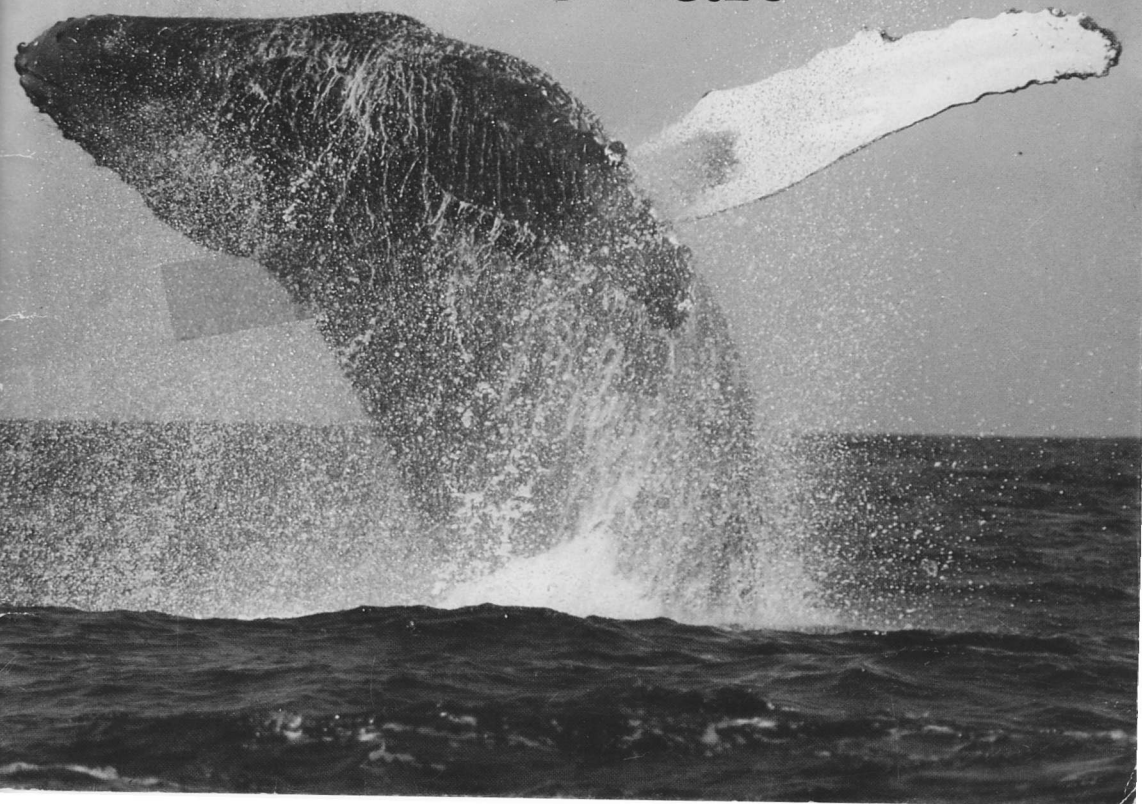


The
HUMPBACK
WHALES

of
Georgia
Strait



PRESS REPORTS FROM THE BRITISH COLONIST

"We learn that whales are disporting themselves in Saanich Inlet and that Mr. Warren . . . is preparing whale boats and apparatus for waging war on the monsters of the Deep."

. . . . September 10, 1866

"The Douglas — (S.S. Sir James Douglas, steam vessel of the Colonial Government) — reports the waters near Deep Bay at the entrance to Baynes Sound alive with Humpbacks, hundreds being seen both going up and coming down."

. . . . July 13, 1868

"Six enormous whales passed Clover Point yesterday . . . saucily spouting and sporting . . . within a short distance of shore."

. . . . July 22, 1869

WATERS

Journal of the Vancouver Aquarium

Volume 8, 1985

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Foreword

This booklet represents the efforts of many people. The original idea came from Bill Merilees, who in the spring of 1983 sent me a letter describing his research into humpback whale hunting that once occurred in the Strait of Georgia. In it he mentioned two spurts of whaling activities: an 1860's fishery and a 1907 one. He added that "by fortunate luck, pictures, at least 12 of them, on glass plates still survive of this last operation." At the end of the letter, he wondered if "it might be a suitable subject for WATERS." Our answer was a resounding "yes"!

The Georgia Strait whaling story is an interesting part of British Columbia's history. Whaling in the inside waters of B.C. was quite distinct and separate from that which occurred on the outer coast, and little has been published on the subject. Furthermore, not many people even know that at one time large humpback whales were a common sight in the Strait. As you will learn in this volume, it took amazingly little effort to kill them all off.

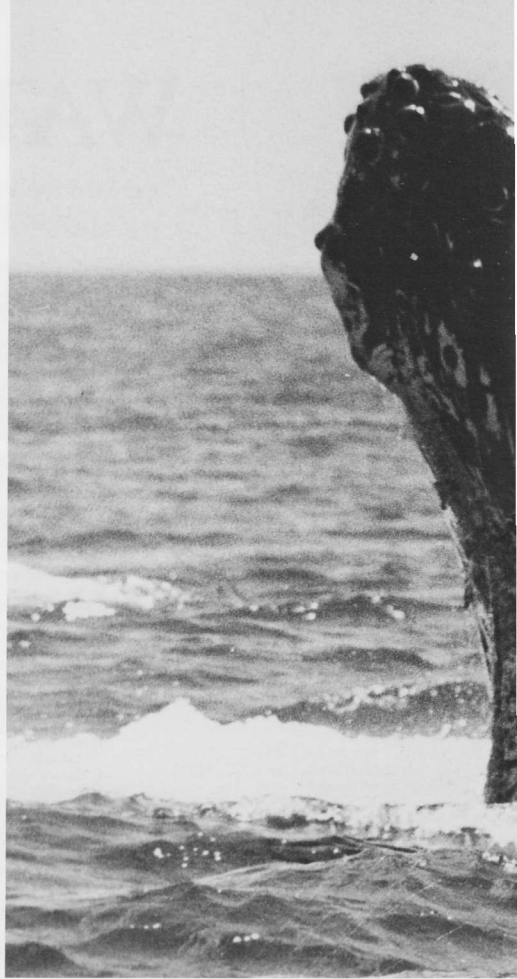
To Bill's article and pictures, we have added a brief biological description of humpback whales. We couldn't have done this without the cooperation Jim Darling, of West Coast Whale Research Foundation, who provided us with additional photographs and information concerning wild humpbacks.

Everyone who contributed to this publication fervently hopes that these great whales will return once more to our inside waters. Your environmental awareness and concern will ensure this.

—S.P.

COVER: A hundred years ago, humpback whales often breached in the Strait of Georgia. The sight was similar to this one of a humpback breaching off Hawaii.

Graeme Ellis, West Coast Whale Research Foundation



A living humpback pokes its head out of the water off Maui. Jim Darling, West Coast Whale Research Foundation



Introducing the Humpbacks

by Roy Tanami

One of the most fascinating cetaceans living today is the great humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*). Distinctive in both body shape and behaviour, it is a unique member of a distinguished family of whales. This family is called Balaenopteridae by scientists and includes the great blue whale, the largest creature ever to inhabit the earth. The

balaenopterids, better known as rorqual whales, are toothless filter feeders. Like all baleen whales, they filter food from the water with a series of baleen plates that hang from the roof of the mouth.

