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Tarpon Springs and the Great Depression

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During the years of the Great Depression, the ethnic and economic mixture of Tarpon Springs gave it a character that set it apart from other Florida cities. During the darkest hours of the depression, the town found itself saved by the sponge, a simple organism that proved to be the life-blood of the city. Ironically, the people of Tarpon Springs entered the decade of the 1930s in a paradoxical situation, as they simultaneously faced the Great Depression and enjoyed the "golden age" of the sponge industry.

Understanding the history of local economies and ethnic groups provides insight into Tarpon Springs during the Great Depression. When pioneer A.W. Ormond built a log cabin on Spring Bayou in 1876, the area was deserted. All that remained of the native Tocobaga Indians who had inhabited the land for thousands of years were their midden and burial mounds. Legend has it that Ormond's daughter, Mary, was so amazed by the giant tarpon that swam in the bayou, that she named the town after them. The surrounding land was covered with pine and oak trees which ran to the water's edge. Wild game and alligators abounded, and many species of fish swam in the bayou.

In 1880 Governor W.D. Bloxom sold four million acres of land to Hamilton Disston at a price of twenty-five cents per acre. This deal included the embryonic settlement of Tarpon Springs, and Disston's title to the land superseded existing homesteads. One of his first actions was to force the people who had settled on this land to buy it back from him at a rate of one dollar and twenty-five cents an acre. In 1882 Disston formed the Lake Butler (now Lake Tarpon) Villa Company with 9,000 acres of what is today Pinellas County. Settlers laid out the new town in 1882, and Anson Safford, an ex-governor of Arizona, arrived to run the company. A hotel was constructed in 1883, and a railway depot was built for a new line that ran from Ehren (twenty miles to the north) to St. Petersburg. The first promotional brochure, "An Interesting History of Florida and the Famous Tarpon Springs," was published in 1884 in New York in an effort to lure prospective land buyers. Local mail service began in 1886 with the construction of a new post office. Until this time the nearest post office was in Clearwater, and anyone who went down the trail brought the mail back for the whole town.

The year 1887 galvanized the fledgling community. On February 12, thirty-three of forty-four registered voters elected to incorporate Tarpon Springs as a city in Hillsborough County, which then included all of today's Pinellas County. The city built a dock at the foot of the main street. A steamboat, the Mary Disston, ran between the new dock and the small settlement of Anclote, where all goods and passengers from Cedar Key landed for transport to Tarpon Springs. President Grover Cleveland ordered the construction of a $35,000 lighthouse on Anclote Key to help mark the harbor entrance.

Tarpon Springs gained notoriety with the arrival of the Duke of Sutherland, who was a cousin of Queen Victoria. His wife, Duchess Anne, was lady-in-waiting to the queen and loved court life. Theirs was not a marriage made in heaven, as the Duke preferred hunting, yachting, and fishing.
He took up with a widow, Lady Caroline Blair, and they bought forty acres on Lake Butler and built a cypress shingle house. When the Duchess died in England in 1889, Lady Blair and the Duke were married.¹¹

The decade of the nineties was known for the construction of the "Golden Crescent," a half-circle of Victorian homes built along Spring Bayou by wealthy northerners. The "Golden Crescent" featured homes with boathouses to provide shelter for yachts. These residents helped make Tarpon Springs a popular winter resort. Between 1890 and 1895, the city’s population increased by 42 percent, to 561 residents, making Tarpon Springs the largest city on the Pinellas peninsula.¹²

In 1890, John K. Cheyney established the Anclote and Rock Island Sponge Company.¹³ The sponge industry began to move from its historical base in Key West to Tarpon Springs because of the nine thousand square miles of rich and untouched sponge beds off Florida’s western Gulf Coast. By 1900 thirty-five sponge boats operated out of Tarpon Springs. The common way to obtain sponges used long poles with hooks in shallow water, a process called the hook method. A Greek named John Cocoris persuaded Cheyney to finance an experiment in gathering sponges by diving for them instead of using the hook method.¹⁴ The future of Tarpon Springs changed
A sponge diver from Tarpon Springs boarding a boat with his catch in 1936.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
overnight when the experiment succeeded. Cheyney asked Cocoris to bring over sponge divers from Greece, and in 1905, some 500 divers made the long trip. These experienced divers came from the islands of Aigina, Khalke, Kalymnos, and Syme. They brought with them their diving suits, dive boat plans, and customs - their language, dress, dance, and love of the sea.

