

Tequesta:

Sponge Fishing on Florida's East Coast

By DAVID SHUBOW

When sponge fishing in Florida is referred to, Tarpon Springs or Key West generally come to mind. It is common knowledge that sponging in Florida began in Key West, where next to cigar making, it was long the most important industry there, and Tarpon Springs has become synonymous with sponges. The East coast which has had a little known but colorful role in that industry is seldom associated with it.

A movie titled *Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef*, in which Key West Conchs and Greek sponge divers from Tarpon Springs engaged in several violent encounters, gave an additional dimension to the popularity of these two areas as sponge centers. Little, however, has been recorded about the activity of the sponge industry on Florida's East coast.

Perhaps the main reason so little is known about sponging on the Atlantic side of Florida is that there never has been a sponge market there such as those in Key West or Tarpon Springs. It is difficult to account for this shortsightedness on the part of Miami merchants, since sponging has always been an important part of the community's economy, except for the period 1938-1952 when a blight struck the sponge beds in the waters off both coasts of Florida dealing the industry a blow from which it has only recently recovered.

In the eighteen nineties as many as one hundred and fifty schooners could be seen each year around the sponge beds of Elliott Key, Soldiers Key, and as far north as Miami. The vessels were manned by Conchs and Bahamians from Key West and included crews of both whites and Negroes. Each ship carried several dinghies from which the sponges were dumped into the numerous crawls that dotted the inlets and coves along the shore from Miami to Key West. The crawls were crude, wooden enclosures at the water's edge, set up to

hold the week's catch. The crawls also made it possible for spongers with smaller boats to stay away from the home port for longer periods of time.

Sponge fishermen of the East coast were not limited to Conchs and Bahamians. Often a Greek sponging vessel was seen in Biscayne Bay. The Greek crews, however, made no attempt to bring their catches to Miami. Instead they sailed south and sold their loads at Key West where a few Greek buyers and packers made an unsuccessful effort to dominate the industry.

By 1910, Greek sponge merchants extended their operations to Nassau and by the start of World War I they had a monopoly of the industry in the Bahamas and most of the Caribbean, which they held until the blight depleted most of the sponge beds in these areas. As a matter of fact, the only sponge center of any importance in the Western Hemisphere in which there had been little Greek influence is Key West, where local residents have always held a controlling interest.

By 1890, sponging was a business that netted Monroe County almost one million dollars annually. A fleet of five hundred vessels was engaged in the industry which employed about eighteen hundred men. Much of the sponge crop brought to the docks at Key West was fished from the waters of Biscayne Bay by local residents who were instrumental in making the island city one of the largest sponge markets in the world by 1900.

Between the years 1850 and 1900 there was a worldwide demand for Florida sponges. England in particular, was a good market for grass sponges which were probably needed for its expanding industrial economy. The volume of export, however, was kept down by increasing domestic demand. The supply was so far behind demand during the years 1870-1894 that the United States imported \$5,503,000 worth of sponges during this period.¹

Shortly after the turn of the century Tarpon Springs replaced Key West as the sponge capital of the world and many of the sponge fishermen who plied their trade along the East coast of Florida from Biscayne Bay as far south as Key Largo now had a choice of sponge markets in which to sell their catches. There was a sentimental attachment to Key West, however, where sponge auctions began shortly after the Civil War and were held continuously until 1947. Many of the sponge fishermen who had fished the waters around Miami

¹ Rowland H. Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida* (Atlanta: The Southern Historical Association, Vol. 11), p. 284.

were transplanted Conchs and gravitated to the Key West docks where auctions became the scene of reunions between friends and relatives.

Other East coast fishermen sold their loads at the Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange. Most complained less about the long trek across state than the general antagonism of Tarpon Springs' sponge fraternity to outsiders. Also, an additional two per cent charge for the privilege of using the exchange facilities did not set too well with the spongers.

