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VINEYARD WHALING CAPTAINS AND FABULOUS FRISCO

by

Lloyd C. M. Hare

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### VINEYARD WHALING CAPTAINS AND FABULOUS FRISCO

by

Lloyd C. M. Hare

The whaling schooner *Mary H. Thomas* sailed out of San Francisco Bay. Samuel P. Smith was master, his brother-in-law Rufe Smith first mate, and the master’s brother George A. Smith second mate, all of Martha’s Vineyard. For the duration of the voyage everybody “Mr. Smith”ed everybody else until a Mr. Jones or a Mr. Brown would have enlivened the monotony of life in the Arctic in a boatload of Smiths.

This is not to say that all the whalers that sailed through the Golden Gate carried a complement of officers who were so closely related, nor did the afterdeck personnel invariably hail from the island of Martha’s Vineyard.

Nevertheless, it is remarkable that so small and so distant an island in the Atlantic Ocean should have played so dominant a role in the annals of the San Francisco whale fishery. Seldom have so many men gone so far from home in order to begin a season’s work as the Smiths and the Tiltons and their cousins and their neighbors of Martha’s Vineyard.

Ten years after the Gold Rush a San Francisco newspaper compared “the men of Martha’s Vineyard” with the Apostles Peter and Andrew. The Apostles “plied their trade upon the little sea of Galilee, alone,” while the whalemen “have penetrated every nook and corner of the globe washed by salt water in pursuit of the great leviathans of the mighty deep.”

Statistics are cited of sixty-two Vineyard masters who, in the over-all fishery, had brought home catchings of sperm and whale oil and bone that aggregated over a million and a half dollars in value.

The writer continues his glowing tribute. Says he, “No better example could be furnished of the characteristic energy and enterprise of the American people than is this. Here we have a community of people living upon an island that possesses but a tithe of the resources with which most other parts of the Union are blessed, carving out for themselves prosperity and fortune, by the use of their own inherent energy alone, and presenting to the world a striking picture of what may be accomplished even under the most disadvantageous circumstances, where apathy and indolence are not permitted to hold uninterrupted possession of the faculties. Many a settler on the rich prairies of the West . . . might find a profitable lesson in the story of the Men of Martha’s Vineyard . . .”
February 6, 1822, was in San Francisco Bay October 15, of the same year "for supplies," and again October, 1823, "to refit." She arrived home May 8, 1824, with a fine catch of 2300 barrels of sperm oil.

The whaler *Massachusetts* was in the Bay October, 1823, and again, 1827. Her master, Seth Cathcart, bore a name distinctly Vineyard in origin.

Forty-seven vessels are more or less clearly identified by name in the archives of 1825. Seventeen of these were whalers. We are interested that one of them should have been the *Apollo*. She touched at Santa Cruz. This entry has possible reference to the ship of that name of Edgartown.

One by one, or in small fleets, the whalers slipped into San Francisco Bay in fog or sunshine through the swift waters of the Golden Gate. They sailed sluggishly past the fort that stood in the strait on a jut of land, and dropped anchors in the Bay where wharves one day would reverberate to the rush of whalemen home from Arctic waters.

It was written at San Francisco as early as 1860 that in the "old days" the "ancient mariners and whalers" resorted to Yerba Buena Island, which they knew as Wood Island (now a part of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge). Here the wanderers of the sea recruited firewood and water. The springs were difficult of access, and the forests were denuded by the whaleman's axe.

The man who visualized the potentialities of San Francisco as a port of refitment was William A. Richardson, the one-time first mate of the English whaler *Orion* who had deserted his ship in order to marry a Spanish senorita. He encouraged the American whalemen to come to San Francisco.

As Bay pilot and captain of the port he piloted the visiting whalers to an anchorage in a large bay that lies north of the strait, and under the towering presence of Mount Tamalpais. The roadstead is modernly known as Richardson's Bay. The sea rovers called it Whaleman's Bay.

In these quiet waters the stump-masted, ample- bosomed, many-davited blubber ships rolled at anchor and rattled their chains at the change of tides. Seamen cut timber on the steep slopes of the hill that drops precipitously into the bay at Sausalito, and floated casks of fresh water out to their ships.

