

Ernesto Flaiban: playing-card manufacturer in Buenos Aires (1936-70)

by Simon Wintle & Diego Flaiban *

The Beginning

In 1928, cousins Ernesto Flaiban and Antonio Flaiban established a small general printing business in Buenos Aires for producing items such as almanacs, containers and other commercial printing. The firm prospered and became a leader in the sector.

The economic ups and downs of the day made for an unstable and difficult market affecting all manufacturing industries in general. To a certain extent all businesses wax and wane in synchronisation with cycles of economic prosperity and playing card manufacturers are no exception. In the wake of an economic downturn circumstances oblige many firms to merge. Thus, in 1930, Flaiban, Camilloni, Biozcati Hnos and Sibolichi Ramella y Cía joined forces and merged into one entity: **Flaiban y Camilloni Ltda**. In this way, Flaiban y Camilloni managed to survive the economic crisis and the military revolt, although only just remaining profitable and with few orders in their books. No doubt there were many interesting stories to tell of these early days which have been forgotten and are unrecorded.

By 1932 the worst of the crisis was over, and the company was able to acquire new land and to build new premises thereon. Although lucrative contracts had been won with the advertising agency Walter Thompson, business continued to be lean. Playing cards were still not being produced by Flaiban & Camilloni at this time.

Flaiban y Camilloni Ltda 1930-1942

In 1936 Flaiban y Camilloni commenced the production of playing cards with the following brand names: "Tiburón", "Patito" and "Tela de Araña". Although the quality of the cards was not too good to begin with, business was picking up, but the military coup of 1941 heralded more problems and



destabilised business. Playing card production was still profitable, however, and although almost running at a loss, the company as a whole managed to ride out the crisis and survive. It is likely that Flaiban & Camilloni manufactured cards for Mario Colombo (Naipes 'Obelisco') and Eduardo Chemmes (Naipes 'Castilla'), amongst others, during this period, and that Flaiban S.R.L. continued to do so later on.

Flaiban S.R.L. 1943-1952

The precarious situation urged Ernesto Flaiban to change the business around and put it onto a firmer footing in 1942. He bought out his former partners and then proceeded to wind up the existing company and terminate the deteriorating economic situation. The following year, in 1943, Ernesto Flaiban installed a new printing works in calle Alberti 282, Bs As, calling it **E. Flaiban S.R.L.** and specialising in graphic arts, educational materials and advertising. At first the printing method was typography (letter press) but subsequently this was replaced by offset lithography: in both situations most of the remaining work was manual, including quality control. Mr Flaiban would personally monitor the quality of his playing cards during production.

Fig.1: Sr Ernesto Flaiban checks the quality during production. Every ace, king and joker needed to meet the specification.



Having the benefit of modern technology for the day, Sr Flaiban manufactured his own cardboard, incorporating an ingenious technique to make the cards opaque, i.e. non-transparent. The secret of this method consisted in sandwiching two sheets of 125 gm card with black glue to give a resultant laminated card of about 280 grs/m². Sr Flaiban devised the formula for the glue himself.

The next step involved giving the sheets a satin finish, which facilitated a better printing result.

Then the sheets were passed through a German machine which applied a cellulose-based varnish onto both faces, giving greater durability and firmness to the cards.

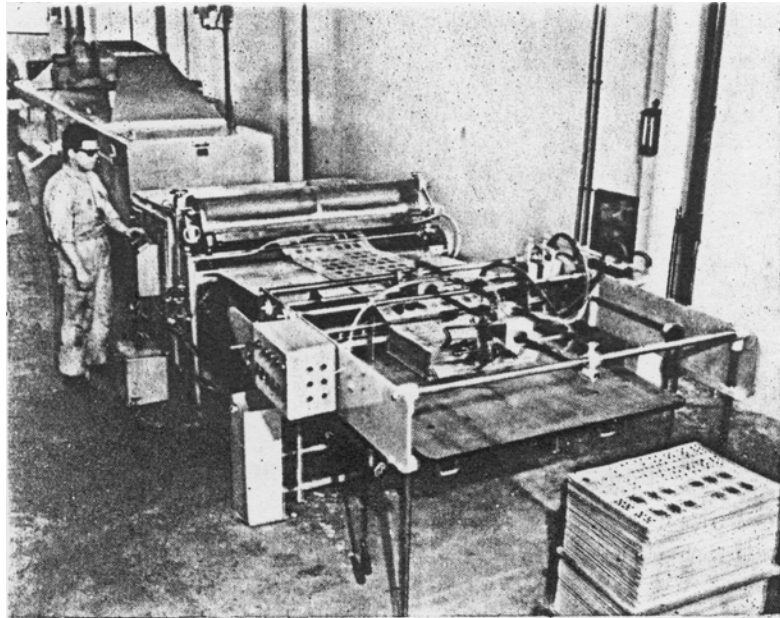
Fig.2: cutting and sorting of playing cards.



