

The Ponce I never knew



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

Barbara Tasch Ezratty has edited a lovely book titled “Puerto Rico, An Oral History: 110 Years of Life on La Isla.” It is different, charming and interesting. She introduces it this way:

“There have been scholarly books written about Puerto Rico—books about its political status, its economy, its old and modern history, its plans for the future. Each supports its premise with hard statistics and impersonal copy.

“This is a different kind of book. In these pages, you will hear first the voices of the people of Puerto Rico who describe the island that was their home from 1898-1950. From their memories, you will find an older, slower, sometimes sweeter, yet often harsher Puerto Rico. Some of their memories are sharp and recall events with the clarity of first sight. Others are weaker and have been diluted and maybe distorted through the decades. But even those bits of the past can tell us how life was then; how it felt to be alive in those yesterdays.”

Reading the book I came upon the oral narrative of Horacio H. Subirá and Teresa Aparicio de Subirá. Horacio Subirá was born in Ponce in 1905 and graduated from Ponce High School in 1924. I was born in Ponce in 1936. I grew up in the same house in the town center where I still live. Although I do not subscribe to the saying of some *ponceños* that “Ponce es Ponce y lo demás es parking (Ponce is Ponce and the rest is parking),” I have a profound attachment to the city of my birth, the one that shaped my values and the vision of my country.

So I read with interest the narrative of Horacio Subirá about the Ponce he knew, which was the Ponce of the 1910s up to the late 1920s. The Ponce I knew as a child was the Ponce of the 1930s and 1940s. Reading from Subirá, I made connections that I had not made before. For instance he tells us:

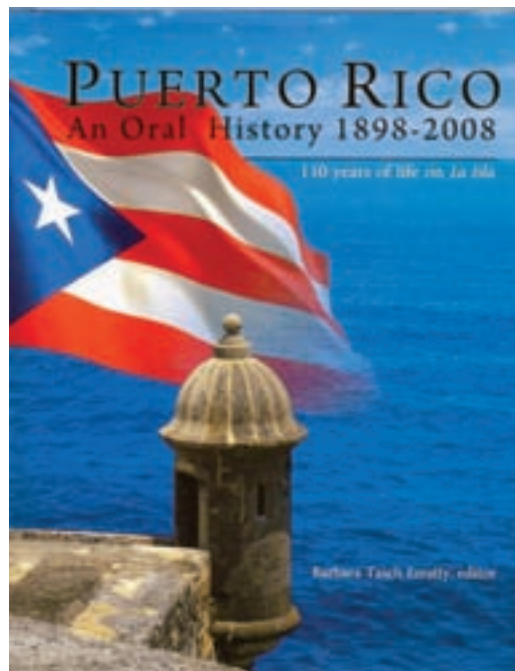
“I remember a lot of things about my childhood in Ponce. I saw the start of baseball in Ponce. Two young men, Mr. Guerrish and Charles Terry, came from the states to teach school in Ponce. They were baseball players and they started to teach the boys in Ponce to play baseball. Ponce had the best baseball team in the island, which these two fellows started with the high school students, the boys.”

Well, I live close to what was Ponce’s original baseball stadium. The games were played on Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings and afternoons. There were no lights so no games were played at night. In those days, Ponce still had the best baseball team, with Francisco

Coimbre, Felo and Juan Guilbe, Griffin Tirado, Pantalones Santiago and others. The stadium was named after Charles H. Terry. But I never knew that Terry was the person who introduced baseball in Ponce along with Guerrish.

Another revelation was about the system for maintenance of the sidewalks and streets.

“In Ponce, there were street cleaners every morning. They went around cleaning and sweeping the streets. They had a hose, something like a fire hose but shorter, and they would connect it to the fire hydrant and wash the streets and sidewalks with these hoses. They sprinkled the dust to keep it down. When the rains came, you would get lovely mud. The mud would go down the drains. If there was a lot of mud, it would be cleaned with the hoses. The streets were not paved until the 1920s,” Subirá recalled.



Since when I grew up all of Ponce’s streets were paved, I somehow imagined that they had been paved forever, or at least as far back as when King Alfonso XII of Spain gave Ponce the title of “City” in the late 19th century. Before that, we were the Village of Ponce. My idealized vision of my city was shattered by this revelation.

Another connection I made with my youthful memories was with something that I had heard once or twice in my grandmother’s house but which I had no idea how it worked. What I had heard was that back in the old days before I was born, Luciano Colón, my grandfather, owned a line of coaches that were stationed in La Plaza—the city’s square. Now when I was growing up my grandfather was a municipal judge and he had nothing to do with the few coaches that were in the plaza. These just provided short rides for *ponceños* or tourists. So I did not know what a line of coaches was. It was a puzzle to me. I found out that they were taxis in Subira’s article:

“These same coaches were the taxis of Ponce.

They were stationed around the plaza. At one time, there may have been at least 20 or 30 of them. If people wanted to go someplace, they came to the plaza and got in a coach. They were taken all over town, and the coach would come back to the plaza and wait for another passenger. Or, you called by phone from the houses that had a telephone at that time to the firehouse, and asked the man there: ‘Would you please tell a coachman to come and get me?’ And he would go out and yell: ‘Say, Mr. so and so wants a coach.’ And the coachman would go and get them. It was real small-town life. At that time in Ponce, everybody knew everybody.”

Now one thing I never imagined was the way that *leche fresca*, or fresh milk, was sold in Ponce in the old days. During the days of my youth, I do remember riding into Ponce on horseback with an employee of my father—my father was a lawyer but he also was a farmer—bringing milk to our home from our farm in Tibes in vessels contained in large round baskets, *banastas*, on each side of the horse. There were no pasteurizers then in Ponce. But, during those days, the practice for the sale of fresh milk which Subirá relates, had ended and I had no notion of it until I read it in his oral history:

“Another convenience that we had during those years in Ponce was fresh milk, sold at home right from the cow. A man would walk around with the cow, yelling, ‘Leche fresca! Leche de apoyo.’ You would go outside, bringing a receptacle to him. You would call him; he would bring the cow in front of you and milk it. Fresh as can be! Not only cows would be milked, they would also milk the goats. You could buy this right in front of your house, too. A lot of foodstuffs, like fruits and vegetables, were also sold by street vendors. It was common during those years. They would sell all sorts of things in the streets.”

Subira’s narrative includes many other anecdotes of the Ponce I never knew such as one about a daredevil from the states who landed his plane on a racetrack that existed then and was later killed while doing some stunts that day. I also learned of the routines at the Casino balls and the earthquake which destroyed the original Teatro La Perla, and so on.

Tasch Ezratty’s “Puerto Rico, An Oral History: 110 Years of Life on La Isla” is excellent reading to get the flavor of not only the Ponce, but also the Puerto Rico, we never knew. ■

Rafael Hernández Colón is a three-term (12-year) former governor of Puerto Rico (1973-'76 and 1985-'92). He served as Justice secretary (1965-'67) and Senate president (1969-'72). He was president of the Popular Democratic Party for 19 years. Comments on this article are welcome at caribbeanbusinesspr.com. Go to [Sign in](#) link on the homepage. Emails also may be sent to column@caribbeanbusinesspr.com.