Among the American sailors who visited San Francisco Bay before the Gold Rush of '49 we find the name of Jared F. Poole, he of the salted Chilmark Pooleys. Jared settled at San Francisco where he became a noted West Coast whaleman. Later he removed to a beautiful ranch in the Valley of the Moon that lies beyond the city.
In 1848 an obscure carpenter named Marshall exploded a series of consequences even more potent to San Francisco, and the breed of Vineyard whalemen, than the military campaign executed by United States troops on the Rio Grande in the late war with Mexico, which had secured California to the Union. Marshall discovered gold on the banks of the American River at Coloma.

The gold strike set into motion a wild scramble of Americans for the California shore. The first wave of manpower struck San Francisco from the sea by way of Cape Horn. This was the well-worn trail blazed by sea captains.

Jared's brothers Matthew and Ephraim Poole were among the adventurers to outfit a gold rush argosy. In company with a handful of neighbors — many of them master mariners — they purchased the whale ship Vesta where she lay in Edgartown harbor, bent sails and joyously set forth for the golden strand, singing, "Oh! Susanna" at the top of their lungs.

This writer has a "waste book" kept by a member of the company. It discloses that the master was Osander Mayhew, the first mate Matthew Poole, and Ephraim Poole third mate.

The not so "good ship Vesta," full of leaks and cranky at the wheel, reached the promised land after many vicissitudes where she ultimately was purchased by the filibuster William Walker, and becomes lost in the mists of Central American turmoil.

In large measure the southeastern New England gold rush transports were whale ships. Many of these were sold at San Francisco.

No story of the "tented" city is complete without a reference to the whaler Niantic of Warren, Rhode Island. She sailed for the whaling grounds September 16, 1848 with Capt. Henry Cleaveland of West Tisbury as master. Captain Cleaveland brought her into the Golden Gate overcrowded with passengers whom he had picked up at the Isthmus. The crew deserted for the mines. Captain Cleaveland sold the Niantic.

The vessel was hauled up into Yerba Buena cove. The lower hold was rented to two gentlemen for the then modest rental of $1,200 per month. Gradually the hull settled in the mud. The cove was filled in with dirt, streets were laid out and buildings erected all about her. The whaler found herself resting in the center of the city on the north side of Clay Street, her stern at what is now Sansome Street.

An enterprising business man built a frame hotel upon the site of her burial. One of her log pumps was driven down as a pile. It struck a stream of water and created an artesian well which supplied the neighborhood for several years.

When the foundations of the Niantic Building were laid during the early '70's, workmen again came upon sections of the vessel that had been a social center in the lives of the Argonauts. A portion of the hotel's stock-in-trade of choice wines was uncashed. Bottles were distributed to important citizens as souvenirs of the olden golden days when wine, women and song had been the trinity of San Francisco. A bottle was shipped east to members of Captain Cleaveland's family.

The Niantic had failed to reach her destination as a whaler which was to have been the North-West Coast of North America. She has attained a more enduring fame at the northwest corner of Sansome and Clay Streets in the city of San Francisco.

Not all of the gold rush transports lie beneath the pavements and tall buildings of the one-time Pueblo of Yerba Buena. Many of the better '49-er ships returned home to resume their chosen trade of whaling. Nothing could be more obvious than that the homeward bound whale ship should hunt whales on its return voyage around the Horn.

The barks Sarah of Edgartown and Popomummet of Fairhaven were the initial ships to obtain clearance papers at the San Francisco custom house, "bound whaling." Neither vessel was locally owned. Neither intended to return to San Francisco.

The distinction of being the city's first whalers is shared by two vessels, the bark Russell and the ship Nile late of New Bedford. The Russell was the first to be enrolled, and the first to sail. She was owned by the mercantile firm of Moore & Folger which later purchased the Nile.

The vessels dropped the Golden Gate in the spring of 1851. Their fair catches encouraged other local merchants and mariners to exploit the business of whaling. The fishery began as a small enterprise; one that was small in numbers of ships, capital investment and men. Several of the pioneer whalers had a tonnage not much in excess of the prey they hunted.

