

The Gray Whales Of Magdalena Bay

Memories Revived by Name of Fleets Rendezvous.

WHILE the naval men of the world have been thinking of the strategic value of Magdalena bay, on the coast of lower California, as a rendezvous for a fleet of American battleships, every mention of those waters brings to the minds of a few old Yankee whalers, and sundry seafaring naturalists, the memory of the days when all the sheltered waters of the Pacific coast of Mexico from Punta Banda to the Gulf of Tehuantepec, were sought every winter by schools of whale literally numbering thousands.

When, as hide-buyers first, and later as prospectors for gold, the people of the United States went to the coasts of the two Californias, they observed during the winter season many whales swimming toward the south-migrating like the wild fowl. Some of the whales were of forms familiar to the men who had sailed on whale ships. The humpback, for instance, was common enough. The long and active sulphur bottom—much longer and more active than his brother of the Atlantic—was also observed, and so, too, was the slender and almost equally agile minke. Occasionally the double spout of the common right whale arose above the dancing waters, but many times more numerous than all of these taken together, were the whales of another and smaller breed that, because of their color, were named the California gray whale.

In a general way, it was noted that these gray whales appeared on the coast in December, every year, for their migration toward the south, and that the first migrants toward the north appeared some time in February. The regularity of their visits seems to have been noted first about the year 1846, but it was not until after 1850 that any one in California gave the matter serious attention.

As some readers will remember, 1850 was one of the years of the golden era of American whaling, as well as one

of the era in gold in California. Hundreds of American whalers were to be found every year in the Pacific, and after the discovery of gold in California not a few of the whale ships went to California where the crews, from captains to cooks, went ashore and hurried off to the diggings.

DRIVEN BACK BY HUNGER.

Inevitably, most of these deserters failed to "strike it rich" at the mines, and were driven sometimes by starvation, back to the beach. There they heard the stories of the migrating whale, and began to make observations for themselves. They even counted the schools that appeared at certain points, and according to published statements made by some who were considered trustworthy in such matters, they saw from the shore, between the 15th of December and the 1st of February, a thousand gray whale, on the average, every day.

The south-bound migrants appeared as early as December 1, but the schools were few in number and widely scattered before the middle of the month. On the whole, it was estimated that during the early years of the migration not far from 50,000 whales passed south within view of the coast of California; and at the same time other uncounted thousands were passing further out to sea. The number seen going north after February was much smaller, because at that season the schools commonly avoided the inshore waters.

Beginning in a desultory way, some of the whalers went hunting these whales, and found that, though smaller than humpbacks and right whales, they yielded oil of good quality and in sufficient quantity to make it worth while to pursue them. Thereupon several shore whaling stations were established, the first at Monterey in 1851. The captains of whalerships that came to the coast also learned about or saw the migrants. The captains of whalerships that came to the coast also learned about or saw the migrants. The captains naturally followed down the beach, and, on arriving off

the different bays on the Mexican coast found that the male gray whales were herding in "pods" just off the entrances to the sheltered waters, while the females were all inside, having gone there to bring forth their young.

Bull whales yielded from 20 to 25 barrels of oil, while the yield from the cows was as much as 40 barrels, and more than 60 was sometimes obtained. Because of this difference, the whaler captains steered their ships into the uncharted bays, cast anchor, lowered away, and without a single shift of position filled their ships with oil from the slaughtered females.

KILLING NOT AN EASY TASK.

The work of killing California gray whales while the fishery lasted had some peculiar features, the shore stations being of special interest. Thus the whalers began, of course, with the tools to which they were accustomed. The boats adopted at the first shore station were purchased from whale-ships having outfits to spare, and so that was pulled by four oars and carried a man at the bow, ready to throw the harpoon, with another at the stern handling the steering oar, the whaler rowed away merrily to attack this new kind of whale. The whales were so fearless when bound south that they came prowling among the kelp-marked rocks in shoal water, and even rolled themselves in the breakers on alongshore sand bars.

It was easy to place a boat within striking distance. But when the man at the bow hurled his harpoon, the result was something astounding to the inexperienced. For the gray whale, while no more than 30 or 40 feet long, was possessed of strength and agility out of all proportion to its size, and a temper that rendered it almost impossible to "start" by four oars and in usually "sound" or run. If one turned to fight, its motions were so slow, relatively, that alert whalers were usually able to "start" by four oars and in usually "sound" or run. If one turned to fight, its motions were so slow, relatively, that alert whalers were usually able to "start" by four oars and in usually "sound" or run. If one turned to fight, its motions were so slow, relatively, that alert whalers were usually able to "start" by four oars and in usually "sound" or run.

Guns for shooting whales were already in use on some of the whale ships. The projectile was a shell that exploded in the whale with deadly effect. But in the ordinary fishery the gun was never used, until the boat had been fastened to the whale by means of a harpoon thrown by hand, and even then the whaler preferred the hand lance unless the whale turned to fight. In the gray whale fishery these guns, which were fired from the shoulder, were used from the first. If well—especially if quickly—handled, they served the purpose. But so many boats were

knocked out of water by these fighters that the gray whales soon came to be known as the "devil fish," and by that name they are now called in the books. It is a significant fact that many of the whales were covered with scars from wounds that had been inflicted with the stone and ivory weapons of the Eskimo and other Indians; and many of these crude weapons were cut from the blubber of the whales that were saved.