Unlike other baleen whales, however, the rorquals have long pleated throat grooves

Three examples of humpbacks that were photographed in both northern and southern waters. The distinctive pigmentation pattern on the underside of the tail enables biologists to identify individual animals.

Photos provided by Jim Darling,
West Coast Whale Research Foundation.



HAWAII
11 February 1980



VANCOUVER ISLAND
10 June 1980



HAWAII
7 April 1980



S.E. ALASKA
31 July 1982



MEXICO
3 March 1979



HAWAII
1 February 1980

30 metres below the surface of the water, and even at this depth the sounds can be heard above the surface. Scientists are still unsure about why the animals sing. However, they suspect that the songs are associated with some type of courtship or meeting behaviour.

In the course of their studies to learn more about the nature of humpback songs, biologists have made some fascinating discoveries. At any one time, all the singers in a population sing the same basic song. The songs are composed of a variety of discrete themes, and these themes change regularly over time. Once a song has changed, all the singers will alter their songs to fit the new pattern. Through such discoveries researchers have started to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding the lives of these great whales.

The humpbacks have had a long-standing relationship with man. This is because they generally travel near the shore and often break the surface with acrobatic leaps, making them easy to spot. Their energetic surface activities, in fact, made them easy prey for the whalers, who relentlessly hunted them and brought their numbers down to dangerously low levels.

Granted international protection in 1966, these great whales now enjoy a somewhat happier relationship with man. Tall misty spouts, songs, and magnificent breaches now signal the presence of humpbacks to a decidedly friendlier generation of humans — those who's purpose is not to destroy these animals, but to learn more about the intricacies of their lives. Hopefully, through knowledge and understanding, people will be able to do as much to help the humpbacks as they once did to hurt them, and in so doing, ensure the survival of these fascinating mammals.

Roy Tanami is a staff member of the Aquarium's Education and Interpretation Department.

Humpbacks in our Strait

by Bill Merilees

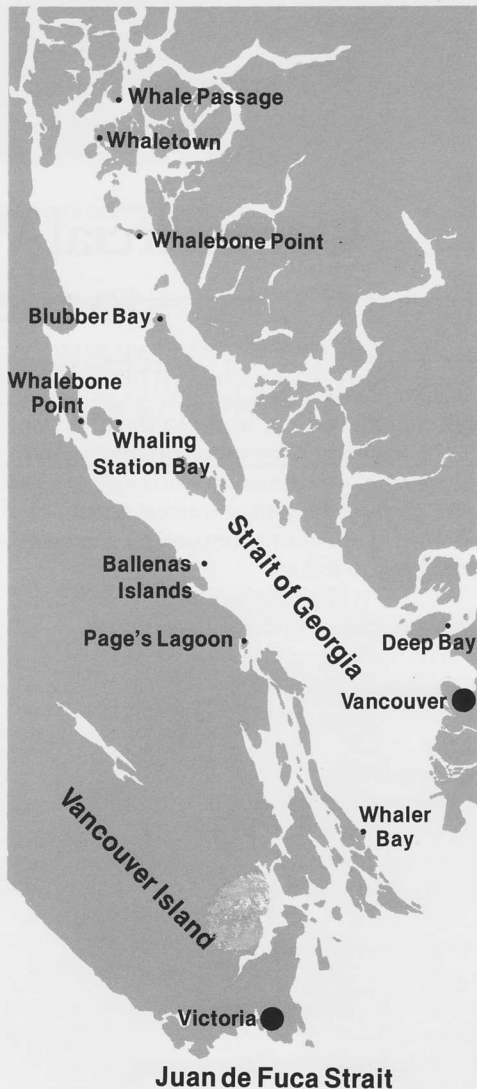
Few people are aware that slightly more than a century ago, humpback whales gambolled and breached in the Strait of Georgia. They even entered Vancouver Harbour. They came each summer to both our inside and outside waters, where they fed on the large masses of nekton that built up during the long days of sunlight. In fall they would leave our shores to swim south to their calving grounds in warmer waters.

Today, the humpbacks are gone from the Strait of Georgia, and so are most of their traces. The only clues that remain to remind us of them, and of their conspicuous absence today, are place names, archival records, and old newspaper clippings. Whaletown, Whale Passage, and Blubber Bay appear on modern maps as reminders of British Columbia's early whaling days. The whalers arrived here in two waves: one in the late 1860's and early 1870's, the other in 1907.

The press record is scattered with a considerable array of whaling stories — probably because cetaceans have always fascinated people. Thus, while fossil and other biological records of whales in the Strait are few, many stories and news items appeared in the early newspapers of colonial Victoria and Nanaimo. One can, in fact, document quite nicely the story of why the humpback whales disappeared from Georgia Strait, as the newspaper record supports what meagre archival materials exist.

Using these sources as well as information obtained from biologists, I have pieced together a reasonably clear picture of our Strait of Georgia humpback whale legacy. I hope you find it as interesting as I did.

Map of the Strait of Georgia, showing places named after whaling activities, and other areas mentioned in this article.



Indian Whaling

The great whales and their annual cycles were certainly known to our native coastal peoples, particularly the Nootka. This group hunted both gray whales and humpback whales on the outer coast, and had developed many rituals associated with this dangerous activity.

Within the Strait of Georgia, the Coast Salish people mainly hunted seals and sea lions. However, a brief reference in the *British Colonist* of December 24, 1868, mentions that "the Sechelt Indians had succeeded in landing four whales." Nothing in the anthropological record appears to confirm this, and it may be

that the Coast Salish were perhaps more content to simply watch these truly massive marine mammals.

Nonetheless, when a dead whale washed ashore, the local natives would readily utilize the carcass, rendering what oil was available from the rotting hulk. Captain Roys, a whaling man who worked in Georgia Strait, learned this the hard way in 1869 when, due to severe weather, his group were forced to cut adrift a whale just harpooned and killed. The animal floated ashore and "was subsequently picked up by the Indians and appropriated to their own uses."

Commercial Whaling Comes to the Strait

In British Columbia, it was the brief visit of Captain James Cook to Nootka Sound in 1778 that alerted the world to the abundant marine mammal resources on the western shores of North America. Although the sea otter sparked the earliest interest and quickly assumed paramount importance, whaling was about to follow.

North American whaling operations, however, began in New England. With improved methods and equipment, the whalers extended their sphere of operation southward through the Atlantic and around Cape Horn in the 18th and early 19th centuries. By 1835 whaling had spread to the North Pacific.

1851 marked the beginning of shore whaling along the California coast, which in turn may have led to more serious whaling in the Strait of Georgia. It began at Monterey, where California gray and humpback whales were pursued from small boats during their annual migrations. With the discovery of Laguna Ojo de Leibre (better known as Scammon's Lagoon) by Scammon in 1855, an intense whale fishery followed in the lagoons of Baja California.

Any story of whales and whaling along the western coast of North America must include the writings of Charles Scammon. His 1874 book, *The Marine Mammals of the North-western Coast of North America Together with an Account of the American Whale Fishery*, lays the cornerstone to our understanding of this spectacular industry and resource. An enlightened whaling captain, Scammon learned all he could about whales and made many original field observations. Today, his book is a classic. It is an early attempt to provide factual information on these animals.