A popular employment was the chase of the sea elephant at Cerros and Guadalupe Islands that lie off the coast of Baja California. This cruise was known in local parlance as a "whaling, sealing and sea elephant expedition," or plain "elephanting." The yield of the sea elephant was about three barrels each of a high grade oil.

A more lucrative fishery than "elephanting" was the pursuit of the California Gray whale, a nasty fighter known to whalemen as the "Devil fish." Mariners traced the amorous Gray into his breeding grounds in the shallow lagoons that indent the western shores of the peninsula of Baja California. The discovery of the lagoons initiated a new, and strange, sort of whaling — an inland fishery akin to shore whaling in reverse. Instead of launching small boats seaward from a shore station on the beach, the whalerman sailed his large ship into the shallow lagoons, went as far as he could —
often dangerously so — chose an anchorage for the season, then lowered his whaleboats to pursue his prey still farther inland.

The alert Jared Poole had the good fortune to discover one of these rich nurseries. He first sighted Ballenas Bay in 1838. The next year he made entry in the bark Sarah Warren of San Francisco of which he was master and part owner with the whaling firm of John C. Hewlett.

The whaler was one who, like his frontier cousin, knew nothing, and cared less, about the laws of conservation of natural resources. The Gray whale was decimated in its several breeding grounds, and the business fell away.

The firing of guns at Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor sounded the death knell of the glamor days of American whaling, an enterprise which already had begun to show the wear of decay in several eastern ports. The Civil War marks the virtual end of the first phase of the San Francisco fishery as a local enterprise.

The war had one compensating factor. A number of eastern whalers, engaged in the Arctic fishery, began annually to come into the Bay in preference to the old anchorages at the Sandwich Islands. The ships "recruited," and in a few weeks time were on their way out of the Heads. The profits of refitting were good, but San Francisco wanted something better. She was not one who liked to do things on a small scale. Nor did she care for shore whaling.

The narrow entry of the Golden Gate did not encourage the presence of many whales. It was otherwise at nearby Monterey with its open bay where even deep-water whalers had been wont to hunt the humpback and the Gray whale within sight of shore.

An enterprising New England sea captain organized a shore whaling company at Monterey as early as 1854. Companies came and went so often that in a short time the "New Company" antedated the "Old Company." Eventually the companies consolidated with a crew of twenty-three men headed by a Chilmark whaler named Thomas G. Lambert.

Lambert was a man of tall and commanding presence with an unforgettable fiery eye when angered, but pleasantly remembered among old whalers at Monterey as a "real deep sea whaler, a blue-bellied Yankee" who had commanded ships, not just offshore whaleboats. In the flamboyant language of the old-time county history it is written "One of the many interesting men of Monterey is Capt. Thomas G. Lambert, for many years one of the potent upbuilders of this beautiful town, but erstwhile a seasoned salt with many years of practical experience upon the deep, and a whaler whose unerring aim has terminated the watery career of hundreds of members of the monsterly finny tribe."

Lambert was actively busy terminating "the watery career . . . of members of the monsterly finny tribe" when the nation was stunned by the unexpected appearance of the Confederate raider Shenandoah in the far Pacific and Bering Sea. Whale ships were captured by the "fleetless" and the most of them put to the torch. San Francisco lost her deep-sea fleet of three whalers.

The burning of ships failed to quench the whaleman's indomitable spirit. Within a few weeks time the Yankee captains had obtained new commands and once again were sailing out the Heads and past the Farallones that lie beyond the Golden Gate. Jared Poole went master in the bark Nathaniel S. Perkins, 216.87 tons, 27 men.

Poole was famed for making what was called the "diamond schedule." He put out from San Francisco, hunted the Gray whale in Mexican lagoons, unloaded his catch at the Sandwich Islands, and sailed for the Arctic. Upon the "making of new ice," which meant that the sea would soon freeze solid, he returned to San Francisco, thereby completing his diamond-shaped cruise.

