

“The Whales of San Diego Bay”

The last and largest whale captured this season made an interesting chase. Her blowing was observed by the crews of the four boats almost simultaneously. The moment she was seen the orders came quick and sharp from the boatswain in command, and at once the men bent to their oars with a will, making their boat bound over the water with such speed as would astonish a green hand.

--San Diego Union, January 11, 1872

The recent sightings of the juvenile gray whale dubbed “Diego” are a reminder of a time when the spectacle of a spouting whale in San Diego Bay was common. Pioneer Philip Crosthwaite, who came to San Diego in 1845, would reminisce many years later of an era when “great numbers of whales entered [the bay] to deliver their young, and rarely was there a day when scores of these mammals could not be seen spouting and basking in the warm sunlight.”

The whales abandoned the bay once ships and people arrived. Instead, they became the prey of hunters who pursued and harpooned the grays off the California coast during their winter southward migration. Whales, after all, were the foundation of the oil industry of the 1800s. Whale oil for lamps and candles illuminated the world.

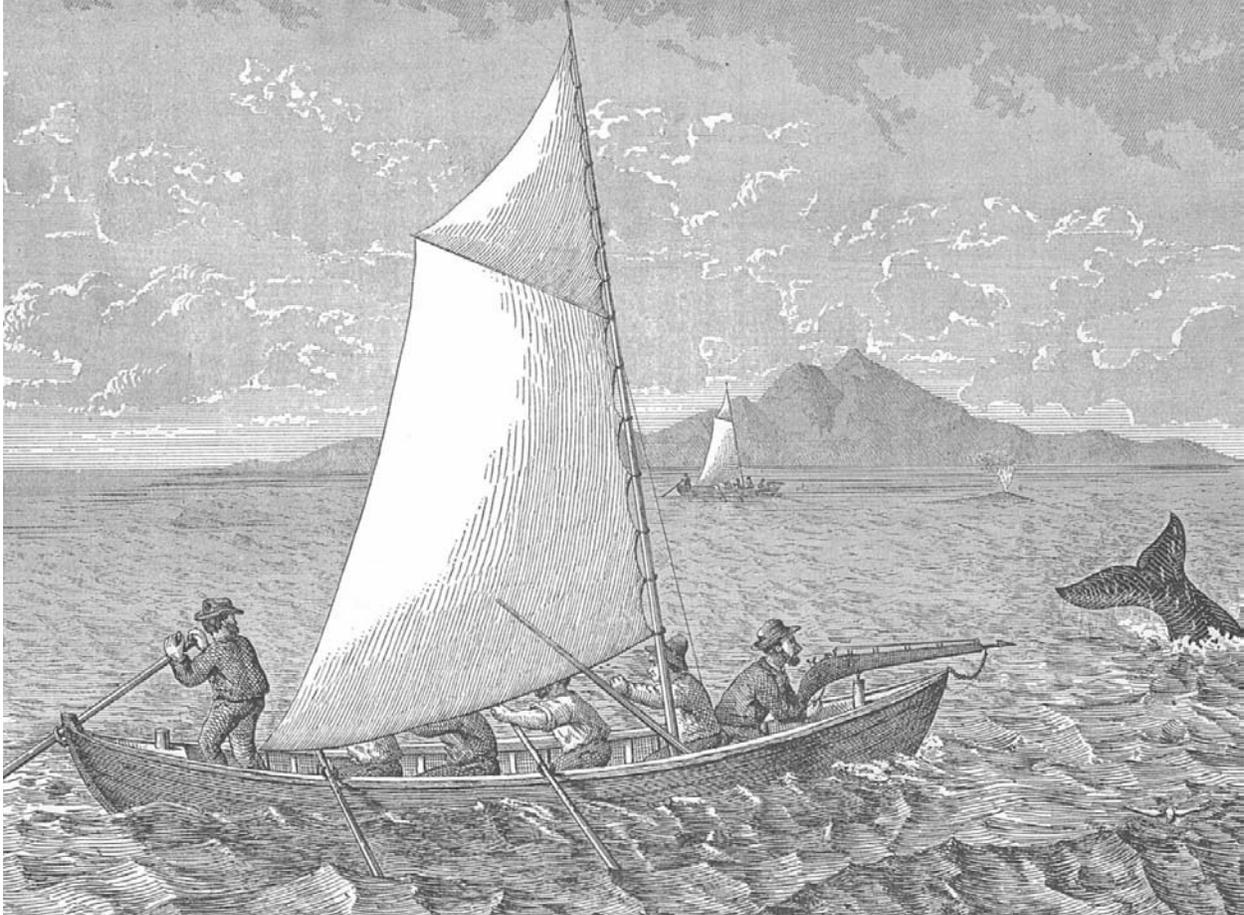
San Diego's first successful shore whalers were twin brothers of Portuguese descent, Alpheus and Prince Packard. The Packards started their operation on the shores of Ballast Point in the winter of 1856-57. A short time later, Captain Miles A. Johnson and his cousins, Henry and James A. Johnson, began another station nearby. The two companies would work side by side for many years.