Perhaps due to overcrowding, Scammon eventually quit whaling and joined the United States Revenue Cutter Service. In this capacity, he spent some time between 1868 and 1870 in Juan de Fuca Strait, which, of course, is just south of Georgia Strait. Coincidentally, it was during this period that whaling became more intense in Georgia Strait.

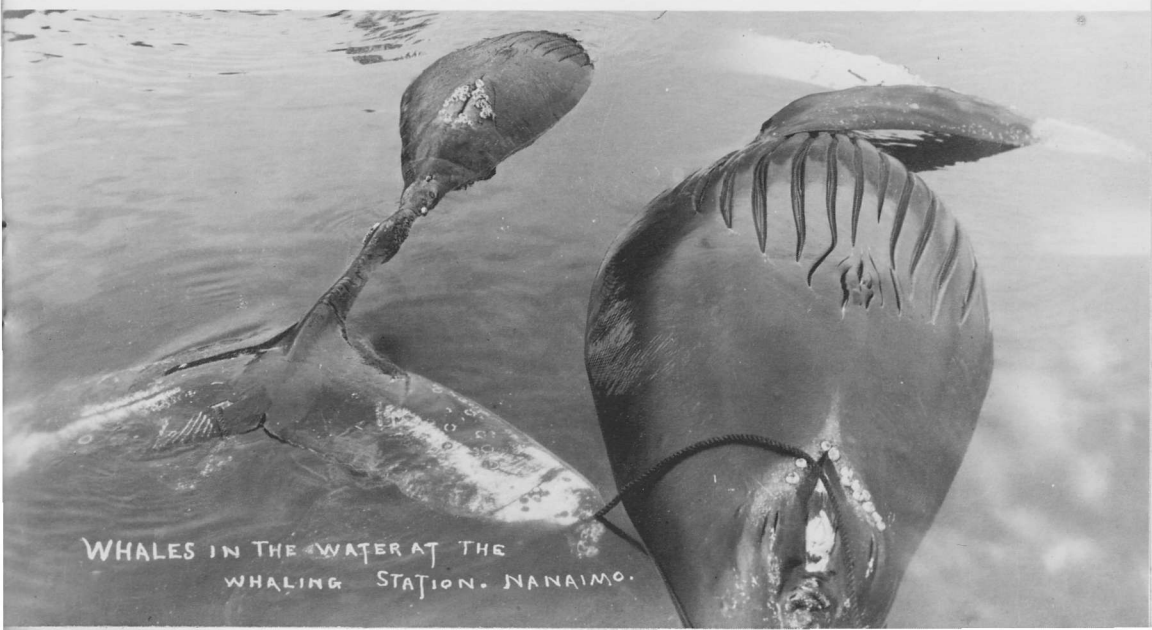
At this same time, on March 29 and April 2, 1869, two long letters to the editor appeared in the *British Colonist* signed "Oleaginous" (meaning "oily"). Although too partisan to be Scammon's writing, the infor-



The Pacific Whaling Company processing plant.

ACTIVITIES OF THE PACIFIC WHALING COMPANY, PAGE'S LAGOON. These photographs are from old glass negatives that date back to November 1907. The originals are owned by Peter Schwarze, of Schwarze Photographers, Nanaimo, B.C.

Humpback whales awaiting processing.





mation on whaling agrees closely with Scammon's writings which appeared in print five years later.

"The California whaling season lasts only four months," wrote Oleaginous. "They catch principally California Grays or Devil Fish, a whale which seems to be of migratory character. Two months late in the fall he goes south which is called the 'down season' . . . Two months early in the spring he comes north which is the 'up season'. There is this distinction between the coast fisheries of California and those of our waters, and it is an important one: they fish the California Gray which they have for only four months; we fish for Humpbacks which we have all the year."

Concerning the benefits from whales and whaling to Victoria, Oleaginous argued that a "wise and judicious government" would give active assistance towards establishing a desirable industry in Victoria. But, he continued, "with such a government as we at present have it would be worse than madness to indulge for a moment in any such expectation." He concluded that, if any benefit would be derived from whaling, the prospect would "rest entirely with the businessmen of Victoria."

The colonial government was not the only group to give short shrift to those promoting active support to the new industry. The Hudson Bay Company had experienced similar misgivings earlier.

Whaling and the Hudson Bay Company

In 1842, the Hudson Bay Company was about to establish a new post on the southern end of Vancouver Island. Sir George Simpson's letters of this time to the governors of the Company make repeated references to whales, whaling and Simpson's desire to have the Hudson Bay Company engage actively in the whaling business. From knowledge gained along the west coast, he attempted to persuade the governors to consider directing their attention to whale fishing.

"For many years," he wrote, "it has been known that whales are very numerous about the Strait of Juan de Fuca and in the Gulf of Georgia." From this he concluded that an establishment situated on the Strait of Juan de Fuca would be admirably suited for the purposes of whaling.

Apparently he was not convincing in his argument. The hoped for approval never

came from the board of governors. As his hopes faded, he further suggested that Captain Hoyer, an experienced north Pacific whale hunter, would be interested in entering the service of the Company. In final desperation perhaps, he suggested that the *Beaver* steamer, as part of her crew, should include 10 to 12 hands experienced in whale fishing. They could make up a crew for two boats that might be employed in hunting whales as the steamer fell in with them.

Although Simpson's desire for the Hudson Bay Company to hunt whales in Georgia Strait was never realized, about 6300 litres (1400 Imperial gallons) of whale oil was shipped annually by the Company between 1843 and 1850 from Fort Victoria. This oil was presumably obtained in trade from coastal Indians.

Fastening the tackle so an animal can be hauled up into the plant.

The First Big Onslaught: 1866 to 1873

Several years after George Simpson's futile pleas to the Hudson Bay Company, there was an increased clamour for whale oil. This chance for considerable profits encouraged many independent companies to pursue whaling in Georgia Strait between 1866 and 1873.

The first reference to whaling in the *British Colonist* newspaper in Victoria appeared September 10, 1866. This issue reported briefly that whales were disporting themselves in Saanich Inlet and that one Mr. Warren was preparing all necessary whale boats and apparatus for waging war on these monsters of the deep. On November 2, 1866, the paper reported that a Mr. Dawson had struck and killed three whales but lost them due to heavy weather, and also that "no whales have been taken this year at Saanich."