In 1867 Thomas G. Lambert made a voyage in the Jeanette.

The previous year the ship Florida had been added to the city's limited fleet. Her master was Thomas W. Williams, who, together with his brother Lewis, became the mainstay of the locally owned fishery for more than a decade. Thomas carried his wife and children with him. They shared all the pluses of visits to the cities of exotic Japan, and the less pleasant memory of shipwreck in the Arctic Ocean. When the eldest son was big enough to whale, he was shipped as boatsteerer. A daughter, born at sea, married Edgar R. Lewis, son of Capt. William Lewis, thereby uniting two families prominent in the annals of the West Coast fishery.

The post-Civil War decade was featured by an expanding trade with Siberia. The year 1867 stands out as a landmark in Russo-American relations in that year the United States purchased Alaska. Perhaps it was the prospect of the loss of the North-West Coast of America that irked a certain Russian naval officer as he sailed the dismal waters of the Okhotsk Sea.

Be that as it may, Capt. Thomas Mellen of Martha's Vineyard reported home the presence of a Russian armed steamer in Okhotsk Sea. She had ordered all ships away, he complained, and had fired on one ship's boat, something previously unheard of.

Mellen comments, "I shall not leave unless he fires into me, but should not like to come here another season if we cannot whale after we get there."

The indignant editor of the Vineyard Gazette ran Mellen's story under the caption, "A Case for the Immediate Intervention of Our Most Able Secretary of State, Hon. William H. Seward."
The next decade is one not to be forgotten in the ancient whaling ports of New England. Within a span of five years the fishery suffered two terrible tragedies without parallel in whaling history. The first of these occurred in 1871. Nearly three dozen ships were sunk or abandoned in the Arctic’s “icy embrace” off Point Belcher. The blow fell heaviest upon New Bedford. Edgartown lost two whalers; San Francisco, three. This was her entire Polar Sea fleet and included the brig Carlotta, Capt. E. Everett Smith of Edgartown, of whom we shall hear more.

Nearby was Capt. Mellen in the Europa of Edgartown. He voluntarily gave up the balance of his season in order to come to the rescue of distressed seamen. Between two and three hundred refugees, which included masters and two women, were crowded aboard the Europa and carried to Honolulu.

The second tragedy struck five years later. Twelve ships were lost. One of these was the Hawaiian bark Desmond owned by Capt. E. Everett Smith who, at least, had the good fortune not to have gone master that year. The Desmond had had a tempestuous career under three flags and three names within the space of a few years — remarkable even for a whaling ship. She originally was the New Bedford bark Helen Snow. Abandoned in the ice, she had been come upon by Capt. L. C. Owen in the bark Jireh Perry who brought her into San Francisco where she was sold to pay salvage claims. She was renamed Tugar and made a whaling cruise under the command of Smith. Smith then purchased her, changed her name to Desmond and put her under the Hawaiian flag. And under that flag she went to her final resting place in Arctic waters.

The abandonment of fleets of ships which had come so closely in the wake of the Shenandoah’s raids, left the San Francisco fishery beaten and gasping. Over the long years her merchants had striven to establish a thriving whaling port which they liked to think someday might challenge the supremacy of the Sandwich Islands, and wrestle from them the proud title by which they had become known, that of being “the New Bedford of the Pacific.” But Luck, the whaleman’s mascot” as Capt. Ben Tilton once described it, had frowned upon San Francisco. She was obliged to fall back upon her historic role, that of refitting eastern whalers. Even this remnant of the whaling business necessitated a ceaseless campaign in competition with the Sandwich Islands.

In 1872 twenty-two of the Arctic fleet of some thirty-two vessels came into the Bay to discharge bone and oil, and to refit. The next year about one-half of the fleet went back to the Islands.

The ultimate triumph came in 1879. Eastern shipowners ordered their captains thenceforth to refit annually at San Francisco.

A local business firm to profit by this shift of policy was Athearn & Company, dealers in ships provisions and groceries, a concern established and conducted by a group of West Tisbury men, and originally located at 3 Clay Street Wharf.

