

Feb. 11, 2001----

KEY WEST, Fla. Like the Baha Men and the manatee, the L. Valladares & Sons newsstand is an endangered species. The southernmost newsstand in America is a lifeline on the island that once attracted artists, writers and other outcasts. Ernest Hemingway bought his newspapers at L. Valladares & Sons. So did Tennessee Williams, although founder Leonte Valladares refused to give the playwright his Sunday newspaper until he paid in advance.

These days Key West is more popular with land developers and time-sharers. Even Jimmy Buffett doesn't live here anymore. And that's why time is running out on L. Valladares & Sons.

The property value would go up if the store closed down.

“My bookkeeper says I'm not making enough money on the bookstore,” says current owner Arthur Leonte Valladares, 75. “And that I should close. I'd make more money renting the space. I won't tell you what I think about that. But I need something to do. I'm not going to sit home.”

Valladares' father, Leonte, started the business in 1927. Valladares' grandfather was a cigarmaker from the Canary Islands who came to Key West during the late 1800s cigar boom. Valladares' parents were born in Key West. Valladares' daughter, Maria, 46, and son, Tony, also 46, were born in Key West, as were two of his grandchildren.

Valladares is a conch to the core.

The bookstore has more than 3,000 titles, including softcover books, Architectural Digest and Soldier of Fortune magazine. I've been going to L. Valladares & Sons since 1976. Just like the island, there's always a precious discovery at the newsstand.

On my visit last month, I found the latest copy of Baseball America. The store still maintains an amazing stock, considering Key West's remote location on a two-by-four mile island of marl rock.

“Getting periodicals to Key West has always been a problem,” Valladares says. “My dad sold Hemingway's books autographed, for a dollar extra. It was a big deal. My dad and Hemingway knew each other well. Hemingway came in and said, ‘I want the New York Times.’ My dad said, ‘I don't know how to get it.’”

Hemingway lived in Key West between 1928 and 1939, when he left for Cuba. Hemingway told the elder Valladares he would call New York himself. Besides the New York Times, Hemingway reeled in the (New York) Herald-Tribune, the (New

York) World Telegram, the New York News and New York Mirror. Gee. How did Ernie find time to drink and write?

“The papers came by train,” Valladares says. “Two days late. My dad would go to the train and pick up the papers on a bicycle and bring them to the store. That’s what established us.”

Florida developer Henry Flager built his Florida East Coast Railroad in 1912, and it ran from Miami to Key West until Labor Day, 1935, when a hurricane tore apart the railroad tracks. The Overseas Highway was immediately built on the roadbed.

Valladares says few people realize empty freight trains made an express run to Key West. “They’d roll the (empty) cars into the ferry which went to Cuba,” he says. “In Cuba, they would pick up all the tomatoes, bananas, avocados, mangos and other small crops. After the storm of '35, all that disappeared. No train, no way to get them back.”

And that’s how Homestead, just west of Miami on the way to Key West, became a farming community. “They developed farms since you couldn’t get them from Cuba anymore,” Valladares explains. “That’s why you see the Key limes, avocados, mangos growing there. Now, property is so valuable, they’re cutting back on crops and building condominiums, homes, whatever you want to call it.

“Progress. . .”

The progress of the highway didn’t speed things up. President Harry Truman began visiting Key West in 1946. He spent 175 days of his presidency catching the rays at what’s become known as “The Little White House,” 111 Front St. (Open to the public, 305-294-9911). The newspapers were still arriving two days late, over the road.

“And the president can’t have his papers two days old,” Valladares says in stern tones. “National Airlines flew from New York to Miami to Key West. So National agreed to shuttle the papers down here for the president. My dad would pick them up at the airport, and I would deliver the papers to the White House. I’d ride my bike right up to the front door. No one stopped me. I’d walk in, put the paper on the coffee table and walk out. I never touched anything. I never saw the president. And I was never stopped.”

Although Jimmy Buffett put Key West on the map as the capital of Margaritaville, Valladares doesn’t recall the songwriter stopping in his store. “I sell his books and they sell very well,” he says.

“Now, when Tennessee Williams lived here (he had a home on the island from 1949 until his death in 1983) we couldn’t get too many New York Times,” Valladares recalls. “Most were reserved and you paid for them in advance. Well,

Tennessee Williams was a small man. He always kept two big bruisees with him. He drove up one Sunday morning and sent in this man to get the Times. I was here with my dad. My dad said there were no New York Times for sale."

