



George Billiris inspects a net full of sponges brought to him by two of Tarpon Springs' Greek sponge divers.

Tarpon Springs Spongers Preserve Rich Past

Once considered the sponge capital of the world, Tarpon Springs had suffered its own blow from a bacterial blight in the early 1940's that nearly wiped out sponge production in the Western Hemisphere. In its heyday in the '20's and '30's, 180 boats lined the docks. By 1986 there were only two sponge diving boats left in Tarpon Springs. The city was ill prepared to meet the demands of the world.

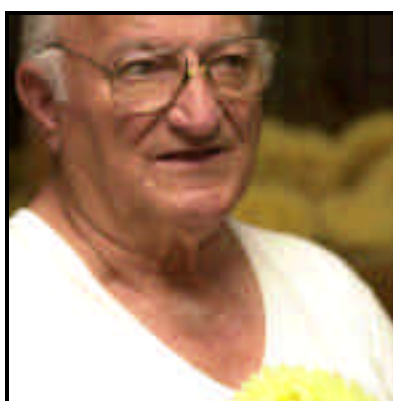
As word spread from Billiris of the need for boats and divers, the small coastal town once again began humming with activity centered on the production and export of sponges. The fleet grew to 100 boats and today Tarpon Springs thrives with a rich Greek heritage and healthy tourist trade.

With increased production the need for adequate storage and processing became a problem. Billiris left his days as captain and diver behind and reopened an old warehouse on Park Street.

These days Billiris spends a lot of his time at the warehouse overseeing the operation. He is busy filling orders for export to countries around the world but is never too busy to talk about his beloved heritage. He admits he misses going out on his boat but a smile spreads across his face and a twinkle appears in his eyes as he talks about the past and the future of the sponge trade.



Wool sponges wait in George Billiris' warehouse for shipping.



■ In 1986, the major source of sponges for Europe and much of the world was devastated by disease sweeping through the Mediterranean. The European community, to find a way to meet the demands of the market, called upon Tarpon Springs' George Billiris, a fourth generation sponge diver of Greek descent and world renowned sponge producer.



The St. Nicholas Boat Lines moors its vessels along the docks at Tarpon Springs.