they occupied in the minds of club members.40
A vigorous theatre developed at the Italian Club. The auditorium for L’Unione attracted a

L’Unione Italiana, the Italian Club, shown here in 1919, is still in operation.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough Public Library System.

A vigorous theatre developed at the Italian Club. The auditorium for L’Unione attracted a
number of prominent opera stars. “We had a theatre, a beautiful theatre,” boasted the cigarmaker and opera afficionado Joe Maniscalco. “We used to get the operetti from New York. The locals also formed a theatre to work with them.” Ybor City became a favorite stopping-off spot for stock companies and performers touring Cuba, such as Pasquale Vittore and Maria D’Amore. The bilingual nature of the Italian community permitted L’Unione’s membership the enjoyment of attending the Spanish-language theatre at the other clubs and also of appreciating plays performed in Spanish at L’Unione.41

From the Latin point of view, the clubs served to maintain ethnic identity while seeking minimal integration into the rest of city life. By organizing ethnic variation in Ybor City and West Tampa, they furnished coalescing points for each of the major groups. They confronted the very real needs of everyday life for Latins and provided a sense of community, an identity which drew upon the cultural heritages of each component. Over time, they were perhaps the principal tools of ethnic adaptation in the city, primarily due to their long lives and unusually high degree of community participation and support.

Spaniards and Cubans had participated in and carried to Tampa working models for cooperative medicine. In nineteenth-century Cuba, a number of mutual aid societies had established medical programs and built hospitals for the benefit of their membership. The idea germinated in Ybor City in 1888, when Dr. Guillermo Machado, a Spanish physician, organized La Igual (The Equal). For fifty cents a week, immigrant cigarmakers received free medical care at La Igual’s clinic. Quickly, cigar manufacturers, led by Enrique Pendas, combined enlightened self interest with benevolence, co-opting the idea of contract medicine and broadening it to include all workers. Named El Porvenir (The Future), the plan provided the services of a physician for a fee of one-dollar and twenty-five cents a month. Faced with the alternative of American physicians who could neither speak Spanish nor understand many of the tropical ailments associated with Cuba and the cigar industry, cigarmakers flocked to the new programs. Like-minded societies spun off the conceptual idea of El Porvenir.43

Cooperative Medicine

The most far-reaching and progressive accomplishment achieved by Ybor City’s mutual aid societies occurred not in the theatre or on the picnic grounds, but in the field of cooperative medicine where the immigrant associations anticipated socialized medicine. Indeed, Ybor City residents took care of their own in ways still not duplicated by American standards.

Yellow fever served as the midwife to the birth of cooperative medicine in Ybor City. During the early days, “immigrants were dying like flies,” remembered Fernando Pendos, president of Centro Español. However, Ybor City shared its suffering with countless other industrial-immigrant communities which did not respond with the same outburst of collective energy. The same forces which voiced Ybor City’s labor movement and leftist yearnings, articulated the responses toward collective medicine. The issue of socialized medicine had long been a topic of debate in Spain, Cuba and Italy, and immigrant societies put this doctrine into action in Ybor City.42
The inauguration of Centro Español moved organizational life onto a larger scale. With hundreds and potentially thousands of dues-paying members, leaders realized that such collective strength could build not only elaborate clubhouses, but perhaps large medical clinics, even hospitals. Leadership debated the fiscal prudence of cooperative medicine, arguing not against the efficacy of health benefits, but fearing the economic drain upon the society. In 1901, Centro Español rejected a proposal to build a private hospital, a decision prompting the secession of several hundred Spaniards to organize Centro Asturiano.

