

1984: A look at the bay's whaling history

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into our archives to republish some of the noteworthy stories out of the past. The following story was printed in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on Feb. 19, 1984.

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The long gray submarine shapes are passing slowly along the North Santa Cruz County coast these days.

Sometimes they are close in, just beyond the line of breakers, and occasionally one of the huge

beasts will send jets of white steam high into the air.

Gray Whales! Word gets around of this annual event and native and tourists appear on the shore, on the cliffs and bluffs near Davenport, binoculars in hand, thrilled just to catch sight of a mammoth tail, a white spout, or the curve of a giant back sliding under water.

The gray whale is protected by law today, but not so long ago it was on the edge of extinction.

Monterey Bay had lots of whales in the early 1800s. They gray was easy to catch, according to old records and the age-

old cry of "Thar she blows!" was often heard echoing over the bay waters by the 1850s.

Captain John P. Davenport was out there, posed with harpoon in hand, standing in the prow of a small boat, beard flying in the breezes, capturing whales. After being harpooned and allowed to thrash and twist and dive to exhaustion, the whale usually died and was towed in to Moss Landing for processing.

The blubber was stripped off in great hunks and then boiled in large black iron pots called try pots, in order to extract the oil. Whale oil was in great

demand. So was the baleen, long springy strips from the whale's mouth. The baleen went into ladies' corsets.

Captain Davenport, one of the earliest Yankee whalers on the bay, arrived here in 1849 from Rhode Island. Spotting the great whale population, he went home just long enough to find a wife, then returned here to make his fortune whaling.

He first worked out of Moss Landing which became one of the main whaling stations on the West Coast. Ambitious fellow, he was soon building wharves: one at Capitola for Frederick A.

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Hihn, and then a 450-foot wharf for his own whaling operations at Davenport Landing.

Davenport and Davenport Landing are different places, a fact unknown to many newcomers to Santa Cruz County. Davenport Landing is nestled into a small cove about a mile and a half north of the town of Davenport where a short loop of road takes off the main highway.

In 1867 Captain Davenport moved his family and business to Davenport Landing which had formerly been known as El Jarro Point. He continued whaling in his daring manner, going out single-handed at times in a small boat.

Looking at the site of Davenport Landing today it's hard to believe it once had a wharf, several hotels, a store, a blacksmith shop, post office and school.

His try pots were set up on the beach and a traveler who visited this part of California in the 1870s observed the operation with great fascination.

The traveler also described Captain Davenport's competition: a group of Portuguese who lived in cottages at Pigeon Point.

His description of the Portuguese whalers includes "some dozen cottages inhabited by the coast whalers and their families ... Portuguese from the Azores or the Western Islands ... they work hard and are doing well ..."

Their boats he described as

"long, sharp, single-masted with odd-looking sails ..."

The Portuguese worked from high points on the shore with signal flags which were manned by fellow workers to guide the seaborne hunters in their quest.

The whaling business mainly too place from January to April or May, when the grays were moving south past our shores on their annual migration to Baja California's shallow lagoons. Davenport Landing hit its peak production about 1875.

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eral hotels, a store, a blacksmith shop, post office and school.

But by the turn of the century whaling was becoming a thing of the past in Monterey Bay. Lime and lumber were being shipped from Captain Davenport's wharf.

In the 1880s he moved his family into Santa Cruz. He was getting too old to go bounding over the main after whales — particularly in the dangerous method he had been known for.

Today, the great gray "leviathans of the deep" as early-day writers liked to describe them, pass our shores in peace. Planes fly overhead to photograph them as one of the wonders of the marine world, humans line the cliffs to peer at them, and others take boat trips out to observe them at close quarters. But no one harpoons them.