

The Greek Community of Tarpon Springs Maritime Traditions: Sponge Fishing

History

Florida is the only state where sponges grow. In 1886 Tarpon Springs began supplying sponges to the U.S. market. At the time, Floridians hooked sponges with long poles while seated in a boat. John Cocoris was a Greek sponge buyer working in Tarpon Springs who believed that more and better sponges could be gathered using diving methods common in Greece. He and his brothers brought a crew from Greece and the first diver reported, "There are enough sponges down there to supply the whole world." In 1905, 500 men arrived from Greece. Within a few years, there were 100 sponge boats and 1,500 Greeks working in Florida waters out of Tarpon Springs. Using diving and hooking, the Greeks harvested four times the quantity and often better quality sponges—revolutionizing the sponge industry and shifting the center to Tarpon Springs

In 1948 a red tide devastated the Florida sponge beds, Mediterranean sponges flooded the market, and Dupont introduced cheap synthetic sponges. Tarpon Springs' harvest plummeted, and many families left for the steel mills of Indiana or Ohio. By the time the sponge beds recovered, most people had entered more secure occupations. Gradually the sponge industry resumed, and it exists today on a smaller scale.

Work on a Sponge Boat

Work on a sponge boat follows annual and trip cycles. The annual cycle is determined by weather. Most boats make their first trip in April, but May through October is the busiest season. Sponge boats often do not work during winter months due to the wind and cold or murky water. In the winter, fishermen clean and repair boats or equipment.

Before leaving port, the captain stocks the boat with food, fuel, ice, and other necessities. Two or three men usually go out on a sponge boat—between them they act as captain, divers, engineer, and deckhands. The captain or boat owner usually takes care of mechanical issues. The engineer or deckhand makes sure that the diver is not pulled by the boat, and that the boat is steered in the direction the diver needs.

Out in the Gulf, the crew works while there is light. A single diver may make several dives for a total of 6 to 10 hours per day under water. Two divers will alternate dives in order to rest. The length of a trip depends on the weather and the number of sponges the boat can carry. Small boats may stay out 2 weeks and larger boats 3 or 4 weeks.

The Gulf has strong currents. Divers must have great stamina to walk or run on the bottom, cutting as many sponges as possible and carrying a full bag. There are many dangers, including sharks, infections from coral scrapes or gurry (sponge innards), bad weather, equipment failure, staying underwater too long and getting decompression sickness, or recreational boats that run over air lines.

Harvested sponges are piled on the deck and covered with burlap or old blankets. The crew wets them down frequently and turns them at least twice each day to accelerate decomposition of the skin. While the diver is underwater, the crew washes the sponges that have shed their skin in order to rid them of gurry.

Back in port, the crew cleans and sorts the sponges. They count them, put them into net bags, and the captain records the number, type, and quality. Buyers view the catch and

make an offer. After a sale, the captain or owner is reimbursed for food and boat expenses, and then each crew member receives a share proportional to their work.

Diving Helmets

Until the early 1960s, sponge divers wore a heavy canvas and rubber suit topped with a helmet made from copper, brass and plate glass. In 1913 Antonios Lerios settled in Tarpon Springs, where he became respected for helmet making, ship mechanics, and other maritime crafts. As a child, Nicholas Toth visited his grandfather's workshop and gradually absorbed his knowledge. After college, he decided to carry on the family tradition. Since his grandfather died, Toth has been the last diving helmet maker.

Suggested Activities

1. Have students research sponges, their habitats, and their uses.
2. Discuss with students the origin of diving, diving equipment, and occupations involving diving.