The year 1879 was one of mixed good and evil import. Somewhere behind the Icy Curtain, in the brooding horror of fog, storm and grinding ice, two whalers and the government-sponsored exploring ship Jeannette had vanished into white silence. The whalers were the Mount Wollaston and the Vigilant both New Bedford owned, neither of which had made the rendezvous at Plover Bay where the captains customarily congregated after passing out of the Polar Sea, nor ultimately had reached “the City.”

The government ordered the revenue cutter Thomas Corwin to go North early the next season to search for the missing vessels. Capt. E. Everett Smith gave up a whaling cruise in order to go in the Corwin as its “ice pilot.” Of him it is said in a San Francisco newspaper that “There is probably no better known man in the San Francisco shipping circles.”

Smith came to the Corwin from the Russian steam whaling brig Siberia, recently built by Captain Neibaum and associates. The enterprise appears to have been one of the many ramifications of the fabulous Alaska Commercial Company with which firm, and its subsidiaries, Captain Smith had been associated from time to time.

The Siberia had an odd status. She was the first vessel in the United States to be built as a steam whaler. Owned and operated by American citizens, commanded by a Yankee sea dog, and sailing out of San Francisco, she carried Russian papers and flew the Tsar’s flag with its double-headed eagle. The same owners built the schooner Vladimir, 71 tons, which was known as the Siberia’s consort. This had made Smith some sort of commodore of the fleet, if not admiral of the Icy Sea.

The Siberia’s importance as an early venture in steam whaling was quickly dimmed by the activities of one of Smith’s fellow islanders. For quite some time Capt. William Lewis had been intrigued by the idea of building a fleet of steam whalers to be berthed at San Francisco. Lewis was a New Bedford merchant, a native of the State of Maine, who at one time had lived on Martha’s Vineyard where he married Lucretia M. Hancock of Chilmark.

While on the island Lewis had been involved in the development of West Chop, and had built a home across from Capt. Cyrus Manter’s on Music Street in West Tisbury. Mrs. Lewis was Cyrus’s first cousin.

Capt Lewis came to have a high regard for Captain Manter’s abilities and judgment as a seaman, and he decided that no one would do but Manter to go down to Newfoundland to look into the merits of the Scotch steam whalers. Lewis had been told that the Scottish whalmen were making a great success of steam whaling
in the Greenland and North-East Coast fisheries. He faced the unpleasant fact that the sailing ship had passed its prime of usefulness. Some sort of change had become necessary if the Arctic fishery were to be continued on a profitable basis.

Captain Manter examined the construction of the Scotch whalers, and investigated the stories of their adaptiveness for ice whaling. He reported favorably to Captain Lewis who promptly gave the order to begin work on the first of what was to be a fleet of six beautiful steam whalers. Later he converted two of his sailing barks into steam.

The initial venture was the steam bark *Mary and Helen*, 420 tons, launched 1879, followed the next year by the *Belvedere*, 440 tons, 140½ ft. in length, 31¾ ft. beam and 17 ft. depth of hold. Both of the “tea kettle” ships made remarkable maiden cruises in the ice.

Waterfront San Francisco went agog at the sight of the steam whalers, and of wharves piled high with bundles of bone. Deeply impressed by what they saw were two San Francisco capitalists, Capt. Charles Goodall and George C. Perkins, among the city’s most enterprising shipowners and widely known as the “Barons of the Waterfront.” Goodall, Perkins & Company virtually monopolized the coastwise steamship trade, a tugboat fleet and the sale of drinking water to ships; truly kings of the sea and of the Bay.

Only the English-born Goodall had had any experience in whaling, and that had been a moderate one. Even less can be said of Maine-born Perkins. He had run away to sea at the age of twelve years, and been around the Horn in a merchant ship, but soon had left the sea to acquire wealth behind a desk.

Goodall and Perkins were farsighted men of energy and means. With a gusto that was reminiscent of the impetuous traditions of the golden city of the ’50’s, the ambitious magnates announced that they intended to put a steam whaler into the ice that very year, and with more to follow, and no delay to be brooked.

