

The Ecology Wing

Water, Water, Everywhere!

People have been drawn to Tarpon Springs throughout history, due in large part to the area's abundant rich natural resources. The town's enviable natural setting is strewn with life-supporting waterways, from the shores of the Gulf coast to the sprinkling of small bays and tidal hollows, to the framework of the Anclote River to the north and Lake Tarpon to the east.

An incredibly diverse terrain complements the region, rich with salt marshes and tidal streams, hardwood hammocks, pine flatwoods, dry sandhills, stands of mangrove, and the spring that gave Tarpon its name. The waters provided sustenance, livelihood and recreation; the trees provided work in the lumber and saw mills where many early Tarpon residents were employed. All told, the Tarpon Springs ecology revels in a breezy tropical ambiance still sought after today.

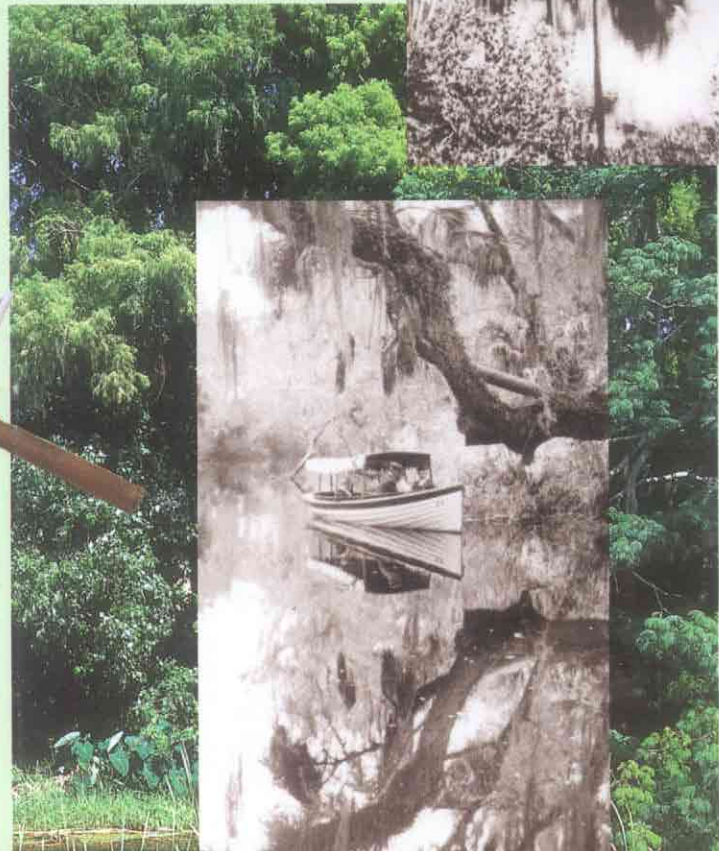
Prehistoric Native American ax
found in Tarpon Springs

Nature

Nature and its bounty are inextricably intertwined with Tarpon Springs' colorful history.

The first settlers in the area were drawn by the waterways and forests, hunting deer, turkey and other game in the woods, and feasting as well on fish and oysters. Prospective land buyers were later lured to the area with the promise of outstanding scenery, climate, fishing and a golden fortune awaiting in orange groves. A lumber mill provided work for many early families. Artists such as George Inness, the father of American landscape painting, wintered in Tarpon Springs and were inspired by its natural beauty.

In the late 1880s and 1890s thousands of wealthy Northerners came to town for a change of climate. Prescribed sunshine, sea breezes, and the smell of pines –



all said to work wonders for respiratory, nervous and digestive problems – they found a haven in Tarpon Springs, where nine-tenths of the area was still pine woodland. The town was further blessed by a mineral spring at the head of Spring Bayou, where “medicinal” waters helped amplify Tarpon Springs’ stature as a health resort.

It was the sponge, however, that had the greatest impact on Tarpon Springs history. From when sponge beds were accidentally discovered by turtle fishermen in 1873 to today, the effect of the sponge industry on Tarpon Springs has been immense, both economically and culturally. The city’s strong Greek culture and unique sponging history is of unmatched fascination for historians and tourists alike.

What is a Sponge?

Sponges are primitive animals with no brain or nervous system. They are free-swimming during their larval stage then attached to a rock or shell on the sea bottom during adulthood. Sponges are found in every ocean of the world, in all depths and temperatures.

While there are some five thousand varieties of sponges, only a few are suitable for commerce and just four of these are found in the Gulf of Mexico. The sheepswool is by far the softest, smoothest and the most sought-after, followed by grass, yellow and wire sponges.

The part of the sponge that is used is its skeleton – a network of connecting passages built up of a fiber called spongin. Spongin can absorb twenty-five times its own weight in water. To be marketed for use, the sponge skeleton must be freed from all organic matter (such as small marine creatures that hide in the safe crevices), thoroughly cleaned, dried and usually trimmed. Sponges range in size from smaller than an inch to more than three feet in diameter. The remarkably resilient sponge does not burn and is nearly indestructible.

The Sponge & Tarpon Springs

Tarpon Springs’ sponge industry managed to prosper during the years of the Great Depression. It wasn’t until 1938 that misfortune struck; a blight infested the sponge



Clippers used to trim sponges



beds, killing many sponges. The industry continued to grow, however, reaching a peak of 180 sponge diving boats in 1948 before a red tide caused further damage. Sponges slowly started to return in 1959, with the beds regaining full strength in the 1970’s.

In recent years the sponge industry has seen a modest revival. Professional divers still search the waters off Tarpon Springs for sponges. Most of the sponge boats are owned and operated by people of Greek descent, and sponges from Tarpon Springs are sold the world over.

Today tourism has replaced sponging as Tarpon Springs’ major economic activity. It’s estimated that the sponge industry brings \$2 million a year to the Tarpon Springs’ economy and helps nurture a \$20 million a year tourist industry, along with the city’s thriving antique and arts community.