In the annals of immigration history, Centro Asturiano proved visionary in its concept of cooperative medicine. In 1903, the society leased the old St. James Hotel on Tampa Street, converting it into a temporary hospital. The membership soon authorized construction of a modern hospital at the corner of Jackson and Ola Streets. Dedicated in April 1905, Centro Asturiano’s Sanatorio may have been the first such hospital constructed by an immigrant group in the United States. Built at a cost of $15,000, the facility ranked among the most modern and best-equipped in Florida. The complex included a pharmacy, X-Ray lab, a modern operating room, beds for sixty patients and a pavilion. The society hired Dr. G.H. Altree to serve as full-time medical director. He supervised a staff of seventeen Cuban and Spanish physicians, nurses and aides.44

During the hospital’s first decade, income from Centro Asturiano’s membership fees, canteen receipts and social activities, consistently exceeded expenses from the clubhouse and hospital. During the period prior to 1939, an average of 250 members received hospitalization each year, costing an average of eighteen dollars per patient. Experts estimated that such care at a private hospital would have cost one hundred dollars, thus saving club members and the city of Tampa millions of dollars. For $1.50 per month members received full social and recreational benefits, including complete medical coverage. La Beneficiancia Asturiana permitted family members to enjoy these benefits at a nominal extra fee.45

Centro Español, pushed by its rival, unveiled its own equally impressive medical program in 1903. A committee led by President Vicente Guerra, a prominent cigar manufacturer, selected a picturesque site for a hospital on Bayshore Boulevard overlooking Tampa Bay. In February 1906, Centro Español dedicated a three-story Sanatorio, which was then perhaps the most modern facility in the state. In its first thirty years, the hospital treated 7,959 patients, of which 1,623 received operations. To minister to members’ families, La Beneficia Español enabled them to receive the same cradle to grave protection for a small fee.46

The completion of the hospitals by Centro Español and Centro Asturiano unquestionably demonstrated the commitment by Ybor City’s Latins to the collective welfare of thousands of families. To appreciate the nature of such a commitment, one must understand that during the period after 1905, Ybor City’s cigarmakers and their families could expect better health services than almost anyone in Tampa. When the Spanish societies completed their institutions in 1906, Tampa’s municipal hospital consisted of a makeshift facility housed in an abandoned courthouse. In 1910, the city completed the two-story Gordon Keller Hospital, but the $24,000, thirty-two bed facility paled in comparison to the modern brick structures built by the Spaniards. Tampa’s black community rightfully dreaded a visit to the Clara Frye Hospital, a two-story frame building with room for only seventeen beds.47
The mere existence and increasing popularity of collective medicine among Ybor City’s Latins angered Tampa’s medical community. The Hillsborough County Medical Society (HCMS) battled the concept of contract medicine for a half-century, labeling it “socialistic,” “un-American” and “radical.” The HCMS in particular waged an incessant battle with physicians who wished to serve the Latin societies. The very first amendment of the HCMS’s constitution prohibited its members from participating in contract medical programs. In 1902, the society passed a resolution stating, “any doctor who continued to hold any already accepted contract organized to obtain a fee for less than regulation [was] guilty of unprofessional and unethical conduct.” Shortly thereafter, the organization broadened its condemnation, prohibiting its members from even “consulting” with the medical pariahs. The Committee on Illegal Practitioners published lists of the guilty doctors (later expanded to include nurses).48

Despite the opposition of organized private physicians, collective medicine gained strength, stature and numbers following World War I. When members of Círculo Cubano and L’Unione Italiana considered building separate hospitals, Centro Asturiano and Centro Español permitted
Cubans and Italians to join their sweeping programs of cooperative medicine. Although economic motivations undoubtedly played a role in opening access to these medical plans, the move allowed inter-ethnic cooperation to function at social and economic levels unimaginable two decades earlier.

Collective medical efforts defined new parameters of mutual aid and dependence. The economic benefits generated by thousands of participants allowed the existing hospitals to modernize their facilities. In August 1928, Centro Asturiano dedicated a new $175,000 facility in Ybor City. Centro Español erected a new facility in 1970. The medical programs provided an invigorating stimulus to the entire program structure of the clubs. Since the clubs were the mechanisms by which members gained access to medical services, they retained healthy membership rolls for remarkably long periods of time. Medical privileges accounted for the major reason why Ybor City’s mutual aid societies retained their cohesiveness and strength even after World War II.49

