Florida's Fleet: An Ebbtide of Shrimp Boats on the San Sebastian River

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December 2009[1]

This paper focuses on a relatively recent part of St. Augustine's history, one that had global implications and formed a central component of the town's economy for almost half a century. Shrimp boat building was a major industry during the 20th century on the city's waterfront and between 1943-1985 almost three thousand, if not more, shrimp boats were launched by local builders. The types of builder ranged from single individuals operating on rented property to corporate boat factories capable of mass-producing trawlers at rates usually seen only during wartime. Labor pattern shifts concurrent with changes in production can be seen as boatbuilding systems in St. Augustine, and elsewhere, move towards to commodify labor and, arguably, the skilled craftsmanship of the individual or family builder is lost. The St. Augustine example, like other towns engaged in hull-specific boatbuilding, such as Mystic, Connecticut and their

[1] Paper presented at the 61st annual meeting of the Florida Anthropological Society, Pensacola, Florida, May 8-9, 2009.

"half-clipper", saw a change in technology and labor patterns that changed the face of the waterfront and the people working there.

Three examples of shrimp boat building yards are used here to illustrate this transition. The first is a small family owned business building few boats but providing all of the labor and skills themselves. The second is a family owned business but utilizing wage laborers to supplement and expand the abilities of the yard to produce boats in production style. The third is a corporate yard with interstate ties to other major corporations involved in heavy industry and with considerable abilities to capitalize growth. However, a brief history of St. Augustine and its maritime past is apropeau here to provide context and set the scene for the topic.

Spanish colonization of St. Augustine lasted for a combined total of almost eight generations, or 232 years. British East Florida survived for two decades between 1764 and 1784. Both of these periods left, with no doubt, a distinguishable mark on the region as new populations of Europeans, Africans, and other Americans were brought to St. Augustine. For many years, historians have selected components of this deep and rich history to focus upon and have made great advances in chronicling the city's first four hundred years. However, the last and most recent century is often left out due to, perhaps, its seeming incongruency with visages of Drake's piratical sacking of the town, Menendez's march to Matanzas to overwhelm Ribault, the bastions of Castillo de San Marcos, Henry Flagler's 19th century St. Augustine, and other pieces of history that the towns most aggressive producers and consumers of history, tourist attractions, put forth.

The 20th century was no dull period for St. Augustine, a town that began the century with a well-developed tourism industry and had already developed a version of its history that was readily marketable. Not unlike other heritage tourist sites St. Augustine had dramatized its history into reenactments of historical events such as Searle's raid, the 1668 hostile takeover of town by English privateer Robert Searle. During the third quarter of the century a battle of the Civil Rights movement was waged here that attracted the attention of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and brief national focus. At the same time this was going on a revolution was taking place in the seemingly sleepy fishing community of northeast Florida that would have a long term and profound impact on global fishing, consumption patterns, and the foodways of many Americans.

Brief History of Shrimping in Northeast Florida

Fishing in northeast Florida for the latter half of the 19th century had largely been subsistence based and it was shellfish, namely oysters, which dominated extra-regional sales. Shrimp were caught using small skiffs rowed or poled by one man while another used cast nets to pull up the shrimp. This likely differed from the traditional European approach to shrimping focusing around the use of dip nets and without the use of watercraft. The small-quantity fishery of St. Augustine, according to an 1883 Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission, landed a total of 600 bushels of shrimp in 1880. Most of the catch found its way back into the water as bait and sold for an average of ten cents per quart. What was not used for bait was locally consumed as table fare, most

likely by the town's large population of Mediterranean heritage. While largely undocumented in years prior it can be said that this likely represents the pattern of catching and consuming shrimp for the area for many decades, if not centuries, prior. It was a small and local industry, not even garnering mention four years later in an 1887 publication entitled "Fisheries and Fishing Industries of the United States"(Goode 1887.)