The pioneer Greek immigrants had a hard life. They slept on their boats, in shacks, or in the "Old Diver's House," which opened in 1907 to house bachelor divers. The sponge beds proved to be very fertile, and many of the Greeks sent back for their families as soon as they had established themselves. All was not peaceful, however, as hostilities broke out between the "hookers" and the "divers." The hookers, mostly "Conchs" from Key West and Cedar Key, felt threatened by the efficiency of the Greek divers. They spread rumors that the Greek divers trampled small sponges walking across the ocean floor in their heavy shoes. A bitter and violent rivalry developed. The wealthy families of the "Golden Crescent" watched in amazement and disbelief as their winter resort evolved into a teeming Greek village. The citizens of the city of Tarpon Springs were a collection of wealthy northerners, native frontier "crackers," African-Americans, and newly arrived Greeks.

The arrival of the Greeks can be dramatically illustrated by the U.S. Census, as the population rose from 740 in 1905 to 2,212 in 1910. The number actually decreased to 1,938 in 1915, a fact explained by the exodus of some of the wealthy northerners and a few homesick Greeks. After that the population grew rather slowly. The 1925 census reported 2,635 citizens, an increase of 21 percent in fifteen years. Tarpon Springs' place as a county leader in Pinellas County was supplanted by Clearwater and a rapidly growing St. Petersburg. A great discrepancy exists between the 1925 Florida census and the police department census of 1926, which claimed 4,459 residents, not counting the hundreds of part-time northern residents. The police department listed 826 foreign-born (Greek) citizens, with half of that number naturalized.

Tarpon Springs prospered in the teens and early twenties as it became the world's leading sponge producer. The city appeared immune to the problems faced by most of postwar America. Anglo-Americans, African-Americans, and Greeks worked together without serious incident. The local economy prospered because of the sponge fleet's catch, valued at $707,202 in 1919. The concurrent Florida land boom also contributed to the area's growth. A savage hurricane smashed Tarpon Springs and the Tampa Bay area in 1921 with winds of one hundred miles per hour, which severely damaged the sponge fleet. Subsequently, the sponge catch fell to $531,300 in 1922. Any rise or fall in sponge sales had an immediate ripple effect throughout the city because so many of Tarpon's residents worked in the industry.

Tarpon Springs experienced a period of great growth during the 1920s. The Tarpon Inn, a $125,000, one hundred-room hotel, opened with great fanfare. The city contained two lumber mills which employed a large number of men and shipped lumber to various points on the coast. These saw mills kept busy supplying the growth of the local building industry. According to a brochure printed by the secretary of the Board of Trade, Tarpon Springs supported "several machine shops and marine ways, automobile garages, laundries, two bottling houses, and other industries." This brochure stated, "two strong banks administer to the financial needs of the community, the business of both having doubled during the past year." A quarter of a million dollars in new commercial structures and residences marked the growth of Tarpon Springs, while
Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange in 1921.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
a score of new businesses expanded the city commercially.\textsuperscript{22} In 1926, the two banks in Tarpon Springs showed a 37 percent increase in net holdings over 1925.\textsuperscript{23} At that time the nearest hospital was in Clearwater. Also that year, the $250,000 Sunset Hills Country Club opened complete with a golf course.\textsuperscript{24} Like the other municipalities of Pinellas County, Tarpon Springs accumulated a huge debt to finance this growth. By 1931, the city owed $2,436,500 in bonds.\textsuperscript{25} Tarpon Springs never enjoyed the boom St. Petersburg had, but the city experienced steady and substantial growth.\textsuperscript{26}

The citizens’ experiences during the Great Depression could best be described as a period of extreme peaks and valleys. Old Greeks described the 1930s as "good ole days" after blight destroyed the sponge beds in 1947. Whatever the oldtimers might have said, though, times were tough.