Their first steamer was the *Bowhead*. She sailed April 27, 1882 — a fine vessel fitted with every necessity for whaling and even a few luxuries previously unheard of, including a forecastle heated by steam.

Tearing a page from Lewis’s book — he always hired a Vineyard master whenever possible — the promoters chose an Edgartown man to go master of the *Bowhead*. Once again we come upon the name of E. Everett Smith, one of the few, probably the only, whaling master at San Francisco to have had experience in steam. The master’s fellow townsman, Samuel P. Smith, was chosen to go first mate. Both Vineyarders were relatively young men. Both had backgrounds of picturesque adventure, and were possessed of that kind of cautious daring that makes money.

The *Bowhead* made an extraordinary catch.

She was joined the following season by the steamers, *Orcas*, *Narwhal* and the *Balaena*, all of them fresh as wood shavings from the shipbuilders’ stocks at Central Basin. The *Narwhal’s* command went to Capt. Thomas G. Campbell of Martha’s Vineyard, late of the windjammer *Norman*, a seaman who began work as a bank teller. A photograph of the *Narwhal*, heading for the Golden Gate and the high seas beyond upon the first leg of her maiden cruise, reveals the gala significance of the occasion. A flag flew at every mast, among them the owners’ house flag of white bunting with the replica of a spouting whale in black.

The fleet was at sea when Goodall-Perkins incorporated their interests October 30, 1883, choosing the name Pacific Steam Whaling Company. The Arctic Oil Works was incorporated on the same day for the purpose of processing much of the oil to be brought into port by the Arctic whalers. The enterprises were referred to by envious competitors as “the Corporation.”
The Steam Whaling Company purchased the Mary & Helen (the second of that name, the first having been sold to the U. S. government) from William Lewis. She was renamed the Betuga, a name that made famous by Hartson Bodfish. The Corporation also owned the steamers Grampus and the Thrasher and controlled the sailing vessel Wanderer together with a miscellany of lesser ships used largely as tenders and for allied purposes.

The advent of the steam whalers supplied the impetus that elevated the “Queen City of the West Coast,” almost overnight, into fame as the world’s principal whaling port. The Arctic Ocean was now the world’s most productive whaling grounds. The “runaway” South Sea fishery of the Herman Melville legend, and the Okhotsk Sea grounds were not forgotten, but they had become secondary sources of wealth as the demand for whalebone had supplanted sperm oil on the market. A few sailing vessels and an occasional steamer made the “between seasons” cruise along the equator. Windjammers continued to search the gale-swept Okhotsk. This trade was largely controlled at San Francisco by successors to the pioneer agency of Shed & Wright. Some of their craft had eastern ownership.

Many of the eastern owners made annual trips to San Francisco by railroad for the purpose of meeting their ships in from the Arctic, and to supervise their refitment. Shipmasters, too, took advantage of the iron horse to spend the winter months at their eastern homes.

Both owners and masters made frequent use of local hotels during their short visits, and among those popular with the whaling trade in the ’70s and ’80s were the Russ House and the Occidental, both first class hosteries. Hotel blotters disclose the fact that an occasional captain made the humorous gesture of naming his last place of residence as “bark Sea Breeze,” or “Arctic Ocean,” or “Icy Cape,” rather than New Bedford, Chilmark or other home town.

The Palace-Grand Hotel (now the Sheraton-Palace) attracted the patronage of masters and shipowners who were both able and willing to pay for the best hospitality the city had to offer the transient guest. The “old Palace” was connected with its Siamese twin, the Grand Hotel, by a 70-foot bridge that resembled Venice’s famous Bridge of Sighs. A guest could obtain a room at the Grand Hotel for as low as $1.00 a day... “Parlor and bath” was one dollar extra. The $1.00 (which too often was the common seaman’s average earning) entitled the guest to cross the bridge and to promote the parlor of the Palace and to listen to a string and reed orchestra.

George A. Smith and Jared Jernegan were among the Vineyard captains who registered at the Palace-Grand. David B. Adams and T. G. Campbell preferred the Russ House.

