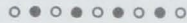


# ARTICLES

## THE SPONGE INDUSTRY OF TARPON SPRINGS

By Myrtle Ferry

In 1960, Elliot A. Macklow, Chief, Audio-Visual Services, BCF, supervised the production of a sound, color motion picture entitled "Sponge--Treasure from the Sea" for the sponge industry centered in Tarpon Springs, Florida. During film production, Macklow was made to feel part of this sponge fishing community, which is made up of people mainly of Greek ancestry. About 6 years after the motion picture was released, during the filming of another BCF motion picture, Macklow again visited Tarpon Springs. He was welcomed warmly. It was during this recent visit that Mrs. Myrtle Ferry, Secretary of the Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange, told him about this account of the sponge industry which she had written. The accompanying photographs were taken by Macklow during the 1960 filming.--Editor.



Although the first record of sponge gathering in Florida dates back to 1822, it was not until later in the century that the domestic sponge became commercially valuable. Many persons in Tarpon Springs, which is about 25 miles northeast of Tampa, on Florida's west coast, had become interested in harvesting sponges. But the prospect for an industry did not appear until the arrival of John K. Cheney.

Cheney was a Pennsylvania Dutchman who came to Florida in 1882 to invest in land. He and some Pennsylvania associates formed the "Lake Butler Villa Company," which bought from the State of Florida sizable acreage in and around Tarpon Springs. It is said that through this venture Cheney acquired some wealth and began to invest wisely. He involved himself in harvesting sponges, but he felt the need for more skilled men and proper equipment.

The second important figure in the story of Tarpon Springs was John M. Cocoris. Born in Leonidion, Greece, in 1878, he was the first Greek to be engaged in the Tarpon Springs sponge fishing industry. He had landed in New York City in 1895 and had gone to work there for the Lembesis Sponge Company. The firm

sent him to Tarpon Springs to buy and work up sponges. They were being brought in from the Gulf of Mexico by the "hookers" (small boats) stationed at Bailey's Bluff, about 6 miles from town.

By 1901, two other brothers, George and Louis, had arrived from Greece to work with John. This trio worked the coast from Tarpon Springs to Key West. In 1902, a fourth brother, Gus, joined them. Today, Gus, 85, is the only survivor. He and his wife Metaxia still live in Tarpon Springs. The Cocoris brothers came from a family that operated its own sponge business in Hydra, Greece, and was very familiar with the harvesting of sponges.

### CHENEY AND COCORISES JOIN FORCES

Cheney had acquired 2 saw mills and was realizing a good income from them. He was shipping sponges all over the U. S. and he hired the Cocoris brothers to expand his operations.

After it was determined that the Gulf of Mexico was rich with the "golden fleece," the Cocorises made plans to import skilled men and diving gear from Greece. In 1904, the first divers, boat helpers, life line tenders, and deck hands arrived in the States. The Cocorises bought their first diving boat, "Eldora," which really was a fishing boat. They converted it into a diving boat and renamed it "Elpis," which in Greek means "Hope."

In February 1905, the Elpis hoisted to her mast a flag of the U. S. and a Greek flag and sailed for the sponge beds in the blue waters. The first diver to go overboard was Demetrius Kavasilos, who stayed down 10 minutes and brought up his sponge bag full of beautiful wool sponges. His first words were: "There are enough sponges in these beds to supply the whole world." By nightfall, the Elpis returned loaded from stern to bow.

Financed by Cheney, the Cocorises built 5 more diving boats and brought crew after crew from the "old country." By the end of

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the first year, 1,500 Greeks had arrived in Tarpon Springs, many of them bringing their families. They built their own school and church.

As time went on, many local people joined in the sponge business. Tarpon Springs became known as the world's largest sponge center. From the very beginning, there was recognition of the need to conserve this valuable resource.

Many of the boats were christened after distinguished men and saints. During World War II, one was christened "General Papagos," field marshal of the Greek army. Others were "General MacArthur" and "President Roosevelt." There were "Socrates" and "Saint Nicholas." The most recent christening was that of the "John F. Kennedy," a strong and graceful craft. The occasion was impressive and poignant.

