

### **Beneath the 12-Mile Reef: Archival curio of 20th century sponger culture**

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Greetings! *Kalispera*. Thank you so much for being here, for having us. A big thank you to SOAS and Mr. Emery for putting together what will likely be the most unique conference I will ever attend. I believe academia is at its best and most vital when it seeks out similarities rather than staking out differences, and the interdisciplinary nature of this conference makes it truly something special.

A little about myself. I am a PhD student in Literature at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States, where my primary focus is 20th and 21st century Caribbean fiction. I came across the call for papers for this conference on the website for the Caribbean Studies Association last autumn and knew I had to be here – and not just because it was here, on the beautiful island of Hydra. My interest in Caribbean literature is largely contingent on my interest in the ways in which island geography has the power to shape human narrative. So here is a bit of mine.

I was born and raised in the city of Key West: a small island off the southern coast of Florida. Key West is the southernmost point of the continental United States, and is geographically closer to Cuba than it is to Miami. I grew up in and around the Gulf of Mexico, learning the names of the flora and fauna that called the ocean home. As a little girl, my parents would take me to the ocean and quiz me on what I saw – barracuda, tarpon, stingrays, corals, and yes – sponges.

The city of Key West has a lengthy and storied history with the sponging economy, and much of this history is not published in peer reviewed academic journals, but rather in a series of hurricane-damaged archives, tourism websites, small museums and local legends, so bear with me. It is generally understood that, as early as the 1820s, Key West fisherman were finding sponges washed up on shore after storms and using them to sell and trade in the local island economy. Once thriving beds of sponges were discovered in the back country of the Florida Keys, however, fisherman ventured out into the shallow gulf waters with boats and rakes and harvested them in much larger quantities. The first shipment of Key West sponges was delivered to New York in 1849,<sup>1</sup> where they were an instant success. Business boomed. At the industry's peak, 1,200 local sponge fishermen, referred to as "hookers" – for the method of prying the sponge from the seabed – were working 350 hook boats, producing around 2,000 tons of sponges annually, valued at roughly nearly a million dollars. By 1890, Key West held a monopoly over the United States sponging industry.<sup>2</sup>

In 1898, however, the Spanish-American War made spongers anxious about travelling too far up the coast at the risk of meeting Spanish war ships, so they settled in a city on the Gulf of Mexico called Tarpon Springs, Florida. Here, dense sponge beds had not yet been over-harvested, and newly discovered varieties of sponge stimulated the market. By this time, Greek divers had been harvesting sponges for centuries, and in 1905, two men – John Corcosis and John Cheyney<sup>3</sup> – worked together to bring Greek divers to Tarpon Springs.<sup>4</sup> With them, the Greeks brought heavy diving suits with hard metal helmets that allowed them to go much deeper into the water, collecting sponges from the reefs without coming up for air. Sponge fishing in Tarpon Springs was massively successful, and the economy swelled throughout the 1920s and 1930s. By the mid 1930s, over 2,000 Greeks had moved to Tarpon Springs and the city was considered by some to be the sponge capital of the world, thanks to Greek immigrants and their technological advancements. In the mid 1940s, however, the combination of a deadly red-tide<sup>5</sup> and the invention of synthetic sponges largely wiped out the Florida sponging economy. Despite minor resurgences in the 1960s and 1970s, the sponging economy of South Florida has never been the same since.

Today, Key West and Tarpon Springs still celebrate their history of sponge diving, though largely now in a tourism and preservation capacity, establishing both museums and storefronts dedicated to the profession's history. Tarpon Springs also remains a significantly Greek community,<sup>6</sup> and in the 2000 U.S. census it boasted the highest per capita percentage of individuals with Greek ancestry in the nation. So, when I read about this conference, I immediately thought of a largely-forgotten film my father had once mentioned. This film, and the unique cultural archive it preserves, will be the focus of my presentation today. Just to provide some context for the images I will be using, the original theatrical film release became public domain. 20th Century Fox Studios revived the copyright in 2013 to produce a DVD edition of the film, which contains footage not included in the original theatrical release. I, however, will be using images from the public domain edition of the film. These images are not my own. \*\*

