

FLORIDA-STYLE SHRIMP TRAWLER



Florida-Style Shrimp Trawler, ca. 1920 – 1980



Top: Mt. Aetna, 1905; Bottom: Flower of Mary 1923. Changes in shrimp boats during this 20-year period included use of stouter vessels with small pilot rooms and a mast, used above to dry the cotton nets used at the time to reduce mildew and rotting.

America's shrimping industry began at the turn of the century in Fernandina, where the highly effective "otter trawl" nets were first drawn by powered boats. By the 1920s, the center of this booming industry, lead by a few immigrant families including the Salvadors, Polis and Versaggis, had shifted to St. Augustine and the entire Northeast Florida region was supplying shrimp by the ton via iced rail-car to the New York market. Also at this time, a new style of shrimp boat appeared on these waters, built by Greek boat builders from the sponge fisheries of Tarpon Springs. The new, Greek shrimp boats displayed a dramatic sheer line ending with a high bow with a sharp entrance and a deck-house located forward to facilitate the hauling of nets from the stern.

Unlike previous shrimp boats with their V-shaped hull, the Greek style shrimper was rounded in cross-section. This hull shape resulted in a deep and slow roll at sea, the source of complaints from some seasick shrimpers used to a hard-chined vessel. The earliest shrimpers

were small, mostly under 30' in length, though they grew in size over the decades to typically 40'

by the 1930s, 50 to 60' in the 1940s and 70' in the 1950s. The Mollie and Me II, pictured above, was built by Greek boat-builder Harry Xynides in either the late 1950s or early 1960s (photograph courtesy of the Xynides family).

While the Greek-style trawler never completely replaced the V-hull shrimper, the type persisted for decades due to the success of the Diesel Engine Sales Company (DESCO), founded in St. Augustine in 1943. By 1954 DESCO had built 500 shrimp boats, by 1971 a total of 1700 and by 1981 a trawler was leaving the plant every four days. While the most prolific builder, DESCO was hardly the only manufacturer in St. Augustine, home also to St. Augustine Trawlers, Inc., along with several smaller yards owned by the Sarris, Nix and Xynides families. The shrimp boat building decades were the heyday of wooden boat building in St. Augustine and one of the last remaining examples of this once vibrant industry in the United States.

The roots of America's shrimping industry first began growing in northeast Florida. Beginning during the first decade of the 20th century, highly effective 'otter trawl' nets were adapted to the coastal waters of Fernandina, Florida. A collaboration of families, many of them recent immigrants with Mediterranean fishing traditions, quickly built an industry that 'discovered' shrimp for the nation. During these early years