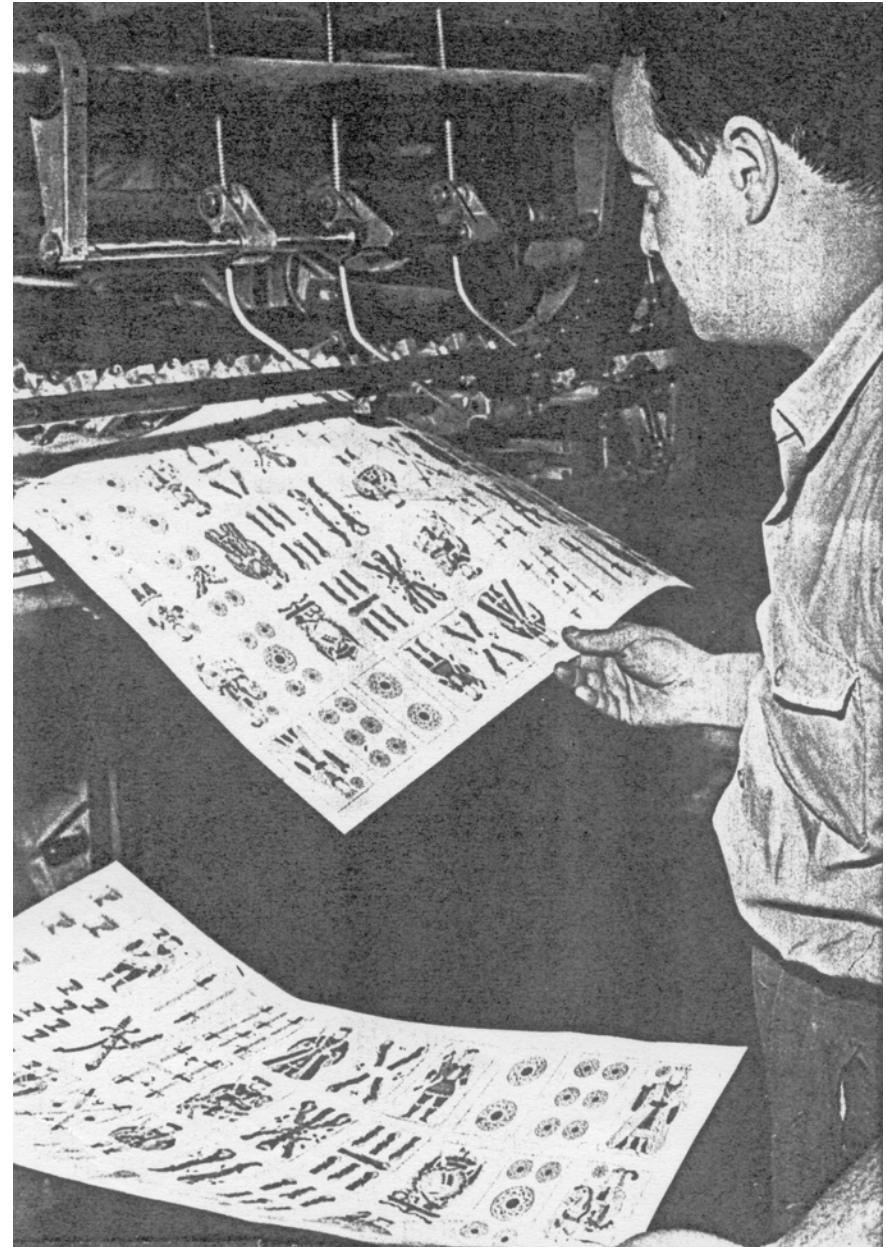
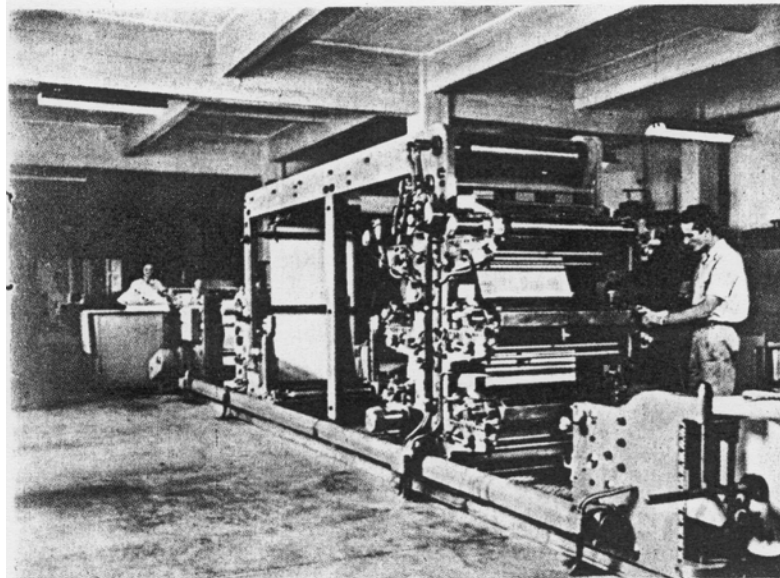
Fig.3: the fours of cups are being removed from 'Paisanito' packs so that they may receive the fiscal tax stamp.



