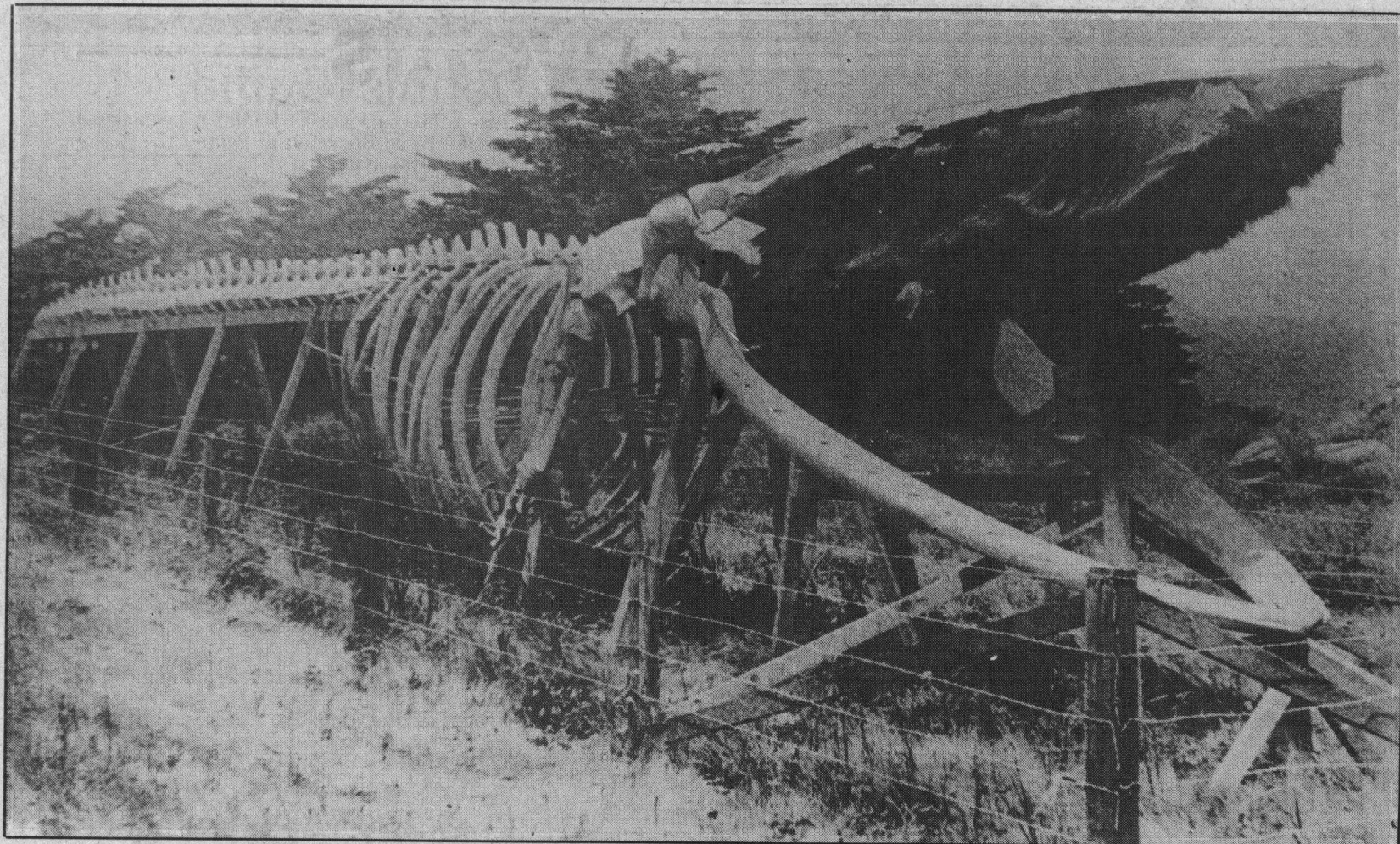


✓ Lydon, Sandy



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The whale that Gennosuke Kodani brought ashore in 1901 was a Point Lobos attraction until 1957. It is now being reassembled.

# Kodani and the whale of Point Lobos

**A**LMOST EVERY Sunday afternoon my folks would load my sister, brother and me into the family sedan (always a Ford) for an afternoon outing. Our very favorite destination was the Pinnacles, but Point Lobos was a close second.

While the picnic lunch was spread out on the table beside Whaler's Cove, we kids would scramble over the old boat, whaling pots and whale skeleton nearby. I can remember standing beneath the huge whale ribs trying to imagine how that Jonah story might have worked. How could such a large creature even exist? And who could have put such a thing together?