#### TECHNIQUES OF SPONGE HARVESTING

Two methods of harvesting sponges are used in Florida: hooking and diving. Both methods use a pronged iron hook to detach a sponge from its location. The hooker works in a small dinghy, which is always near the mother boat. He kneels in the bow searching for sponges through a glass bottom bucket. When he locates a sponge on the Gulf bed, he lowers immediately a long pole with the iron hook attached. He measures the sponge for legal size by the width of the hook. If the sponge is 5 inches, the hooker sets the hook into the sponge as near its base as possible and lifts it into the boat. The operation goes on for several days, or until the captain feels he has a good catch and sails for home. If the water is clear, hookers usually work in depths of 30 to 40 feet.

The diving boats working out of Tarpon Springs are of the same design as those used in the Mediterranean. The design was brought to the States by the Greeks several years ago. The vessels are diesel powered and steered by tiller rather than wheel. A crew of 6, two of them divers, is needed to handle the boat, clean the sponges, and provide food. Sponge divers wear a thick rubberized suit with bronze helmet and breast plate. Air is pumped into the helmet by an air pump aboard the boat. The boats are fully provisioned to enable the crew to stay at sea 3 to 6 weeks, depending largely on the weather.

Diving operations are conducted in depths up to 125 feet. As fast as sponges are sent up to the deck by the diver, they are trod on thoroughly by the barefoot crew to crush the soft animal matter and tissues to hasten death. Then they are washed several times with sea water and hung on lines to dry. Back in Tarpon Springs, they are sorted, strung on lines, and stored to await an auction day.

Auctions are held each Tuesday and Friday, if there are sponges to be sold. Each lot is bid on separately and sold to the highest



Fig. 1 - The sponge fleet at Tarpon Springs, Florida.

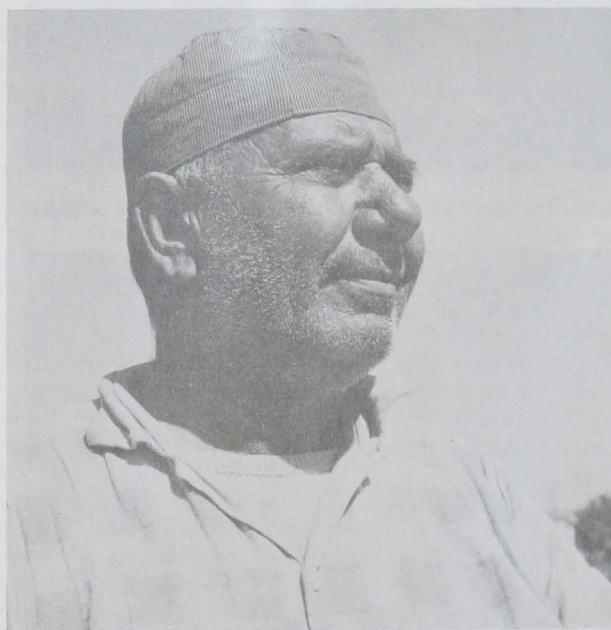


Fig. 2 - Experienced sponge fisherman.



Fig. 3 - Young diver--newly arrived from Greece.

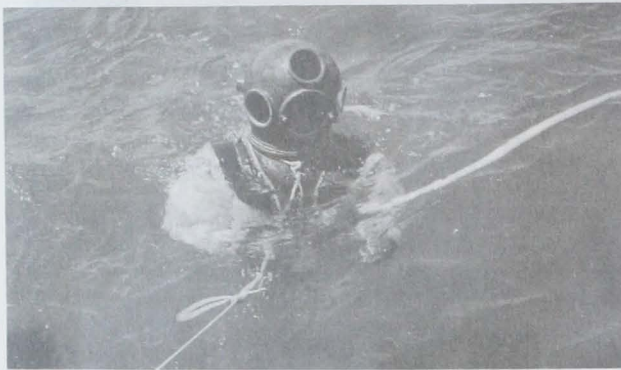


Fig. 4 - The diver goes down, lifeline on left, air hose on right.



Fig. 5 - Diver and sponges surface.



Fig. 6 - On deck, cleaning out the living material.



Fig. 7 - Drying the catch.



Fig. 8 - Six weeks of sponging and a fully loaded boat returns to Tarpon Springs.

