

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

**#90 September 24, 2011
California Whaling**



Humpback whale being towed ashore at Richmond for processing.

One of the high points of each year when I was growing up in southern California was heading north in the old family station wagon for a month of camping every summer in the redwoods, and along the Oregon and Washington coasts. Our first stop was always in Berkeley where my dad had an old college roommate who was on the faculty there in Geography. He was a fascinating guy who took his family all over the world on his research trips. They had a great big house in the Berkeley hills filled with books and all sorts of interesting things he had collected from various adventures to exotic places around the world. I thought seriously each time we visited that house about one day being a college professor. I knew he had a doctor's degree, which at age 10 was a little intimidating for me to contemplate. So I asked my dad – what do you have to do to get a doctor's degree? To which my dad replied, you have to write a book! Not being much of a writer, I quickly shelved the idea of ever becoming a college professor.

After an always interesting evening, we would leave Berkeley early the next

morning, and head north along the edge of San Francisco Bay to Richmond, where we drove the car onto a ferry for the trip across to San Rafael and the beginning of the Redwood Highway. This was in the early 1950s, well before the bridge was built. Driving the car onto a ferryboat with the sound and smell of the diesel engines, the boat rolling with the currents, the whistle as we cast off, and then standing on the upper deck for the Bay crossing was exciting for a young boy.

On one of those early trips I clearly recall my dad stopping the car along the waterfront area of Richmond and saying- hey I want to show you guys something. My two brothers and I were always up for getting out of the car, so we jumped out and followed my dad across the highway. I have a vivid memory of an overpowering smell, and then the sight of a massive whale up on a ramp. I was probably 12 or 13 at the time, yet the sight and smell that morning is still pretty clear in my mind.

We were seeing the Richmond whaling station, one of the last two whaling stations in America, which was active in San Francisco Bay until 1971. The Del Monte Fish Company opened it in 1956, not far from the Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor. During its 15 years of operation, the 40-man crew boasted that they could reduce a humpback whale to oil, poultry meal and pet food in an hour and a half.

The whaling station's boats harpooned whales offshore along their California coastal migration routes, and towed them into San Pablo Bay, where they were pulled up a ramp by their tails with huge hooks. Station records indicate that in a typical year they brought in about 175 finbacks, humpbacks and sperm whales. Using very large knives, huge slabs of the whale were cut off and then cooked down in big pots, which produced the stench. That part of the Bay was usually filled with blood and brine and the remains of the processed whales.

It's hard to look back and imagine this today, but those were different times and the whaling station crew was working every day to make a living, just like everyone else. We didn't have the Environmental Protection Agency, Environmental Impact Reports, the Endangered Species Act or Marine Mammal Protection Act in the 1950s.

In 1971, however, Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans signed the paperwork that ended whaling in the United States, and the Richmond whaling station was abandoned, ending 120 years of whaling along the California coast. After the site began leaking diesel oil into the bay, a hazardous waste remediation crew pulled out the underground tanks that fueled the station. A subsequent fire in 1998

destroyed much of what was left, leaving behind only charred pilings and memories.

We have our own whaling history in Monterey Bay, although it began in the previous century. Captain John Davenport was the guy who conceived of California shore whaling. He was a New Englander, originally from Rhode Island, where he had been half-owner of a 180-ton schooner that sailed between California and Hawaii from 1845 to 1852, whaling and trading. But whaling in those days of Captain Ahab and Ishmael was a difficult life. Whalers spent many months at sea, going after whales in longboats using hand thrown harpoons. Sometimes they didn't come back.

In 1852, John Davenport, newly married, moved west to California. Learning that humpback and gray whales were passing within view of Monterey, he soon recruited a dozen Portuguese men to hunt humpback and gray whales with hand lances and harpoons. He first whaled in the bay from a ship in 1853, but then started whaling from small boats rowed out from shore in 1854. Thus began the enterprise known as shore whaling, also dangerous, but most times the men returned home every night.

Davenport's business proved to be economically marginal at best, although it soon attracted considerable competition. He sold out to a group of Portuguese, and returned to whaling from a larger ship - *The Caroline E. Foote* - in 1863, and spent two more years whaling along the California coast. His next venture was a shore whaling station at the mouth of Soquel Creek, where he operated unsuccessfully for two years. Interestingly, he blamed an earthquake in the East Bay in 1865 for his lack of success at whaling.

Davenport then headed 15 miles up the coast to El Jarro Point, just north of the town that now bears his name. In 1866 he rented the land that is now called Davenport's Landing. He built a 450-foot wharf, which handled the shipping for several lumber companies and shingle mills. There is no evidence, however, that John Davenport ever built a whaling station in this location. This enterprise was also not that successful because the north coast swells kept tearing his wharf apart. Despite all of his ambition, John Davenport ultimately went bankrupt and moved to Santa Cruz.

While four sets of steel and concrete pilings from a pier can still be seen from the cliff across Highway One from the cement plant, these are not the remains of Davenport's wharf. This 2300-foot long pier was built in the 1930s with the dream

of shipping cement by sea from the north coast. This was a tough spot to tie up a ship, however, and after 15 years of marginal success, the pier was abandoned to the waves, and cement left the county in trains and trucks. Transport of cement ceased when the cement plant closed in 2009.