At the turn of the century shrimping entered a new era and for the early years it was based solely out of the small coastal town of Fernandina, near the Georgia border. Some of the men credited with this were Sollecito Salvador, Cpt. William Jones Davis, and Cpt. Billy Corkum. Salvador and his partners, Salvatore Versaggi, Antonio Poli, and Joseph Gianino opened the fishery to outside buyers, notably Fulton Fish Market in New York City. He arranged for refrigerated railroad cars to speed fresh iced shrimp to northeastern railheads, ultimately finding their way onto distant plates and opening a market previously untapped. The popularity of shrimp began to gain a national foothold and with the expansion of the market technology needed to catch up in order to supply the growing demand. Cpt. Davis applied the first net to a power driven boat in the area and catch numbers began to rapidly increase. During these early days the plentiful shrimp were easy to catch with unrefined seine nets being pulled by small motor-driven skiffs. Billy Corkum, hailing from Boston, had been aware of a type of net originally developed in England called the 'otter trawl', which had found its way into the New England cod fishery. This style of net increased the efficiency of shrimping and was able to land many more bushels of shrimp due to its wide mouth and bottom-hugging abilities. It is worthwhile to mention too, that this fishery was primarily an inshore fishery since the small nature of the boats prevented them from fishing in heavy offshore seas.

By the 1920s shrimp boats were increasing in size as well as the size of the nets they were pulling. The otter trawl had been modified to include 'wings', which helped to guide shrimp into the mouth of the net. At the same time an influx of Greek immigrants into Florida from the Dodecanese and Saronic Gulf Islands in the Aegean introduced a maritime population replete with traditional boatbuilding skills and plentiful labor to build them. Tarpon Springs, with its burgeoning sponge fishery was the center of the Greek diaspora within Florida and Greek immigrants soon found their way to St. Augustine and Fernandina. One of the early builders of shrimp boats in the modern style was the Tiliakos family. Closely related to the Deonas family, another shrimp boat building family in the area, the Tiliakos began in 1919. These first Greek built boats would introduce a new style of trawler to the United States. They were built with low deadrise and often with very rounded bottoms for holding more ice, fuel, and shrimp. During the 1920s and 30s the size of the boat increased and by World War II it wasn't uncommon to see 45'-50' boats sliding down the marine ways.

At the same time Fernandina started to build shrimp trawlers St. Augustine's San Sebastian River was developing into a modern boat-building center. Greek families settling in downtown purchased riverfront property or leased it to establish boatyards for repairing, building, and rigging the rapidly growing shrimping fleet. Harry Xynides, originally from the Greek isle of Symi, had some experience building boats from his youth on the Aegean waterfront. After establishing contact with relatives in St. Augustine

he moved there to work for Tony Ramos, who sat on the board for the Southeastern Fisheries Association (Jones 1999: 1) and owned a marine railway along the San Sebastian. Mr. Xynides ran the marine ways and performed repairs on shrimp trawlers. By 1942 Xynides rented a small patch of land on the river by the mouth of Oyster Creek to establish himself as a trawler builder. The land was rented from the Sarris family, another boatbuilding family on the river. Building almost completely by himself he would take orders for one boat at a time and complete approximately one boat per year. The 1940s shrimp fishery was undergoing a substantial change in its ownership structure. Most shrimp trawlers prior to the war had been owned and operated by the same family. Some families had multiple boats operating, especially if a father and son were operating together but these were rarely incorporated entities and were run predominantly as one man-one boat businesses. Despite setbacks in material availability such as steel, rubber, and fuel due to the allied war effort shrimp boat building did not suffer dramatically. Harry Xynides continued to build boats as well as several of his local competitors, Leonard Nicks, Steve Sarris, Minus Sarris, and the Pterudis (pronounced 'Pet-rood-is') family. By this time the river had become a bustling working waterfront full of boatyards and their ancillary support infrastructure such as Bush and Pope rigging shop, Midge Whitmore's machine shop, and Gordon Bonner's woodworks (Xynides 2009a; per. comm.).