American whalers had shown themselves to be among the most conservative of any class of workers in the country, but when they had fully comprehended the danger in the gray whale fishery they began to look around for some new-fangled notion that would make their pursuit less dangerous. The harpoon gun now in use in the Arctic fishery had not been invented at that time, but the whalers from the Scotch ports used a harpoon-throwing gun, that was so big and heavy it had to be mounted on a swivel. This gun had been useful along the Arctic ice because of its range. The Greenland whalers were so shy that it was difficult to get within harpoon-throwing range. While the gray whale was comparatively easy to approach, what its hunters wanted was a method of striking that would enable them to keep out of range of its ready tail, and the British gun proved just the thing.

The barrel of this gun as described by the maker was three feet long and the bore had a diameter of an inch and a half. The projectile was a two-barbed harpoon of steel-pointed iron that was inserted, butt first, in the muzzle of the gun. The shank of the harpoon was short, and in the slot was a ring to which the harpoon line was attached. The charge of powder used in the Greenland fishery was six drams. The look was of the old hammer style, enclosed in a brass box that usually rested it from the spray. The trigger was pulled by means of a cord. The weight of the gun was 70 pounds. When this gun was fired, the harpoon flew, point first, dragging the line behind it, to a range of 40 yards.

SPECIAL HARPOON ADOPTED.

In adopting this style of gun the California whalers made a harpoon of their own. Instead of two bars it had only one, and this one was made in a separate piece which was affixed to the shank of the harpoon in such a way that when fired from the gun the barb lay close beside the head of the shank. After it had entered the whale, however, and a strain was brought on the line, the barb turned around the end of the shank, forming a cross like a T. It was thus firmly anchored in the whale. The charge of powder used in

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Having a gun that would throw a harpoon to a range of 40 yards, the whaler had space enough between their boat and the agile gray whale to enable them to dodge—usually—and thus they found time for using the deadly shoulder gun.

The Pacific coast fishery was peculiar in the ferocious character of the whales that were most numerous, and in the use of these swivel guns. Nowhere else in the United States have such guns become fashionable. Another peculiarity in the fishery at the shore station was found in the fact that the crews in most cases were partners and not employees of one man or company, or rather it should be said that they were at once owners and employees. When a whale was "saved" each man received a "lay" in proportion to the

work he had done. Thus the men who pulled the bars received a "lay" of from one-sixtieth to one-seventieth of the product. The men who steered the boats received usually one-fortieth, while the men who struck the whale with the harpoon had from one-sixtieth to one-twentieth. It is to be noted that the harpoon throwers also used the bomb-throwing guns, or the hand lance, when fast to a whale that did not fight. In the ordinary whale fishery, the harpoon thrower, after fastening a whale to the boat, went aft and allowed the man at the steering oar—always one of the mates of the ship—to go forward and finish the killing. The members of the shore station crew, having once drawn their "lays," proceeded to divide what remained, according to the shares that each owned in the outfit. Still another interesting peculiarity of the shore stations was the presence of a Chinaman, who was usually a cook and received for his pay the sinews of the whale taken.

ANOTHER CURIOUS WEAPON.

A curious weapon that was invented for the use of the shore whaler was a harpoon-carrying rocket. A harpoon was fitted to the head of the rocket. A gun barrel of the kind commonly used to fire bombs into whales was also fitted to it. By means of a curiously arranged trigger this gun barrel fired a bomb into the whale as soon as the harpoon had pierced it. Tests on the beach showed that the rocket had a range of 120 yards, but for some reason (presumably because it was less convenient and less accurate than a swivel gun), it was never popular with the whalers.

Of course in this fishery, as in the others, the adoption of improved weapons did not shorten the life of the industry. No record was ever made of the number of whales killed in Magdalena bay and on the other breeding grounds off the coast of Mexico, but it has been authoritatively estimated that at the shore stations at least 10,000 whales were taken in the course of 20 years after the first one was established. If one considers the number known to haunt the coast during the migrations, the annual kill was seemingly insignificant; that is, it might seem so, at first thought, for on the average the number was less than 1 per cent of the migrants.

But this annual toll, together with the slaughter on the breeding grounds, was more than enough to destroy the balance of nature. Indeed, it is likely that the annual increase was no more than enough to preserve the numbers of the schools in the presence of the natural causes of death, before the whaler began the slaughter, and that the invasion of the breeding grounds

was of itself enough to exterminate the race. What the race was not destroyed was due to the depression in the oil market. The gray whales did not yield valuable bone, and as the price of oil fell (after kerosene came into use), the Americans abandoned the fishery, leaving it to the men from the Azores, who were content as long as they were able to secure a score or so of whales of various kinds in the course of a year.—John R. Spears in the N. Y. Evening Post.

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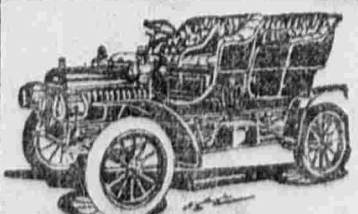
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