Well, some mysteries take a little longer to solve than others. Now, 40 years later, I finally have the answer to the origin of the old whale skeleton at Point Lobos.

**A**T THE beginning of this century there was a small colony of Japanese immigrants living at Point Lobos. Intent on diving for the millions of abalone that coated the ocean floor, the Japanese had replaced a colony of Chinese fishermen and Portuguese whalers who had moved on to other occupations. The leader of the Japanese crew was Gennosuke Kodani, a graduate of Keio University who had majored in fishery and commerce. Kodani kept a personal diary, and through his descendants, who still live in Carmel, (and the relentless pursuit of my co-author, Kurt Loesch) I now have a copy of Kodani's diary entry for April 20, 1901.

One February evening in 1901, Kodani spotted what he thought might be an overturned boat floating off Point Lobos. The young diver sent out to investigate returned with the news that it was a huge, dead whale. Believing that such an animal might be an added point of interest for visitors to Point Lobos (a conclusion shared by the Point's owner, A. M. Allan), Kodani decided to bring the 95-foot monster finback ashore and prepare its skeleton for viewing.

Noting wryly that "not all the divers share my enthusiasm," Kodani and his crew attached the whale to their row boat and slowly dragged it ashore.

## Hindsight



Sandy Lydon

"The days that followed were an experience none of us are likely to forget," wrote Kodani. They cut the tons of blubber and flesh off the animal and buried it in trenches dug all over the point. The smell of rotting whale flesh was everywhere, and later observers noted that it took several years for the odor to finally dissipate from the fields.

What remained looked like a huge fish skeleton "eaten by a hungry giant." The Japanese crew then carefully dismantled the skeleton, scraping and boiling each bone and labeling it for later reassembly. Kodani then had the bones moved over to the most-visited headland near the point's famous Cypress grove, and after building a wooden scaffolding, they put the whale skeleton together. To heighten the effect, the whale's jaw was left open so that when viewing the whale from the front "one (had) the uneasy sensation of soon being swallowed alive by a monstrous creature."

**V**IEWING the project, which had consumed two full months of their time, Kodani pronounced the completed skeleton as "stunning," but also suggested that following their experience, none of his fellow Japanese would ever become whalers.

The following year, Kodani and his crew put their first-hand knowledge of whale anatomy to good use by constructing a wood and paper whale replica that they entered in Pacific Grove's Fourth of July parade. Propelled by the crew hidden inside, the whale lumbered down the street, periodically

spouting water through its blowhole to the delight of the crowd.

Until his death in 1930, Gennosuke Kodani managed the abalone diving company at Point Lobos, and he is credited with founding an industry that eventually spread the entire length of the Pacific Coast.

Point Lobos became a state reserve in 1933 and the skeleton was dismantled and moved down to the level spot beside Whaler's Cove, the location where my brother and sister and I got to know it. Ever fearful that someone would be hurt climbing on the skeleton, park rangers dismantled the skeleton in 1957, and the few remaining bones slowly scattered to the winds. Some were taken home by souvenir hunters while the larger bones, including the skull, wound up on a refuse pile.

**A**BOUT 10 years ago, after some inquiries to the Department of Parks and Recreation, the remaining bones, including the huge skull, were relocated to the rear of the small cabin that was being converted into a museum. Over the past couple of years, as local residents learned that the skeleton was back on display (even if only on the ground), the bones that were spirited away in the late 1950s have been returned.

Slowly but surely, Gennosuke Kodani's "stunning" finback whale is coming together again to remind us not only of the parade of whales migrating just off our shore, but also of the ingenuity of those Japanese fishermen who painstakingly assembled the whale in 1901.

Footnote: Gennosuke Kodani kept a daily diary for more than 30 years, but only a half-dozen entries have survived. In the spring of 1942, with the FBI swooping in and arresting Japanese-speaking immigrants all around the region, Gennosuke's widow, fearful that she might be separated from her children if found to have Japanese-language materials in her possession, decided to destroy the papers. As they prepared to leave for imprisonment at the Salinas Rodeo grounds, the family dug a pit in the backyard of their Point Lobos home and fed, page by page, the journals of Gennosuke Kodani into the fire.

We can only imagine what wondrous things we might have learned from the man who knew so much about the sea and the humans living alongside it. We've been able to reconstruct Kodani's whale, but we'll never be able to reassemble the pages of his remarkable life.

*Sandy Lydon is a member of the Cabrillo College history faculty.*