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## The Greeks of Tarpon Springs: An American Odyssey

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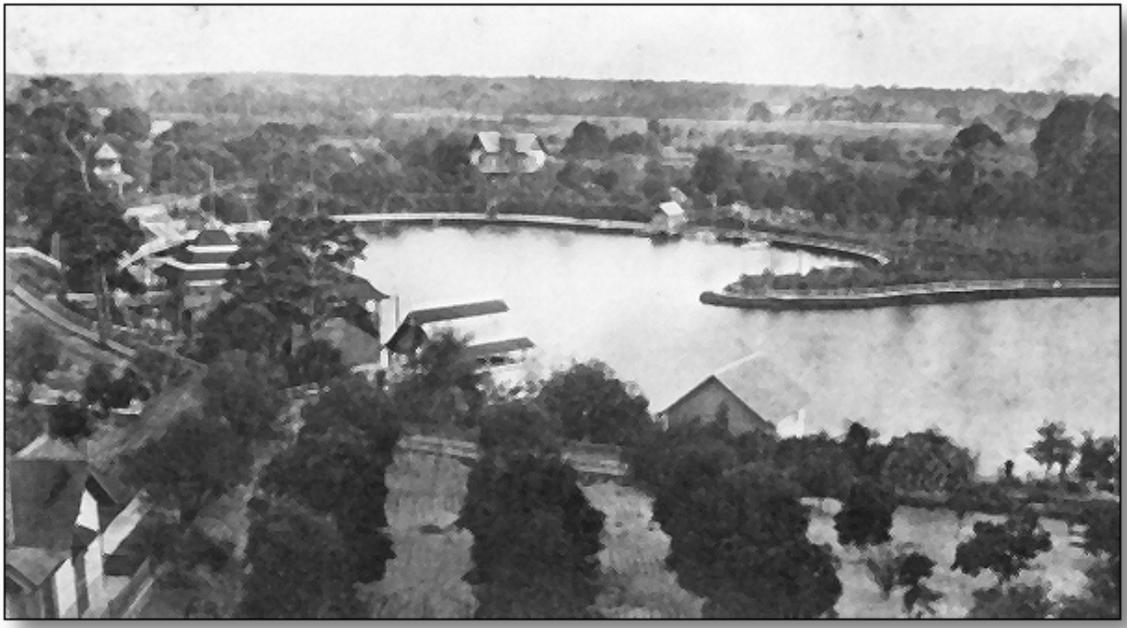
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**THE GREEKS OF TARPON SPRINGS:  
AN AMERICAN ODYSSEY**

By William N. Pantazes

When one thinks of Tarpon Springs, visions of rough and vibrant seamen diving for treasures on the sea floor, and a small town that would be reminiscent of any bright port on the Aegean Sea come immediately to mind. The city is not only known as the sponge capital of the world, it is lionized for its Hellenic ethnic character. The sponge industry was built by Greek Dodecanesian Islanders, who upon arrival in 1905, suffered the hardships of pioneers, but were able to transplant a culture that has remained extensively isolated from outside influence for nearly three quarters of a century. Walking through the streets of Tarpon Springs, one experiences a culture and lifestyle that evokes the past. Recently however, some have questioned whether the slow adaptation of modern American values into their lifestyle is changing the ethnic identity of these Greeks in Tarpon Springs, and this essay addresses this question.



**Overview of Tarpon Springs**

(courtesy of USF Special Collections).

Tarpon Springs is famous mainly for its sponge industry. Before immigrants discovered the area, it was well advertised as a health resort attracting rich northeastern industrialists. It was not until some Key West turtle fishermen accidentally discovered sponge off its coast that Tarpon Springs entered a new phase in its life. After a rich Philadelphia Quaker, John Cheyney, opened the Rock Island Sponge Company in 1891, the industry was formally organized. Cheyney seemed satisfied with the profits reaped by the slow hook gathering methods of his Key West spongers. In 1900, an enterprising young Greek sponge buyer from New York, John Cocoris, explored the Tarpon shores. He realized that by introducing Greek diving methods a lucrative industry could be organized. With Cheyney as a partner, Cocoris was able to finance such a

venture. Buoyantly, Greek divers returned with a bountiful harvest of fine-specimen sponges. The exodus to Tarpon Springs had begun. By 1907, Tarpon Springs had become an Hellenic enclave on the Gulf Coast as some 1500 Greeks lined the shores of the Anclote channel.