Through the years the Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange had become a close-knit organization, with boat captains, buyers, and wholesalers forming a tight inner circle, made even tighter by its ties with the Greek Orthodox Church, appropriately named St. Nicholas, in honor of all mariners and spongers. The church became the hub of the activities of the Greek community, most of whose members had come from the Aegean Islands following the news of the rich deposits of sponges in the Gulf. It was this friendly but exclusive atmosphere that many other sponge fishermen found difficult to break through.

There was one thing that the East coast spongers liked about the Tarpon Springs auctions. They were not really auctions. The highest bidder did not always get the sponges, for, according to the rules of the exchange, the seller had the choice of selling to the highest bidder or holding the sponges if he thought they might bring a higher price at the next auction. A cagey sponger could usually size up the market and play it from both ends. This offered little consolation for the absence of a sponge market. Yet enterprising Miami businessmen completely overlooked the rich potential that existed.

If a sponge center were established exclusively for the benefit of the residents of Biscayne Bay and the keys to the south, it more than likely would have been a success, considering the large number of families engaged in sponging there. The families of Walter Thompson, Sr., Norwood Roberts, and John Russell were among the pioneers who hooked sponges in the waters around Miami. In Marathon the Feltons were the most prominent sponge fishermen, and in Key Largo, Beauregard Albury, one of the most colorful characters in the keys, engaged in sponging for over fifty years.

The Thompson family probably collected sponges on the East coast of Florida longer than any other. Thomas Thompson began hooking along the keys in the eighteen eighties. His five sons also continued in the sponge business. One of them, Walter Thompson, Sr., moved to Miami, where he plied the trade until 1964. His son, Walter Thompson, Jr., pursued the same occu-

pation until 1968, when he switched to crawfishing. One of the last holdouts is William "Sonny" Larson who is still sponge fishing out of Big Pine Key. Larson learned the trade from his grandfather, a Norwegian sailor shipwrecked off Key West in 1898. Larson is the last of the pioneer sponge fishermen still actively engaged in the trade.

A check through the records of the old Miami Board of Trade, now the Miami Chamber of Commerce, revealed that an attempt was made in 1915 to investigate the feasibility of establishing a sponge market in Miami. The city fathers of Miami had always been on the alert for new industries, particularly the type that could take up the slack during the summer months. J. W. Johnson, a former sponge hunter from Key West, was appointed to do a survey among local fishermen to determine whether or not sponge collecting could be developed into a profitable venture in Miami.

Captain G. Duncan Brossier, President of the Miami Board of Trade, wrote to the Department of the Interior at Washington requesting a report on the quality of sponges hooked in Biscayne Bay. The answer that came back was very encouraging. The report read in part, "Your sponges are very superior to the sponges harvested in Key West or Tarpon Springs because Biscayne Bay sponges are softer and are more absorbent."²

Considerable interest was displayed after the report was made public. Hasty meetings were called and even a site was considered for the erection of a building. Unlike the real estate boom that caught on ten years later, the plans for a sponge market never materialized.

It wasn't until thirty-five years later that any great interest was shown in merchandising sponges out of Miami when Andres Dworin, a former sponge dealer in Batabano, Cuba, arrived in Miami and started the East Coast Sponge Company. He was followed by the Arellano brothers, also from Batabano, who set up a packing house on the Miami River. By 1960, many Cubans who had fished the waters around Cuba, were engaged in hooking sponges in Biscayne Bay and the keys to the south. By 1968, it was estimated that there were approximately fifty Cubans in Florida actively engaged in the sponge business. The contrast was startling, since there were only two or three full-time spongers in Biscayne Bay in the fifties.

Before they became political exiles, the Arellano brothers operated a large sponge business, specializing in exports. In 1962, they opened a modest

² Agnes Ash, Miami News, May 1, 1966.

plant in Miami from where they made a trip once a week to Key West, where there is no longer a market, buying sponges from Cuban fishermen. Spongers along the way came to look for the two brothers and their two-ton truck each Friday.

Having a dependable outlet is important to small fishermen who must rely on a broker to convert their hauls into cash. The Arellano brothers recognize the importance of a regular run and have established a good relationship with the spongers. They have even attracted Americans who formerly made the long trip to Tarpon Springs to sell their catches.

