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## ALASKA WHALING

In the waters of Alaska there are several kinds of whale—the sperm, bowhead, right, humpback, finback, blue or sulphur bottom, beluga or white whale, and killer or orca.<sup>1</sup> The right whale is one of the most valuable; as it yields both bone of the best quality, and oil. It is found in temperate waters in the Pacific Ocean, south of the main part of Alaska. The bowhead is an Arctic whale and is found along the margin of the ice of the polar sea or in Bering Sea. It much resembles the right whale, and is valuable for the same products. The sperm yields both sperm and oil which were formerly highly prized but in recent years they have greatly decreased in value. The range of the sperm is along the lower coasts of the mainland and islands. The humpback, finback, and sulphur bottom are found on the same grounds as the sperm. The killer, is found from Bering Sea southward and the beluga frequents the coasts and the mouths of the rivers from Cook Inlet to the Kotzebue Sound. The right whale was one of the most desired during the height of the whaling prosperity, but it has been so nearly exterminated that at the whaling stations during the past two years but one right whale has been taken out of a total of 859, notwithstanding the fact that the Akutan station is at the western side of what was once one of the greatest of the right whaling grounds of the world. Bone in the jaw of the right whale is reported to have been taken of an extreme length of 17 feet, and is, ordinarily, of eight or nine feet. One of the largest of these whales would yield from 2,500 to 3,000 pounds of bone, and some of the largest produce 250 barrels of oil. The sperm whale is not so large and the yield of oil is seldom over 100 barrels.<sup>2</sup> The blue whale is the largest of the animals captured at the stations, being taken of as great length as 80 to 100 feet and weighing from

<sup>1</sup>In addition to these there is taken at Akutan a small whale, resembling the finback, called the sie whale. In the Arctic near Point Barrow the Eskimo kill a smaller whale than the bowhead known to them as the ing-ah-took, which is considered by them to be a separate species.

<sup>2</sup>Starbuck, History of American Whale Fishery, pp. 155-157.

80 to 100 tons. The finback is taken in the greatest number, in 1915 numbering 239 out of a total catch of 470.

The waters of the North Pacific Ocean, along the Alaskan shores from Kodiak to the Arctic Ocean, ranked at one time among the greatest whaling grounds of the world. The earliest visitors to these waters note the abundance of these animals, and when the Billings expedition sailed there in 1790, the number of whales is made a subject of mention by both chroniclers of the voyage. Sauer says, "Whales are in amazing numbers about the straits of the islands, and in the vicinity of Kodiak." Sarychef records, "During the whole night the whales swam round our ship, and perpetually occasioned, by their violent lashing of the waves, a report very similar to that from the discharge of a cannon."

The natives of the country gained a large part of their livelihood from the pursuit, and manifested much hardihood in the capture of the different kinds of whales. The chase was invested with much superstition, both by the Aleutians and the Eskimo. Certain ceremonies were observed, particular care being taken as to the weapons used, and much dependence was placed in charms and medicine. Among the Aleutians even human bodies were stolen and secreted to give the possessors good fortune in the hunt.<sup>3</sup> The Kodiak whalers used a harpoon with a slate head which detached from the handle and remained in the wound, causing death, after which the carcass was towed or drifted with the tide to the shore. The Eskimos used harpoons of fine workmanship equipped with heads of ivory and slate; and floats were attached to impede the progress of the animal. The taking of a whale was an occasion of great rejoicing among the native inhabitants.

The history of the whaling by civilized nations in Alaska is a story of the larger part of a century. Since the first ship entered the Pacific Ocean, in 1790, and returned with a catch of 139 tons of sperm oil, the whalers have worked northward. The War of 1812 stopped the progress for a time, but in 1822 they had reached the coast of Japan. The Kodiak grounds, sometimes called the Northwest Coast Right Whaling Grounds, were first brought to notice by a Nantucket whaler, Captain Barzillar Folger, of the ship *Ganges*, who cruised to those grounds in 1835; and they soon became the most important in the North Pacific.

From 1835 to 1889 the whaling grounds in the Pacific Ocean north of 50° north latitude were the greatest in existence and produced

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<sup>3</sup>Urey Lisianski, *Voyage Round the World in the Year 1803*, 4, 5, and 6, . . . in the Ship *Neva* (London, 1814), p. 209.

sixty per cent. of the oil secured by the American fleet, amounting to 3,994,397 barrels. The principal localities were discovered by Americans between 1845 and 1848 and were largely controlled by them, few foreign vessels being engaged there. At its height, in 1846, 292 ships sailed north of the 50th parallel. At this time the ocean was alive with ships; from the masthead the lookout in the height of the season might count seventy or eighty sail, and from many of these the black smoke denoted that they were boiling their oil-pots.<sup>4</sup>

