

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

#91 October 8, 2011

Whaling in the Bay

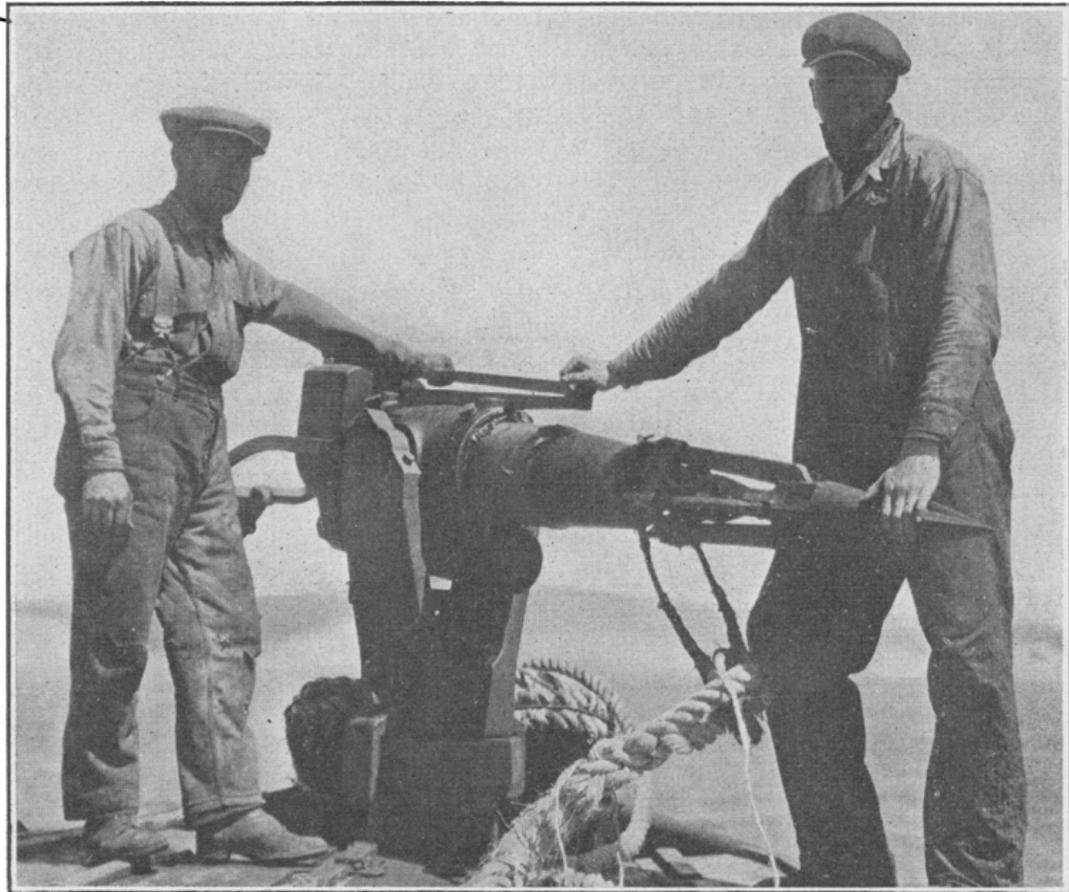


FIG. 1. Whale gun with harpoon loaded. Photograph by O. H. Stolberg.
The advent of harpoon guns rapidly changed the nature of whaling.

Captain John Davenport starting shore whaling in California, but rowing out to harpoon whales from shore had its limits. It was hard and whalers could only work the waters out to about 10 miles from the beach. Even when they were successful in harpooning a whale, they then had to get a 15 to 30-ton animal back to the beach for processing, by rowing, or if they were lucky, with the aid of a sail. A fairly large percentage of the harpooned whales, especially humpbacks, were lost when they sank.

From the mid-1850s to about the 1880s, as many as 18 whaling stations were

active along the entire length of the California coast, at Crescent City, Bolinas Bay, Half Moon Bay, Pigeon Point, Soquel, Monterey (2 stations), Carmel Bay/Pt. Lobos, Point Sur, San Simeon, Port Harford (Port San Luis), Cojo Viejo (Point Conception), Goleta, Portuguese Bend and Dead Man's Island (San Pedro), and San Diego Bay (2 stations). By 1886 however, only five of these were still operating.