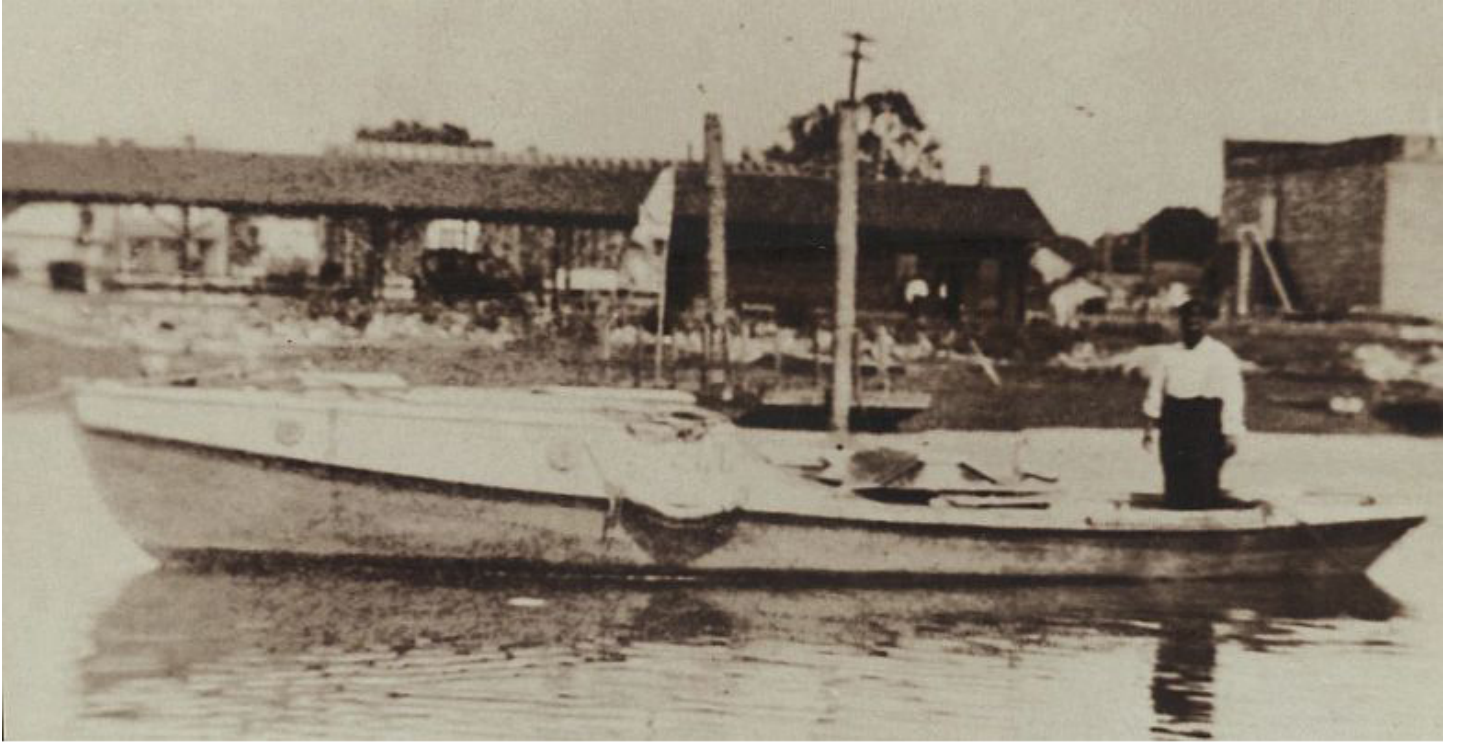
many of the families, with names such as Sollicito, Salvador, Poli, and Versaggi, moved to St. Augustine for its access to good schools and boat-building resources. By the 1920s St. Augustine was the center of this booming industry and supplied shrimp by the ton to New York City markets via refrigerated rail car. Simultaneously, a new style of fishing boat evolved to meet the needs of the business. Based on sponge boats introduced to Florida by Greek spongers, the shrimp trawler carried familiar lines of the Mediterranean. A rounded bottom and high, bluff bow was modified to carry a wheelhouse up forward, an engine down below, and a cut off, U-shaped transom. The old sailing rig was done away with and replaced by a single pole mast with a boom for handling the nets and catch. This hull shape resulted in a boat that rolled more

than flat bottomed fishing boats, but was weatherly and could stand up to rough seas. These trawlers began to grow from the first shrimp boat, which were most often converted from other boats. Purpose-built shrimp trawlers began to commonly measure over 30' in length and by World War II, were often over 40' in length. It was this pre-war period that the Florida-style trawler was born. Builders such as Klonaris, Tiliakos, and Deonas were among the first to hew local live oak and long leaf pine into the hull style that would become iconic of the American fishing industry. After the war, trawler size

continued to increase and the Super-trawler was born, a large, high-horsepower boat over 50' in length that could travel thousands of miles

to fish distant waters such as the southern Caribbean. Diesel Engine Sales Co., started in St. Augustine in 1943, modernized the world of trawler building. What Henry Ford did for automobiles, Diesel Engine Sales Co. (later known as DESCO) did for shrimp boats. By 1954 the company had completed over 500 trawlers, complete and ready to fish on their first voyage! The Florida-style trawler was traditionally built from wood with a pine keel, white oak frames, and cypress planking. As good building wood became more expensive and hard to find, yellow pine was used as planking and during the 1960s fiberglass entered the scene as a hull material. A few steel hulled trawlers were built but wood and fiberglass dominated the industry. The *Mollie and Me II*, pictured above, was built by Greek boat-builder Harry Xynides during the mid-1960s (photograph courtesy of the Xynides family). Many other builders prospered on the banks of the San Sebastian River, the boat-building epicenter of St. Augustine. From the corporate yards of DESCO and St. Augustine Trawlers to the family owned yards of the Sarris, Xynides, and Nix families, this small river was once home to a forest of shrimp boat masts. By the late 1980s, the building boom was over and few shrimp boats are built in St. Augustine presently. However, many of the thousands of shrimp boats built right here in St. Augustine persist, plowing the waves of the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean every day to bring home the catch.