Now almost all spongers from Miami to Key West are selling to the Cuban buyers, with the result that the Arellano brothers have a near monopoly of the sponge market on the East coast.

Dworin's firm is more interested in buying from the islands in the Bahamas and selling to markets throughout the world. Though there is a rivalry between the two companies for local sponges it is not very intense since each engages in a different method of distribution.

At the Arellano packing house the brothers employ several skilled workers who trim, sort, grade, and pack the sponges in burlap bags, which are then shipped to various wholesale outlets throughout the country. In the past few years the brothers have built up a large following and indicate that they can sell all the sponges they purchase. Their major problem is getting enough sponges to meet the demand.

According to Julio Arellano, a former English teacher in Havana, the total number of sponge hookers plying their trade between Miami and Key West is approximately one hundred, equally divided between Cubans and Americans. The Cubans are heavily concentrated in Miami and Key West, while the Americans work out of Marathon, Sugar Loaf Key, and Big Pine Key.

In order to get the Cuban refugees started, the Arellano brothers, in many cases, financed them. They bought the men boats, hooking equipment, food, gasoline, even gave cash advances to help them pay their rent. According to Julio Arellano, this was the nudge needed by the Cuban fishermen who had arrived practically destitute.

It was good business, too. The men, with few exceptions, paid back their loans and are now independent operators in good standing. By putting the

men in business, the brothers actually helped themselves since it greatly increased their primary source of supply.

The Arellano brothers have visions of Miami eventually becoming a sponge center. They are quick to point out some of the obstacles, however. One of them is that for almost one hundred years the Rock Island wool sponge found in the waters north of Tarpon Springs has been publicized as the finest in the world. As a result, wholesalers buying Florida sponges have been wary about the quality of sponges that did not emanate from the West coast. Tradition dies hard in the sponge business. Once a wholesaler bought East coast sponges there was no trouble obtaining repeat orders. The problem was in getting the first order.

At the East Coast Sponge Company warehouse sponges from Exuma, Abaco, Andros, and Turk Island are piled high in endless rows. Once a month Dworin makes a trip to the Bahamas to buy up all the sponges on the islands. These are shipped to Nassau by mail boat. In Nassau one of his agents forwards the sponges to Miami.

During the past nineteen years Dworin has built up a trade with such countries as Japan, France, England, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. In addition, the firm ships to many of the major sponge wholesalers in the United States. Dworin, who travels to ten or twelve countries each year to line up his buyers, compared the sponges from the Mediterranean to those of Florida. It takes from two to three years to grow marketable sponges in the Mediterranean countries, he said, while sponges harvested in Florida waters take only a fraction of that time. Rain is a big factor in the growth of sponges, he explained, and Florida has more rain than most of the countries along the Mediterranean.

With one firm specializing in international trade, and the other in national outlets, both Dworin and the Arellanos agreed that Miami could easily become the nucleus for a world sponge center. Besides, they asked, now that sponging has been revived on Florida's East coast and with Miami's location as a bridge between the Americas, isn't it time that serious consideration is given to the establishment of an international sponge mart?

To obtain a better understanding of one of Florida's most important maritime industries, which never received appropriate credit for its significant role in the state's history, it is necessary to go back to the origins of the Florida sponge industry.

The industry actually began in the Bahamas from where it came to Key West about the time Florida became a territory. Sponging was not treated seriously until Alejandro Piestro, a turtle fisherman, financed the first recorded sponging operation in Key West around 1850.³

About the time Piestro organized his sponge fleet, William Kemp, a Key West merchant, shipped a cargo of sponges to New York which narrowly missed being dumped overboard because it was considered worthless. The shipment, however, caused a sensation among New York buyers, who eagerly signed contracts with Kemp for all the sponges he could deliver.

From Key West sponging spread to the Keys on the East coast and to Tampa, Cedar Key, and Carrabelle on the West coast as far north as Apalachicola.⁴ In 1879, Carrabelle had the largest sponge fleet in Florida next to Key West.