Winds of change began blowing in 1943 when L. C. Bergman started Diesel Engine Sales Company (DESCO). By this time trawlers had broached the 50' mark with some being built over 60'. These newer and bigger boats were still built of wood but were capable of pulling two nets instead of a single net and thus increased their productivity by sometimes more than double. The increase in size meant a substantial increase in the horsepower required and no longer were marinized automobile engines capable of pushing these boats. Bergman saw the opportunity to increase his sales of industrial diesel engines by fulfilling shrimpers' needs for bigger boats. The increase in the size of the fleet, as well as an increase in the size of the fishing grounds, created a need for boats with greater fuel capacities, liveaboard facilities, and better seakeeping capabilities. Thus, the 'supertrawler' was born. After the war was over an entrepreneurial man named L. C. Ringhaver joined Bergman at DESCO. Ringhaver was a Caterpillar engine distributor and introduced the D-1300 Caterpillar engine to DESCO. His main introduction however, was in working with Bergman to develop a production line for shrimp trawlers so they could be mass produced with great speed. As a testament to their success by April of 1957, only fourteen years after opening their doors, the 600th boat, the *Mary Call Collins* rolled into the muddy waters of the San Sebastian. The governor, LeRoy Collins was there for his daughter's namesake to be launched and a celebration of epic proportions was thrown to commemorate the event. Out of the 3,570 workdays over this fourteen-year period a brand new DESCO boat had been completed every 5.95 days.

For the U.S. shrimping industry the mid 1950s were the starting point for a dramatic increase in the productivity as well as range of the fleet. Fleet expansion, thanks to the efforts of companies like DESCO, and to family builders such as the Xynides and Sarris had supplied the fishery with ample catching ability, range, and even larger trawls. It has often been accredited to ex-Coast Guardsmen and Navy personnel who were stationed

along the coastal southeast for having brought a taste for shrimp back to their hometowns and thus, enlarged the market to cover the entire nation. Traditional shrimping grounds were being depleted of shrimp and the days of steaming back and forth within sight of the home inlet and catching a hold full of brown or white shrimp were dwindling. Much of the extended range ability of the shrimp boats had been used to take advantage of regional price fluctuations and steam to the port with the best ex-vessel prices. The same year that DESCO launched its 800th boat, called the *Sondra Leigh*, Key West became the hot new port for commercial shrimping in 1957. Pink shrimp in unprecedented numbers were discovered around the Florida Keys and between 1950 and 1960 the population of Key West more than doubled, largely as a result of the boom in shrimping. With this seemingly endless new supply of shrimp, as all of the other stocks had once been characterized, the demand for new shrimp trawlers blossomed. Not only was St. Augustine busy building boats but its suppliers of engines, propellers, rigs, nets, shafts, bearings, generators, and other machinery saw sales skyrocket to unseen heights. It is with little coincidence that Harry Xynides moved his shop to a more productive location with a formal marine railway and an enclosed building barn, leaving the bare yard where trawlers had been built under the shade of oak trees and launched by pulling them through the marsh mud by other boats.

Shrimp were now a nationwide commodity and even though prices were dropping due to a glut of shrimp landings volume sales outpaced the supply and supported a feverish rush to sea by fishermen. Companies formed such as the Singleton Seafood Inc., started in Mayport and then moved to Tampa. Originally setting out with four trawlers in 1948, by the 1970s there were dozens of trawlers owned by the company and operating throughout the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and Atlantic.

To supply the shrimp fishery with the volume of boats it needed DESCO enlarged its factory along the San Sebastian to over 1,000 feet of waterfront. Its laborers were divided into specific tasks such as plankers, framers, engine-installation specialists, electricians, and other specialized tasks. For the first time on the San Sebastian River shrimp boats were being built by individuals who were not, by trade, shipwrights. Certainly, smaller yards such as the Xynides utilized wage laborers on occasion but were not equipped to handle the sheer resources necessary to build boats by the dozens. As the trend moved towards corporate fishing companies such as Singleton, company managers needed to deal with suppliers who could handle their volume needs. Orders of five, eight, even ten boats at a time were not uncommon.