The man returned to the car. After a few minutes the man went back to the newsstand and saw the papers behind the counter. The elder Valladares told him the papers were reserved. The man retreated to the car. Several more minutes passed before the man went to the newsstand for a third time and said, "You don't understand, Tennessee Williams wants a paper." Valladares says, "My dad had enough. He said, 'I don't care if it's Jesus Christ. If you haven't paid for a paper, you don't get a paper.'"

The original L. Valladares & Sons newsstand was part of a drugstore near the La Concha Hotel at the heart of Duval Street. In 1941 Valladares' father started a wholesale agency in a conch shack off Duval Street. From there, he started delivering magazines to six accounts in Key West. He left the original location in 1953.

"He had bought this property for \$2,500," Valladares says of the store's current location at 1200 Duval St. "And I had been born next door. My grandmother on my mother's side used to cook for cigarmakers that were in this building. She'd make black beans and roast pork and send it in here through a window on a plank that ran between the two buildings. This building caught fire and was destroyed, but I don't remember the day. We had to rebuild."

L. Valladares & Sons has been at its present location since 1953. The store is on the ground level; four furnished apartments are upstairs. In 1953 the apartments rented for \$75 a month. "The city commission has built up Duval Street on the north end, but they don't do anything for us down here (on the south end)," Valladares says. "We don't get any publicity at all."

Well, last year the Chicken Store opened at 1229 Duval St. The Chicken Store sells rooster-related art, T-shirts and artifacts. The staff also attempts to relocate nuisance birds, repair the wounded and raise the orphaned. My editors will fry me if I get any more into this, but let me say that I generally stay on the south end of the island. Last month after revisiting my compatriots at the Green Parrot tavern, I walked back to my hotel to the sounds of roosters crowing in the dead of the night.

That rooster's call has become a familiar sound for Valladares. Between 7 and 7:30 a.m. every day he prepares to open up the newsstand with his daughter. The store opens at 8 a.m. Valladares goes home around noon for a couple of hours. He returns after lunch and stays until the store closes at 8 p.m. (During off-season he closes at 6 p.m.) "I work hard," he says. "I don't pay for extra help. When you get down to 10 customers an hour, it's not worth it."

Valladares stocks his store by working with 10 wholesalers that encompass 48

states. But he lost a key account to Anderson News out of Miami, which handles international newspapers. During our conversation, a middle-aged couple from England walks into the store. They ask Valladares if he carries the London Times.

He later explains, "I used to get the London Times, the London Mail, the German papers. It's all gone away. And a lot of Europeans come in the store. I used to get the Chicago Sun-Times. But I can't get it anymore. Miami's got it locked up. Now, with the books, the popularity of the author really makes a difference. Oprah (Winfrey) does an awful lot for us. Every time she picks a book (for her club) we have to put it on the stands."

There's even a best-selling story behind the store's vintage Key West postcards. The elder Valladares had color scenes of the Little White House (built in 1890), Duval Street and other key locales printed in 1935 by a now-defunct Massachusetts company, but he neglected to have them copyrighted.

"The freight from Massachusetts to Miami was less than from Miami to Key West," Valladares says. "So people in Miami would buy the postcards, send a truck down here and sell them lower than my father could sell them."

So his father boxed up 25 cases of cards and placed them in storage. He also boxed up his 1946-48 collection, which for the first time featured photographs of Key West on a postcard. Several years ago Valladares brought them out of storage. "They're really original antiques," he says. "Some of them even have a little termite hole in them. Once they're gone, they're gone. I've been asked to reprint them and I've said no."

Valladares looks around his empty store. Outside on the sidewalk, tourists rush past the newsstand. Valladares nods toward the tall rack of postcards, a totem to another time. "And there's one of the sunset," says the steadfast bookseller. "That hasn't changed a bit."

I never intended to write about L. Valladares & Sons.

I was on vacation.

However, among the thoughts that accompanied me to Key West was word of the Feb. 4 closing of the Kitch-Inn restaurant in Mendota, Ill. The restaurant had been in the same family for 92 years. Owners Andrew and Genevieve Troupis closed because of Andrew's health problems; their children were too far along in their own lives to take over the classic diner.

I'll always remember the Troupis' gentle and dignified manner. The warmth of their restaurant reflected their synchronicity as a couple. I thought about them as I wandered up and down Duval Street. It was those memories that inspired me to introduce myself to Valladares.

Key West has changed a lot in the 25 years I've been going there. L. Valladares & Sons has remained as constant as the sunset.

It turned out that watching the gentle Valladares close his eyes and spin his stories became a big part of my trip.

No story is too small to be told.