See below for the story of building shrimp boats in pictures.



A pioneer of the early shrimp industry, Salvatore Versaggi, standing in his boat in the Amelia (Nassau) River in Fernandina in 1905. The Mount Aetna was one of the first shrimp boats used in northeast Florida. As you can see, she lacked outriggers, or even a mast. The earliest boats were re-purposed fishing or cruising vessels with small gasoline or kerosene engines for power. They dragged a simple balloon net behind the boat and hauling them on board was done by hand over the side. Fishing trips were daily affairs during good weather as these small boat could not stay at sea for days due to lack of crew quarters and a way to keep the catch from spoiling.”



This picture of the "Flower of Mary" was taken in Fernandina, Florida in 1923. Her name was likely taken from the Italian immigrant families in northeast Florida who were some of the most active in the early days of commercial shrimping and responsible for its rapid development. The Santa Maria del Fiore (Flower of Mary) is the iconic symbol of Florence Italy, and likely had significance to the owner. We can see that, only 17 years after the Mt. Aetna was photographed, shrimp fishermen moved to stouter vessels with small pilothouses and a mast sprouted from the deck. On these prototype trawlers, the mast was used less for actual trawling than for creature comfort and gear maintenance. Early nets were all cotton fiber and highly prone to mildewing and rotting. The mast could be used to hoist nets up for drying after each day's work as well as for rigging a shade awning for the workmen on deck. While this boat had enclosed space, presumably used for quartering crew from time to time, there was limited hold space for ice and trips were still limited to one day or less.



This picture was showcased in the Chicago Tribune in 1947. Taken to show the size of the fleet, shrimping had taken off after World War II and during a northeast blow, as depicted in this photograph, sought shelter in Matanzas Bay. Check out the lighthouse tower in the background, and the breakers behind it in what is now Salt Run. There appear to be over 50 trawlers moored in the bay, can you imagine seeing that many now?!



Diesel Engine Sales Company became the largest shrimp trawler building company in the world right after World War II. Started in 1943, the company merged production capabilities of post-war industry with a rapidly growing taste for shrimp throughout the country. By 1958, over 700 trawlers had been delivered. Diesel Engine Sales employed Henry Ford-style production to wooden boat construction. The bays to the right of the framed-up hull each hold a specific component to the hull. As soon as the hulls were planked and outfitted with everything needed to be watertight, they were launched to make more room in the yard. Engines, rigs, even wheelhouses were added after launching. For every 100 boats, Diesel Engine Sales hosted a party for their employees, local citizenry, and clients. Mr. Ringhaver, the president and owner of Diesel Engine Sales, was known for these parties and many people in St. Augustine have fond memories of these halcyon days of shrimping.”



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Hull #800, the Lady Kossie, is shown here steaming out the San Sebastian River. Clad in a fresh coat of white paint, trimmed in black, she is riding high in the water. Soon enough, several thousand gallons of diesel and many tons of ice would weigh her down for her inaugural fishing trip. At least eight vessel are in production phase behind the Lady Kossie. Diesel Engine Sales, which would become known as DESCO during the late 1960s, also served as a major repair center for their own trawlers and for other builders. The vertical planks between the gunwhale and guard on the Lady Kossie's side were introduced to keep rafter trawlers from snagging their guards on each other when alongside. The significance to this is the level of standardization introduced by St. Augustine builders to the American commercial shrimp fishery. Shrimpers, by this period, could steam to most distant ports and expect a standardized set of replacement parts and supplies.”