Following the discovery of oil in Titusville, Pennsylvania in 1859, which was refined to produce kerosene for lighting and heating, the economics of whaling and the value of whale oil declined quickly. While the shore whalers certainly reduced the number of whales along California's coast, it's not clear that the reduction in numbers was a significant factor in the decline of the industry.

In the early 1900's some new technologies like steam powered chase boats and the harpoon cannon, led to a brief resurgence in whaling, including a short-lived Norwegian-owned whaling operation that operated at Moss Landing between 1919-1926.

Another retired ship captain, Charles Moss, brought his family from Texas in 1866 to build a homestead in California. Partnering with Portuguese whaler Cato Vierra, Moss built a 200-foot long wharf on the sand spit directly west of the present Sandholdt Bridge to create a commercial pier. The wharf was soon busy, attracting whalers, fishermen, and salt pond operators to Moss Landing Harbor. The port's traffic was further boosted by gold rush fever when Moss Landing Harbor began exporting goods like potatoes, lumber, and sugar beets to a booming San Francisco. Extraction of salt from evaporation ponds and oyster farming soon followed.

Though Charles Moss eventually sold his holdings in the area to the Pacific Coast Steamship Company, residents clearly respected him enough to adopt his name for the area. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake seriously damaged the old wharf and much of the town's infrastructure, however.

In 1919, the California Sea Products Company and a Norwegian whaler, Captain Frederick Dedrick, selected Moss Landing as the site for a commercial whaling factory. Whaling at Moss Landing began in earnest. Two new steam driven boats with bow mounted harpoon cannons would make whaling in the bay a whole lot easier for the whalers, but a whole lot more dangerous for the whales.

The deck-mounted harpoon cannon, and also harpoon guns held by whalers at the shoulder, were both used to get a line on the whale. This was usually followed by a bomb lance shot from a gun, or in some cases, the harpoon and bomb gun were mounted together on a pole and thrown as one would an ordinary harpoon. When the harpoon entered the whale a certain distance, it engaged a trigger that fired the explosive. While whales stood a reasonable chance of evading the older shore whalers, steam powered ships and the harpoon cannon and bomb gun led to much higher take rates. An interview with one of the harpoon gunners who worked out of the Richmond station, the last whaling facility on the west coast, described the injuries that befell many of the gunners as well. Whaling has always been a risky business, no matter what tool or technology was used.

Data from logbooks of whaling stations at Moss Landing (1919–1922 and 1924) and Trinidad (1920 and 1922–1926) record the taking of 2,111 whales, including 1,871 humpbacks, 177 fin whales, 26 sei whales, 3 blue whales, 12 sperm whales, 7 gray whales, and 15 others. This works out to be about 80 whales every year for each of these two stations.

Sandy Lydon's history site explains how the arrival of a whale at the new Moss Landing whaling station was initially a spectacle that attracted large numbers of people, at least large numbers for Moss Landing at the time. After a year or so, the novelty wore off and the stench from the processing plant drove people away. When winds blew from the south, the odor of a whale being boiled down could be smelled all the way to Santa Cruz.

The Moss Landing plant used just about every part of the whales they brought in. The blubber was turned into oil used by soap manufacturers; the meat was converted to chicken feed, and bones were ground into bone meal.

Within several years of the whaling resurgence in Monterey Bay, the new tools were proving very effective and the whales were become both scarce and wary. By 1924 the last whale had been brought ashore and the Moss Landing site was closed, bringing an end to whaling in Monterey Bay.

As I explained in my last column, the Richmond whaling opened for business in 1956, thirty-two years after whaling in Monterey Bay ended. Perhaps the whale population had recovered sufficiently for whaling to become profitable again. However a short fifteen years later, federal protection closed down this last west coast whaling factory, ending 118 years of California whaling.

Today, whale populations have slowly rebounded but are still not believed to be anywhere near the numbers that passed along our shores prior to human intervention.