What an adventure it was, because these men knew neither the language nor local customs. Strangers in a strange land, nevertheless, by 1910, they had established the Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange, erected a church, and had brought their families to this New World. Their success was so great that Tarpon Springs was now being called the sponge capital of the world. Until the end of the 1920's, they averaged a total annual income of \$600,000. With the onset of the Depression, Tarpon Springs may have been one of the only cities in America to experience prosperity. With the collapse of the European sponge market, the world demand brought profits of approximately \$1,000,000 annually. Such prosperity did not last, and with the opening of the Second World War, approximately 1,000 young Greeks left the industry to enlist. The others that remained managed to run the industry on a minimum scale while also working for the war effort. Those returning from the war attempted to reorganize the industry, but nature had wreaked havoc in the once abundant sponge beds. In 1947, through the waters of the Gulf a disease spread that rotted sea life. A catastrophe such as this perhaps had not been seen in the world since the potato blight afflicted Ireland in 1845. The industry nearly collapsed, and many Greek-Americans discouragingly left to find work in the mills and factories of the North. The once vibrant town seemed hauntingly empty. Those few who remained managed to survive only through the tourist trade. The main bonds that kept them together through the hard financial period with its end in 1957, were their faith and their strong and stern family unit. They felt proud and strong to carry on the tradition of their brave ancestors.

Their patience was rewarded. In 1957, the sponge beds were replenishing, and the federal government granted the people \$20,000 to reorganize the industry. However, the damage was too far gone to correct completely. The young had left, and those that remained were now too old to maintain the rigid life that was demanded of the diver. Also the synthetic sponge which had been introduced in 1947, had long since captured the larger share of the market. Many of the Greeks began to realize the exploitation of the tourist trade brought in greater profits in comparison to the amount of hardship that had to be faced to secure profits from the sponge industry alone. A new breed of Greek developed, businessmen concerned with maintaining an up-to-date image.

The following interview was conducted in March 1979, with George Georgeiou. When talking with this seaworn former sponge boat captain, one may look into his eyes and see that through him there is still hope for his past in our future.

**Interview with George Georgeiou:**

Pantazes: *Tell me captain, how did you first arrive in America?*

Georgeiou: I heard about the diving in Tarpon Springs in 1910, so I went to the consulate to see if I could get a visa. Let me tell you something, the reputation of the American flag then cut weight in influence. Not like today. Then it had influence. My brother-in-law was an American citizen. He came back to visit. So we went to the consulate, and we saw many old men waiting. My brother-in-law started talking to one. They soon found out he was an American, and they all crowded around him. My turn had come. So I went into the consulate's office. I went inside. He asked me, "Where are

you going, my good son?" I answered, "I'm, going to America, Mr. Consul." He responded, "What mother, which crazy mother, is this that would send such a young son to a crazy and strange hard land at your age! Why do you want to go?" he said. I said, "I want to work." "So there, how old are you?" I lied and said I was twenty. He didn't believe me; I was near thirteen. So it took him no time to red pencil my application. He said to go back. All right, I thought, and returned to my brother-in-law and told him the news. He gets mad and takes me back into the consul's office. His being from Skios he was tough. Asks him why. The consul got tough and asked him who he thought he was that he could ask such questions. He said, "I'm nobody, only you will find trouble when I go back to Pireaus." Then one poor old man jumped into the office saying, "Mr. Consul, this man is an American." Once he heard this, the consul threw everything down and he says, "Spit! If you are an American why didn't you tell me this?" "I wanted to see where a man could fall to," he replied. In one second he stamped my exit visa, and I was ready to leave. This is to tell you what America was all about. Then after my brother-in-law brought me to Tarpon Springs by boat, I left for the North for four years. You see, I wanted to see America. Then I returned, and I have been here ever since.



**The Sponge Docks in Tarpon Springs**

(courtesy of USF Special Collections).