Residents felt the effects of the depression almost immediately. In 1930, the First National Bank of Commerce nearly dissolved. A midnight meeting of 75 percent of its major depositors saved the faltering institution. The morning after was labeled as "confidence day," celebrated with posters all over town and a band playing on Spring Bayou.\textsuperscript{27} The bank stayed open until March 4, 1933, when it closed under presidential orders.\textsuperscript{28} It reopened as the First National Bank of Tarpon Springs on January 27, 1934. The bank was capitalized at $50,000 with a $5,000 surplus and guaranteed deposits of up to $2,500.\textsuperscript{29} This was a far cry from the bank’s situation in 1926 when both banks (the Bank of Commerce and the First National Bank, which later merged) had posted assets of over $2,000,000.\textsuperscript{30}

Shortage of income created a tax collection problem. In 1932 the city offered a tax discount to stimulate collection. This plan was dropped after one year because of increased revenue.\textsuperscript{31} In December 1932 the city almost had to do without a Christmas tree because the American Legion, the usual sponsor, could not raise the money. Guests of the Arcade Hotel contributed twenty-five dollars, and the community’s children enjoyed their tree.\textsuperscript{32} In 1932 the city foreclosed on its airport which had been the site of its annual air show.\textsuperscript{33} In the same year, the city saved nearly $5,000 by closing the public golf course for six months and by closing the sanitary department.\textsuperscript{34} After the sanitary department closed, the city had to pass an ordinance preventing the dumping of trash on the streets. When Lake Butler, the source of the city’s water supply, became salty due to extreme high tides in March 1932, the city lacked sufficient funds to make a $125 deposit with Florida Power to turn on the old pumping station in town.\textsuperscript{35} The well at the Tarpon Springs Golf Club provided a solution when it was turned into the city water main. The Sunset Hills Golf and Country Club closed its doors in 1934. It was sold at a sheriff’s auction for $4,000, a fraction of its cost.\textsuperscript{36} The site of the country club served as a year-round baseball training school for a while; now the site serves as the home of Anclote Manor, a world renown psychiatric hospital.\textsuperscript{37}

In 1932 the Halki and Claymnos societies opened relief kitchens to feed the needy and the unemployed. The Halki Society, whose members traced their origin to the Greek island of Halki, served two meals a day to all who asked. The kitchens were funded by the sponge industry with each boat captain donating a bunch of sponges. Officials of the two organizations maintained a close watch on the conditions of needy families so help could be given without delay.\textsuperscript{38} Their actions meant other charity groups, such as the Red Cross, could focus on other areas of the community. Even though these two kitchens eventually closed, the Greek community of Tarpon
Springs managed to weather the depression by lending each other a helping hand when times were tough. The government also assisted the needy with distribution of hundreds of sacks of free flour. Even with these aid programs, there was never enough relief to go around. Residents often had to depend on their fishing skills to secure their next meal.

The city faced another problem with the arrival of waves of unemployed northerners. According to the Florida Census of 1935, Tarpon Springs was populated by 3,414 year-round residents, including 648 Greek immigrants. The number of unemployed residents increased from 137 in 1933 to 250 in 1936. An example of the sad plight faced by the chronic unemployed was the suicide of William McFather. An unemployed father of thirteen, McFather chose to commit suicide with his own knife rather than deal with failure.

By 1933, the New Deal began to influence life in Tarpon Springs. The unemployed worked at projects sponsored by the federal government. By 1935, the Works Projects Administration (WPA) had enlisted 184 of the city's unemployed. The workers helped to beautify the city; their various projects included Coburn and Rotary Parks. They repaired the streets and painted public buildings. When the WPA worked on projects such as Coburn Park, local businesses received assistance since contracts were let for materials, such as cement, lumber, crushed stone, and other items that were used in construction.

President Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration (NRA) of 1933 also provided much needed help. "Every person must do his share. We are going through a great war, a war of life and death," Perry J. Wilson stated as he addressed a mass meeting at the city park during which the NRA was explained. He received an ovation as he explained the project in every detail. The NRA raised the salary of workers covered from $1.50 to $2.40 a day. Local workers labored from one to three days a week to support some 400 dependents. The citizens and employers of Tarpon Springs supported the NRA until it was declared unconstitutional in 1935. The city showed their support for the Roosevelt by holding a "New Deal Dance" at the municipal pier (Sunset Beach). Throughout the depression, the citizens of Tarpon Springs supported the New Deal programs by voting overwhelmingly for Roosevelt.