The Sarris family of boat builders operated at a level in-between the Xynides and DESCO. With the expertise of the Sarris builders, accentuated by wage labor, the yard was able to produce a boat, on average, every seven weeks (calculated at 37.5 work days.) Wooden shrimp boats built from planking of yellow pine, framing of white oak, and stern/stem posts of live oak were the norm throughout until the early 1970s. A man named Dick Valdes, who had been heavily involved with fiberglass boat production. As the founder of Columbia Sailboats in 1958 he had directed world's largest fiberglass sailboat manufacturer. When the company was sold to Whittaker Marine Group, who had bought DESCO in the late 1960s, Valdes was brought in to St. Augustine to transition the

company towards modernizing its product and building fiberglass shrimp trawlers. Starting in 1971 with hull #F101, the 75' fiberglass *Tica* was sold to the Versaggi Shrimp Company. DESCO initiated the beginning of the end for wooden shrimp boats. A few steel hull trawlers were also being built on the river by St. Augustine Trawlers and Stimati Leakis but the early boats proved to be too top heavy to be seaworthy. Fiberglass required a completely different type of building infrastructure since it is built into a mold and framed afterwards. Likewise, it required a completely different skill-set to build.

After review of DESCO photos from this transition period it appears that the learning curve for building large boats out of fiberglass was fairly steep for the company. Early glass boats had a tendency to crack in vital areas as well as not be able to withstand impacts and retain their seaworthiness. A quote from a report on research vessels operating under government ownership tells the story of some of the early DESCO glass boats, "like most of the early built fiberglass DESCO boats she is too lightly built and rolls badly." (Rabalais et al 2004: 129) The vessel mentioned in the quote was one of the first fiberglass boats built and is now operated by the Massachusetts Maritime Academy under the name of the R/V *Edgerton*, a 68' trawler (the boat was brought onto the government rolls after being seized for running drugs from South America.) These early boats were built without a full keel and due to the lightness of the balsa-cored glass hull, had higher centers of gravity than their wooden counterparts. A 1988 decision by the 5th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals (Snyder v. Whittaker, A.M.C. 2534, 24 Fed. R. Evid. Serv. 1217) found that, after a fatal incident in which a 75' DESCO fiberglass trawler sank after a mild collision with an oil platform, the boat had inherent design flaws that created weak spots subject to augmenting damage incurred to the hull during a collision. This boat, the *Texas Lady*, had been built in 1978, almost a decade after the company moved to fiberglass construction.

Interestingly enough, wooden boats did not disappear from DESCO's yard until early in the 1980s. While no conclusive single reason for this has been found, it seems probable that with a large workforce of 400-500 employees at the factory trained to build mostly wooden boats a slow transition was more economical than a fast one. The 1970s were the true heyday for Florida shrimping. Boats were being launched at unprecedented rates and were paying for themselves after just a few trips. In times where shrimp brought money to a boat so quickly, owners were relied less on having an easier to maintain glass boat than simply having a working boat. Thus, volume won once more and graced the wooden shrimp boat with one more decade of life.

By the mid-1980s the 'limitless' shrimping grounds of south Florida had largely been fished out. Imported farm-raised shrimp had also cut dramatically into the market while federal and state fisheries regulators clamped down on the ecological damage inflicted by shrimping. Blockades of harbors by enraged shrimpers over regulations such as the implementation of the turtle extruder requirement seemed as though a war was being waged against the domestic fishing fleet when, in fact, a situation was developing much like the fencing-in of the American West. The days of unregulated fishing were over and American consumers were flocking towards cheaper imported shrimp.

DESCO and other St. Augustine builders, however, did not rely on the domestic fleet alone to support their industry. Foreign fleets from Africa to Southeast Asia featured DESCO, St. Augustine Trawler, and other San Sebastian Built boats. DESCO's motto was, in fact, "The Sun Never Sets on a DESCO Boat." According to scant company records DESCO built somewhere in the number of 2,569 boats. Out of these, 2,230 were wooden hulled. To keep up with production DESCO temporarily established a hull-building facility in Ft. Meyers where two or three wooden hulls would be built, towed to St. Augustine in a string, and then were outfitted with engines, running gear, decks, pilot houses, and finished for launching.

Considering the rapidity or brand new shrimp trawlers leaving St. Augustine during the post-World War II period up until the 1980s one maritime historian commented that it was the 'largest number of purpose-built wooden fishing craft ever built…changing the economies of North and South America"(Fleetwood 1995: 195).

