

Davenport

Thar She Blows!

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Sentinel Staff Writer

The old echoing cry of "Thar she blows" no longer sounds over the waters of Monterey Bay. No more does the harpooner balance in the bow of a small boat to hurl the steel weapon by hand . . . as the rowers dip their oars quietly so as not to frighten the giant beast below.

Those days are gone forever, given over to the harpoon gun which usually kills in about three seconds—or to the newest whale-weapon, an electric current which kills instantly. So efficient has man become in killing the whales that some authorities today fear it will become extinct in a few years.

From January to May each year, a watery parade of the largest animals on earth goes by almost at Santa Cruz' doorstep. Just a few miles "up the coast" at Davenport, with a bit of patient waiting, the whale monsters of the deep may be seen.

They reveal themselves with spurts of cloudy vapor, or by rolling and playing in the water and sometimes by coming clear out of it in mammoth leaps.

Most of the migrating whales along our coast are California Grays, according to authorities. They swim an annual 6000-mile trek between the Bering Sea and Baja California where they calve. The California Gray is a toothless baleen, or "whalebone" kind of whale, growing to 50 feet in length. It lives on small crustaceans and shrimp which it strains through the curtain of baleen it possesses instead of teeth.

Today the California Gray is protected by International agreement after being threatened with extinction twice. It had been hunted in California waters as early as the 17th Century and by whalers from China, Russia, Japan, Spain, Norway and New England.

Davenport was settled by a whaler—Capt. John Davenport of Tiverton, R. I. He went out from shore in a small boat to harpoon the great mammals, towing their carcasses back to the beach where the oil was boiled out in huge black iron kettles. In 1862 the Captain's whaling company processed 1700 barrels of whale oil according to research done by Mrs. Elio Orlando of Davenport.

Old-time whalers left their sailing ships in small boats to pursue whales—usually the slower-swimming right whales and sperm whales. Right whales are baleen whales which grow to greater size and length than the California Grays.

Sperm whales, which also grow to monstrous size, are equipped with a set of 44 large ivory teeth, a jaw 12 to 15 feet long, a forehead tank full of high grade oil and a fierce temper when attacked.

They were the ones which occasionally bit small boats and men in two. The sperm also is the only whale which could swallow a human being as he is the only whale with a throat large enough. But even the toothless baleen has killed men and rammed and sunk boats or knocked them to pieces with blows of its great tail flukes.

Most whales "sound" or dive for the depths when wounded or frightened. In the old days a wounded whale sometimes swam off at top speed, towing the whaleboat full of men in what was called a "Nantucket sleigh ride," at the end of the harpoon line.