J.N. Craig, mayor of Tarpon Springs during the entire decade of the 1930s, faced financial problems almost immediately after taking office. The most serious problem involved delinquent taxes and a $2,500,000 lawsuit by the holders of municipal bonds. This suit was not settled until 1938, with the city paying off at a rate of seventy-five cents on the dollar. In 1933, the Sponge Exchange agreed to pay off its three years of delinquent occupational licenses with city bonds. A spokesman said that this was the only way they could pay off their back taxes and keep their occupational license. The city commission did many things in an effort to save money: taxes were slashed, salaries were cut, and the street lights were turned off. The hospital was leased to E.H. Beckett for five years at one dollar a year, because it had run so far into the red. Schools, including the Negro Union Academy, faced hard times. Teachers were often paid in scrip, redeemable at select local merchants, and it was never certain at the beginning of each year how long the term would last.

Just as today, politics in Tarpon Springs during the depression was never dull. A 1936 mayoral election almost led to bloodshed. The contest was fought between Mayor J.N. Craig, who...
represented the Anglo-American community, and George M. Emmanuel of the Greek community. Emmanuel sought to become the city’s first Greek mayor. According to the 1935 census, Tarpon Springs’ Greek population comprised 1,273 out of the city’s 3,520 citizens. In 1935, Tarpon Springs reported that 881 people paid their poll taxes, along with the 325 citizens who were exempt because they were over fifty-six years of age. Thus, a total of about 1,200 citizens were eligible to vote. The number of Greeks who were registered to vote was relatively low. In the official account, Craig led with 649 votes to Emmanuel’s 443. Emmanuel immediately announced that he would seek the arrest of all five members of the local election board. Emmanuel cried foul because the city hall was closed while the votes were being counted, instead of being open to the public as in previous years. Emmanuel also questioned the tally of 179 absentee ballots. Reputedly, these ballots were cast mostly by members of the sponge fleet. Emmanuel, the sponge exchange president, and his supporters were shocked when the count of absentee ballots was released, and Craig received 170 out of the 179 total. Emmanuel’s supporters said affidavits would be sought for the absentee voters to see how they had voted. Later that night, Emmanuel claimed that he had received a letter which warned him to stay out of politics and was signed with a bloody dagger. The subsequent election probe ran into a snag when subpoenas were issued to spongers who were not scheduled to return for many weeks. In the end, Craig won the election; however, the wounds incurred would not heal for years to come.

Aside from occasional bolita trafficking, crime was not a serious problem in Tarpon Springs during the Great Depression. The region’s meandering coastline invited smuggling, and more than one bootlegger landed his cargo in Tarpon Springs. This problem ended when the sale of liquor became legal on November 6, 1934. Most of the crime was of a trivial nature, such as a woman wanted for the theft of her own car. The teeming throngs attending the annual Epiphany celebration attracted would-be criminals, causing the sheriff to issue a warning to watch for pick-pockets.

Tourism, though at a low level, was still a viable industry during the depression years. The ex-president and Mrs. Calvin Coolidge visited in 1931 and were taken by boat to the Anclote lighthouse. Other notable guests included Paramount film director Paul Lannin and Tammany Hall Chief James Dooling. Luxury yachts put into harbor occasionally, and the city boasted four hotels, including the fashionable Villa Plumose. The Chamber of Commerce was so hard pressed for advertising money that they put bumper-stickers on north-bound cars.

It was sponges, however, not the New Deal programs which saved the economy of Tarpon Springs in the thirties. "Sponges and gold." insisted George Emmanuel to the Rotary Club in 1931, "are the only two commodities whose price has not fallen in the last two years." Historian Gertrude K. Stoughton observed, "For the Greek speaking part of Tarpon Springs, sponge was gold." The sponge trade provided for Tarpon Springs families in the midst of a horrible depression. Sponge diving was the life-line of the Greek community. It was estimated that one diver provided jobs for fifteen other men.

Sponges have been a commodity of trade since antiquity. By the 1930s sponges were chiefly used for cleaning automobiles and by the paint industry. Until the invention of the artificial sponge in the 1940s, there was no comparable substitute and demand constantly exceeded supply. According to The Journal of Geography, New York received the majority of the Tarpon
Springs catch. In 1931, New York alone received almost one-half of the domestic production. Other important markets included Chicago, St. Louis, and Cincinnati. Tarpon Springs was a convenient center for the industry because of its favorable transportation facilities, both by water and by railway.