The Russians in the Colonies took notice of the coming of the American and English whalers to these waters and protested against their acts, as in coming into these seas they considered the foreigners were intruding on their domain. In addition the whalers at times landed and took property and food from the caches of the inhabitants, both Russian and native. Protests being unavailing, they attempted to enter the fishery. A company entitled the Russian-Finland Whaling Company was organized under a charter dated December 13, 1850. At the port of Abo, Finland, a ship, called the *Suomi*, was built, which made a successful cruise. Two other ships, the *Turko*, and the *Ayan*, were placed in the trade, but with indifferent success. The Crimean War interfered with their operations; after the war the enterprise was not prosecuted with vigor, and was finally abandoned.<sup>5</sup>

In 1848 Captain Royce passed through Bering Strait with the bark *Superior*, of Sag Harbor, and had a very successful cruise in the Arctic Ocean. The high latitude was favorable in some ways, enabling the work to be followed night and day, and the first whale was taken at midnight. Within the next three years 250 ships obtained cargoes in those waters<sup>6</sup>; but all were not successful, for in 1854, 30 ships of a fleet of 50 vessels in the Arctic Ocean were reported to have returned without a drop of oil. The first whalers were said to have passed to the east of Point Barrow in August, of 1854, and to have returned about September of that year. Later they equipped for a stay of from one to three years in the Arctic, and in more recent years Herschel Island became a favorite rendezvous for wintering.

Whaling vessels have a crow's-nest at the masthead for the lookout, who is constantly on the watch for whales. It is of canvas, made rounding to enclose and protect the inmate, painted to exclude the wind, and in it the men stand their watch from sun to sun in periods of two hours each. When the spout of the whale is seen they send

<sup>4</sup>Starbuck, History of the American Whale Fishery.

<sup>5</sup>Tikhmenef, Historical Sketch of the Russian American Company, pp. 129 et seq.

<sup>6</sup>Petrof's Report (10th Census, 1890), pp. 350 et seq.

<sup>7</sup>Starbuck, op. cit., p. 98. In 1849 the Arctic catch sold for \$3,419,622. Spears, Story of the New England Whalers, p. 324.

the word below, "There she blows." When whaling was done from the sailing ships the boats were lowered away, and a race ensued to see which could first fasten to the prize. If they were successful in fastening the iron, the whale frantically endeavored to escape either by sounding to the depths of the sea or by plunging ahead at a speed estimated to be as great as twenty-five miles an hour at times. The immense strength of the great brutes may be imagined from the record of a steamer of the Akutan fishery which struck a blue whale near the tail with a bomb harpoon which fastened and exploded but did not disable the animal. The wounded whale towed the steamer at the rate of four miles an hour from 5 P.M. until 9 A.M. of the following day, although the propeller of the ship was kept going reversed at half speed during the entire time. The crews paid out the line to allow the whale to sound, or held fast and to let it tow the boat until they could approach closely enough to "put the lance into its life," as they termed the final thrust into the vitals. Some whales fought viciously, different kinds varying in their resistance, and individuals of the same kind differing as do other animals in their fighting qualities. When killed, the prize was brought alongside the ship, the blubber cut away and hoisted on deck, and the head taken on board to save the bone which was contained in the upper jaw. When the whalers first came to Alaskan waters the killing was done with the hand lance, but soon the whaling gun came into use. In modern whaling it is done with a bomb gun which fires an explosive charge into the vitals of the animal calculated to kill him instantly. From the sailing ships and whale boats with lances, the method has changed to steam-propelled craft with swivel guns mounted on deck, and the larger number of whales are now captured from boats operated from shore stations. Even the Eskimos in the Arctic, when whaling from their skin *oomiaks*, use guns which contain an explosive charge. These are of two kinds: one fired from the shoulder, the other thrown after the manner of a harpoon, and called a darting gun.

Whaling, at its best, was an uncertain and dangerous employment. The quick profits and the excitement of the pursuit led men to take great risks. When the ships began to hover the edge of the Arctic ice to secure their prey the business was on the decline. At the beginning of the Civil War the fleet was still of enough importance to attract the attention of Confederate privateers, and no less than fifty vessels were destroyed during the war. The *Shenandoah* steamed into the whaling grounds of Bering Sea in 1865, and, as the whalers of that day were sailing ships, easily captured and set them on fire. The smoke of the burning ship attracted other vessels, which,

thinking to render assistance, approached and thus became easy victims. She captured and burned thirty-two ships and captured and bonded three others as transports.<sup>7</sup> During the war forty of the fleet were purchased and loaded with stone, taken to the harbors of Charleston and Savannah, and sunk to prevent vessels entering these ports.<sup>8</sup>