### **Cinematic development**

*Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* was released in 1953 by 20th Century Fox Studios. Spyros Skouras, the studio's president between 1942 and 1962, was a Greek immigrant known for having deliberately maintained such a prominent accent, despite having lived in the United States for decades, that it is rumored that Bob Hope once mentioned that he "has been here 20 years but still sounds as if he's coming next week."<sup>7</sup> The screenplay was written by Albert Isaac Bezzerides, a Greek-Armenian immigrant who had moved to the States around 1910, most famous for writing the screenplays for *They Drive By Night* (1940) and *Desert Fury* (1947), among others.

In a period of time when in-home televisions were putting pressure on cinema for economic prominence, and as white, nativist sentiments continued to ravage immigrant communities, and national-origins quotas set by the Immigration Act of 1924 continued to restrict the already severely limited number of immigrant visas to be granted to individuals from Eastern and Southern European countries,<sup>8</sup> *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* was released in all of its pro-Greek sentiment, pushing back against this national narrative of xenophobia.

The film itself was shot with the newly developed CinemaScope anamorphic lens, allowing for wide-screen panoramic vistas – perfect for capturing the lush underwater ecosystems of southern Florida. CinemaScope had been developed by Skouras himself,<sup>9</sup> who teamed up with French cinematic inventor Henri Chrétien in an attempt to revitalize an industry that was in decline. The technology was finalized only months before the film was shot; *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* was the third film ever to be shot with CinemaScope, following *The Robe*, and *How to Marry a Millionaire*.

Though the film's casting team did not hire Greek actors for Greek roles – a disappointing trend that continues in American cinema to this day – *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* was the first starring role for American Actor Robert Wagner, who would go on to appear in such films as *A Kiss Before Dying*, *The Pink Panther*, *The Towering Inferno*, and even the satirical spy-focused *Austin Powers* trilogy.

Despite a not entirely unsuccessful box office, critical response to this film was minimal and largely unfavorable. A review released by *Variety*<sup>10</sup> in December of 1952 reads:

In handling the young cast, Robert D. Webb's direction is less effective, particularly in the case of Robert Wagner and Terry Moore. Both are likable, so the shallowness of their performances is no serious handicap to the entertainment.

*The Harvard Crimson* released a similarly scathing review in 1954,<sup>11</sup> wittily describing the film as "a meagre catch", and, "the longest dive in motion picture history", citing a weak script and actors with "feverish emotion" who seemed to suggest that the "only way to express great feeling is with a shout or a groan". The film's cinematographer, Edward Cronjager, would go on to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Color Cinematography, but would lose to Loyal Grigg's work on the Paramount Picture's western, *Shane*.<sup>12</sup>

Insofar as the storyline is concerned, *The Harvard Crimson* was not incorrect. The film's plot follows the brief and relatively trite romance between a Greek sponger's son, Adonis "Tony" Petrakis, and a white Florida Keys-native "conch" <sup>13</sup> girl, Gwenyth Rhys, as their families feud over sponging territory. My suggestion, however is that much like the 1957 sponge-related film *Boy on a Dolphin*, the romance plays a clear second to the scenery.

### **Development of scenario**

*Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* opens to a series of beautiful underwater shots, and the following introduction:

*"This is the world beneath the sea. Beautiful. Mysterious. And for the most part, unexplored by man. These are the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, off the west coast of Florida. This is a sponge fisherman. A special breed of man, dedicated to the most dangerous of professions."*

The audience is first introduced to the Petrakis family as they return to Tarpon Springs after a relatively unsuccessful haul. When the protagonist's friend comes back with a boat full of "\$100-dollar strings" – a reference to how sponges would be kept aboard until selling them – Tony asks where they came from. It has become common local knowledge that the shallow seas they work in are being overfished, leaving spongers to travel further and further from home.

He is told that they come from the 12-mile reef: a fictional but accurately described deep water reef dangerously replete with large, sharp corals, underwater currents, and numerous caves. Once all of the Greek sponging families return, the bay is blessed in a religious ceremony, which concludes with a bishop offering blessings to the individual who is able to retrieve the golden cross from the bottom of the bay.