In 1934, the Civil Works Administration completed its study of the sponge industry. According to the report, national sponge sales in 1933 netted $597,458, of which $420,481 was from Tarpon Springs. The industry employed approximately 629 men; 515 worked on boats and 114 in packing houses. Fifty diving boats based in Tarpon Springs and thirty hooking boats based in Key West, comprised Florida's sponge fleet. The industry annually spent $95,000 for food, $90,000 for fuel, $15,000 for diving suits, $6,000 for miscellaneous items, and $25,000 for interest on financing and debt. Even though the sponge industry employed mainly Greeks, its success in the thirties was shared by many who were not directly involved in it. The entire town prospered.

Another assessment of the sponge fishing fleet in the early thirties estimated the value of a diving boat and equipment at $6,000. The fleet’s fifty-four boats amounted to an assessment of $324,000. The average replacement value of a hooker boat was $1,200; there were twenty-five of
these for a total of $30,000. The value of the Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange was $30,000. Waterfront docks and improvements were worth $20,000. Machine shops, marine ways, and shipyards totaled $75,000. Sponge preparation and packing houses were worth $50,000, and boat supply houses and special stocks on hand equaled $30,000. The total investment according to this estimate was $559,000.62

Sponge sales continued to rise during the depression. While most industries in the country suffered a severe downturn, the sponge industry continued to grow. The federal government even did its part to keep the sponge industry thriving. For example, in 1938, the federal post office purchased 5,000 sponges to "pump-prime" the industry. A spokesman commented, "We have to keep the windows clean in 2,745 post offices across the country." He also noted, "With this last order, we have shot our load as far as this commodity is concerned. We won't be able to buy any more on this year's budget."63 In 1933 Congress appropriated funds to dredge the Anclote River.64 This deepened the shallow river, enabling the sponge boats to travel the Anclote River freely, not just at high tide.65

Sales in the years 1917-1938 fluctuated according to consumer demand and supply, but they reached new highs in the 1930s (see Table 1).
Table 1

Sponge Sales in Tarpon Springs, 1917-38

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Value in Dollars</th>
<th>Quantity in Pounds</th>
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<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>$870,135</td>
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<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>592,778</td>
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<td>707,282</td>
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Sponge prices declined through the first years of the depression, but by the auction of July 1933, prices began to rise again. This brought cheering and celebration from the boat owners and crews at the Sponge Exchange. Prices were 20 percent higher than in June, and continued to climb. This extra money immediately circulated through the community.66 The million dollar year of 1936 had an immediate impact upon the Greek community.67 In January 1937, community leaders announced plans to erect a new $100,000 Greek Orthodox Church.68 The plans for the church were drawn up in Greece; it was to be modeled along ancient Byzantine lines. The Greek Orthodox Church traditionally received a portion of sponge sales. By 1938, the Sponge Exchange was inadequate, and plans were readied to enlarge its capacity from sixty to one hundred cells and to erect a new two-story office building.69

The New Deal imposed new regulations on the sponge industry. The National Recovery Administration attempted to work out standard codes of hours and wages for the producers and packers, but the many sided sponge industry proved a difficult industry to order. The supply firms, boat owners, and crews formed the Sponge Producers Association in 1932, in part to
oppose government regulation. In 1934, Tarpon Springs became the location of the first national convention of the Sponge and Chamois Institute. The delegates worked out a code to cover all divisions of the sponge industry in the United States. The agreement prohibited packers from buying sponges in any place other than Tarpon Springs, Keaton Beach (near Perry), or at Key West. However, the federal government thought that the sponge industry had gone too far in collaborating on a pact of mutual aid. In January 1937, the government charged Tarpon Springs Sponge Exchange, Inc., along with twelve other distributors of sponges, with conspiracy and restraint of trade by member packers and distributors. After a long struggle, the case was finally dropped.