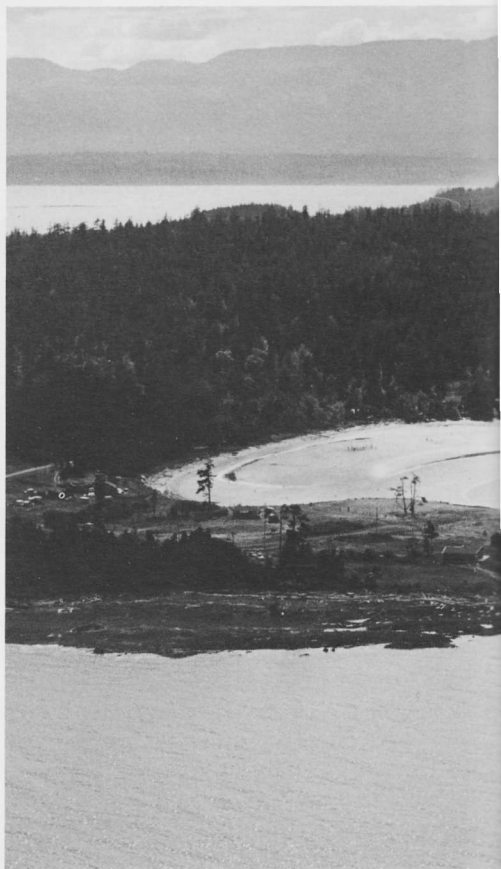
The record appears blank until July, 1868, when a Captain Ross "cleared for a whaling cruise in the Gulf of Georgia." The results of this endeavour are unknown.

From this point onward, until 1873, a succession of companies, parties, and individuals pursued humpback whales. The most successful of these was James Dawson, a well known citizen of Victoria.

A native of Clackmannashire, Scotland, Mr. Dawson formed a party to pursue whales in Saanich Inlet. Their early efforts in 1866 were unsuccessful. In 1868, however, it was reported that Dawson, in company with a group of San Francisco men (including Captain Abel Douglas), purchased the former sealing schooner *Kate* and outfitted her for whaling.

Once again whales were hunted in the waters around Saanich Inlet. Although hampered by poor weather and fog, the whalers succeeded in capturing and processing eight whales. These yielded about 45,500 litres (10,000 gallons) of oil "as good quality as any ever brought from the Arctic Ocean."

In 1869, Dawson and Company became



Dawson and Douglas Company. They moved their shore works to Cortez Island, at a site known today as Whaletown Bay. Here, they had considerable success, taking twenty-two whales between early June and late December.

Joined by four Victoria merchants (Thomas and James Lowe, Robert Wallace and James Hutcheson), the Dawson and Douglas Whaling Company Limited was formed in 1870 under the Joint Stock Companies Act with \$20,000 in capital. Again the site of operation was moved — this time to Hornby Island, at the place known today as Whaling Station Bay. The stated purpose of

Whaling Station Bay, Hornby Island. In 1870 it was the site of the Dawson and Douglas Whaling Company shore works. Today there is only a tranquil sandy beach.

Provincial Parks Branch photo by Rik Simmons



the company was “to prosecute whale fishing within the waters adjoining British Columbia and the sale of oil and such other things as are incident or coincident to the attaining of the above objects.”

Operations began June 9th and continued until January 1871, and during this period at least twenty-two whales were taken. At the end of the season, the Hudson Bay Company wharf in Victoria “presented a scene of activity to which it has long been a stranger,” as thousands of litres of whale oil were loaded on the *Lady Lampton* for shipment to London. It was expected that this shipment would “be

one of the largest, if not the most valuable exported from the colony.”

Despite this success, the company fragmented into three groups for the 1871 season. The new merchant partners formed the British Columbia Whaling Company Limited, and James Dawson and Abel Douglas ceased to be stock holders. However, Captain Douglas, along with Alexander Strachan, then formed another whaling company. They purchased equipment in San Francisco, where they outfitted the schooner *Industry*.

The *British Colonist* of May 27, 1871, suggested that the Colonial Government should “meet this enterprising firm in a spirit of liberality and, if it can be legally done, remit the duties thereon (as) nothing infuses a spirit of confidence into an enterprise more thoroughly than a knowledge that an enterprise will be met by Government in a spirit of appreciative liberality.”

Whether this suggestion was acted upon is unknown. However, by Christmas the *Industry* had processed nearly 600 barrels of oil from perhaps eight whales.

James Dawson apparently formed a third group but by August had not met with any success. This is the last mention of Dawson in connection with whaling. He turned his attention to prospecting and died a few years later of “general debility” at age 56.

In early 1872, the British Columbia Whaling Company Limited went into liquidation. It is presumed that this whaling outfit was purchased by Wallace and Hutcheson, who fished in 1872 and 1873 with very limited success. The last report in the *British Colonist* appeared on July 13, 1873, and simply stated that “the Wallace and Hutcheson whaling schooner was seen off Lasqueti Island on Thursday. The run of whales this season has been very light.”

From Dawson at Saanich in 1866 to Wallace and Hutcheson off Lasqueti in 1873, this series of companies took a minimum of eighty-one whales. With no mention to the contrary, all are believed to have been humpbacks.

The Howe Sound Whaling Company

Ferry travellers from Horseshoe Bay to Langdale on the Sunshine Coast traverse the waters once fished by the Howe Sound Whaling Company. The *British Colonist* first refers to these whalers on July 15, 1869, when after taking two whales "Mr. Lipsett came to town. . . to engage hands. He thinks they can secure three whales a week." By September 17, they had started back to their whaling grounds and by month's end they had taken two more whales.

Nothing more is mentioned of the Howe Sound whalers until late December when the Dawson and Lipsett whaling crews formed the United Whaling Company for a winter cruise of six weeks off Howe Sound.

News reached Victoria in mid-January 1870 that, of four whales harpooned, three had been landed. One of these was the largest taken all season. The oil from its blubber filled 100 barrels, of 31½ Imperial gallons (143 litres)

each. The remaining two animals yielded 45 barrels each, for a total of about 5,800 gallons (26,400 litres). This, the *Colonist* reported, at 40 cents per gallon, put about \$2,320 into the pockets of the enterprising spirits who formed the Company.

On February 3rd, the *Kate* arrived in Victoria at the Hudson Bay Company wharf with the tail of the largest humpback whale yet. From tip to tip, the flukes measured 5.8 metres (19 feet) across and weighed 1360 kilograms (3,000 pounds)! By this time, whales in the Strait had become scarce, and operations were closed for the season.

By June 16, 1870, the Howe Sound Whaling Company was once again out after whales. Where their base of operations was located in Howe Sound is unknown. We do know that in early September, they had their first success and by season's end, January 12, 1871, their total catch was reported to be ten whales.

Captain Thomas Welcome Roys

With the arrival in Victoria of Thomas Welcome Roys in 1868, this British Colony acquired the services of a whale hunter with exceptional knowledge and ingenuity. Born in 1816 in Wayne County, New York, he had become a whaling captain at the age of 25.

Roys was fascinated with everything related to whales and their capture, but nothing intrigued him more than their migratory habits. In 1848, armed with knowledge gleaned from a number of sources, Roys became one of the first whaling captains to work the Arctic Ocean by way of the Bering Strait.

