

The Greeks Of Tarpon Springs

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

"Tarpon Springs" by Dolores Kilgo is one of the many volumes in the Images of America series that features a section of its images on Greeks in the United States (Arcadia Press, Charleston, South Carolina: 2002). While visiting Tarpon Springs this past December, I can report, that Ms. Kilgo's volume was to be found in virtually every tourist shop up and down Dodecanese Boulevard that runs the length of the city's sponge docks.

Only five volumes in the Images of America series are devoted exclusively to Greeks: Staten Island's Greek Community; The Greek Pioneer Women of Illinois; Growing Up Greek in St. Louis; The Greeks of Phoenix and The Greeks of Chicago. However there are various other community volumes that among the other groups discussed feature a few select images and documents related to local Greeks such as Haverhill, Massachusetts;

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...on sponge follow us have to look back at? If
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Park City, Tennessee; Resorts of Berrien County (Michigan); Steubenville, Ohio and others (see www.arcadiapublishing.com).

Let me stress that this volume is not exclusively about the Greek community of Tarpon Springs Florida. Of the one hundred and ninety-five photographs, maps, and other documents seen in this volume only perhaps a third overall deal with the local Greeks. This volume is divided into an Introduction and seven chapters: 'Early Settlers on the Anclote and the Bayous;' 'From Bayou Village to Winter Resort;' 'Bailey's Bluff and the Developing Sponge Industry;' 'Civic Pride and Progress;' 'Sponge Capital of the World;' 'Greek Community and Culture;' and 'Unique Local Attractions.' Significantly, the cover of this volume showcases a close-up of the 1934 photograph of the sponge diver and crew aboard the 'Georgia.'

I believe, for Greek-American Studies, the importance of this particular volume lies in the very fact that it is not solely focused on the local Greeks. What one predominately sees in the initial chapters is the local rural community that the Greek immigrants met upon their arrival. The date to keep in mind is 1905, for that is when the vast majority of Greek sponge divers arrived in Tarpon Springs. Prior to that date Tarpon Springs was really no more than a tiny vacation fishing and winter hunting camp for wealthy Northerners. Since the



1800s, pioneer explorers and hunters were all that could really be found along the coastal waters around Tarpon. The history of the state of Florida closely follows the transformations of this inland bayou community.

In the Introduction we learn of/and see Hamilton Disston (1844-1896), and the very origins of Florida land-deals so much a stereotype of this state. Disston purchased four million acres of the state for twenty five cents an acre. While still owning a huge amount of 'swamp and overflow' land, Disston by draining and converting swamp land, ended up with 70,000 acres of prime real estate. This deal made Disston, at the age of 36, the single largest land-holder in America. 'Early Settlers on the Anclote and the Bayous' reports on and shows select adventurous individuals (and later families) who first settled along the Anclote River just north of Tarpon Springs. These

would be the original 'locals' who met the wealthy land-developers. For it was "the advent of the railroad and the building of the Anclote Key Lighthouse [that] brought...wealthy Northerners [to Tarpon] creating a winter haven while numerous fishing vessels plied city waters."

In 'From Bayou Village to Winter Resort,' we meet Anson P.K. Safford (1830-1891), a business associate of Disston (in the Lake Butler Villa Company) who in 1897 is said to have helped to found Tarpon Springs as a winter resort. As the story goes, this city received its name because of the frequency with which the tarpons (Tarpon atlanticus), large silvery elongated sport fish, were seen jumping out of the water in local bayous.

This volume is not focused on big businessmen. As we see in these first two sections, more was at

work. Rare historical images document (while captions identify) pioneering adventurers, steam boats, ex-soldiers, fish-camps, early settlers, their homes and families, farmers of the first citrus groves, vacationers holding up fish, the first hotels and early stores, festivals, bayou scenes, mansions of the wealthy, street-scenes of the 1890s, businesses, celebrations, and local landmarks.

Not insignificantly very few photographs are present of African-Americans. The two that do appear in this first chapter report that, by 1885, the African-American population was nearly 900 but growing due to the local lumbering and sponging industry. What is omitted is always as important as what is reported. Local African-Americans, at the invitation of the Greek immigrants, worked the sponge boats. Consequently complex native-WASP fears concerning racism fueled the attacks against the early Greeks. To this volume's credit, the burning of Greek sponge boats and armed night raids by competing WASP sponge-fishers, known as Conches, does see passing mention.

With 'Bailey's Bluff and the De-

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Tarpon and a warehouse in the city itself. With Safford's death Cheyney took over in the Lake Butler Villa Company. In 1891, Cheyney with financial backing from Hamilton Disston established the Anclote and Rock' Island Sponge Company.

For some 15 years Cheyney's operations in Bailey's Bluff were the center of Florida's sponge industry. During this period, the village of Sponge Harbor sprang up across the river from Anclote. Sponging operations were 'primarily by African-American sponge men.' With the beginning of the Spanish-American War, the sponging hook-boats were restricted in their movements. Nevertheless, "by the early 1900s, sponge fishing, employing thousands of people statewide, had become Florida's single most valuable fishery resource."

By looking at the photographs in this section closely we see which buildings, churches, civic public events, organizations and people lived in Tarpon Springs before their arrival of the Greeks in 1905. After 1905, it was the sponge industry that brought real growth and prosperity to the local economy. A point not raised in this volume.

In 'Civic Pride and Progress' we

presentation. Civic improvements such as bridges, bayou piers, and beach fronts are offered as yet another extension of civic works and life.

It is with the next two sections 'Sponge Capital of the World' and 'Greek Community and Culture' that we see a focus on the local Hellenes. For the history of Tarpon Springs there is no more significant a figure than John M. Cocoris (1877-1944). Cocoris is always credited with two critical accomplishments: first he brought the Greek sponge divers to Tarpon. While the exact means by which Cocoris lured these men to Florida is not fully explained in this volume it is unquestionably the case that "by late summer 1905, some 500 Greek men were living in the city." It is also specifically Cocoris' business acumen, rather than Cheyney's or anyone else involved in the local sponge industry, that is always cited as making Tarpon Springs the world capital of sponge production.

In 'Unique Local Attractions,' the development of local tourist attractions sees discussion. That tourism was the principal industry of this remote hamlet even before the Greek spongers arrived is always

Next, and I would argue no less significant, is that specifically Greek-American tourists have had more of an impact on retention of local Hellenism that allowed to date.

I have heard the criticism that the stories told of Greeks around the nation as well as the vintage photographs seen in the Images of America series are no more than simple picture-books of little lasting historical worth. Were there a vibrant field of Greek-American Studies producing one historical account after another, I would agree. With over 500 Greek Orthodox Churches in North America no one knows with certainty how many parish histories exist. Faced with this indisputable current reality all these minor efforts gain new stature. Yes, both the Arcadia volumes and the parish produced histories may not be the work of university-trained academics. But, in 10 years, 50 years or 100 years what else will those Greeks who follow us have to look back at? If you have never thought about this most basic of questions, my question is, why not?

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