

## A sponge with a history



*Beryl with the family sponge.*



*Editor: A memorial to sponge divers in Tarpon Springs, Florida. Many Greek divers, particularly from the Dodecanese operated in America. Photo credit: Daniel Oines/Flickr*

## Beryl's Sponge – a story of an unusual treasure, history and emotional ties

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This is not a fanciful memory concocted by some romantic older relative! My mother's story brings credence to this 'find'. This is how it goes:

As far as hand harvested sponges go this one is regarded as huge. Or so it was when, in 1927, my mother, Maria Mavrocolides was about 17 years old; (original surname is Vasiliou-Mavrocolides being an acquired nickname).

My mother Maria kept this sponge as a treasured possession. I can remember it as far back as I can remember anything. She used to refresh or water it about once a month, by hand sprinkling it with cold water. She told us that if this wasn't done the sponge would become hard and crumbly.

Can you imagine that, amongst the few personal belongings which she transported to Australia in 1936, this was one of those treasured possessions.

When I asked her about the sponge, she told me that one of her maternal uncles, Diamantis Malaxou, of the Malaxos clan, was a sponge diver. This is one of those very sponges that he retrieved from the waters surrounding Kastellorizo; and he gave it as a valuable gift to his niece - my mother. He was renowned for the extraordinary depths down which he could dive. He had a permanent limp: the result of 'the bends' from either diving too deep or staying underwater for too long.

So legendary were their skills as deep-sea divers, that he and his brothers, Kyriakos and Konstantinos, were assigned to dive and locate a sunken ancient sailing ship off the coast of America. Unlike the previous attempts of sponge divers, the Malaxos brothers were able to locate this ancient ship which was full of treasures.

The more I think upon it, the more I'm fascinated with how much history and emotional ties it represents. Fancy! My mother, who was leaving behind her beloved family and idyllic life on Kastellorizo, to come and marry a man she didn't know, valued the symbolism of this humble sponge so much that she made room for it in her limited allowance of luggage!

And so it continued throughout all her life. She tended to it like a living object by 'refreshing' it approximately every month. 'Refreshing' meant that she hand-sprayed it with cold water to prevent it from drying out, as full immersion would cause it to harden and crumble.

*For the fascinating story of the  
Sponge Divers of Greece in  
America visit this article  
[here](#)*

And yet, this innate object, spoke to all our hearts, of long forgotten economic endeavours, of dangerous diving practices, of the loving gift of one's uncles (who can imagine, in this day and age, being given a sponge as a valuable gift!).

It spoke of two different worlds, the one my mother left behind which valued such large sponges, to the harsh reality of a hostile post-depression country and a migrant husband who, leaving the beauties of Kastellorizo, spent most of his 15 years in Australia cutting sugar cane in the heat and isolation of tropical Queensland. Putting it colloquially....this humble sponge stood out like a 'sore toe'!!!

And yet, there it abided, and has remained long enough for us to reminisce and research and reconnect with our treasured and intriguing history, telling us who we were, and who we are. All this through the silent presence and testimony of 'The Sfoungkarri'.