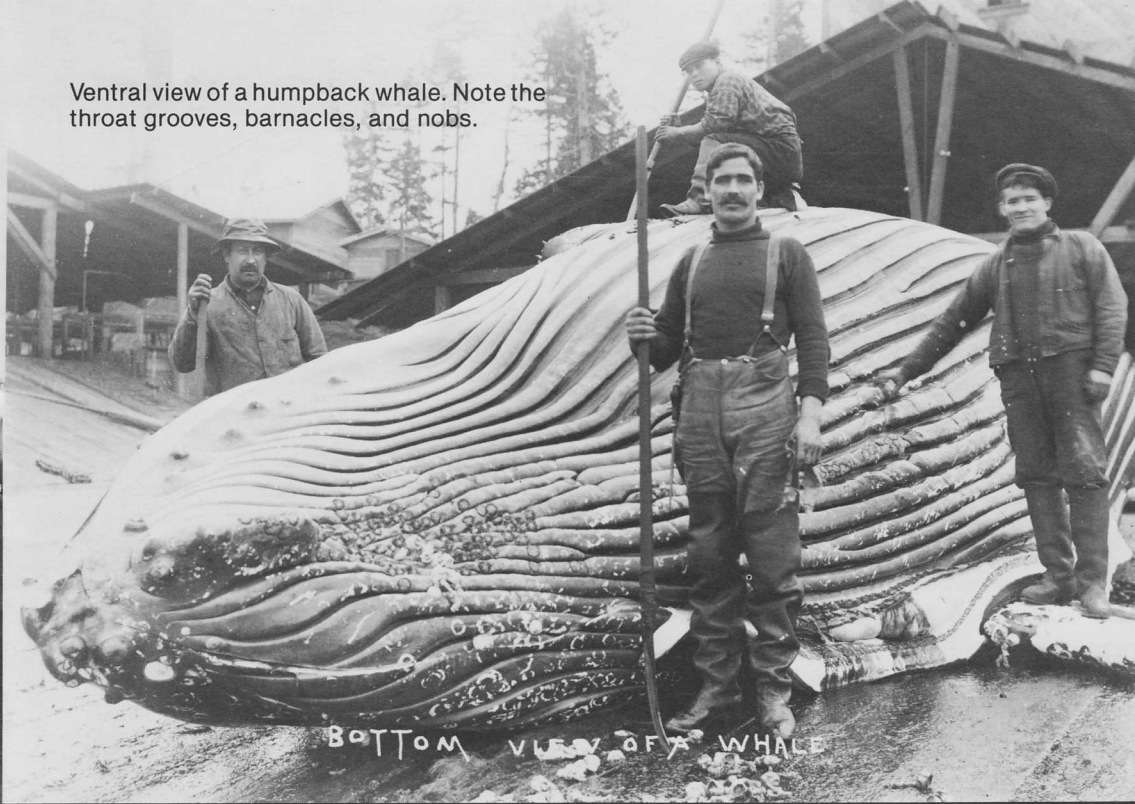
Here he hunted the bowhead whale so successfully that a year later 154 ships followed in his wake, taking 206,850 barrels of oil and

more than 907,000 kilograms (two million pounds) of bone. Shortly thereafter he wrote a book describing eighteen species of whale with which he was familiar. One form of the bowhead whale, in fact, was named *Balaena mysticetus roysii* in his honour.

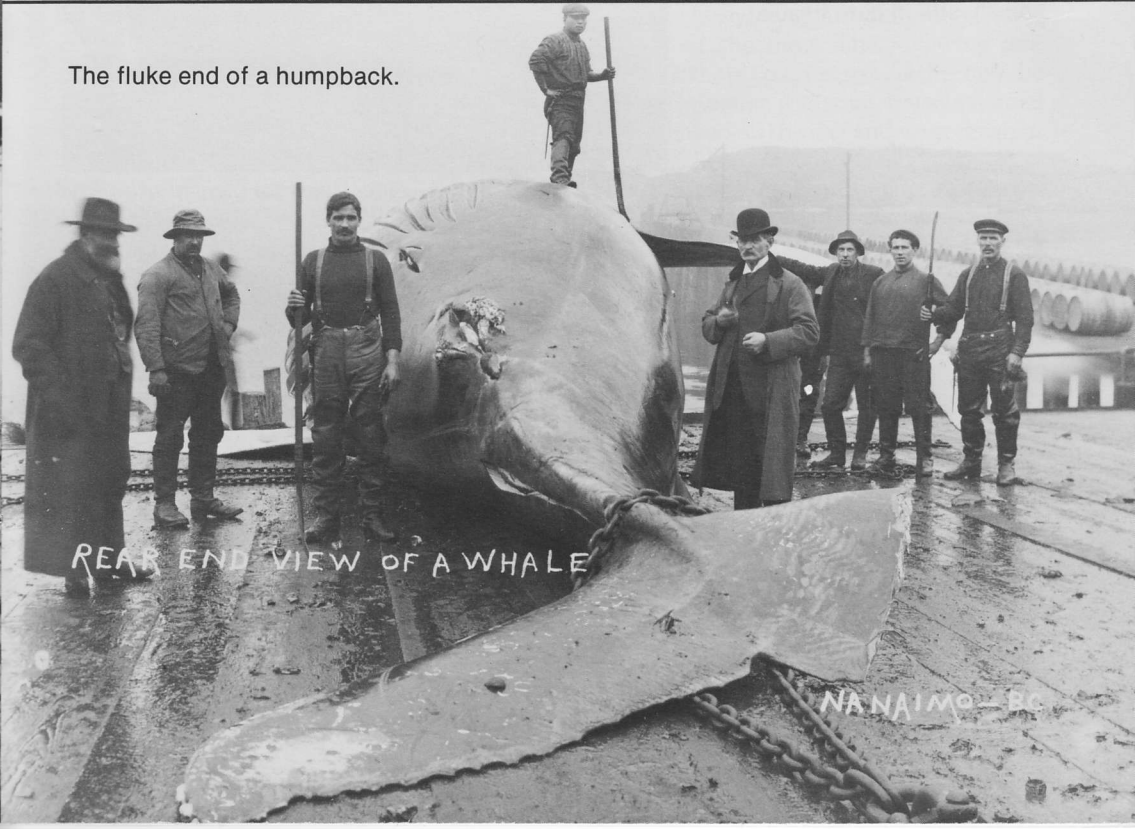
Whaling up to this time by necessity concentrated on the smaller, weaker, and slower swimming species: those most easily approached by hand rowed whaling boats. The larger, mightier and speedier rorqual whales, including the blue whale, still remained unmolested. It is not surprising that Roys decided to invent a new weapon to capture these giants.

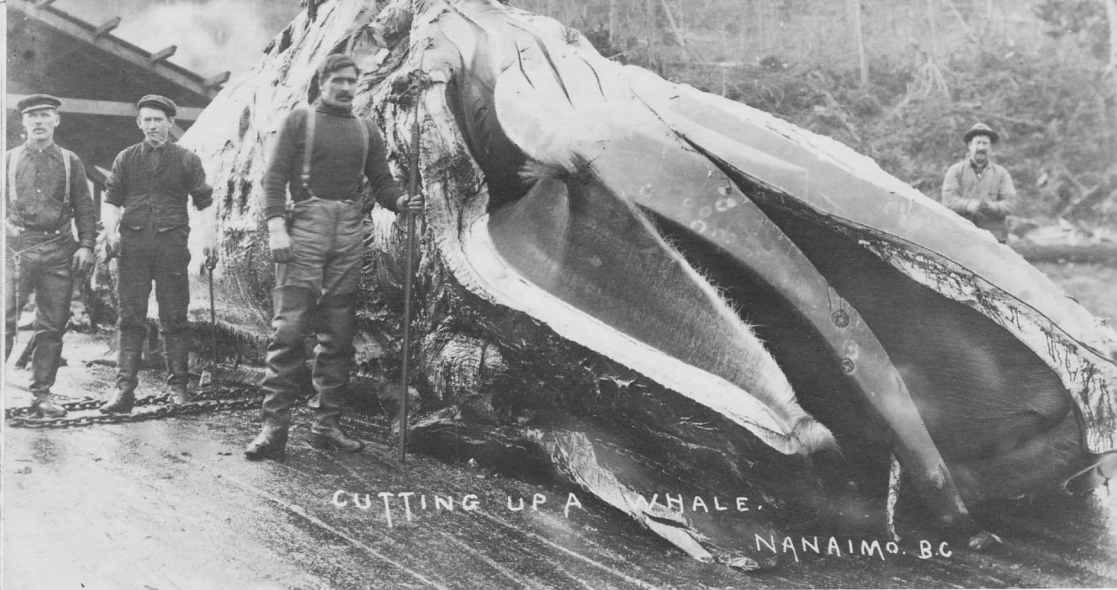
For several years Roys focused his attention

Ventral view of a humpback whale. Note the throat grooves, barnacles, and nobs.