The shipmaster’s purse was fattened by the fact that San Francisco had become the headquarters of the American steam whaler. Captains jumped to and fro between the two great shipping firms of William Lewis and “the Corporation.” If a master made an exceptional catch he was offered a ship by the one, and if he had the ill fortune to have had a bad season he was cheerfully released to the other—and sometimes had no choice.

Leander C. Owen is the example of one master who gave up steam. Commodore of Lewis’s fleet, he lost the North Star on her first voyage, and went over to the Pacific Steam Whaling Company. But, having a disagreement with his new employer, he resolved to sever that connection and bought a share in the bark Mary & Susan of New Bedford, returning to his original love, the windjammer. He, however, continued to be one of the owners of Lewis’s steamer Belvedere together with J. H. Knowles, the Pacific Steam Whaling Company’s general manager.

There were other connecting links between the principal whaling firms at San Francisco who obviously competed on a friendly basis. The hazards of Arctic whaling did not encourage a cutthroat competition either on the part of owners or, especially, the captains who were always ready to go to great lengths to help one another in distress.

One might hesitate to compile a list of all the Vineyard Smiths who went master of whalers on voyages out of San Francisco. Such a list would include the names of E. Everett, George F., Samuel P., George A., Rufus N., Gilbert L., and Edward Jones Smith.

Tiltons were runners-up, fewer in number but no less men “with salt in ’em:” James A., Benjamin Thomas, and George Fred, “Mr. Whaleman” himself, whose fame rests chiefly upon his overland trek across Alaska in quest of relief for the whaling fleet caught in the ice the year that the steamers Ora and Jesse H. Freeman and the schooner Rosario were sunk in the vicinity of Point Barrow.

The directory of Vineyard masters at San Francisco (and some day their names should be listed on a bronze plaque) includes such stalwart seaman as Cyrus Manter, Leander C. Owen, Benjamin D. Cleveland, H. H. Bodfish, Stephen F. Cottle, T. G. Campbell, Edwin Coffin, Thomas Mellen, Benjamin B. Worth, George W. Brown, Jared Jernegan, Ward P. Vincent, Eugene O. Thaxter, Jared F. Poole, T. G. Lambert, Ellsworth L. West, David B. Adams, West Mitchell, James A. M. Earle and George L. Donaldson.

Many of these captains were steamer men, but all of them were skilled seamen in the rugged handling of sail. In the final analysis, the steam whaler was not more than a sailing vessel augmented by what was called “steam auxiliary.”
Be he master of steam or sail, the commander of a whaler at Point Barrow, Cape Parry or Banks Land was likely to be the son or grandson or nephew of a whaleman who had been engaged in the earlier fisheries either in the South Atlantic, or off the coast of Africa, or in the Indian Ocean, or at New Holland, or in the waters of the mysterious Galapagos Islands, almost any little known and uncharted corner of the globe.

Ben Tilton was grandchild of Capt. Benjamin Skiff Tilton and nephew of Capt. Owen H. Tilton and Jared F. Poole, and brother-in-law of Capt. David B. Adams. Adams was son, grandson and great-grandson of master mariners, and nephew of three distinguished masters of sail.

Steve Cottle was son of Capt. Frank Cottle and grandson of Francis Cottle, shipkeeper, who lost his life in the wreck of the whaling brig William and Joseph of Holmes Hole, now Vineyard Haven. Both of Cottle's grandfathers and one of his great-grandfathers were whalemen and masters of ships.

The name of the unfortunate Francis Cottle was perpetuated not only in the Cottle line, but also in the Smith family of Chilmark. The name was borne by a nephew, Capt. Francis Cottle Smith who, at an early age, became one of the island's most successful whaling masters, and later was High Sheriff of the County of Dukes County. Smith was one of a quartet of brothers, all of them whaling masters. The fifth brother, Asa, attained the rank of first mate and after "more than circumnavigating the globe," as he once said, retired from sea and became a member of the State Legislature.