The sponges were brought up by fishermen who used poles sometimes as long as forty feet attached to a four-pronged rake. A glass bottomed bucket was added later for better vision of the ocean floor. This method of collecting sponges, called hooking, is still in use in the shallower waters and accounts for about forty per cent of the sponges harvested in Florida, the only area in the United States where sponges grow and are gathered commercially. The bulk of the sponges brought in are collected by divers, however, who work the deeper waters out of specially designed and equipped diving boats. These boats comprise the sponge diving fleet of Tarpon Springs, which at one time was as large as some navies. Since divers use the air hose and diving suit they can descend to depths where sponges are washed more vigorously by the ocean currents resulting in finer sponges, which bring higher prices.

In recent years the synthetic sponge has made a bid to supplant the natural sponge, but thus far has not posed a real threat, since the demand for natural sponges has always been greater than the supply. Antiquated methods of production and periodic blights, however, may accomplish what competition from the synthetic sponge could never do.

The unusual qualities of the natural sponge are difficult to duplicate. To begin with, the sponge has a natural filter of a highly complex nature. Its structure is so nearly perfect that each part can perform many functions after

³ Carlos Barker, "Fifty Years of a Sponge Fisher's Life," *The Independent*, April 21, 1904, p. 884.

⁴ Along the East coast sponges have never been harvested commercially north of Miami.

the sponge is hacked into a lifeless state. As a matter of fact, the sponge is useful only after it is dead and everything is removed except the skeleton. Sponge processing has changed little since the time Greek soldiers used sponges to line their helmets. Basically, many of the methods employed by sponge fishermen to clean and trim sponges during the time of Aristotle, are still in use today.

In the eighteen fifties Rock Island wool sponges brought one dollar to a dollar and a half a pound at the Key West dock. This unheard of price induced mullet and turtle fishermen to leave their trades and become sponge fishermen. By 1880, the sponge business was the most profitable of all maritime industries.

The picture changed with the advent of the Spanish-American War. In order to avoid enemy warships, sponge boats sailed north to dispose of their catches.⁵ The spongers made their way to Tarpon Springs, a sleepy little fishing village on the Anclote River. Here John K. Cheney, a wealthy Philadelphia banker, who opened one of the first packing houses on the West coast, bought most of the sponges. Cheney became interested in sponges when he sailed his yacht to Key West and was intrigued by sponge fishermen spearing sponges off the reefs.

By 1890, though no threat to Key West, Tarpon Springs became a market for spongers around the Tampa Bay area. After the Spanish-American War the sponge volume at Tarpon Springs climbed steadily, while Key West sales went into a gradual decline.

Rivalry between the two areas began in earnest after suit diving was introduced at Tarpon Springs in 1905. Many Greek divers were not content to remain in the waters around Tampa Bay and extended their operations to Monroe County. This was the beginning of a long smoldering feud between the divers of Tarpon Springs and the hookers of Key West.

Key Westers claimed that the divers had ruined the young sponge beds by walking over the sponges with their heavy leaden boots. The result was a series of clashes that ended in the burning of boats, some gun play, and several arrests. The enmity was real and long lasting. When the movie *Beneath the Twelve Mile Reef* was shown at a Key West theater in 1954, the audience showed where its sympathies lay. Robert Wagner, who played the part of a

⁵ George Th. Frantzis, *Strangers at Ithaca* (St. Petersburg, Florida: Great Outdoors Publishing Company, 1962) p. 45.

Greek sponge diver, tangled with an octopus. To a man, the Key Westers rooted for the octopus.

Diving operations quadrupled the volume of sponges brought up from the waters off the West coast, and sponging reached its greatest heights as Tarpon Springs not only became the center of an industry, but brought with it the customs, traditions, and religion of Greece to the shores of Florida. Tarpon Springs grew rapidly. The port was deepened, piers and boat installations were added. Boisterous and booming, the community took on the appearance of a frontier town. Moreover, Tarpon Springs spearheaded an industry that was now an important part of the state's economy.