Conclusion

The mutual aid society functioned as a bellwether of ethnic solidarity, generational change and the evolving urban community. The genius of Ybor City’s collective associations was their
ability to adjust to the changing tensions of ethnic group relations, the evolving workplace and waves of newcomers. Immigrant collectives, which began as simple institutions dispensing death and accident benefits, grew into complex networks of insurance, medical care, recreation and culture. Beginning in the 1890s with a few hundred immigrant males, the Cuban, Spanish and Italian societies crested in power and influence in the immediate pre-and post-World War II era, boasting two modern hospitals, five pharmacies, five medical laboratories, seven clubhouses (including West Tampa), and a membership totalling over 20,000 persons.
Ybor City’s mutual aid societies exhibited a high degree of ethnic interaction, economic cooperation and institutional sharing. A wide range of activities drew Cubans, Spaniards and Italians together, ranging from Latin picnics to athletic leagues to shared facilities during moments of mutual distress. Nothing, however, demonstrated more clearly the extraordinary degree of ethnic interaction than the outpouring of collective energies involved in cooperative medicine. Latins responded to problems of medical care with a dignity and dedication unequalled in urban America. That Ybor City’s Spaniards built such facilities dedicated to group health care was remarkable; that they willingly and creatively shared them with Cubans and Italians was even more noteworthy.


4 *El Internacional*, January 26, April 2, 1917.


7 “Life History of Enrique Pendas,” WPA interview; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, March 17,1926.

8 *Resena Historica de Cencuenta Ahos*, 10; WPA, “History of the Centro Español.”

9 *Tampa Tribune*, June 15, 20, 23, 1892, August 12, 1892.

10 WPA, “Centro Español”; *Tampa Tribune*, October 20,1983.

11 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, March 25, April 22, May 1, 1909.

12 WPA, “Number of Members in the Centro Español by Year.”

13 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 8, 1902; WPA; “History Facts, Centro Asturiano,” 318.


15 *El Centro Asturiano en Tampa. Inauguración del Edidico Social 15 de Mayo de 1914* (Tampa, 1914),11-13; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, January 23, 1909, September 9, 1911, October 9, 1912; *Tampa Daily Times*, June 16, 1912.
16 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 15, 17, 1914.

17 Interview with Anthony Muñiz, May 20, 1982, Tampa; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 20, October 4, 1909, April 3, September 18, 23, 1911.


19 Ibid., 154-203.


21 Ibid.; WPA, “Study of the Centro Asturiano.”

22 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, January 31, 1899; WPA, “Number of Members in the Circulo Cubano by Year.”

23 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 15, 1907, May 23, 1909, April 7, 1911, November 17, 1916, May 19, 1917.


28 Interviews with Alfonso Diaz and Juan Mallea, August 15, 1982, Tampa.

29 WPA, “Study of La Union Marti-Maceo Cuban Club for the Colored Race;” interview with Diaz; *Tampa Morning Tribune*, January 2, 1906, September 24, October 4, 1908.


32 *Registro Soci Famigliari, L’Unione*, 5 vols., in Special Collections, University of South Florida Library.

33 Interview with Dominic Giunta, May 5, 1984.

34 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, October 13, 1983; WPA, “Photographs on Tombstones: A Latin Custom.”

35 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, June 18, 1910, October 10, 1912; interview with Paul Longo, June 1, 1979, June 30, 1980, July 1, 1980.

36 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, April 4, 1915, April 18, 1917.

37 Interview with Joe Maniscalco, April 3, 1980.

38 *Tampa Morning Tribune*, May 13, 1924.
39 Interview with Nina Ferlita, April 25, 1980; interview with Alfonso Lopez, April 24, 1980.


41 Interview with Maniscalco; Tampa Morning Tribune, July 25, 1906, January 24, October 4, 1908.

42 Tampa Times, June 8, 1965.


44 Tampa Morning Tribune, February 28, 1904, April 9, 1905; El Centro Asturiano en Tampa, 4-7.

45 WPA, “Centro Asturiano Hospital;” Tampa Morning Tribune, December 12, 1926; El Federal, May 3, 1902.