One of the major problems faced by the sponge industry was the persistent shortage of divers, which limited the number of boats which could operate. The efforts to bring in more Greek divers were thwarted by the federal government's Immigration Restriction Acts of 1921 and 1924, which discriminated against newer immigrant groups from southern and eastern Europe. Consequently, some boats worked within the state's nine-mile limit because it was possible to get more bottom time at the shallower depths. This led to many arrests and a rekindling of the diver-hooker feud. The hookers expressed anger because the sponge beds inside the nine-mile limit were reserved for them, and diving was prohibited within that boundary. Authorities
impounded sponger boats and arrested crews. Also, the city of Sarasota tried to lure the sponge fleet away. Nick Nicholas led this movement, describing Sarasota as the "land of milk an honey." He had no takers, however, and the movement failed.74

In November 1932, tragedy struck the Greek community. Three Greek sponge fisherman died when the jail that housed them in Cedar Key burned. Stathis Johannou, Theodore Samarkos, and George Georgiou had been jailed on charges of drunkenness and disorderly conduct. They were being held under orders of Justice of the Peace T. W. Brewer. State Attorney J. C. Atkins confessed he "could find no other reason for their incarceration, except that Brewer was drunk and admitted to being under the influence of intoxicating liquor." Atkins also said that there was evidence that gasoline had been spread around the wooden jail. The Greek community expressed outrage. Brewer and Special Constable Thomas Booth were later convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for stabbing and bludgeoning the men to death and then setting fire to the jail.75

Sponge diving made for a very dangerous living. Prolonged time underwater could and usually did lead to a case of the bends. The "bends," or decompression sickness, is caused by small pockets of nitrogen which form in the blood and arteries while diving. The bends can be prevented by surfacing slowly and allowing the nitrogen to escape the body, a process called decompression. However, the early Greek sponge divers knew little about this hazard or how to prevent it. Each year several unfortunate divers lost their lives to the bends. The number of incapacitated divers in need of charity further aggravated the community's efforts at dealing with the depression. George Poumpouris was one of the lucky ones; the only injury from twenty years of diving was the loss of most of his hearing. He claimed that sharks never posed a problem for the divers. The main problem was the air hose getting tangled or cut by an escort boat. He knew of only one instance of a man getting attacked by a shark, and the man fought the shark off without serious injury.76

Still, no matter how careful the Greek spongers were, fatalities did occur. On December 2, 1932, Antonio Fataakeis, a hooker, died of a stroke on his boat. He had come from the island of Halki twenty-three years earlier, and like many of the sponge fishermen, his wife and two sons were still in Greece.77 In November 1933, the diving boat Xios and its five crew men failed to return home. The mystery was not solved until February 1935, when the wreck was found twelve miles off Cedar Key by Captain Gahielle Peterson of the sponge diving boat, The Gabriel.78 He found the fire-scarred remains of the boat as well as two battered dive helmets and some bones. Captain Peterson believed that fire aboard the Xios had cut off the air supply to the divers below. Those aboard the boat either perished in the flames or jumped overboard and drowned. The families had all but given up hope when the Xios failed to return home for Christmas and the Greek ceremony of Epiphany on January 6.79

Sponge boat captains welcomed new technologies, such as the service provided by state radio station WRUF at the University of Florida in 1932. Daily weather reports broadcast in Greek aided the sponge divers working in the Gulf of Mexico.80 Sudden storms threatened the sponge boats, which remained at sea for many weeks at a time. The sponge boat, however, was capable of navigating storms and distances. In 1933 the sponge boat St. Nicholas traveled to Chicago via the Mississippi River and was exhibited in the 1933 World's Fair next to the Florida orange grove exhibit.81
A sponge boat captain pictured in 1941.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
The Greek community awaited anxiously for the outcome of an invention by Simon Lake. It was a crawling submarine capable of prowling along the gulf bottom in depths beyond which the divers could work. The inventor began work on a twenty-two-foot submarine which would roll along the ocean floor on wheels and would be used to retrieve sponges in depths of 250 to 300 feet. In the end, the experiment failed.

In his autobiography, the Rev. John Pappas revealed the problems of sponge production. According to him, even with the success of the sponge fleet, all was not well. He explained how the fleet was owned by individual captains who operated on shares. To recruit crew members, the captain gave them a share before they set sail on a three-month expedition. Often the crew spent the money on drinking or gambling and then refused to sail with the captain. Also another captain might come along and promise more money than the first, leaving the first captain short of crew. This caused delays and a loss of time and money. Bankers sometimes charged captains exorbitant rates of interest, anywhere from 35 to 40 percent a year. Pappas also stated that the businessmen and even the banks took advantage of the Greeks, who, according to the 1930 census, were 85 percent illiterate and often could not read or write even their own language. Since they bought their supplies on credit, they ended up paying almost double for everything. Since they could not add, they were left at the mercy of unscrupulous men who charged them whatever they wanted. "They tried to gyp the captains and crews," recalled ex-sponge diver George Georgeiou, who fifty years later remained bitter toward the businessmen who had preyed off the sponge industry.