*P. Did you like the North better than Tarpon Springs?*

- G. No, I made years in Rochester and Pennsylvania, but I like it better here because I had work for myself. I was my own man. I liked this. There I worked as a sweeper and a shoe shiner in the stores you know?
- P. *What type of work did you do here?*
- G. Here I had work with the spongers. There was a *kaieki* [boat] called *Kasteras*. I soon bought it, and from this small *kaieki* I was able to buy another one called *Ornisos*. And I made business very well until the *astenia* [sickness] which filled the water in 1947. It befell in 1947 so the people left from Tarpon Springs. At this time I had two more *Kaiekakia* working for me. I did not know what to do either. Fish? What would I do? I went to Mr. Sanmarkos, the exchange agent, for advice. He asked me, "It's 5 o'clock; where are your people going?" "They're going to the fishery." "I don't think it's over yet," he replied. So I decided to wait. Well, by the end of 1947 work had stopped. We all had nothing to do, we left because we had lost our money. We used to have much. I used to make over \$13,000 per year total for six months. I then decided to stay. I saw a house on the Bayou I liked and worked it nicely. Johnny, my son, was in school; Stratis was in the Army. I chartered boats for a year. Then I took Johnny out of school because he had no strength in the letters, and we worked together to develop the curio shops and restaurant my family has today. I just have this house now. So now you know this sickness brought a catastrophe to many of my friends. I was lucky I thought of staying in 1947. Till 1949 no life existed in the Gulf waters. I did not want to go north and leave Tarpon and my friends. I had too much here. I did not want to go to the fisheries—that's a bad job there, you make a bad life and you are not yourself; it's not worth it. I decided to wait it out with what I had and thank God this old man was saved, not that I'm too old now but that's another story.
- P. *Were you the only one to stay behind like this?*
- G. No. Some few others also; but the only one to start buying such properties at that time was myself. The others sold their properties. I also survived with the tourists. I charter fished and went out with the diving exhibition, which I still do today.
- P. *When you first came down, for whom did you work?*
- G. At that time I worked as mechanic on the boat of Captain Vassilis Christou. It did not take long, however; once I married I bought my first boat—in six months—for \$160. I also had my daughter as a baby then too.
- P. *How did you meet your wife?*
- G. I met her here, in Tarpon Springs. She had come from my *patrida* [country] to marry. I wanted a wife to start a family. Others went back and got wives for themselves and had managed to involve me with many women potentials, but I wanted a true family. I wanted a woman with intelligence so we could bring up a good family in our new land together. This was my priority. I did not look for youth and beauty, I wanted the older wiser one. She was eight years older than myself, but we lived a good life, may God bless her soul.
- P. *Were you introduced through other families?*
- G. Yes, a good one. They did not want me to marry an old woman—my friends tried to stop me—but I was set on my ways.
- P. *How many children did you have?*
- G. I have four. One daughter runs the curio store. Steve runs the ship-yard; John has the restaurant; and my daughter Giani has a captain's license for fish trawling. She had a store but was not happy so she rented it out.
- P. *Did Tarpon Springs have many Greeks together then?*

- G. Let me tell you: I came in 1912. From 1906 to 1917 the population was 1,500 sailors or spongers in the fish house.
- P. *Where you all united?*
- G. United yes, unionized no. If we were they would probably all still have jobs here. My men working for me would have done better—we all would have; but these merchants had power, my good son. They had power to do as they wished, and dragged us about like sheep. They opposed any corporation. They wanted our blood, and that's why the industry left Tarpon Springs I feel.
- P. *Did you ever have any problems with the Americans?*
- G. No, never. We only had problems whenever we went down to Key West. The Key Westians burned our boats. Here we had problems with the [sponge] hookers. We fought a lot and both of us went to jail but it was their problem. The local Americans were all right. Well, you know if you bother an American what will he do? He won't bother you.
- P. *What traditions did you bring over and keep in Tarpon Springs?*
- G. We kept everything here. Since 1906 some unknown person donated the crying icon of St. Nicholas. At those times and today many *ragalia* [storms] started out in the Gulf during the winter months. They made destruction in Tarpon. Since 1906, when our first church, which was the size of my kitchen, was built, no storm has ever hit Tarpon Springs directly. Do you understand? Even the American locals believe this and tell it to me. But this icon helped everyone progress [who] worked at sea on the boats. Now this is the truth—I have heard it. I have seen it; now you have heard it, my boy. There was once a hurricane coming to Tarpon Springs. I saw it move around the town and go to Tampa. We were hardly touched, but we should have lost everything. From northeast to northwest with seventy mph it was called Diana went to Tampa and left. St. Nicholas alone had the power to move the hurricane away for thirty miles. This shows why we all should believe, and why no culture was lost my good boy.
- P. *In the old days all of you were religious. How do you see the situation today?*
- G. The people, my son, the people have changed today. They were not like in the old days. They have lost their place. They have no respect for anything. Tarpon Springs you know has its good reputation from us old timers. There were times when Americans came to us for help. To sleep, get washed, eat. They did not know what to do. But us good Grecos decided to help them. So that is why Tarpon Springs has its name. The new Greeks don't understand what we have done. If you needed help on the road they wouldn't help you. In the old days you would find help 100% of the time. Today 75% and you are lucky.
- P. *Did you ever return to Greece?*
- G. No, I never wanted to. I have come to be known and loved as Captain George by all. I trained many to dive, even tried some American boys, but they were not patient. They wanted to grow beards, which is not good for diving. I did not like to travel. My wife, God bless her soul, went back two times. Let me tell you another reason. To go back was good. They expected to find me rich and to show it. But I was not this type. My heart was not in this. Five thousand dollars was needed to give any time I'd go. Why, I had my children first.
- P. *The new Greeks?*
- G. Those that are married are civilized. These new young men have no brains. They're only eighteen to twenty-five years old. They want fast money and have no respect. My sons would never do this.
- P. *What was the situation with the blight?*