In 1871 the greatest disaster of the sea occurred to the fleet in the Arctic Ocean when thirty-four ships were crushed by the ice near Point Belcher on the Arctic Coast. During that season forty-two whalers gathered at the edge of the ice-pack, and in August most of them entered the lane of water that had opened between the land and the ice while the wind was off shore. The whales were plentiful and the ships were being rapidly filled with bone and oil; but on the 15th the wind changed to the westward and the pack penned them against the shore. On the 25th the wind again changed and drove the ice to sea a few miles. The Eskimos came and begged the whalers to go, telling them that when the ice came in it would not again go out. A few ships heeded the warning, but most were too deeply engrossed in the pursuit of the bowhead, and for four days the work went on. Then the wind shifted to the southwest, lightly at first, increasing to a gale, and the great ice-field that reached across the Siberian shore came moving in like a vast continent. On the 2d of September the brig *Comet* was crushed and her crew barely made their escape to another ship. On the 7th the bark *Roman*, while cutting a whale, was caught between two immense floes off the Sea Horse Islands, crushed, and raised out of the water. Then the ice parted and she sank out of sight, while her crew fled for their lives. The next day the *Arwashonks* met a similar fate. There was no sign that the ice would open again that season. Consultations were held from day to day by the captains of the remaining ships, and three boats were sent along the shore to find out how far the ice extended, and what chance there was, if any, to escape. Captain D. R. Frazer was in charge of this party, and he returned on the 12th and reported that it was entirely impracticable to get any of the main body of the fleet out of the ice; and that there were ships eighty miles down the coast in the clear sea below the Blossom Shoals. On the 14th of September orders were given to abandon the ships. At noon the flags were set at the mast-head of every ship, union down, and all on board, among whom were the wives and children of some of the officers, entered the whale-boats and made their way through the narrow strip of open water along the

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<sup>7</sup>On May 27th, 1865, the "Shanondoah" began taking prizes in Bering Sea, and by the end of June had captured 24 whalers and one trader. *Ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 102.

coast. On the afternoon of the second day the refugees reached the ships below the Blossom Shoals and were stowed away on the seven vessels that lay at anchor at that place. Of the whole number, 1217 persons, who left the ships, not one was lost on the journey, and in October all safely reached Honolulu.<sup>9</sup> The financial loss in ships and equipment was over two millions of dollars.

The fishery was continued with 27 vessels in 1872, and this was increased to 29 in 1873; but in 1876 misfortune again visited them, and 12 of the fleet were destroyed near the same place. Several lives were lost through exposure and hardships endured, and 53 men stayed among the Eskimo during the winter.<sup>10</sup> The ships so abandoned were valued at \$442,000, and the bone and oil on board amounted to the sum of \$375,000. Some of the ships were carried into the Arctic with the ice-pack, and this fact gave rise to strange stories of phantom vessels drifting to and fro in the mysterious northern ice-fields.

In 1898 the four ships, *Orca*, *Jessie M. Freeman*, *Rosario*, and *Navarch*, were crushed by the ice near Point Barrow. A whaling station had been established at Cape Smythe, and the shipwrecked men reached this refuge. Captain Tilton, mate of the *Belvedere*, one of the ice-bound ships, made his way along the coast southward to ask for aid. He succeeded in his quest, but meantime the Government had despatched a relief expedition under the command of Lieutenant D. H. Jarvis of the United States Revenue Marine. Accompanied by Lieutenant Bertholf and Dr. Call of the same service, Jarvis left the *Bear* at Bristol Bay and made his way overland to Cape Prince of Wales, meeting Captain Tilton at St. Michaels. At Cape Prince of Wales the reindeer herds at that place were secured, and, with the assistance of Mr. W. T. Lopp and his native herders, they were driven

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 103; San Francisco Bulletin, Nov. 6, 1871. But one ship survived the winter of the whole number abandoned this year. In the summer of 1877 the "Minerva" was found afloat in Wainwright Inlet, safe and sound.—Spears, Story of the New England Whalers, p. 408.

<sup>10</sup>The Fisheries and Fish Industries of the United States (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1887), p. 84. There have been many stories told of the ships that went off to the Arctic with the understanding that the crews were on board the vessels. This does not seem to be true, as the account of Captain Barnes of the bark "Sea Breeze" says "The men that spent the winter among the natives report most kind treatment. They say, however, that occasionally they had to flee from one house to another, when the inmates of the first were on a drunken frolic, as at such times they could not be sure of their lives. A few years ago these people did not know the use of intoxicating liquors."—Ibid., p. 77; and, "Several men perished from exposure in journeying from one beleaguered vessel to another apparently more safe, and many died on the tollsome, perilous march and voyage to the rescuing ships. Many more preferred to stay by the ships and risk their chances of surviving during the terrible Arctic winter, to assuming the nearer, and, to them, apparently no less dangerous alternative of an immediate escape. Three hundred men escaped, and fifty-three remained among the natives. . . . Only two of the abandoned vessels survived the winter: one of these was burned by the natives and the other was lost in September, 1817."—Ibid., p. 84. The most authentic accounts do not indicate that the crew of any ship went away into the Arctic and was lost.