After a trip, the owners figured out expenses and paid the crew via a share system. From the proceeds, crew expenses such as food, fuel, and operating expenses were deducted. The remainder was split between the crew and the vessel owner. The profit margin for the crew was small. Rev. Pappas estimated that in the first six months of 1933, the average man working on a sponge boat earned forty-three cents per day. Since some of the men received higher shares than the others, the majority made only around thirty cents per day for the support of their families.

Given the vicissitudes of the industry, spongers sought temporary work elsewhere. The citrus industry served as an important employer in Tarpon Springs. The Tugwell and Wiseman cannery opened in 1929. Processing over 1,000 cases of orange and grapefruit juice a day during its six-month season, the plant employed between 100 and 200 people. The citizens of Tarpon Springs received a shock when the cannery closed in 1937, but the plant reopened a year later much to the relief of the city.

Since the town’s earliest days, Tarpon Springs had African-American residents. Most of the men worked in the lumber mills; others worked in orange groves, maintained homes, or cut wood. The women worked as cooks, maids, and midwives. African Americans also worked in the sponge industry. They were hooking sponges before the arrival of the Greeks, and after their arrival they worked side by side for a number of years. Some even learned how to speak Greek and became divers. The Greeks were racially tolerant at first, but gradually the African Americans were squeezed out of the industry. The black community erected its own Christmas tree which attracted many residents in a Christmas Eve tradition. Every January 1 they celebrated Emancipation Day with a parade that ran through the main business district to the Union Academy, an African-American school, where a barbecue was held.
The African-American community of Tarpon Springs fared much worse than the Anglo-American and Greek communities during the Great Depression. They did not share in the wealth of the bumper sponge crops of the thirties. The Greeks were very tightly-knit in their work, and few outsiders were employed by them. Very little of the sponge profits, which helped the town hold its head above water trickled down to the African-American community. According to the 1935 census, there were 637 African Americans in Tarpon Springs; of these, an impressive number of 250 were registered to vote.88 The African-American community received very little help from the city. In 1933, at the height of the depression, the board of governors of the Chamber of Commerce asked the city commissioners to condemn and secure the removal of "a series of dilapidated, unsightly and unsanitary shacks" occupied by African-American families. The African-American community did receive help from the community in 1939, when the Jolly Juvenile Ministers put on a performance of "The Chocolate Wedding" to raise funds for the Union Academy.89

A vivid illustration of the difference between the African-American and the Anglo-Greek communities remains today in the Cycadia cemetery. The Anglo-Greek section is immaculate, with well-maintained lawns and elaborate tombstones. Some of the Greek graves actually serve as little shrines, with eternal flames. The African-American cemetery lies in an unmarked field across the street. The cemetery is weed-choked and desolate. The cemetery itself suggests the poverty experienced by the African-American community. Many of the graves are marked by two-foot tall, thin pillars of stone. Few have names engraved on them. The oldest readable tombstone dates to 1910, although it is probable that there are illegible ones that are even older. The tombstone of the Rev. W.G. Andrews, who died in 1929, was of a much higher quality. This shows the high regard which the African-American community placed on religion. The African-American cemetery of Tarpon Springs is a sobering testament to the plight of this community during the depression.

Women played an important, if unsung, part in Tarpon Springs history. From the earliest days they were civic minded. Women raised money for such things as the first school building, the first street lamps, churches, general welfare and temperance. The women were especially active during the depression years. In the Greek community, it was the women who ran the free kitchens of the Halki and Callymanin societies. Mrs. Boyer became the first county social worker in the area, but she found that she was able to help only the worst cases until state funds became available in 1935.90 In 1937, Janet M. Black took a new step for women when she ran for the office of commissioner. Even though she was unsuccessful, she was the first woman of Tarpon Springs to run for public office.91

By 1939, most residents felt confident of the future. J.N. Craig confirmed this optimism when he said, "I honestly think that this year will be better than the last and one of our best so far."92 With sponge sales increasing yearly, times did indeed look good for the city. Yet as late as 1941, the Great Depression had not disappeared. The fifty-three students of the Tarpon High School graduating class of 1941 faced uncertainty. Sponge diving, fishing, or work picking or packing in the citrus industry remained customary career options. College was a luxury few enjoyed.