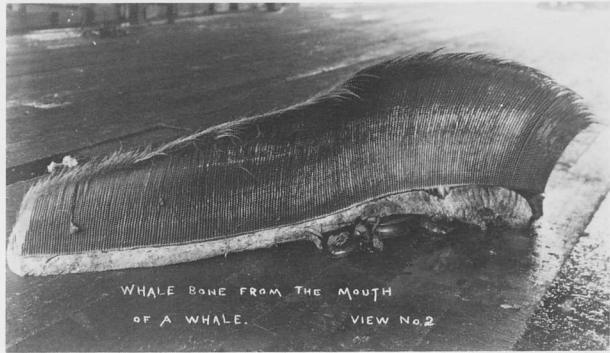
The fluke end of a humpback.





CUTTING UP A WHALE.
NANAIMO. BC

Baleen (also called "whale-bone"), still in gum tissue.



WHALE BONE FROM THE MOUTH
OF A WHALE. VIEW No.2



Cutting up the whale.

on the invention of a rocket harpoon. From 1857 until 1866, he patented a number of devices towards the perfection of this "ultimate weapon," and while not totally successful, his harpoon showed considerable promise. In fact, the famous Norwegian inventor of the modern whaling harpoon gun, Sven Foyn, was intrigued by Roys rocket harpoon, and even used some of its features. Foyn, however, thought Roys' weapon was too expensive and impractical.

Roys tested and retested his rocket harpoons in the waters off Iceland between 1857 and 1866. Although the results were encouraging, at each stage problems arose to impede his ultimate success. Finally in 1866, unable to compete with Sven Foyn's harpoon gun, Roys sold out his Icelandic investments and moved to San Francisco.

In 1868, at the age of 52, he arrived in British Columbia to try his rockets "one last time." He soon became one of the principals of the Arnold, Meeker and Roy expedition. Although they were out whaling early in July, problems with their "rocket harpoons" forced a delay. They solved these and were out again in the Deep Bay area until October 7th, when all hands came down. Bad weather in the Strait was blamed for their poor showing. Of six whales struck, only four were landed. By this failure; Roys was "by no means discouraged," and still maintained there was "excellent whaling in our waters."

Soon afterwards Roys was involved in the formation of the Victoria Whaling Adventurers' Company. This endeavour began with capital of \$10,000, and Captain Roys himself travelled to Honolulu to "engage competent hands to assist him in carrying out the intentions of the New Company."

Roys was back in Victoria on January 25, 1869, with his hand-picked crew. On March 4th, they departed to Dodger Cove, Barclay Sound, where once again weather foiled

Jawbones, showing baleen plates in the roof of the mouth.

them. So, they relocated to Deep Bay the first week of May. Nothing improved, and on June 8th, the new company decided to wind up.

Captain Roys did not return to Victoria in 1870, but on May 10, 1871, turned up on Captain Calhoun's brig *Byzantium* for a summer whaling cruise in Queen Charlotte Sound. Their intention was to fish the Strait of Georgia in the fall. No expense had been spared with this boat. Captain Calhoun had, in fact, spent \$8,000 outfitting the *Byzantium* as a whaler.

First sailing north, they succeeded in landing four whales by September 2nd. However, by September 17th, the *Byzantium* had moved south and was lying in Deep Bay, where the party had formed a station. Whales were numerous and Captain Calhoun was very optimistic of a successful hunt. Shortly thereafter, disaster struck.

On October 19th the *Byzantium* ran heavily aground on a reef in Weynton Passage, near Alert Bay. Captain Roys and all hands got off safely and managed to reach Fort Rupert (near Port Hardy). Captain Calhoun was not on board at the time. The following day, when the steamship *Otter* passed through the area, the *Byzantium* was gone. It was assumed that she slipped off the reef and went down in 60 fathoms.

This, however, was not the case. Apparently, the boat floated free at the next tide and was boarded by local native peoples, who hid her from passing vessels behind Malcolm Island. After stripping her, they allowed her to float out to sea via Queen Charlotte Sound. The *Byzantium* was never seen again.

Captain Roys and the crew were taken to Victoria on board the *Otter*. What had begun as a well-provisioned expedition had ended in ruin. "Cannot something be done for their relief today?" asked the *Victoria Colonist* of November 7, 1871.

When compared to the other whaling parties working in the Strait of Georgia, Captain Roys and his party had poor success. They took only about nine whales in three seasons. While the weather and their equipment probably accounted for some of this misfortune, it

The sealing schooner *Kate*, purchased at auction by James Dawson and used by the Dawson and Douglas Whaling Company, 1868 to 1870.



appears that during most of their whaling operations, Roys and his crew were simply in the right place at the wrong time.

Evidently some humpback whales were present in the Strait of Georgia and adjoining waters from early May, and their southward migration wouldn't have started till the autumn and early winter. Thus, by winding up operations in June, 1869, the Victoria Whaling Adventurers Company indeed missed the best part of the whaling season.

Following his bitter disappointment in British Columbia, Roys returned to San Fran-

cisco. Here he continued work on his rocket harpoons. At the end of 1876, he boarded a ship sailing south from San Diego, and on this voyage, contracted yellow fever. He was eventually put ashore "at the grubby little Mexican fishing port of Mazatlan," and died shortly afterwards on January 29, 1877. On his person was a roll of papers, including an autobiography as well as some drawings of new whaling inventions. For all his work, Thomas Welcome Roys is now regarded as the "pioneer of modern American whaling."

Postscript: 1866 to 1873

During this early whaling period, blubber and some whalebone (baleen) were the only parts of the whale utilized. Normally a dead whale was brought to a nearby beach for flensing and the blubber loaded for transport to the Companies' shore works. It was then boiled in large try pots to extract the oil.

This method of processing partially explains the former presence of whale bones on and near beaches around Georgia Strait. Due to their age, however, they are no longer a common sight.

In the case of James Dawson's early operations, the oil was put up in Island-made casks,

each of which was the equivalent of about five barrels or about 680 litres (150 gallons). A story in the *Colonist* described how the timber used to make these casks "was cut by Mr. Dawson three years ago, split to the proper lengths, and left to season thoroughly, so that no leakage is to be found in any of them." Dawson cut and stored enough material to make nearly 200 casks. From this observation, the *Colonist* concluded "that whaling in our inland waters is a safe and paying business that creates numerous additional occupations."