At the very time that Tarpon Springs was making its mark as the greatest sponge center in the world, a small group of men was working on a project at Sugar Loaf Key, about twenty miles north of Key West, that was earmarked to make the volume of sponges coming out of Tarpon Springs appear small by comparison.

This group was engaged in a grandiose experiment in sponge cultivation which was calculated to outstrip by far the harvesting of natural sponges. In fact, if plans materialized, the project would soon become the largest industry in the Florida keys and the fastest growing in the state.

At a time when few people, sponge fishermen included, had ever heard of sponge cultivation, the Florida Keys Sponge and Fruit Company set up operations on a secluded stretch of land and began one of the strangest enterprises ever attempted on the East coast of Florida.

It all began when Charles W. Chase, a British theatrical producer, stranded with his troupe in Key West, heard about the sponge cultivation experiments that had been conducted by Dr. H. F. Moore, head of the Bureau of Fisheries of the United States government. Dr. Moore's experiments were the latest in a series that started in 1867 when Gregor Buccich made plantings off the coast of Trieste. The experiments were conducted on Sugar Loaf Key on land owned by Dr. J. V. Harris, who was also interested in the cultivation experiments.

Dr. Moore had already compiled much information on this comparatively new field from Jeremy Fogarty, a sponge buyer and packer from Key West, who had conducted several successful growing experiments in the lower keys. Fogarty's main problem was coping with the marauders who swooped down

on his sponge farm and cleaned out the crop just as the sponges were about to mature.

Additional information was obtained from "Commodore" Ralph M. Munroe, of Miami, who had conducted experiments near Elliott Key, where seventy-five per cent of the cuttings survived and doubled in size in six months. But again, as in the case of Buccich and Fogarty, he was plagued by sponge pirates.

Munroe saw the tremendous possibilities in sponge cultivation but was practical enough to realize that little headway could be made unless legislation was passed which would reserve specific areas for cultivation somewhat along the lines that oil drilling rights are protected in offshore waters.⁶

Munroe and Fogarty joined forces in getting a bill passed in the State Senate, but it failed in the House when word leaked out that one of the senators was privately interested in the experiments. Thus, an overzealous lawmaker with a political axe to grind wrecked whatever chances there were of setting aside a large tract in Biscayne Bay for the cultivation of sponges.

After the "Commodore's" experiments in Biscayne Bay, little is heard of sponge cultivation until 1901 when Dr. Moore began his project on Sugar Loaf Key. As an official government undertaking, Dr. Moore's experiment was supplied with ample resources, equipment and manpower, which was not the case in many of the privately conducted experiments.

In 1908, Dr. Moore claimed that sponge cultivation was feasible and that success in this field depended on the following five steps:

1. Complete absence of fresh water.
2. Protection from marauders.
3. Freedom from sand.
4. Use of concrete discs ten inches in diameter and two inches thick tied with aluminum wire.
5. Water shallow enough to make planting and harvesting not too difficult.

⁶ Ralph M. Munroe and Vincent Gilpin, *The Commodore's Story*, (Narbert, Pennsylvania: Livingston Publishing Company, 1966) pp. 197-198.

Through a strange series of circumstances Charles Chase, whose theatrical bookings ran into a snag with an unethical Key West impresario, heard of the sponge cultivation experiments just north of Key West. He was so impressed with the results of Dr. Moore's findings that he decided to start a sponge farm on the very site where the experiments had taken place.

Charles Chase was joined by his brother George, and a friend, Henry Bate, all three London residents. They purchased the land from Dr. Harris and became majority stockholders in the Florida Sponge and Fruit Company.⁷

By following Dr. Moore's advice to the letter, the project went ahead rapidly, but with very little fanfare or publicity. As a matter of fact, the British government was more familiar with certain aspects of the enterprise than were many of the residents along the lower keys. The Foreign Office even sent down a representative, Douglas Gent, to investigate the possibility of growing sisal on the key.