to Point Barrow as provisions for the whalers. Fortunately no loss of life ensued, and the following year all returned in safety.<sup>11</sup>

The off-shore fleet continued to decrease until 1913, when it was the lowest on record in the history of the industry, there being but three vessels, the whole catch returned amounting to but 32,430 gallons of sperm oil, valued at \$12,072. This was taken by the *Gay Head*. The remaining two vessels contributed nothing. The *Belvedere* was frozen in the ice and compelled to remain in the Arctic, while the *Elvira* capsized and became a total loss. In 1914, five vessels took 35,000 pounds of bone valued at \$26,250; during 1915 and 1916 the results have been so insignificant that the reports of the fisheries take no cognizance of them.<sup>12</sup>

There are at present two shore stations in Alaska at which whales are taken. One of these is at Port Armstrong on Baranoff Island, the other on Akutan Island. The shore stations operate by sending out small swift steamers equipped with a bomb gun mounted at the bow with which the animals are killed. The whales are then towed to the station, where they are converted into oil and fertilizer. The system is a great advantage over the old off-shore whaling methods, where all the carcass was thrown away except the oil and whalebone. The shore stations are efficient and expeditious, and economize against waste. An 80-ton whale can be cut up to the last fragment and put in the boiling vats in half a day. The investment in the shore stations in 1916 amounted to \$1,091,471. During that year 233 persons were employed and the product was valued at \$363,721.<sup>13</sup>

The future of the fishery points to but on conclusion, namely, the reduction of the animals to that point below which it is unprofitable to hunt them. No business that takes from a public stock without a restraint upon the amount taken, and that kills promiscuously males and females from the herd, will continue. In whaling both male and female are killed, gravid females included; thus not only the breeding females but also the unborn young are destroyed. The low price of

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<sup>11</sup>Cruise of the U. S. Revenue Cutter *Bear* and the Overland Expedition (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1899). Tilton was accompanied by an Eskimo and his wife who had come with him from Point Hope. Charlie Artisanlook, an Eskimo of Cape Prince of Wales, who gave his herd of deer to be driven to Point Barrow, and who went with them to drive, is entitled to mention. Also Taotuk, another of the Eskimo reindeer men who accompanied Mr. Lopp to drive the deer. Taotuk is now a wealthy reindeer man of Seward Peninsula, near Nome, Alaska. There were 275 men at the station of the Cape Smythe Trading & Whaling Co., and there was but one death after the arrival of the relief party.

<sup>12</sup>Reports of Alaska Fisheries for 1913, 14, 15, 16.

<sup>13</sup>*Id.*, (1916).

bone and oil<sup>14</sup> has given a respite to the whale during the past few years, but, as soon as prices advance, they will be practically swept from the ocean.<sup>15</sup>

CLARENCE L. ANDREWS.

<sup>14</sup>The price of whale oil immediately after the Civil War was \$1.45 per gallon at the highest price reached; from this it declined steadily until in 1905 it stood at 31c. It now stands at about \$1.50 per gallon. The bone was valued at 70c in 1871, rose to \$4.90 in 1905, and again declined until in 1917 it stood at about \$1.00 per lb.

The whaling fleet of the earlier years was entirely from the New England coast, was gradually transferred to the Pacific beginning with 1868, when of a fleet of 68 ships in the North Pacific there were 2 from San Francisco, to 1884, when 19 out of 39 ships hailed from the Pacific port.—The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, pp. 86, 94.

<sup>15</sup>In 1868 the whaling fleet in the North Pacific numbered 61 vessels; in 1884 there were 39. The exact statistics of the catch is not available in the publications of the Government, but so far as given are as follows:

1868-73:			
Oil (bbls.).....	170,735	\$ 3,926,051	(Fisheries... of the U. S., 1887.)
Bone (lbs.)....	2,315,550	2,816,571	(Ibid.)
1874-90:			
Oil .....	306,039	2,853,351	(Census Report, 1890.)
Bone .....	4,202,043	8,204,061	(Ibid.)
1891:			
Oil .....	12,228	(1,218,293	(Report Gov. Alaska, 1892.)
Bone .....	186,250	(	(Ibid.)
1892-05:			
(No statistics.)			
1906-16:			
Oil, bone, fertilizer.....		2,414,670	(Alaska Fisheries Reports.)
		<u>\$21,433,003</u>	

This does not contain 15 years catch from 1892-1905, and also omits the Arctic catch of 1906, as well as 28,085 bbls. oil and 347,500 lbs. of whalebone taken by foreign ships in those waters.