## VARIED FORTUNES OF THE INDUSTRY

The sponge industry has suffered many ups and downs. It realized the peak year in 1936, when production reached more than \$3 million. Several prosperous years followed. During the good years, the waterfront was a beautiful picture to behold--more than 75 sponge boats, berthed side by side, lifting their prows from time to time as the ripples of the water pushed them up and lowered them back into their berths.

When the crews returned to port, the city was bathed in gaiety. Streets were crowded, faces beamed. Coffee houses buzzed, barbers' scissors clicked--the butcher and baker busy as bees.

During this period, too, the captain-owners of boats were busy taking care of necessary chores and assembling new crews. Boats had to go on ways for general repair, engine overhaul, and new coats of paint. A thorough checkup was made to assure the crew of a boat's seaworthiness. The Captain either "shared" his crew or advanced them more money to care for their families. Food and other necessities were bought. Readiness was the word. All in all, it was a joyous time.

The picture has changed; it has become bleak. Beginning 1943 and running through 1949, the sponge beds suffered a disease known as the "red tide." It all but closed the industry. There were virtually no sponges to be gathered. The minute production of the 1940's went mainly to the Army and Navy. The public was forced to use the synthetic sponge. Many boats were converted to fishing boats. Several were sold and taken to Cuba for lobstering. Those tied to their moorings sank for lack of proper care, never to be raised. A few--12 or 15--survived through the wisdom of their owners.

Gradually, year after year, the sponge beds began to regain their health and became productive again. By 1960, production was up to \$425,000 and stayed near this figure until 1966 when it fell to about half. So far this year, a tremendous amount of healthy sponges on the beds wait to be gathered, but production is acutely limited. In fact, this resource needs harvesting badly, else the overgrowth will cause the beds to become dormant and a very rich resource will cease to be. Our present problem is the shortage of manpower.



Fig. 9 - Preparing the sponges for auction - during the filming of "Sponge Treasure From The Sea."



Fig. 10 - After trimming, grading the sponges for size.

bidder. The buyers take their purchases to their warehouses, where the sponges are re-assorted, trimmed, and classified as to size and quality. Qualities determining commercial value of a sponge are color, size, shape, softness, durability, resiliency, and absorptiveness. This final assortment is done by men who have expert knowledge of the natural sponge.

The best known and most valuable sponge is the Rock Island Sheepwool Sponge, which is unequalled for durability, absorptiveness, and general utility. It is used by chemical companies, schools, janitors, hotels, motels, drug stores, and many other organizations.

Population has doubled in the past 6 years. It is now 16,000 including the suburbs. Many Captains are eager to take their boats out to work the beds, but they cannot secure a crew. The older men of the industry are now feeble men and cannot endure the rough sea life. The younger generation does not care to follow their fathers' footsteps--at sea 2 to 3 weeks each trip, away from families, enduring the dangers of a spongemans life. The old spongemans had a limited education and knew no other way of earning a living; his son has received an education and prefers another profession. Many young people have become teachers; others, the less fortunate ones, are working in the industrial centers.

Louis S. Smitzes, president of the Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange for the past 24 years, and his Board of Directors have made several appeals to our governmental bureaus for permission to import skilled spongemans from Greece who are willing to come to the States to work in the industry. The bureaus denied the appeals saying that manpower was available here. The most recent appeal was made to the Bureau of Immigration in Miami for Cuban refugees, many of whom no doubt

worked as spongemans in Cuba. Just how long the few remaining diving boats now in operation (two of them have been sponging for more than 40 years) can supply part of the demand and keep the industry alive is anybody's guess.

There is a certain amount of overhead that cannot be eliminated if the Exchange is to furnish captains facilities for storage and preparation of their catch. Since the Exchange is sustained by a small percentage of the sponge sales, if production decreases for yet another year the Exchange will be forced to close. It can survive only if skilled spongemans become available. Otherwise, it could be the end of the once colorful and prosperous Sponge Industry of Tarpon Springs.

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On October 4, the U. S. Employment Service notified Commercial Fisheries Review:

"Applications for alien employment certification were approved for 20 job openings as sponge divers on November 1, 1966, and for 30 job openings as sponge diver helpers on January 1, 1967 for the Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange, Tarpon Springs, Florida. Since the dates of approval, 15 divers and 18 diver helpers have been certified against these job openings."

