

## Field Guide to Coronado History:

### Whaling in Coronado

By Bruce Linder



Coronado Whaler's Bight late 1920s.

One of the major geographic features of early Coronado was a small watery notch on the western side of North Island; an inlet just across from Ballast Point and near Zuniga Point. This natural inlet was widely known as "Whaler's Bight" and this cachet was no accident — whaling was an interesting part of Coronado's past.

Whaler's Bight had been shaped by the interaction of currents with the flow of fresh water from a natural Coronado spring. Located at the exact entry point to San Diego harbor, it always held a certain maritime fascination and

for eons had been a popular location for ship captains to careen their vessels on its beach to repair bottoms or to scrape hulls clean.

Whaling was huge in the nineteenth century — a completely different dynamic than today. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing and whale oil was a key element in lighting, machinery, and lubrication. Whale oil was the petroleum of the day, high in demand and lofty in profits.

New England whaling vessels routinely hunted whales off the California coast, but, by the 1850s, a new wrinkle had appeared in whaling — “shore whaling.” Attracted by the potential for gigantic profits and knowing that humpback and gray whales routinely swam close to the coast on their December through April migrations, several entrepreneurs set up shoreside stations to intercept whales on their southward journey.

Brothers Alphaeus and Prince William Packard established the Packard Whaling Company as San Diego’s first whaling station in 1858. The Packard operation at Ballast Point dispatched small boats and schooners out beyond Point Loma, much as sightseeing boats do today, and then killed their prey with a harpoon or the shot of a bomb-lance. Whales were towed back into the bay and processed at large tryworks furnaces where the whale oil was extracted and saved in barrels. The Packards also drew oil from satellite camps in Baja California, and shipped product to either San Francisco or aboard the occasional whale ship heading to New Bedford or Nantucket.

Within a few years, Whaler’s Bight came into common use, not just for the repair of ships, but as a “parking” area for whale carcasses towed in from sea. Here, whales could be safely secured to buoys for days at a time awaiting processing. Note for the historical record: The smell routinely lofting over Coronado could not have been pleasant.

Throughout the 1860s and into the 70s, all was well — convenient supplies of whale oil kept swimming by and money kept flowing into the till. Then, in 1873, the Army suddenly evicted all whalers from Ballast Point to begin the building a major harbor fort. Whaling companies shifted their operations to La Playa or North Island with the Packard Company and the Wall-Plummer Company setting up shop at Whaler’s Bight.

Whaler's Bight operations in Coronado featured tryworks ovens, dormitory shanties (Coronado's first "hotel," right on the beach!), a barrel warehouse, a cooper's shop and various vats, tubs, and lumber piles. Several capstans were used for wrestling animals ashore for flensing.

Whaler's Bight workers were a diverse lot, the kind who would naturally be attracted to grueling work paid by the hour. Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiian, Mexican, Irish, New Englander, even native Indians all showed up on the work rolls of the period.

Oddly, there are also stories of the tryworks attracting sightseers (not that far-fetched an idea if you envision the eye-catching oily black clouds from tryworks furnaces sweeping in long billows by the westerly breeze and the mammoth size of the whales themselves).

As industries go, whaling was, without a doubt, Coronado's first. Whaling in Coronado continued until probably 1886 when demand for whale oil plummeted in the face of cheaper petroleum products and the whale stations were abandoned. Whaler's Bight, itself, survived until the late 1930s when the Navy filled it in to expand the naval air station.

For history buffs, there is one final abstract whaling fact from Coronado's past: The first American owner of Coronado was actually a whaling ship captain, Bezar Simmons. He bought "The Peninsula" (all of Coronado) in 1846 from Pedro Carrillo and held the property until his death in 1850.