Anthropological Considerations

While company records for DESCO, Xynides, and Sarris have yet to be fully documented, providing they still exist, it is likely that they would paint a similar picture to that gathered from ethnographic stories of fishermen and former boat builders long the banks of the San Sebastian. Fortunately, two men who were long involved with shrimping and who both worked for DESCO, are in the process of documenting their experiences. What can be said, however, is that there was a noticeable change in how boats were built during this heyday period. Artisanal boatbuilding managed to hold its own for some time considering the heavy pressure applied by DESCO to rout out its competitors through buy-outs and sheer competition.

Shrimp boat building transitioned from a vernacular style of build to one based on a commodity, shrimp, which had a significant market value. While individual shrimpers were not necessarily forced out of the business the rise of fishing cooperatives was one of the few tools individual owner/operators could use to battle corporate fishing companies.

As profitability grew from the decks of shrimp boats large multinational agribusiness corporations became involved such as when Singleton Seafood was purchased by ConAgra in the early 1980s. While this may seem as a deviation from the boatbuilding in St. Augustine it has unavoidable implications. Corporate fishing fleets, due to their volume requirements, could not afford to purchase trawlers one at a time from small yards unable to build more than a couple boats at once. Moreover, corporate purchasing was able to leverage the price of boatbuilding down to levels unattainable for small builders. The Henry Ford-style production line that DESCO introduced, while providing lots of jobs for St. Augustine, was a death knell for traditional boatbuilding. The style of production used in the DESCO factory was one described in Washington Babcock's treatise on labor in American shipyards at the turn of the century that defines the transition from "skilled labor in one of the principal departments of a shipyard…hitherto indispensable and correspondingly arrogant and high handed…replaced by unskilled labor' (Thiesen 2006: 182 [1900:29]).

The ability of a yard to employ unskilled laborers to do readily-trainable jobs allowed the employer to better control the labor pool. Apprenticeship was no longer required for one to build boats and become a master shipwright. In fact, there were, in reality, no shipwrights at DESCO. Employees hired on from other yards may have had the knowledge to build boats entirely on their own or with little help but these skills were no longer required at the modern yard. With little investment in a yard or shop laborer they could be easily replaced. Without a corporate structure the laborer had few other options on the outside since his or her task was part of a composite structure. Thiesen (2006), in his "Industrializing American Shipbuilding" documents two major trends in domestic shipbuilding. The first is that unlike British shipbuilding, which relied on the theoretical development of nautical architecture, American designers acted in a manner he described as 'rational' and 'practical' (Thiesen 2006: 213) Removing typical connotations of what we know to be 'rational' and 'practical' and applying his definitions, DESCO started by borrowing a European-influenced hull style originating with Greek and Anglo boatbuilders along the southeast Atlantic coast and then applied a practical approach. Again, being careful to avoid subjective determinations of the term 'practical', what happened was simply a boat style adopted by corporate builders and modified to make it more easily buildable, cheaper to produce, and lacking the continual artistic progression of building utilized by traditional shipwrights. In 1957 one of DESCO's advertising slogans was "Let us 'Standardize' Your Fleet", indicating the cookie-cutter ability to make the same boat over and over again. This can also be seen in that certain parts of a DESCO boat's exterior architecture are designed so multiple DESCO boats could be docked alongside each other and fit together perfectly.

It is easy to define this transition with a light of nostalgia, and certainly most wooden boat enthusiasts continue to do so. However, the primary focus here is the economic impact wrought by this change. While the population of St. Augustine undoubtedly proffered financially from the building boom surrounding DESCO, St. Augustine Trawlers, and a few other successful builders, the community's structure changed and many individuals' agency to negotiate their local economy faded as well. Boatbuilding was certainly not the only corporate structure to change the town's political economy as the railroad employed hundreds of St. Augustinians as well. The significance here is that this transition in labor patterns took place as part and parcel of an explicitly unique boatbuilding industry specific to St. Augustine, one that has been largely overlooked.
Further research on this topic is likely to uncover much more about labor patterns in Northeast Florida and specifically, race relations in a largely integrated business situated in a hotbed of racism that came to a boiling point during the shrimp boat building boom. Whatever these implications mean, it is important to remember that what happened on the San Sebastian River engendered local, national, and global changes in fisheries, foodways, and the maritime environment.

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