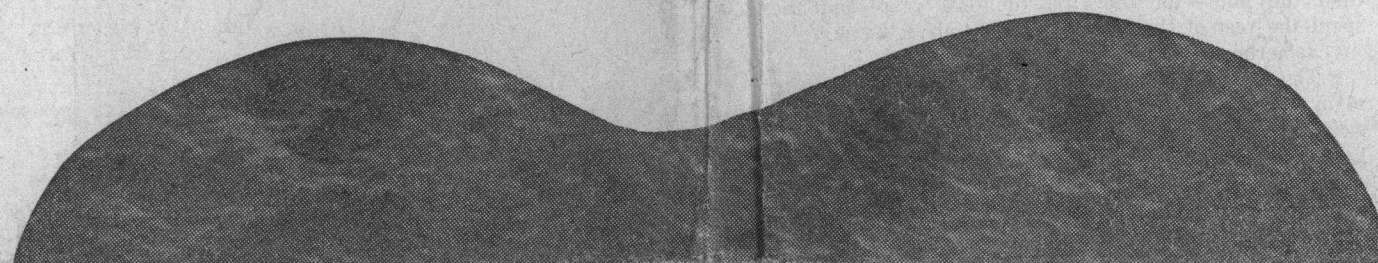
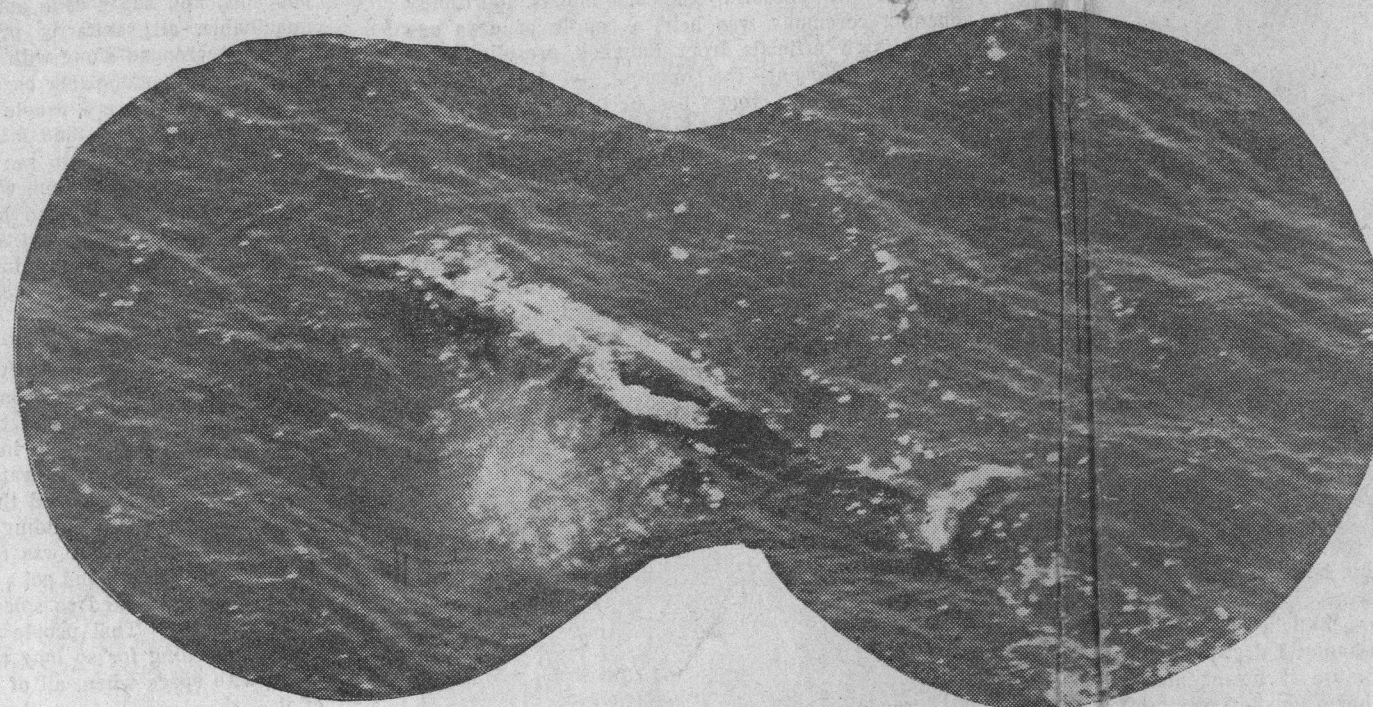
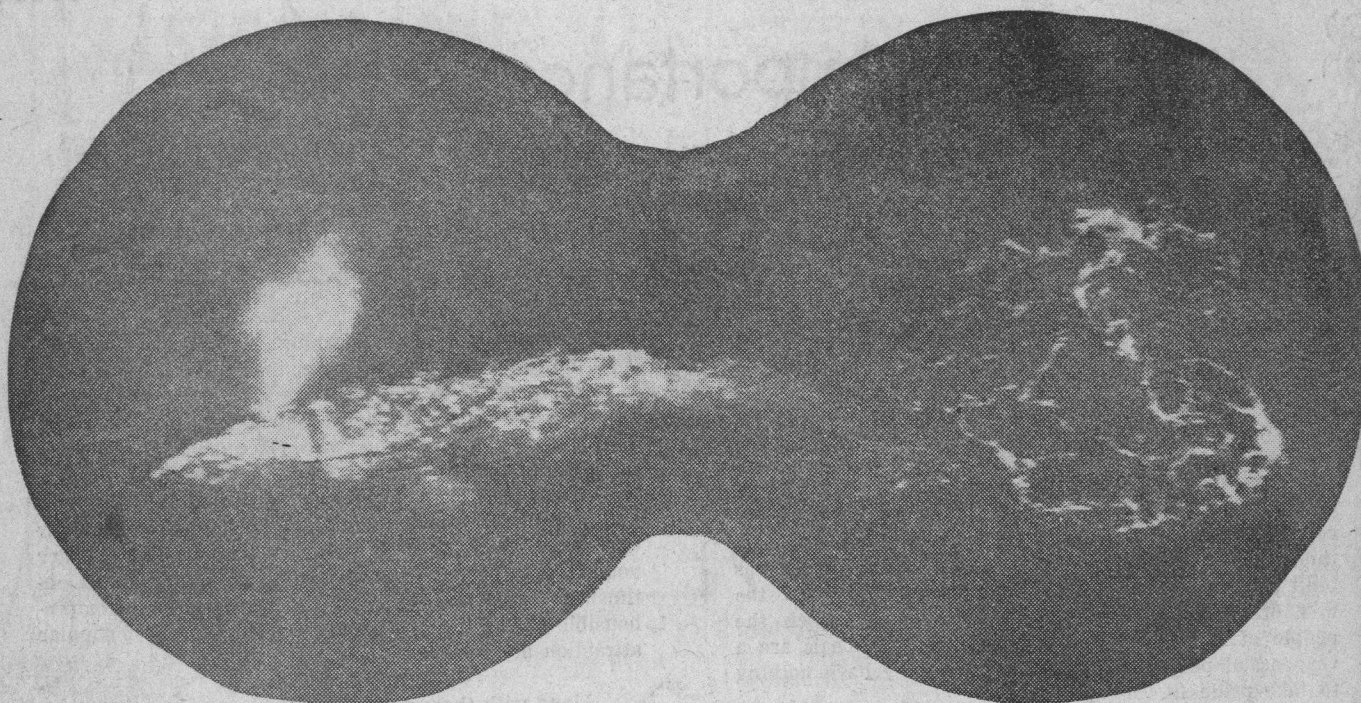
An experienced whaler could tell the kind of whale he was chasing by the spout it sent up. After he had rammed one—or two—harpoons into the whale's side and it had exhausted itself in a bloody fury, a 12-foot lance was driven in to finish the killing job.

