

## Between History and Memory

# THE OLD MAN OF MONTEREY BAY

## The legendary sea monster that bedeviled local fisherman

By Geoffrey Dunn

The very first piece of local history that captured my attention as a child growing up on the Santa Cruz waterfront in the 1960s was the legend of “The Old Man of Monterey Bay”—a mythical sea monster, or serpent, reputed to live in the deep waters off our shores. My aunts and uncles and assorted cousins all recounted the tale, and on the wall of a small fish house on the wharf was a dramatic cartoon of the legendary creature, by the celebrated *San Francisco Call Bulletin* cartoonist “Tommy” Thompson.

As I grew older and began writing about Santa Cruz history, I realized that this was a story that those who hadn’t been raised in Santa Cruz would never

know. Call it provincial history. It was a myth with profoundly local roots, and one that says a good deal about the era in Santa Cruz history that spawned it. But it lacked historical legs.

It was also a deeply personal history. Several of my uncles and cousins reportedly encountered the monster while fishing in their small, double-ended fishing vessels. Who was I to doubt them?

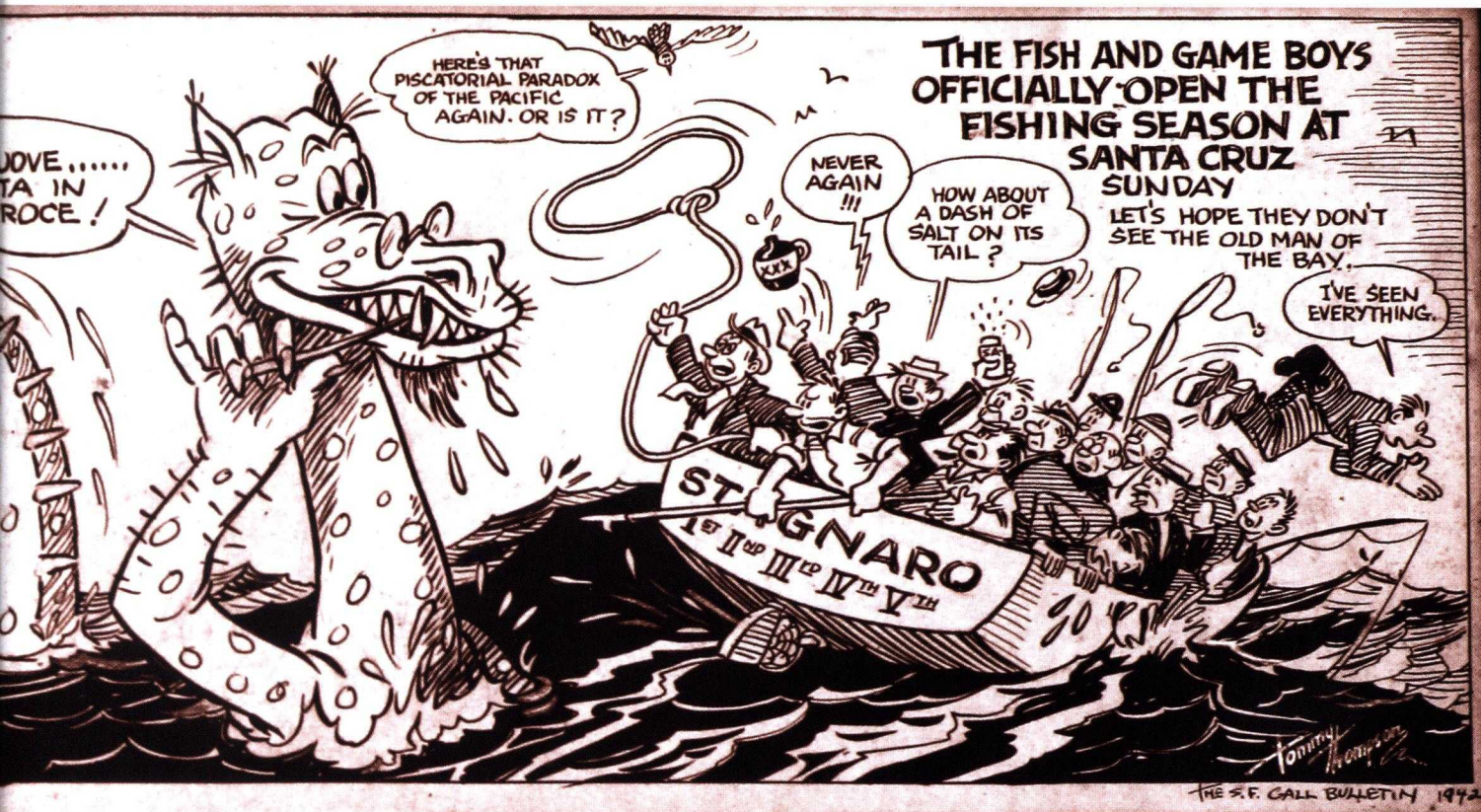
My late uncle, Malio Stagnaro, once recounted for me the afternoon that a badly-shaken fisherman, Bill Totten, returned to the docks following a day of fishing in June of 1941. “I saw that serpent or monster out there!” he screamed. “Get me out of here. I’m going home.”