By 1912, the sponge propagation project had evolved into a small town. Henry Bate had already brought over his entire family from London to Sugar Loaf Key, now known as Chase, Florida. The community which employed over one hundred, had up-to-date concrete residences, office buildings, stores, machine shops, a boat building shed, a refrigeration plant, telephone wires, marine ways, a disc factory, lime and fig groves, and a truck farm. The Florida East Coast Railway tracks ran through five miles of the firm's property. The site was wholly owned by the company, which was self sufficient, and on its way to becoming the largest community in the keys north of Key West.

The sponge farm was operated on an assembly line basis. Two large schooners carrying ten men each, brought in thousands of natural sponges which were cut up into two inch cubes, tied to discs and dropped into shallow water. In the first two years of operation it is estimated that enough natural sponges were harvested to produce one hundred thousand cuttings.

By 1913, the natives along the lower keys were beginning to show a little interest in the strange goings on at Sugar Loaf Key as barges of cement and other supplies were shipped north from Key West. Spongers from surrounding areas were becoming concerned about the inroads the company might make by cultivation and the first feelings of resentment began to crop up.

⁷ Arthur Bate, son of Henry Bate, is a long time resident of Miami.

When attempts were made to poach, the company built a huge tower overlooking the sponge farm and even made arrangements for Chase's son, C. W. "Pete" Chase, Jr., to become a deputy sheriff for Monroe County, so he could legally drive off the trespassers. According to Chase, a long time resident of Miami Beach, the stiffest judgment he ever meted out was a strong warning, which was usually enough to send the would-be poachers on their way.

Pete Chase eventually joined forces with Carl Fisher and became one of the pioneers in the development of Miami Beach.

The company could have paid a dividend in 1913, but the stockholders decided to wait and cut up the sponges that were already growing and gamble on a windfall. Sponges of three years' growth averaged ten cuttings each, and 630,000 cuttings at the bottom of the sea, would mean 6,300,000 sponges in a little over two years.

The firm expected to enter the commercial sponge business with an anticipated annual output of 2,000,000 sponges. The market was there. Neither Key West nor Tarpon Springs could fill the domestic demand, not to mention the rapidly increasing volume of the export market. Besides, the sponges were high grade and would have brought an excellent return. An article in the *Scientific American* had this to say about the quality of the sponges. "These sponges like so many things cultivated, are superior to nature's products, for they are not damaged by the hook or divers. They do not have to be torn from coral rock basis, or cut or trimmed, and are consequently the most perfect sponges in the world.^s

Everything went according to plan. In another six months the sponges would have been ready for market. There was only one flaw. No one had foreseen England going to war.

When World War I broke out, Great Britain froze the firm's assets. The future of the project appeared very dismal. The major stockholders of the corporation were British subjects and had their capital on deposit in a London bank. As a result, the project was left with insufficient funds to operate. What had been the most promising industry in Florida a few short months earlier was beginning to appear more and more like a financial disaster.

In order to rescue the tottering enterprise, a Miami Beach realty firm, Tatum Brothers, was called in to sell shares to American investors wintering

^s Norton S. Roberts, "Scientific Sponging," *Scientific American*, June 27, 1917, p. 99.

in Florida. The Tatum brothers, pre-occupied with numerous other real estate ventures, turned over the job of raising capital for the Florida Keys Sponge and Fruit Company to R. C. Perky, one of the firm's crack real estate salesmen. Investing in a sponge cultivation project did not appeal to northern tourists who were more interested in turning a fast dollar. Before long, the firm filed for bankruptcy. At the bankruptcy sale Perky was high bidder and wound up with practically all of Sugar Loaf Key, which he turned into a real estate development.

Several hundred thousand sponges in various stages of growth were left to the poachers who fished the waters off Sugar Loaf Key for many years afterward. Today, the only reminder of this dream that almost materialized, is a collection of concrete discs which serve as stepping stones in front of a few residences on the key.

Thus ended an interesting venture in sponging along the East coast of Florida. The Conchs came and went. The British tried a fabulous scheme and lost. Even the Greek spongers sampled Biscayne Bay and left it for the waters of the Gulf. Maybe the Cubans can succeed where others have failed . . . and finally establish a sponge center on the East coast of Florida.

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