Today we burn electricity instead of whale oil; ladies cinch their bulges with nylon instead of whalebone. Buggy whips are not in demand; neither are whalebone umbrella ribs.

The great whales are still being hunted for their blubber, which is made into dog food and fertilizer, and their oil which is used in fine machinery.

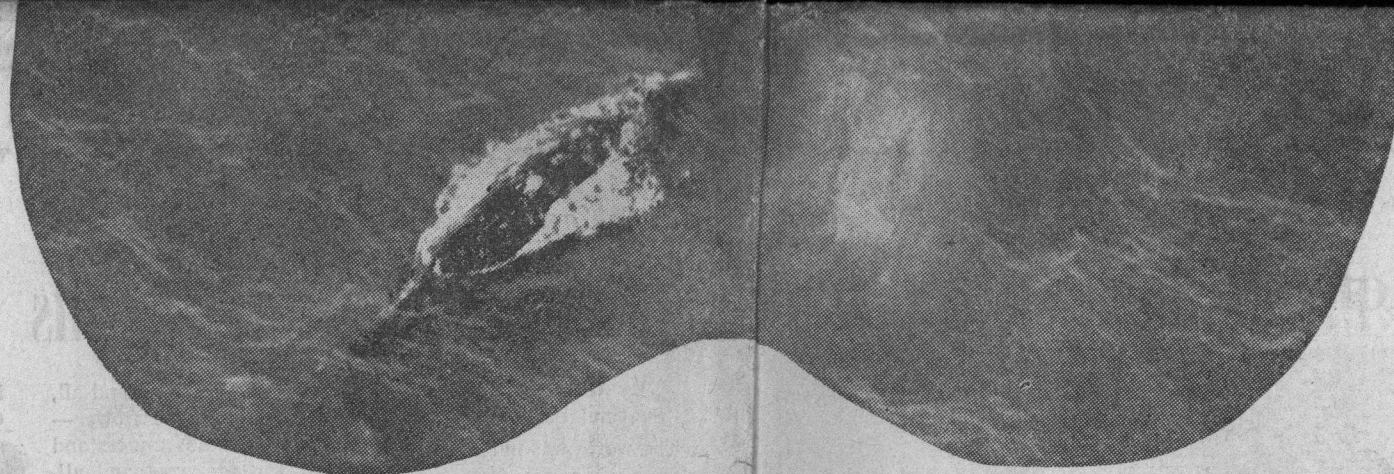
But the California Grays are becoming more wary—at least that was the experience of Photographer Pete Amos who flew over them to get these pictures.

Whale
Photos
By
Pete
Amos



II Family Interest Section

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Marker at Davenport commemorates whaling days . . . although there is some controversy as to the extent of the local operation. Moss Landing was the main Monterey Bay whaling station. Below, two Santa Cruz men who were caught in harpoon lines, dragged from small boats and towed through the sea in the wake of whales. The old photo from the Roy Boekennoogen collection shows the two standing with the type of hand harpoon used until about 1875. They were (left) John Silva, of the ship, Philip Fast, and M. C. Bittancort of the ship, A. F. Bass.