For Tarpon Springs, times were not destined to get better. Just as the economy began to pick up a terrible blight struck the sponge beds, and the industry was all but destroyed. The Great
Depression and the "golden age" of sponge diving came to an end, and the city on the bayou would never be the same again.

NOTE: THE ENDNOTES 54 – 56 HAVE SEVERAL DIFFERENT ENDNOTES IN THE BOOK

NOTES


4 Maxwell, "Tarpon Springs."

5 Ibid.

6 Stoughton, Tarpon Springs, 8.

7 Maxwell, "Tarpon Springs."


9 Maxwell, "Tarpon Springs."

10 Dill, "The Glow that was Rome."

11 St. Petersburg Times, January 3, 1937.

12 Stoughton, Tarpon Springs, 23.


14 Jennie Harris "Sponge Fisherman of Tarpon Springs," National Geographic (January 1947), 119-123.

15 Stoughton, Tarpon Springs, 44.

16 Harris, "Sponge Fisherman," 120.

17 Walter Corbit, "Tarpon Springs House was Tough" Tampa Tribune (n.d., clipping).

18 Tampa Tribune, July 3, 1926.

19 St. Petersburg Times, January 2, 1938.

20 Ibid.

21 "Tarpon Springs" (Promotional Brochure), 1926.

22 Ibid.
23 *Tampa Tribune*, June 8, 1926.

24 Ibid., July 17, 1926.

25 Ibid., December 17, 1926.

26 *St. Petersburg Times*, January 17, 1931.


28 *St. Petersburg Times*, January 30, 1934.

29 *Tampa Tribune*, January 27, 1934.

30 Ibid., June 8, 1926.

31 Ibid., November 28, 1933.

32 *St. Petersburg Times*, December 22, 1932.

33 Ibid., August 8, 1933.

34 Ibid., September 24, 1932.


36 Stoughton, *Tarpon Springs*, 76.

37 *St. Petersburg Times*, July 17, 1932.

38 Ibid., July 15, 1932.

39 *Sixth Census of the State of Florida, 1935*, Table 5, 25.

40 *St. Petersburg Times*, January 4, 1935.

41 Ibid., August 6, 1933.

42 Ibid., January 11, 1933.

43 Ibid., August 3, 1933.

44 Ibid., August 6, 1933.


46 *St. Petersburg Times*, August 6, 1933.

47 Ibid., November 9, 1932, November 11, 1936.


49 *St. Petersburg Times*, December 28, 1933.

50 Stoughton, *Tarpon Springs*, 73.
51 *St. Petersburg Times*, November 5, 1932.

52 Ibid., January 20, 1936.

53 Ibid., January 21, 1936.

54 Ibid., January 23, 1936.

*St. Petersburg Times*, January 23, 1936.

55 *Tampa Tribune*, January 24, 1936.

*Tampa Tribune*, January 24, 1936.

Tampa Tribune, January 24, 1936.

56 *St. Petersburg Times*, January 3, 1939.


58 Ibid., 77.

59 *St. Petersburg Times*, January 2, 1938.


*St. Petersburg Times*, January 3, 1939.

63 *St. Petersburg Times*, January 14, 1938.

64 Stoughton, *Tarpon Springs*, 78.

65 *St. Petersburg Times*, January 14, 1938.

66 Ibid., July 31, 1933.

67 Ibid., January 1, 1936.

68 Ibid., January 25, 1937.


70 *St. Petersburg Times*, June 10, 1932.

71 Ibid., January 7, 1934.

72 Ibid., January 15, 1934.

73 Ibid., January 3, 1937.
74 Ibid., August 8, 1933:

75 Ibid., November 29 to December 20, 1932.

76 Corbit, "Tarpon Springs."

77 *St. Petersburg Times*, December 2, 1932.

78 *Tampa Tribune*, February 16, 1935.

79 Ibid., March 12, 1934.

80 *St. Petersburg Times*, July 14, 1932.

81 Ibid., April 30, 1933.

82 Ibid., November 9, 1932.


86 Mary Alice Perry, Various unpublished letters, 1905-1907.

87 *St. Petersburg Times*, January 1, 1937.

88 Ibid., January 10, 1937.


90 Ibid., 75.

91 *St. Petersburg Times*, January 17, 1937.

92 Ibid., January 1, 1939.