To capture the grays the whalers kept their six-man, thirty-foot boats off shore throughout the day, waiting for the migration stream to appear in the kelp line off Point Loma. When a gray was sighted, the crews rowed hard in pursuit then fired harpoons from bow-mounted swivel guns. After “getting fast” with a successful strike, the whalers hauled in the harpoon lines and drew close enough to fire bomb lances from shoulder guns. The bombs were designed to explode within the whale's body and kill instantly.

In practice, the killing of fifty-foot, forty-ton “devil-fish” rarely followed design. All whalers considered the gray a most difficult and dangerous whale to capture. It took great skill to strike with the harpoon guns and some luck to kill with the hand-held “bum guns.” The shoulder guns kicked violently to “fire aft with as much emphasis as forward,” frequently hurting the hunter as much as the whale. Bombs often failed, requiring several shots to finish the kill.

The hunt was often wasteful; many harpooned whales sank before they could be towed ashore. In February 1859 the *Union* reported that the whalers based at La Playa had killed about a dozen whales in a few weeks “only five of which have they been able to get into port.”

When a gray was successfully taken, there remained the back-breaking task of towing the whale to the station—often from a distance of several miles. The whalers had to beach the carcass at high tide then strip the blubber in large sections. In wooden troughs the blubber was sliced into smaller pieces then boiled out in 150 gallon iron pots. Rendering or “trying out” the blubber for whale oil could take a dozen men twelve hours for a single whale.



California shore whaling scene. From Scammon, *Marine Mammals of the North-Western Coast* (1974)

When the malodorous rendering process was complete barrels (31.5 gallons each) of “coast oil” was casked for shipment to San Francisco where it sold for about ten dollars per barrel—less money than regular whale oil was worth and far less than the premium oil from sperm whales.

Much of the hard work on shore was done by Native Americans employed by the whaling companies. Local judge Benjamin Hayes reported in 1861 that the Indians made \$15 per month. “The work is measurably light, and the Indians well content with this pay, better than they can get at any other kind of employment.”

Despite the “villainous stench” produced at the whaling stations, the first catch of the season was often the signal for a picnic party to view the “monster of the deep.” Ballast Point presented an interesting spectacle to sightseers in January 1873 as reported by the *Union*:

All the livery “turnouts” in town were chartered and a number of private carriages were also brought into requisition to convey the excursionists to the Point. About forty persons comprised the party . . .

The whalers . . . were busily employed stripping the blubber from a carcass; others were engaged in carrying it to the “trypots” for the purpose of extracting the oil; and still others were firing up, and stirring the boiling mass of blubber as it sizzled and snapped in the pot.