Tony retrieves it, bringing blessings to his family's boat, and with the blessing upon them, his father decides to take them not to the 12-mile reef, but further, to the significantly more dangerous "glades" – the back country of the Florida Keys. There, territorial white English Conchs with hook boats are rumored to patrol the waters as vigilantes, slicing the air tubes of non-local sponge divers.

Regardless, they travel to the glades, and Tony's father goes to "work the bottom".

A small dinghy with two white men appears, and while Tony doesn't think much of them, his uncle is wary. And with good reason.

The men survey the scene and hijack Tony's father's air hose, threatening it with a hatchet unless they hand over all of their sponges. They signal to a much larger vessel nearby, which sails through to take the sponges.

The Greeks are warned, *"Come to the glades and this is what you get. You Greeks ought to know better than to come to our waters."*

The Conchs return to Key West, where the audience finally meets Gwen Rhys and learns that the Conch crew responsible for the theft includes both her father and her implied love interest, Arnold. The Greeks follow them to the harbor in an attempt to reclaim their sponges, but their mission is complicated when Tony meets Gwen and instantly falls in love.

Arnold and Tony's father face off in a fist fight, leaving Arnold as the loser, and the Greeks leave in search of the 12-mile reef, hoping to fish back what they lost. When a valve bursts in their diver's air compressor, however, Tony's father becomes a victim of decompression sickness, or what is colloquially known as the bends.

A condition resulting from faulty depressurization most commonly associated with diving, decompression sickness can affect every system of the body from pulmonary to musculoskeletal, and is often excruciatingly painful, if not deadly.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately for our protagonist, the latter condition transpires, and Tony's father dies before they are able to return to Tarpon Springs. While filing a report to the Coast Guard, the Greeks leave their ship in the Key West harbor, where it is sacked and burned by local white fisherman.

Tony is devastated and, after being attacked by Arnold, flees. Gwen follows and they escape together on the Conch boat, hiding out in the back country of the Florida Keys together.

Tony: *And then there's the reef. Bright coral like a garden full of flowers. The deeper you go, the more beautiful it gets. The light gets dimmed...like a church almost. It gets so you don't wanna come up...*

Tony and Gwen return to Tarpon Springs together, where they are assumed to be married and Tony takes over his father's profession. After a brief but dramatic tussle with a giant octopus, there is one final standoff between the Conchs and the Greeks, but after Tony saves Arnold from drowning, their feud ends peacefully. The film concludes with a beautiful wide-lens sunset and dramatic romantic music.

### Conclusion

The film, though perhaps overly "feverish" and performatively shallow, preserves an authentic portrait of a life that has been largely forgotten by American popular culture. The South Florida "sponge wars" were at that time so contentious that, according to Bill Baggs, long time columnist for the *Miami Daily News*,

"when... *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* was shown in Key West in 1954, the audience loudly cheered for the octopus to kill the [Greek] diver in the underwater fight scene".<sup>15</sup>

But despite the social landscape in which it was produced, hiring a Greek screenwriter allowed *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* largely to avoid negative stereotypes and cultural inaccuracies, portraying Greek immigrants in a refreshingly positive light, contrasted starkly with the clear villainy of the local white fishermen.

From the accurate depictions of the diving suits invented and brought to America by Greek immigrants, to the myriad inherent dangers of the sponging profession, to the realistic consequences of over-extracting natural resources, and the reality of nativist anti-Greek sentiment in South Florida at the time, *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* serves as a sort of rare, pop-culture archive for the experiences of Greek divers in central and south Florida in the 1930s and 1940s.

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### NOTES

\*\* The images contained in this paper are reproduced in the online version, at [www.geocities.com/soassspongesconference2018/herpe-schroder.pdf](http://www.geocities.com/soassspongesconference2018/herpe-schroder.pdf)

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**Figure 1:** Aboard the sponge boat, Florida. *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* [1953] 2:55 widescreen. Prod. Robert Bassler, Dir. Directed by Robert Webb





Figure 2: 20th Century Fox film poster – *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* [1953]