To remind its readership of something warm and tasty, the Chicago Sun Times published this photograph on December of 1962. Taken in Key West, this image illustrates the boom in the shrimping industry throughout the southeast. Fishing grounds around the Tortugas produced some of the cleanest catches with the biggest shrimp and from 1949 until 1957, was probably the most productive shrimp fishery in the world. During the late 1950s decreases in the catch prompted the state of Florida to implement controlling regulation on the grounds to protect the species. However, the shrimp fleet was flush with boats in this photograph, many of which were constructed in St. Augustine.



St. Augustine trawlers were, and are, used throughout the world. Corporate fleets, such as this “Chicken of the Sea” boat, established themselves globally and required a steady supply of new and replacement vessels. Diesel Engine Sales Co, and other builders here in St. Augustine readily supplied this need. By the 1970s it was said that “The Sun Never Sets on a DESCOCO Boat”.



Not all trawlers were built by corporate yards. Shown here is the building shed of the Xynides family. Building trawlers from the 1940s until the 1970s, this yard relied almost solely on family labor. It must be stated that the Florida-style trawler was born in sheds like this and adopted by corporations, and not the other way around. Young men learned traditional wooden boatbuilding skills in these yards, continuing a legacy that, in some cases, had been passed down over millennia in Mediterranean families.”



This is a small snapshot of the Versaggi Shrimp Company fleet. The family held a fleet of trawlers ranging from British Guyana to Brownsville, Texas, Patterson, Louisiana, to Tampa, Florida. Families such as the Versaggis and Backmans owned large fleets that travelled sometimes a thousand miles to reach the best grounds.



This bow shot of a freshly launched Diesel Engine Sales Co. (later DESCO) boat shows off the typical bow of a Florida-style trawler. Note the fairly bluff entry and sheer sides. A little flare was sometimes used in the bows, but as often as not, the bows were very straight sided with little discernible flare. The stem post, shown as the chamfered timber farthest forward and vertical (also forming her cutwater), took a great amount of strain from trawling as much of the upperworks and rig is stayed here with wire or solid iron bars. If a net snagged on the bottom, much of this strain was taken straight to the bow of the boat, compressing and pulling on the stem. These old wooden boat were built very stout and could endure long open ocean voyages. The Captain Frisky was the 900th trawler built by Diesel Engine Sales Co.



The Singleton Fleets 17 was constructed in 1978, at the zenith of trawler building in St. Augustine. She was a 103 gross ton vessel, 74' in length, and capable of pulling a double rig (two nets on either side). Some of her sister ships by this time had tankage for up to 21,000 gallons of fuel for long range cruising. Note the stepped-up wheelhouse, an addition to the DESCOCO design that appeared during the mid-1970s. This picture was taken on her way out the San Sebastian River.