Finally, sheets were cut and sorted into complete packs using a circular guillotine to cut the sheets into strips of cards of the same suit sign, which were then sorted, cut out and made up into packs of 40 or 52 cards. The corners were rounded using a special cutting forme mounted on a jig system.



MAQUINA PLASTIFICADORA
MAQUINA ROTATIVA 6 COLORES FLEXOGRAFICA



After cutting, packs were subjected to quality inspection to check the precision of the cutting. Around 5% of cards were found to be imperfect, and these were destroyed. Packs were wrapped in damp proof paper and then inserted into individual boxes. They were then placed into cardboard boxes containing 144 decks each, called 'gruesas'. Output was typically around 40 'gruesas' per day of Spanish-suited packs.

By 1945 playing cards made by Flaiban attained a quality which was deemed to be comparable to that of cards manufactured in France and Spain, although cards made in North America were always considered superior. The high quality of E. Flaiban's playing cards won the loyal patronage of customers to such an extent that foreign, imported cards dwindled. In 1948 the E. Flaiban works relocated to calle Mario Bravo no. 840, whilst the administration department remained at no. 547 of the same street.

Paisanito S.A.C.I. 1952-1970

In 1952 the company became **E. Flaiban S.A.C.I.** and a separate firm **Paisanito S.R.L.** was hived-off to calle Rio Limay 1527, but was subsequently re-merged with E. Flaiban S.A.C.I. shortly afterwards for legal reasons. At the same time the envelope manufacturer Balint y Cia S.R.L. was acquired, and new German machinery purchased in 1955/6. In 1958 the company began quoting on the Buenos Aires stock market, breaking records for the number of shares sold. Further expansions were completed by 1961 when the company's capital value peaked.

Around this time, Ernesto Flaiban, now in partnership with his son Jorge, took the step of becoming exclusive distributor for Celulosa Argentina, the only paper manufacturer in the country. They were also agents for security paper for printing cheques and bonds, which was obtained by arrangement from Wiggins Teape & Co. Ltd. As a result, Flaiban were able to expand their own activities into business stationery, educational materials and other markets, and to develop their own distribution networks.

In 1963 the company moved all machinery to new 6000 m² premises in calle Santa Rosa in Florida, in the province of Buenos Aires. Here, around 50 machines in five main sections, and 400 workers were accommodated, producing envelopes, containers, office and educational stationery, serviettes and other related paper goods including playing cards. However, during the

second half of the 1960s fortunes were reversed, and in spite of efforts to continue expanding and to diversify, output and profitability declined and the business was finally closed down in 1970.

* I am indebted to Diego Flaiban and Antonio Flaiban, descendents of Sr Ernesto Flaiban, for help with historical details and company records, and the photos illustrated in this article. The photos were previously published in the Buenos Aires newspaper La Nación, 2nd July 1967. See also www.wopc.co.uk/argentina/flaiban/index.html