Whaling from Nanaimo: The Second Onslaught

After 1873 whale hunting in British Columbia by British Columbians remained dormant until 1905. When it resumed, whaling had entered its modern era. Armed with the new Sven Foyn harpoon gun, stronger, faster steel-hulled steamers now permitted the easy capture of even the largest, fastest whales.

Taking advantage of this new technology, the Pacific Whaling Company, of Victoria, opened its first station at Sechart, in Barkley

Sound in 1905. Four more stations soon followed — Kyuquot Sound and Page's Lagoon in 1907, Rose Harbour in 1909, and Naden Harbour in 1911.

The third station, at Page's Lagoon, was located just north of Departure Bay, Nanaimo. It cost \$114,000 to construct and was a somewhat smaller version of the one at Kyuquot. Despite a ten-day strike in July, it was completed and ready to begin operations

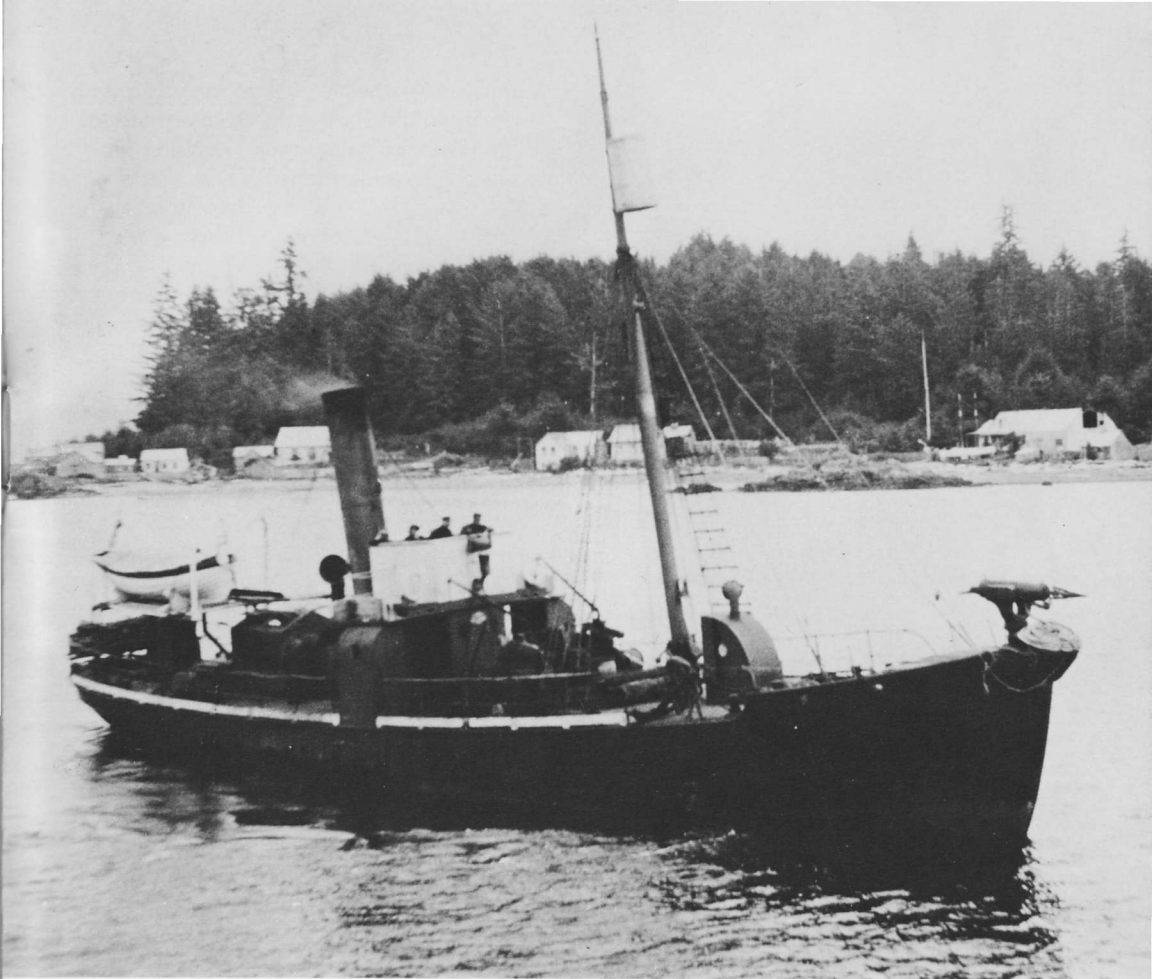


Artist's rendition of the steam ship *Orion* harpooning a humpback near Nanaimo. November 1907. Schwarze Photographers, Nanaimo

in mid-November, when the steam whalers *Orion* and *St. Lawrence* arrived from the West Coast.

Hunting began on November 16th, and five whales were taken during the first two days. The *Nanaimo Free Press* described how "a smart little vessel of some hundred feet with clean lines and engines capable of making 12-14 knots per hour leaves the station very early in the morning so as to reach the probable hunting grounds around day break."

Hunting was brisk. In early December, good catches were made off the mouth of the Fraser River, where it was believed the whales were lying in wait of small fish running up the river. As many as nine whales were seen in one pod here, and during the first week of this month



thirteen whales were taken. Such success so overtaxed the station's capacity that the ships were forced to be idle.

Hunting continued into the New Year, but by early February 1908, whales were scarce and hunting ceased. In total, 97 humpback whales had been killed and processed. The station, however, was not to close. Arrangements were made for it to be used by Japanese and Canadian fishermen who were fishing dogfish for their oil.

In 1908, for reasons not stated in the press, whaling from the Page's Lagoon station never resumed. The equipment was moved or sold, and today the area is a quiet, residential suburb of Nanaimo. Not a trace remains of the station.

Accounts of this station's operations

The steam whaler *St. Lawrence* used by the Pacific Whaling Company at Page's Lagoon, from October 1907 to February 1908. Provincial Archives of British Columbia

Vegetable, Flower and Field
Seeds, ready for Spring Seed-
ing are opened up.

* WHALE FERTILIZER FOR SALE *

A fine line of Sprays and
Spraying Materials at ...

A. R. JOHNSTON & CO'S

Wholesale and Retail Grocers.

Corner Commercial and Bastion Sts., Nanaimo.

Advertisement in the *Nanaimo Free Press*,
November 1907.

Log sheet of the Pacific Whaling Company
for the week ending December 21, 1907.

THE PACIFIC WHALING COMPANY, LTD.

FACTORY REPORT.

Station, PAGE'S LAGOON No. 3 Week ending, December 21st 1907

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	TOTAL
TOTAL WHALES TO DATE							60
WHALES RECEIVED	5	2	2	2		1	12
TANKS CHARGED							
Meat	9	6	5	6	4		30
Bone	2	3	2	3	2		12
Blubber	2	1	1	1	1		6
OIL MADE (casks)							
Meat	14	20	22	12	22	18	108
Bone							
Blubber	50	45	30	35	35	40	265
SODA USED lbs.							
Meat	45	30	25	30	30		160
Blubber							
Meat	400	240	225	300	180	200	1675

published in the *Free Press* provide us with some interesting biological observations: first, all the whales taken were humpbacks; no other species is mentioned. These whales were mostly taken "hard by the shore," and, curiously, while the herring fishery was in full operation during the whaling period, only two of forty whales examined had consumed herring. The remainder had been "apparently living on small fish somewhat resembling a shrimp" [sic].