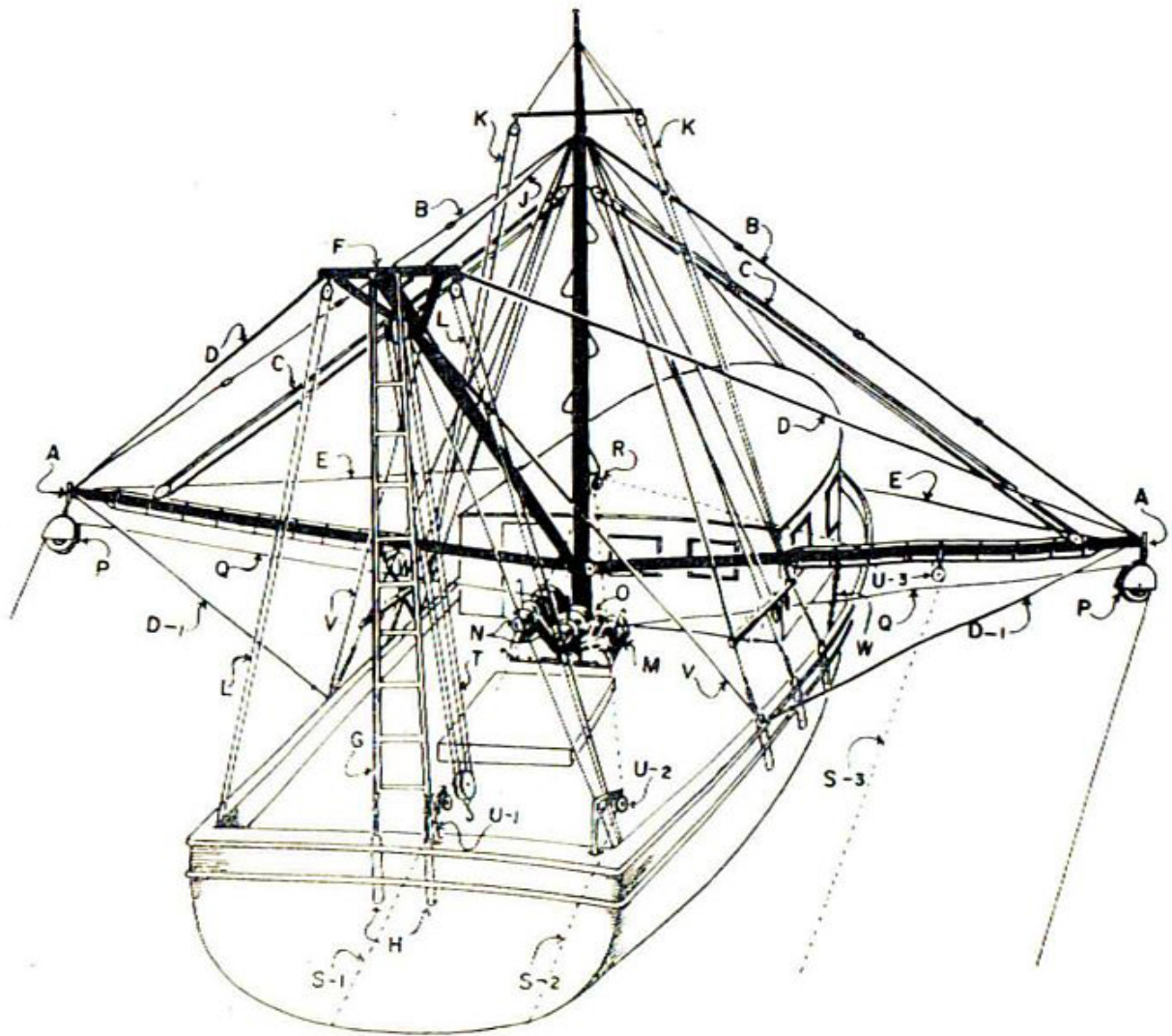


Fig. 685. Rigging arrangements required for double rig shrimp trawling: A—towing boom or outrigger; B—towing boom topping stay; topping lift preventer; C—topping lift tackle; D or D-1—towing boom outrigger back stay; either one may be rigged, but not both; E—towing boom outrigger bow stay; F—modified boom superstructure; G—boom back stays—ratline structure; H—boom back stay plate on transom; J—boom topping lift stay; K—single block tackle; L—single block tackle; M—modified trawl winch; N—gypsy heads two on trawl winch; O—centre drum for try net wire; Q—towing wire; R—leading block for try net; S-1, S-2, S-3—try net lead block; any one may be used; T—main fish tackle tail block; U-1, U-2, U-3—try net lead block; any one may be used to accord with selection of S-1, S-2 or S-3; V—boom shrouds; W—chain stoppers for outriggers

Reproduced from an article by L.C. Ringhaver, owner of Diesel Engine Sales Co. is a diagram of the typical shrimp boat rig used during the 1950-60s. Modern rigs, while somewhat different, employ the same principles to set (shoot), drag, and haul back nets.



As hull #2260, the Apple Jack was one of the last wooden trawlers built by DESCO. She spent her life shrimping the Florida, Georgia, and Carolina waters under the direction of Cpt. Kenny Thomas. A home-town girl, many people remember the Apple Jack fondly passing out the inlet with her outriggers down and nets spread. Her last drag was completed in 2011 and she has now been dismantled.