“He was scared to death,” my uncle recalled with his characteristic high-pitched chuckle. “He must have seen *something*. I didn’t see him around the wharf for a while.”

Totten was among the last of a long series of local fishermen who claimed to have seen the monster off the Santa Cruz coast. This mythical entity, usually sighted in the waters of the mile-deep Monterey Canyon, came to be known by the affectionate sobriquet, “The Old Man of Monterey Bay.”

“Yeah, I saw it when I was a kid,” my late cousin Victor Ghio said matter-of-factly to me one day a few decades ago. He was in his 80s then, still fishing for a living. “We didn’t know it then, but it was





(Above) Celebrated cartoonist Tommy Thompson depicted the adventures of the locals with "Old Man" in the *San Francisco Call Bulletin*.

probably a big elephant seal or other sea mammal. Something like that."

Others who saw the monster included my uncle, "Stago" Stagnaro, great uncle Joe Loero, and several assorted cousins and family friends, including Marco Olivieri, Willie Piexoto, Serafino Canepa, Al Thevenin, and Robby Canepa. The beast was usually described as looking like a sea-going dragon, with a huge head, long tail and spines along its back. The first sightings occurred in the early 1930s. By March of 1940, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* reported that "30-odd pilots of local fishing craft" had seen the "Old Man."

A year or so later, my uncle "Stago" Stagnaro and Robbie Canepa were taking an old barge across the bay and spotted "a freakish looking sea monster," which the *Evening News* jokingly reported sounded "like a monster [the Boardwalk's] Sip Littlefield might have seen after eating too many of his beach hot dogs."

One of the local Italian fishermen, Johnnie Cecchini, claimed to have sunk a harpoon into him, but the creature escaped. Cecchini considered it bad luck.



(Above) A well-dressed woman ventured to Moore's Beach to examine the 37-foot beast which had washed ashore in 1925.





(Above) A crowd gathers at Moore's Beach to view Charles Moore's discovery, which the *Sentinel* described as a creature having "a tail something like that of a whale and a mammoth head with a mouth like the bill of a duck."

As it turned out, the "Old Man" wasn't just a local phenomenon. On the other side of the bay, in Monterey, fishermen there saw it too. Dominic Costanza saw "what looked like the face of a very old man or monkey," perhaps four feet across, "with two eyes the size of breakfast buns." The Coletto clan and Tredo Balesteri all saw it too. They nicknamed the monster "Bobo."

In 1942 the *San Francisco Call Bulletin's* famed cartoonist Tommy Thompson drafted a sketch of the monster based on a variety of the fishermen's descriptions. Presumably, the bifocals and toothpick he included in the drawing were added for comic relief.

Many local land-lovers attributed the sightings of their ocean-going brethren to the need for psychological relief necessitated by the hardships of the Great Depression. There were also whispered rumors that a strong batch of "dago red" might have had something to do with them as well.

**"I saw that serpent or monster out there!" screamed Bill Totten, a badly-shaken fisherman, "Get me out of here. I'm going home."**

Long after I had heard the myth, while conducting some research on local labor history, I stumbled across some local photos and newspaper clippings from June of 1925 that caused me to look more closely at the mythic sea monster that had colored my youth.

On June 1, 1925, local dairyman Charles Moore journeyed down to his beach (now Natural Bridges) to find a 37-foot beast washed ashore. No one, at the time, was quite sure what it was.