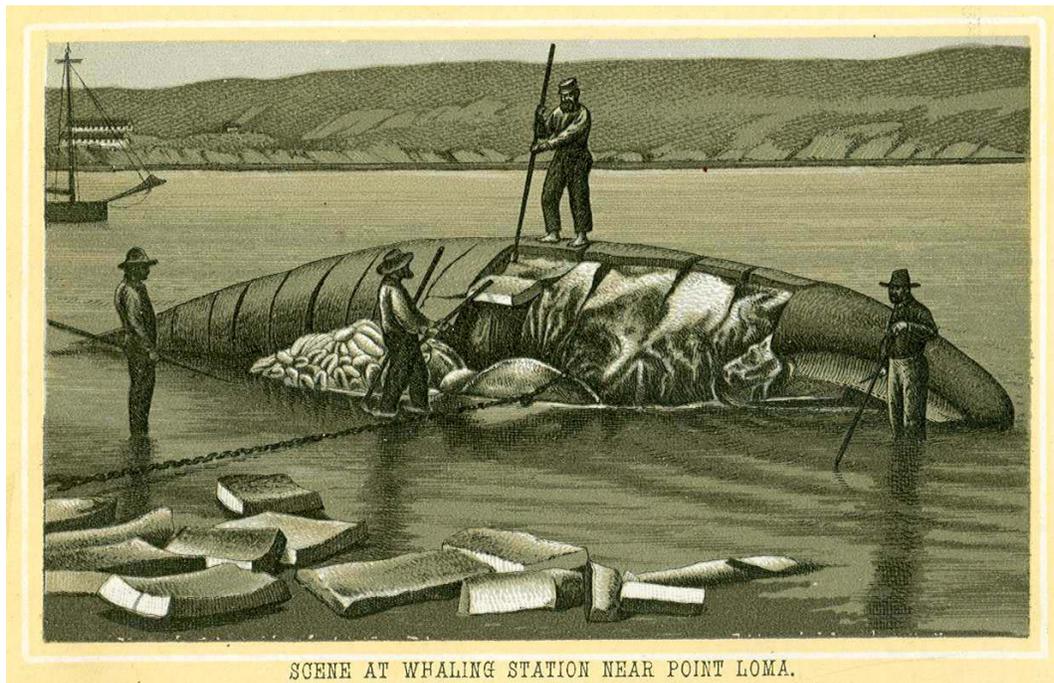
San Diego's first whale watching boat may have the steam yacht *Cuyamaca*, which charged \$1 for sightseers in December 1876 to "see the big fish." The steamer *Emma* advertised its services in the 1880s: "all who want to see a whale will be accommodated with passage."

But beyond their entertainment value, shore whalers provided a commercially important product for San Diego—one of the city's few articles of export. The prosperity of shore whaling varied greatly from year to year. In the 1859-60 season, the Johnson's' station produced 800 barrels of oil worth about \$8,000. Yet only three years later, the county assessor would value their assets at only \$1,760.

The Packard's did not fare much better; in 1865 they were sued in district court for failing to pay a \$700 grocery bill. Often, the industry provided only marginal subsistence to the whalers.

The two companies' best year came in 1871-72 when they landed over forty whales. But catches off Point Loma fell markedly in succeeding years and most shore whaling profits for San Diego whalers came from stations they operated in Baja California at Punta Banda and Santo Tomás.

With the rise of petroleum products in the 1880s, the market for whale oil declined. Gray whales, by this time, were nearly decimated. In 1885-86, the last reported year of local whaling, the Johnsons landed eight gray whales. The next year, the unique enterprise of San Diego shore whaling was abandoned.



SCENE AT WHALING STATION NEAR POINT LOMA.

Stripping the blubber from a gray whale in San Diego Bay. From *Album of San Diego and Coronado Beach, Cal.* (Columbus, Ohio: Ward Brothers, 1887). *San Diego Public Library*.

Originally published in shorter form as "Whaling was once a prosperous business in San Diego," by Richard Crawford, in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Apr 2, 2009. p. CZ.1