

The Narwhal

*A ship without a country,
A mast without a sail.
Then someone swiped the galley range,
And that's the Narwhal's tale!*

These were the words of *San Diego Union* reporter Jerry MacMullen in the fall of 1932 as the storied whaling ship *Narwhal* was towed to the mudflats off National City and abandoned. In earlier days the steam-powered bark had been the prize of the San Francisco whaling fleet as it hunted bowhead whales in the North Pacific and Arctic Ocean. Later, the famed ship's career would end in ignominy in San Diego Bay.

Launched in 1883, the 350-foot long *Narwhal* made seventeen voyages to the Arctic for the Pacific Steam Whaling Company. Whaling was big business in the late 1800s. While petroleum had replaced whale oil for illumination, the whims of the fashion industry created a demand for whalebone, used to stiffen corsets and make hoop skirts. A single bowhead whale contained thousands of dollars worth of “corset stays in the rough.”

But relentless whale hunting in the western Arctic drove the bowhead whales to near extinction. Fashion changed, spring steel replaced whalebone for most uses, and the industry declined. The *Narwhal* was retired from whaling in 1908 after the longest and most successful career of any steam whaler.

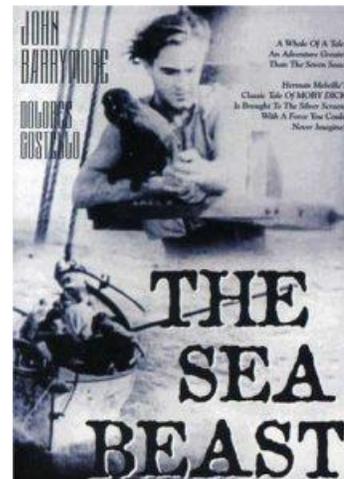
The *Narwhal* was laid up for the next eight years then joined a “motley fleet of vessels” owned by Lars A. Pedersen, a San Francisco salmon packer and trader. Pedersen removed the ship's engine and used her as a sailing cargo ship in the lumber and copra trade in the South Pacific.

In 1923, Pedersen's widow sold the *Narwhal* to a group of artists, writers, and amateur sailors, who sailed the bark on a “gentleman cruise” to Australia and returned via Samoa and French Polynesia. Hard times returned the next year when the *Narwhal* was sold to the wreckers for \$1,100 but the ship survived as a fishing barge in Santa Barbara.

Redemption, of a sort, came in 1926 when the *Narwhal* went into the movies. With John Barrymore at the helm as Captain Ahab, the bark starred as the *Pequod* in a Warner Brothers silent film of “Moby Dick” called “The Sea Beast.” After a “talkie” sequel in 1930, the ship was sold to an American in Baja California who planned to use the old whaler as a fishing boat.

Anchored off Ensenada in February, 1932, the *Narwhal* became known as a “ghost ship.” A youth hired as a caretaker to watch the ship quit after a night of strange noises—“a hand-power foghorn, beating on the deck, wild yells” and worst of all, “phantasmal shapes flitting around the deserted decks.”

After the *Narwhal* dragged her anchors, nearly destroying Ensenada's best pier, the San Diego tugboat *Cuyamaca* hooked on and towed the ship north.



The *Narwhal* was docked at the pier of the San Diego Marine Construction Company at the foot of Sampson Street. Her ownership uncertain, the leaky ship became the target of scavengers. The newsman MacMullen reported:

Men and boys with skiffs, wrenches, screwdrivers, knives and crowbars were awake to the situation. In short order she was stripped to a gantline—and then they stole the gantline. They took the brass rims from her port lights; they cut away her lifts and braces; they walked off with the wheel, and the doors and the companion-ladders. They even stole the galley range.

After several months, the old ship was pumped out, towed away from the pier, and beached at National City near the foot of Ninth Street. When San Diego port director Joe Brennan decided that the hulk was a menace to navigation and “the morals of the young,” a wrecker was hired to tear up the ship and remove the remains. For unknown reasons the work was never done. Slowly, over time, the *Narwhal* fell to pieces in the wind and surf.

But one more chapter to the *Narwhal* saga remained. On the night of August 23, 1937, a PBY-1 seaplane from North Island came in for a landing on the waters of the South Bay. Suddenly, the plane hit an obstruction, nosed over and sank in eight feet of water.

Six Navy fliers were killed in the crash, two more were injured. “About twenty yards away,” noticed a reporter, “looming starkly black and looking like the gaunt skeleton of some primeval sea beast, was the hull of the *Narwhal*.”



The *Narwhal* beached on the mudflats at National City in 1932. *Maritime Museum of San Diego*