

Trabing



Mostly about People

By Wally Trabing

Although he's been kidded about it, Owen "Curly" Lloyd still doesn't think being nearly swallowed by a whale is funny.

The whale probably wasn't even hungry, and as everyone knows, it has a small throat; but Curly is pretty near swallowing size, so it might have happened.

But the reason Curly doesn't think it's funny is because the whale sunk his \$27,000 boat.

I found Curly at Davenport, busy pounding away in his new auto paint shop across from Gregory's. When he heard I was interested in his adventures, he waved me to an old garage chair, settled on his hunkers, and started to tell away.

This all happened back in August of 1949 when he was a commercial fisherman. Lloyd is a wiry 5-5 and ex-navy. They used him to paint the inside of submarine ballast tanks.

But size means nothing when you got guts and a will to get ahead, and Curly finally fished himself up to skipper of a 50 foot trawler which was named the Narhel when he got it.

He was heading out to sea from Santa Barbara with 62 blocks of crushed ic in the hold and aching for tuna. He had one deck hand with him. His name was Manuel Tiexeria, a Portuguese-Hawaiian fellow.

It was about 10 o'clock in the morning and they were plowing along admiring the fine day when all of a sudden the boat rose over a wave but didn't come down like it was supposed to. A sailor can quickly sense any unusual motion. It's like breathing to him, and Curly felt right away that all was not shipshape.

He sent Manuel out to look over the side, which Manuel did, but when he tried to tell his skipper what he saw, the only thing he could make work was his mouth. It kept opening and closing like Charlie McCarthy without Edgar Bergen.

So Curly had to look himself. Instead of finding ocean under the boat all he could see was blubber. They had gone around on the back of a whale.

About this time, if I were in Curly's place, I would have rushed down to my bunk and changed shoelaces or some foolish thing like that, but Curly was a cool cookie.

He ran in the wheelhouse and disengaged the clutch—put her in neutral, so the propeller wouldn't chew into the whale's hind-side and make it madder than it probably already was. He said the Narhel weighed 35 to 40 tons.

So out they went to sea like this Curly figures the ride last-

ed close to 15 minutes. It was the darndest thing he had ever heard of, he said. The Narhel swayed from side to side creaking and groaning.

Finally the whale sounded. As they do, and as it did, when the whale's head went down its gigantic tail went up. One tail fluke at the stern lifted water over the whole boat.

When the whale disappeared the boat settled and Curly saw she was taking water from the bottom. The weight of the boat and the strain of movement had split the bottom from stern to bow.

Curly put out "Mayday" calls. The pumps were losing headway and they were 21 miles from shore. One of the first to come to his aid was the Yolanda, skippered by Emo Pieracci, now on the Santa Cruz Police force.

Water was six feet deep in the engine room and Curly, with an awful knot in the pit of his stomach began salvaging his valuable navigation equipment. Finally the coast guard came and took her in tow, but she was too far gone.

They took Curly aboard the cutter, but he couldn't stand to see her die. He asked directions to the head, went down and cried like a baby.

Why did the whale attack Curly's boat? Maybe because it read the name Narhel, a Scandinavian word meaning a species of whale.

There's another loose end. What pulled Curly to Davenport, to a shop fronting the ocean where spouting whales can be seen almost every day. Across the street is a sign proclaiming Davenport a whale-watching area.

Right after his adventure Curly was put to bed for two days by his doctor to clear up the shock.

"I was really feeling down. How was I going to support my family?" he asked himself.

"But do you know what snapped me out of it? My 7-year old daughter came to my bed and said: 'Don't worry daddy, we can always get another boat, but we can't get another daddy.'"

We both got misty-eyed over that.

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