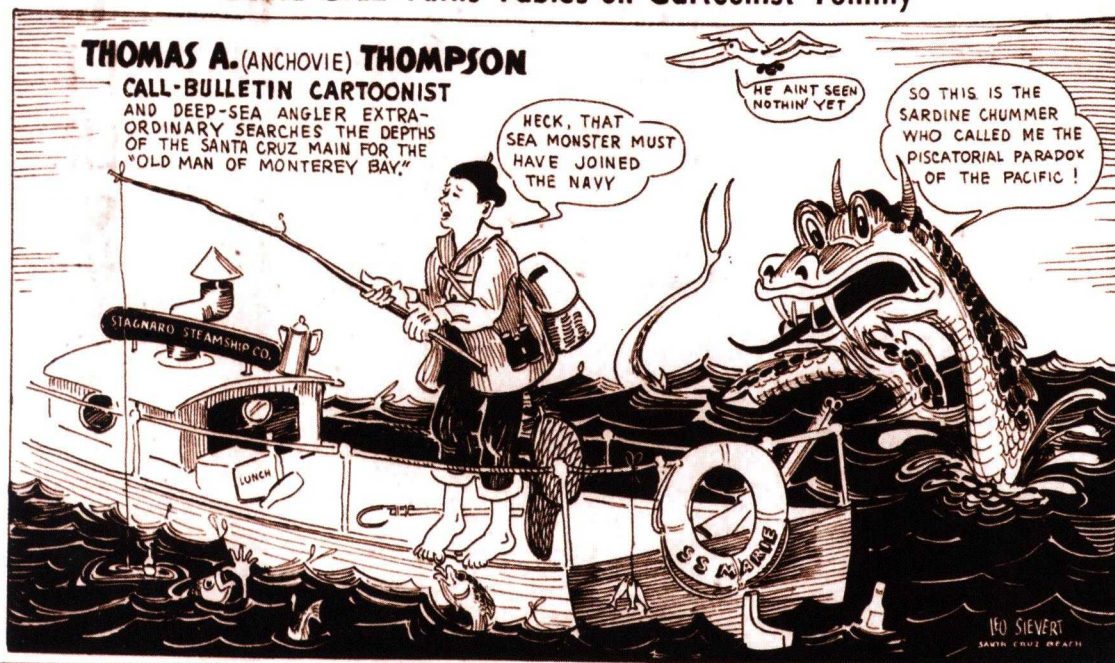
The day after Moore's discovery, an account in the *Sentinel* described the creature as having "a tail something like that of a whale and a mammoth head with a mouth like the bill of a duck." According to Randall Reinstedt's delightful book, *Mysterious Sea Monsters of the Central Coast*, other descriptions included "elephant-like legs" and "ivory toenails."

Dr. David Starr Jordan, president emeritus of Stanford University, journeyed to Santa Cruz and classified the rapidly decomposing carcass as a "bottle-nosed porpoise," while E.L. Wallace, twice president of the Natural History Society of British Columbia, thought it to be a prehistoric "Plesiosarus" that had been preserved in an Arctic glacier and subsequently dislodged into the sea through centuries of glacial melting.

Following a few more days of speculation, the California Academy of Sciences took over the classification process, declaring that the beast was actually a beaked



## Santa Cruz Turns Tables on Cartoonist Tommy



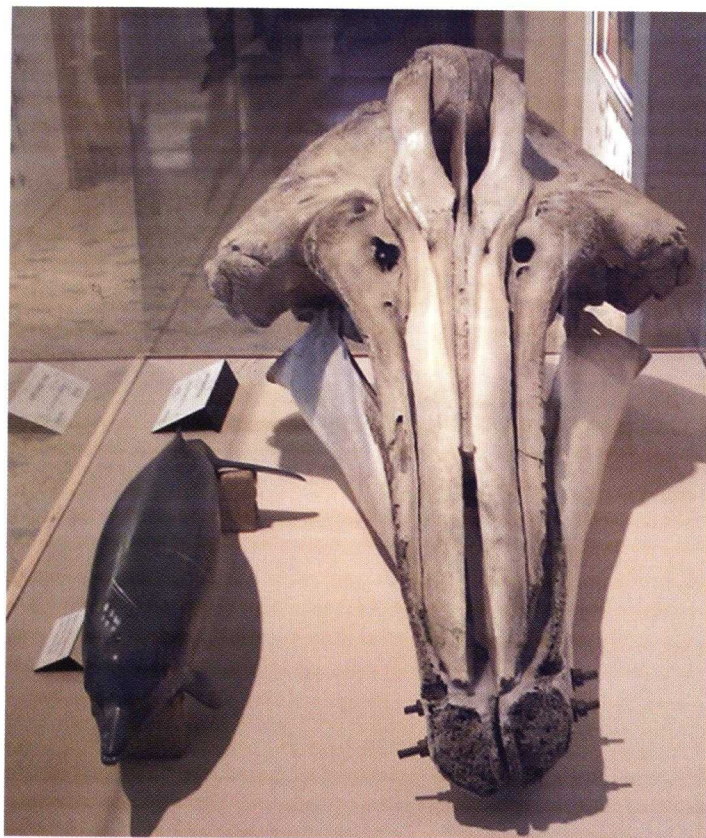
(Above) Leo Sievert, local artist and sign painter, responded to San Francisco cartoonist Tommy Thompson's portrayal of Santa Cruz locals with his own cartoon in the a 1942 edition of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*.

whale, so rare that it had only a Latin name, *Berardius bairdii* — what we know today as Baird's Beaked Whale—still rare, still something of a mystery even to those who study marine mammals.

"No one has been able to name it positively," the *Sentinel* wryly reported after a week of squabbling, "but when it comes to smell, all are of one mind."

The skull of the Moore's Beach creature was eventually housed under lock and key in the California Academy's Steinhart Aquarium in San Francisco. Based on a tip I received from local artist George Milo Buck, I recently made a trip to the Academy. The skull is indeed still there, though presently not on display.

Perhaps some day we can return it to Santa Cruz, where we can have a look at an old myth under a different light. 🐋



(Above) The skull of the Moore's Beach creature was eventually housed under lock and key in the California Academy's Steinhart Aquarium in San Francisco.