

A whaleman's watercolor showing the New Bedford ship *Niger* "cutting-in" a bowhead in the Bering Sea, 1852-1856.



Hurrah for Five and Forty More!

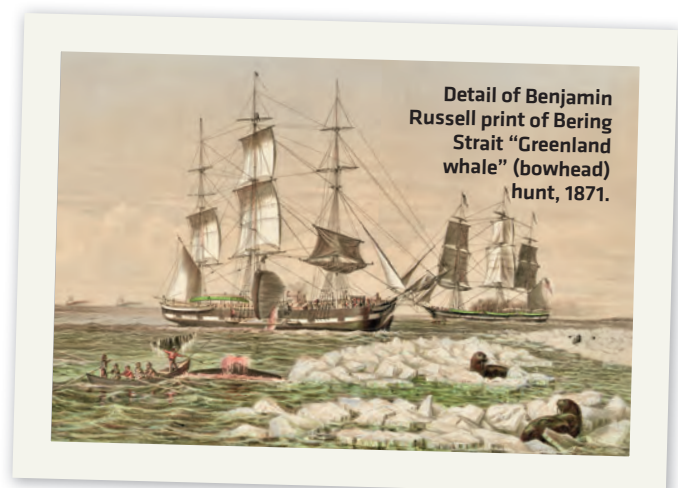
Yankee whalers in Alaska

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

ON AUGUST 29, 1871, A SHIFT IN WINDS DRIVING PACK ICE toward northern Alaska's coast near present-day Wainwright trapped 33 of the North Pacific whaling fleet's 40 ships. Many had come from New England, around Cape Horn, with their captains' children and wives; others had sailed up the West Coast or crossed from Hawaii. On September 12, the skippers abandoned their ships for lack of safe anchorages, game, fuel, and provisions to feed 1,200 mouths in the months ahead. The refugees traveled 70 miles in the ships' whaleboats to reach the few vessels outside the glacial front lucky enough to have dodged its vise-grip. Dreadful seas threatened the boats while freezing brine drenched the bailing men. Of their former homes, only the bark *Minerva* later was salvaged—the rest got crushed or stranded.

This was the second big blow to Yankee whaling within a decade. In 1865, a month after the Civil War's official end, the Confederate raider *Shenandoah* had seized and torched 20 Union whaling ships in the Bering Strait and Sea. As *Shenandoah's* "last act of expiring insolence" in the ice, she harried *Jireh Swift*, prey clearly not swift enough.

Other factors doomed the enterprise. The Kodiak and Bristol Bay right whale grounds were quickly depleted; the more



Detail of Benjamin Russell print of Bering Strait "Greenland whale" (bowhead) hunt, 1871.

dangerous Southern Beaufort Sea's ice pack sheltered holdout pockets of bowheads. Captains had already resorted to shooting walrus, which yielded less blubber but were easier killed, on floes, with buffalo rifles. Between 1840 and 1850, the North Pacific fleet dismantled 11,000 right whales, and in the next decade, only 3,000. Quaker whalemens lumped closely

related “polar” or “Greenland” whales together with “right” whales, the right ones to chase, because they were rich in oil. They measured a bowhead’s size in barrels of oil—up to 350—and pounds of “whalebone” (baleen). The customary, post-mortem *Hurrah for five and forty more* acknowledged the number of barrels gained from a typical sperm whale. By 1914, hoop skirts and corsets stiffened with baleen strips called “busks” had become unfashionable. Coal-gas and Kerosene replaced whale oil for lighting homes, streets, and factories. In southeast Alaska, where maintaining whaling stations was cheaper, dozens operated into the 1930s. Whalemen, ironically, discovered the seeps that started another boom, at Prudhoe Bay’s oil fields.