Despite this observation, in 1909 a Japanese herring fisherman from Nanaimo suggested that the herring were no longer entering the bays near Nanaimo because the whales were no longer present to drive them inshore!

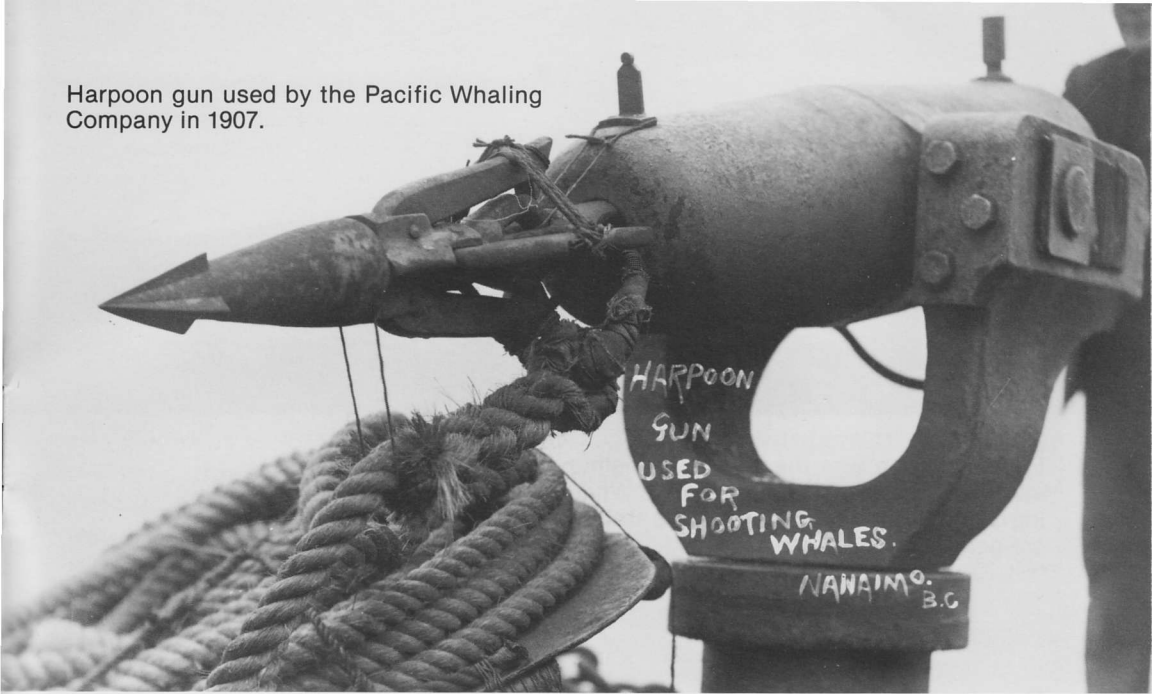
If we compare whaling activities in 1907 with those fifty years earlier, some notable differences in processing are evident. In the 1860's, a captured whale was beached, flensed and the blubber loaded onboard for shipment to the parties' tri works. The carcass was left to rot.

Later, in 1907, whales such as those harpooned by the *Orion* and *St. Lawrence* were towed to a station for processing. At these stations, like the famous "Chicago pig," everything was processed but the squeal. Only in the case of the whale, it was the smell. Even this, the *Free Press* suggested, might be bottled and retailed in drug stores at so much per! The products produced at Page's Lagoon included oil, whale bone, guano, and fertilizer. The skin was also saved and turned into the finest leather.

Whaling never returned to the Strait of Georgia, but it continued along the outer coast until 1967, when the last shore station at Coal Harbour, on Quatsino Sound, closed permanently. The final flurry, aided by spotter aircraft, probably killed off those last few humpback whales intent on passing through the Strait of Georgia.

All told, whaling in British Columbia lasted 101 years. For the humpbacks in B.C.'s inshore waters, there was never any recognition of their plight. The stock was all but eliminated, and with its passing coastal British Columbia lost a spectacular and sensational resource.

Harpoon gun used by the Pacific Whaling Company in 1907.



What About a Humpback Comeback?

After 1907, no humpback whales disturbed the inside waters of Georgia Strait for nearly seventy years. And if there were a few occasional transients, their passage went unnoticed and unrecorded. These waters remained silent until October 1976, when a small group was observed in Haro Strait.

Since then there have been further sightings. During the summers of 1984 and 1985 a few humpbacks were regularly observed around the mouth of Knight Inlet, and in Georgia Strait proper a lone animal was observed in Comox Harbour in May 1984. Small numbers are also seen fairly regularly around the Queen Charlotte Islands.

On August 17, 1985, ferry patrons crossing from Nanaimo to Horseshoe Bay were treated to an impressive spectacle — a single humpback whale breaching. John Lee, who reported the action to whale biologists, said the animal was first seen tail lobbing, then began to breach repeatedly, coming as close as 200 metres from the ferry.

While this information is scanty, it certainly indicates that a comeback for our humpback whale population is possible and quite likely on the way. However, because the natural annual increase in whale stocks is exceedingly small, such a comeback will take a long time.

One day, perhaps fifty or more years from now, ferry patrons from Horseshoe Bay to Langdale may see these spectacular animals once again playing in the same areas of Howe Sound, where more than 150 years before, the Howe Sound Whaling Company stalked them with oar, sail, and hand-thrown harpoon.

Bill Merilees is a native of British Columbia and a resident of Nanaimo, with strong interests in natural and local history. In 1979 a series of coincidences started a chain reaction of discoveries that culminated in this edition of WATERS. Currently employed by the Provincial Parks Branch, Bill has been a member of the Aquarium Association since 1958 and a Life Member (along with his family) since 1970.



Page's Lagoon was the site of a whaling station set up in 1907 by the Pacific Whaling Company. Today all traces of the station are gone. Bill Merilees

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Many thanks.

Bill Merilees, Nanaimo, B.C.
August 28, 1985

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“Yesterday morning about nine o’clock a large whale entered the mouth of (Victoria) harbour and rounding Shoal Point came gallantly spouting as he came to the stationary buoy. A schooner running out of the harbour passed so near to the marine monster as to receive a few barrels of water on her deck which wet the hands to the skin. Immediately upon this performance . . . the monster threw himself entirely out of the water. . . He descended amidst a cloud of spray.”

. . . . August 6, 1869

“The Howe Sound Whaling Company have caught two more whales. Several of these huge finny visitors have also made their appearance in Burrard Inlet and spouted their defiance at the millmen.”

. . . . September 28, 1869

“On the up-trip of the Douglas, three whales went through Dodd Narrows in company with the steamer. They were rather more playful than was agreeable or safe. One of the fellows, throwing himself full length into the air, washed the steamer’s decks with the spray as he struck the water.”

. . . . September 30, 1871