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Tampa Bay History

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Turn of the century Tarpon Spring: a postcard from the USF Special Collections.

SMUGGLING AT TARPON SPRINGS: A PROTEST

Editors' Note: Smuggling is undoubtedly as old as the practice of taxing imports, and the illicit liquor trade along the Gulf Coast certainly predates Prohibition, as the following 1901 protest makes clear. Written by a Tarpon Springs businessman, it also contains some interesting information about life in that town at the turn of the century. The other fact worth noting is that this document was found in the National Archives where a wealth of original source material on local history is housed. The exact location of this document is Record Group 36, Treasury Department, "Custom House Nominations – Tampa," Box 79. It should also be pointed out that the file contains an official response from an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Department who answered that the federal government could not afford to appoint a customs officer for Tarpon Springs to police traffic at the mouth of the Anclote River. Perhaps most remarkable is the fact that the reply from the Washington official is dated August 27, 1901, a mere eight days after the following complaint was written.

**Office of W. W. K. Decker
Dealer in
Rock Island Sheep's Wool and Anclote Grass and Yellow Sponges.**

Tarpon Springs, Florida

8/19/1901

M. C. Macfarlane
Collector of Customs
Tampa, Florida

Dear Sir:

I feel it urgently incumbent upon me to again call the attention of the Department to the illegal traffic in dutiable merchandise which is being constantly carried on at and near the mouth of the Anclote River. Lately this has assumed alarming proportions, large quantities of liquors distilled in Cuba, and brought to these waters by fishing smacks, the home Port of which is Havana, are being conveyed from these vessels to land in almost *open* violation of Customs laws, and sold ashore in violation of United States and States law, by the quart, gallon, demijohn and I presume barrel to suit the inclination of the purchaser. This in itself we who are engaged in business here might endure if the Government authorities are disposed to permit its continuance, but to such the consequences of this traffic are something direful to contemplate with equanimity.

The demoralization and debauchery that arises from this state of affairs plunges our business into confusion, engenders animosities that result in loss of life and property and excites and intimidates the law abiding and law defending element of the community.

Speaking now only for myself, I am constrained to say that my direct losses from having supplies which are furnished my vessels for the legitimate pursuit of the business, traded for rum by dishonest members of the crews; the jeopardy to my large interests as a sponge buyer from men made irresponsible or vindictive by drink and considerations of personal safety leads me to think seriously of abandoning a business the volume of which amounts to nearly \$100,000 a year.

It may be proper here to supply some data relating to the Sponge industry and market at this place:

There are at present about 150 vessels engaged in fishing along this coast, about forty of which are outfitted here, the balance outfitted at Key West, and about 1200 fishermen, commonly called spongers, are employed in operating these vessels. This fleet all rendezvous within from one to three miles from the Anclote River, while on their trip and there cleanse the sponges caught, and prepare them for the market.

There are usually five buyers representing as many business firms and nearly all of the catches made by the Key West vessels from these waters are sold here as well as the entire product of the

vessels owned or operated at this place. For past two or three years the value of the product which has been disposed of here has averaged \$250,000 annually. There are from thirty to forty men employed in the various sponge packing establishments and disbursements for wages aggregate \$20,000 per year. The above statements, I can readily substantiate, from accurate records and by other parties interested in this business and it is the opinion of all that an industry of this magnitude is deserving of adequate protection from the hands of the Administration.

You will no doubt note account of the murder committed at Anclote last night when reported to the newspapers. This was attributable solely to causes complained of at beginning of this letter, the last of several that have been perpetrated through same causes.

Yours very truly,

(signed)

W. W. K. Decker