G. I was lucky again. I worked for the government researchers in 1946-47. Everything was rotten and smelled. I used to go down, when I went down, I could feel the water burning. It was like my body was boiling, and dark. I could not see my hand in front of my face. It must have been a heat peak from the earth. The doctors came over and needed helpers. They asked me to help find divers. So I went in the coffee houses and told them that these people were here to help. I told them we would meet every morning at the Exchange and commanded all of them to show up. They discussed it among themselves. The government made the mistake to ask for volunteers of bankrupt people. No one was that willing. I had to make the first move. Since many had lost hope, they thought I was crazy to bother going down. So I went down with my three crew men to help. I made a dive in Tarpon waters, in the Gulf and Cedar Key. Everything I managed to find alive I brought up to show the doctors; it wasn't much, but they tried to analyze it. Even the rocks and dead stuff. They did not discover the cause. In the 1950's the sponges returned, but the people were old now, and there were few that could dive, no one had interest in it now.



**Diver coming up with sponges in Tarpon Springs**

(courtesy of USF Special Collections).

P. *Didn't you try bringing in new divers?*

G. We tried. The Exchange is the largest in Florida and the government granted permission to do what it could. So they brought over people. But they were the worst people they could have brought over. For example, if 300 came ten were good and stayed. The others just weren't workers. This is what they did: they took advantage of the fact that the government gave them visas to arrive with their families, to find a new home. They then turned and left. Within a year the gates were closed. I knew, for at the time I was trying to bring a relative over and I couldn't, and I lost \$200.

P. *Your children— are they interested?*

G. No, they make better money where they are.

P. *Do you think the industry will return?*

G. No, it will not. To do so it will have to be handled by the government. The government will have to spend millions on boats and artificial sponge beds. It will have to import men and restrict their visas on a yearly basis under a corporation. This I would like to see. Really . . .

P. *I heard that the early Greeks had a good relationship with the black people?*

G. In 1906 they came to us starved. They are people. They were good workers, so we helped. Today only one or two have stayed. Back then the black would speak the Greek dialect of the

- boss he worked for. If he was from Aegea, the black spoke Aegean, if he was from Kalymons, he spoke Kalimikan—that was a funny sight.
- P. *I know the story of Tarpon pretty well, Captain. What I would like to know is what you have seen with your own eyes.*
- G. In 1906 my brother-in-law came by to Tarpon and had to tread the river to reach the port—it was too shallow. That is why in the early years they had trawls to deposit the sponges in. Others would then pick them up and bring them to market. A Greek-born black used to make our ropes which he would pass them along. He started this stringing tradition. This way nothing was lost. My wife would bring them to market by carriage wagon.
- P. *Did you ever have problems with the merchants?*
- G. Always. They tried to gyp the captains and crews. They were, in a sense, responsible for the destruction of the industry also. It was the government that saw the situation as it was, and they came and dredged the river so that the boats could come in. Fourteen feet in high tide so now the formal exchange helped secure better prices. Now it is useless. It operates at a minimum because there is little sponge.
- P. *Is there an active industry?*
- G. There are a few boats working. . . . Three or four only working constantly as in comparison to 125 boats and forty hooker boats. Do you realize the difference?
- P. *What was the situation with the tax revolt in 1921?*
- G. What happened was that the city people claimed the fish house and boats as being property and should be taxed. What was the real situation, though, was that the city had made it to let the industry develop and, therefore, the boats were free. It should not have happened. We were forced to pay a personal tax of \$3 whether we used the road or not, and the boats were considered transportation. They were just trying to get rid of the boats from the city—that's all.
- P. *What was the political interest of the Greeks?*
- G. We always tried to enter politics. We have had policemen, chiefs, mayors. They could not help us much though, unless the rest of the commission was with them.
- P. *When did the first Greek school open?*
- G. 1915-1916—The priest helped them. Today we have the largest Greek school in all of Florida. You should see this.
- P. *Did all the spongers have families?*
- G. No, some married here, and others went back to make families. But we are all members of the community. They all went to various jobs. Today, we work on the tourists. It's rough, because we have to work with different kinds of people. Then we had 150 boats supplied with food for six months. We knew where we stood. We don't know if we will starve. During the blight we went and worked even if it was at our cost. We did it to live. My wife went to work also. We scrounged our money and lived on beans. With my move everyone kept working. During the depression we lived like this.
- P. *Do you consider yourself an American?*
- G. Yes, it is a good land. If you work honestly, you are free to do as you please. I like this system, that's why I spent my years since I was thirteen. When I left Greece my father said, "When you leave you might not ever return to our port again and see us alive. Let me give you some advice. Don't go about begging for a job. That is not worth it at \$500 a day and is dishonest. Be careful to earn the best you can honestly. Don't be a burden on anyone." I was

never to be lazy and I have always been taken care of. I started as a shoe shiner—worked for tips.

P. *Did the Greek bosses ever take advantage of their countrymen in Tarpon Springs?*

G. No, we had a good quiet life down here.