
TALKING FILES: The water seller is coming!

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Water for all...because Lola won Pepe's heart with a good bath, they used to shout at times for the delight of the children.

Water has always had a leading role in the life of my family. When we lived in Mañana neighborhood, in Havana's distant town of Guanabacoa, my grandparents threw plates at each other, when any of them dared "to open the tank tap". And then my mother Graciela, old and highly whiny, used to stand beside me, when I was washing, ready to defend every drop at the expense of the loudest tantrum.

Late 19th century Havana, center of secrecy and quarrel against the Spanish colonial government, was not even the shadow of what it would be in the 1900s, when it became one of the neatest and most bohemian cities in the continent.

The milkmen walked through its dusty, sunken and muddy streets with their herds of plump cows, which they milked in front the doors of the houses, along with pig, turkey and guinea sellers always ready to respond to the shout of the landladies, the cart drivers full of all kind of goods, and a swarm of street vendors led by candymen, some blacks with boards full of flies that trapped people's attention

with their corn puddings, royal eggs, meringues on a plate, sweet nibbles and sweet potato puddings.

In the area of family hygiene the existing terror situation does not displease much lineage ladies and gentlemen, who associate a good bath with a dangerous shipwreck and much less professionals, bureaucrats, salesclerks and rustic men, unable to wet and refresh their skins with due frequency. The rich mansions and the dwellings of humble sectors lack bathrooms and sewers; consequently, toilets with glazed earthenware, comfortable urinals, nickel-plated showers, porcelain bathtubs and other contemporary gifts are absent. Instead, they use silver basins with arabesques in which water is poured from bottles or jars of the same metal. In the backyards of the residences they dig filthy pits, absorbers, always full of excrements, bad smells, rats and cockroaches that invade rooms, reception halls and the most conspicuous dinning rooms.

Neither the original Zanja Real nor the Fernando VII Aqueduct, antecedent of the Albear Canal, inaugurated in 1893, have the due flow and facilities to provide an interrupted service. In 1850, only a fifth of the capital city, estimated in 130 000 inhabitants, receives water directly in their homes through some 2000 taps, notwithstanding the village only reaches Belascoain Street: El Vedado is barely a project and Jesus del Monte and Cerro neighborhoods comprise a few holiday palaces standing at the foot of their respective avenues.

Ramiro Cabrera in an article published in Social magazine in July 1919 comments that the shortage of this odorless and tasteless liquid was solved, partly, by the popular water seller, a very interesting guy, still frequent in our streets in the 1980s. Generally, they were Gallicians who sell overparticular families in cleaning issues some little barrels full of water and covered with mosses, hauled from Vento springs in some carts with two big wheels drawn by a mule or a yoke of oxen during the stormy days.

Is the job profitable? Yes —and a lot—, to the extent that the water seller is as expected as Christmas. He's paid half bill in cash and sometimes up two quarters per delivery and clients always keep him pleased with gifts that may include food and worn clothing.

"The last water seller I talked when I was a boy —and he was skilled in the subject, concluded:

-Little friend, water is a barometer: the more water a city has, the better concerning the education of its citizens; water increases the number of people; water attracts, fascinates...

Water helps ease your thirst and helps you cooking as well. Taking a shower, for

instance, cools down passion, calms the nerves and improves

human condition (...). Don't tell me about clean villages without aqueducts and lots of water for everyone. If you are one day King of Spain and you want to become famous Columbus, take my advice and do what I just say: introduce a water pipe in your house and you will see the results in your vassals as they would become braver, more skillful, more patriots."

Giving publicity to these water sellers with big mustaches, heavy smokers, full of muscles and foul-mouthed are truly green parrots. Water for everyone!

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