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# AN HISTORY OF BLACKS IN TAMPA/ HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY FROM 1526 TO THE PRESENT

By JAMES E. TOKLEY

& Who shall tell our history when we are  
dead  
and gone  
of the beauty and the mystery & the pain of  
Freedom  
Song  
Shall I tell you, sitting 'round me/ of our  
long and sacred past  
Will you tell it to your children - tell it true,  
so it  
will last?

It was said by all the wisemen/and the Truth  
is still complete:  
If you do not learn from Hist'ry/Then from  
Hist'ry you'll  
repeat &  
If you do not know you hist'ry that began  
across the waves  
You have doomed yourself, my children, &  
your children shall  
be slaves.

This Truth I come to tell you - all about that  
which has been  
As a poet, this I tell you/of the long &  
winding sin/  
Of a time when days were filled with  
pain/confusion walked  
the land/& all who were Black were  
considered slaves every  
woman, child & man.

I speak, young ones, of a wonderland  
that rose from a painted sea  
A golden Caribbean Paradise - like the land  
of Adam and Eve; I bring you memories/

of a land so green & abundantly given by  
God  
that our Spanish cousins - once removed –  
fell in love with this mystical sod  
& They christened the land El Florida  
(which means  
the flowery plains)  
Then proceeded to search for the Fountain  
of Youth –  
at a place that they also would name

T'was Espiritu Santo - a place by the Bay  
The land of the Timucuan  
and the home of the brave Caloosa tribe  
who made the Spaniards run!  
T-'was the year of 1526  
on the voyage of Narvaez  
that an African hero called Esteban  
established  
himself in the West/as  
the first Black man to land in Tampa  
and walk its winding shores  
This Estevanico - which means "Little  
Stevie"  
was born a North African Moor.  
As a matter of fact, it was Esteban –  
as the story is often told –  
who was sent by Narvaez to find The Seven  
Cities of Gold!

Some seventy years before John Smith  
built Jamestown for the King,  
young Esteban and Narvaez claimed Tampa  
Bay for  
Spain

I sing of a time when Florida was the  
Promise of

Liberty

When the Seminole Joined the African slave  
in the hopes they  
could both be free.

On the Apalachee-cola back in 1695, they  
built a fort  
& called it Musa - like a king of days gone  
by.

But the fort was destroyed by battleships  
and many Africans died/The Seminoles,  
who were  
their friends, died also at their side.

Yet, the fight was far from over & the  
Seminole Wars raged on  
Inspired by men like Osceola and men like  
Gopher John.

Osceola was Chief of the Seminoles and he  
was also  
Black.

His Seminole wife was Pee-to-Kiss, but  
Cher-to-Cher  
he liked.

For, Cher-to-Cher was his African bride  
whom the  
slavers stole away –  
which started the Second Seminole War that  
made  
America pay!

& Then, there was ol' Gopher John  
as dark as a Tampa night  
whose warrior spirit & cunning ways  
prolonged the  
Freedom fight  
until there was a treaty signed & the  
Seminoles moved West.

Black Seminoles were the first to leave  
But the struggle would not rest.  
Blacks fought in Florida - the Civil War –  
in the 48th Infan-try  
Then took Rough Riders up San Juan Hill  
just to hel the Cubans get free.  
O' the Buffalo Soldier was their name –  
when they camped in Tampa Town

The 9th and 10th Horse Cavalry even took  
Geronimo  
down

& Even though the Tampa Press accused'em  
of acting White  
They walked the streets of Downtown  
Tampa & weren't  
afraid to fight.

Then Ybor City opened its doors and  
Cubans gathered  
'round  
& we marveled at Black Cubans/as they  
wore their freedom  
crowns

But we could not speak their language &  
they did not  
know our names  
So, our African reunion was a day that never  
came.

But the days of the 1900's/just before the  
First World War,  
were the days of pain and murder:  
Blacks folks dying by the score!  
& the papers printed front page news while  
Tampans read  
their fill/  
of the "Nigger In The Woodbox", or "That  
Bad Black Negro  
Killed"!

"At Fleeing Coon He Fired" ("Coon" is what  
they called us  
then.)

"The Unspoiled Nigger" was another  
headline (For, we were  
Niggers ... never men.)  
in that same old Dally, another headline  
states:

"Negro Death Rate Doubles Birth Rate" - it  
announced in  
gleeful hate.

While Black soldiers risked their lives in  
World Wars I & II,  
We were living, leaving and dying as we  
paid our

Tampa dues  
But even then we kept the faith, though  
surely most would  
disbelieve  
Yet, Black folks came to Tampa, by the  
thousands –  
thick as bees...  
came from Georgia, S. Carolina, from New  
Orleans,  
Alabama  
Came from up in Archie, Florida, even  
Bealsville lent  
a hand  
& together with Italians, Germans, Jews and  
Spaniards, too,  
We built Henry Plant a railroad & a fine  
hotel, to boot!  
For, the building that most people know as  
good ol'  
U. of T.  
was once the grandest hotel that the world  
had ever seen.

Now, after we had built this town & laid its  
red brick streets  
We built our tabernacles where the children  
of God could meet  
& when our souls had rested and the White  
Man's work was  
through  
We gathered all our dreams & put up  
Central Avenue

There was Saunders' Central Blue Room,  
Palm Dinette &  
Green's Cafe;  
'Was the Lincoln Movie Theatre, Central  
Theatre on the way.  
Jackson, Fordham & Rodriguez - three  
Black men who  
practiced Law  
Drs. Richards, Williams & Silas who were  
always there  
on call  
We had Richard's Photo, the Pepper Pot,  
Central Newstand

& beauty shops  
The Shoe Shine Parlor, Johnny Gray's, the  
ol' Stink Moon  
where the big boys played  
There was the old Kid Mason Hardware  
Store, Palace Drugs  
and many more!  
We had the Florida Sentinel ('fore the  
Bulletin came)  
& Central Life Insurance (To this day, it's  
called the  
same.)  
There was the Clara Frye infirmary where  
only Blacks  
could go  
a union of Longshoremen whose Black  
membership would  
grow.  
There were High Schools - Blake &  
Middleton,  
Debutants and big parades - like the Tilt of  
the  
Maroon and Gold when FAM and Cookman  
played.

There were names like Armwood, Wilson,  
Dorsett,  
Davis and Stewart, too  
Rodriguez and Hammond answered the call  
But Lowry made it through!  
Rev. Lowry was the first Black man to win  
by local vote  
Then Hargrett, Perry & Padgett/each  
increased Black voters  
hopes.  
Jim Hargrett won a capital seat/Rubin  
Padgett –  
a County beat  
& Perry Harvey prospers in  
his post as City Council-man.  
Yet, there are others who soon will be/a part  
of  
our prosperity  
whose dreams & hopes have yet survived  
the thin that eat Black dreams alive

Like Urban Renewal –a “dream-come-true”  
- that murdered  
Central Avenue  
& Integration - which was used as a tool  
to steal from Black Tampa its public high  
schools.  
Yes,

even the drugs and crime we see  
that ruin our communities

...these, too, will pass, though many may  
die  
But we'll remain & continue to try  
Until one day when most of us/will pack our  
bags  
for the Exodus....

These things I sing as History/But the truths  
I speak  
are Destiny.  
For, I am a poet of the Line of Kings  
& I speak of Black Tampa & all that it has  
been.  
May your young ears listen & your spirits  
hear  
What my heart has told you  
In Truth and Fear.

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