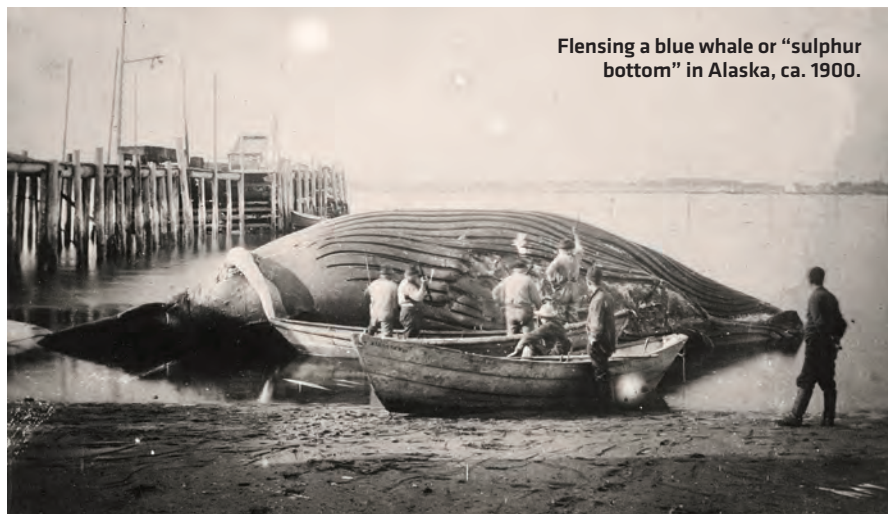
Western Arctic industrial whaling, a world set apart by its jargon and specialized gear, was crucial to the U.S. economy. In a single voyage, the brigantine *Mary D. Hume* rendered 37 whales worth \$400,000. “Nantucket sleigh rides” thrilled boat-steerers and oarsmen in open whaleboats that, bucking waves and lashed by spray, tired targets the size of 50 bison. Cetaceans remained a force to be reckoned with past the 1880s, well into the steam era. Sail-assisted steamers could pursue whales more closely and stay longer on the hunting grounds. An Akutan station log describes a blue whale towing a chaser boat for 16 hours—the boat’s engine ran in reverse at half speed the entire time.

The toil made underground mining look like fun. Imagine a slaughterhouse, smoke-cloaked or slick as a skating rink, its greasy floor pitching. “We have to work like horses and live like pigs,” one “green hand” wrote in his diary. On one six-year whaling voyage, the longest on record, crewmembers succumbed to madness, scurvy, and cold. Their bodies were stored frozen until spring, when they could be buried.

Besides depleting the Natives’ marine-mammal larders, the southerners brought guns, rum, diseases, strife, and trading for sexual favors. Their proximity held brighter moments too. Inupiat scavenged wood and iron from wrecks. They sold furs, baleen, and ivory and worked shore-based hunts or on ships. At Herschel Island, they mixed with old salts at baseball matches near vessels snow-banked for warmth, at 40 below or in blizzards, when outfielders became invisible from the home plate. Reels,



Baleen from the jaws of whales dries in San Francisco’s Arctic Oil Works yard in 1890.



Flensing a blue whale or “sulphur bottom” in Alaska, ca. 1900.

chanteyns, and minstrel tunes rang out from the hulls encased in the cove.

With pay to spend and goods to barter, officers boosted souvenir manufacturing. In 1892, *Mary D. Hume*’s first mate Hartson Hartlett Bodfish invited “Happy Jack” Angokwazhuk to winter aboard at Little Diomed Island. There, the future master carver learned to make cribbage boards, speak rudimentary English, and to play the accordion. Angokwazhuk crafted walrus-ivory parasol and umbrella handles, “Mutt & Jeff” figurines, and a pocket-watch effigy whose hands never moved. Yankee-inspired scrimshaw—pictorial scenes on tusks and bones—flourished along the coast between Herschel and Nome.

You don’t really know a whale until

you’ve had your face right in the warm, salty breath of a surfacing one, a modern Native artist told a friend. By that standard, New Bedford, Hawaiian, and San Francisco whalemen knew Leviathan. If not for the sea change in commerce, however, they would have extinguished him.

In 2007, Inupiaq hunters chain-sawed a Victorian bomb lance fragment from a legally landed bowhead, a species still endangered, which meant it was at least 130 years old. This proved the giants’ longevity, their resilience, and that of a culture as well. ♫

While not a fan of industrial-style whaling, Michael Engelhard would have loved to take a “Nantucket sleigh ride” in the days of Pequot.