Every whaling master led an adventurous life. This fact made him a popular source of news. Reporters never failed to meet the incoming whalers. The captains were not always talkative to strangers, but the press generally managed to wheedle a story of sorts, if not from the master himself, then from one of his mates or some loquacious member of the crew. The captain's typical report was usually a laconic statement to the effect that he had had "an uneventful cruise." This often meant death at sea, mutiny, temporary imprisonment in the ice, loss of a whaleboat, or, sometimes, a fabulous catch of bone and oil.

The ubiquitous "press" greeted "Harty" Bodfish when he came into port in the Beluga laden with the "limber jaws of sixty-three cetaceans." (Your newshawk only used the word "whale" after he had run out of synonyms.) The reporter wrote, "Captain H. H. Bodfish is the terror of the whales, for more than any other man sailing from the port of San Francisco, he has proven himself their despoiler." The owners smacked their lips at the value of the catch estimated at $915,000. This was the gross income of three seasons spent in the North, and "a voyage full of strange and terrible adventures, such as were never dreamed of in fiction."

So said the reporter. Bodfish's share of the catch was reputed to be $21,000. It should be kept in mind, however, than an extraordinary catch often "broke the market" and reduced the first enthusiastic estimates of profit.

Ben Tilton was a hero of the season of 1900 when he brought the steamer Alexander into the Bay with a cargo of 19,000 pounds of bone valued at $95,000. He had spent only six months to the day at sea.

Ben's cousin, James A. Tilton, in the same ship, did slightly better one year when he returned with a catch worth $100,000. Jim made several smashing voyages in the Alexander. This was not a new experience. In 1892, reporters had described him in the headlines — "Luckiest of whalers. Wonderful catch." He had brought home the products of thirty-six bowheads estimated to be worth over a half million dollars. This record-breaking catch represented twenty-nine months spent in the North. Tilton's ship the Mary D. Home, had been one of the three whalers (all of them owned at San Francisco) that had completed the first attempt to winter in the ice at Herschel Island, 1890-91.

The vicissitudes of the fishery is nowhere better demonstrated than by the fact that one of the vessels to have participated in this extraordinary venture returned home from Herschel Island without catching a single whale. This was the little Nicotine of San Francisco, a sailing schooner of 71 tons.

The epic of San Francisco whaling comes to an almost blank page after the season of 1911. A few cruises were made until as late as 1928. They were largely trading ventures. Whale oil and bone no longer had a ready market.

The Smiths and the Tiltons, Bodfish and Cleveland and other famous captains returned home, some of them to retire, others to open stores in their home towns, and a few to farm. Capts. Benjamin D. Cleveland and James A. Tilton continued to follow the sea as whaling agents at New Bedford.

The great names no more sail through the Golden Gate. The Sea Breeze, the Rainbow, the Dawn, the Tropic Bird, the steamers Grampus and Beluga, like the Smiths and the Tiltons, are memories in man's ever changing and never ending book of adventure.
THE AUTHOR

Born of pioneer California stock on both sides of his family, Lloyd C. M. Hare also goes back to pioneer Vineyard stock through his mother. Her father, William B. Mayhew, was born in West Tisbury and went to San Francisco by way of Panama in 1861. Both her grandfathers, Bartlett Mayhew, II, and Otis Smith, were whaling captains as were three of her great uncles Smith.

A lawyer by profession (he received his LL.B. from the University of California in 1926, and was admitted to the Bar in 1927) Mr. Hare has distinguished himself in the literary world with two book-length biographies, one of Governor Thomas Mayhew, and a second of Lucretia Mott, as well as numerous briefer works. Among his longtime interests has been promoting recognition of the importance of the whaling industry in the early growth and development of San Francisco as a major Pacific port.

Mr. Hare is a veteran of World War I, and it was during this tour of duty that he made his only visit to Martha’s Vineyard, which shares his allegiance with his native city on the West Coast.

NOTES FROM THE SOCIETY’S ARCHIVES


—p. 7. Upon leaving San Francisco, John O. Morse, master of the Bark Sarah, one of the outstanding whaling masters of Edgartown, was taken ill off the coast of South America. He was put ashore at Paita, Peru, where he died at the age of 49.

—p. 11. The revenue cutter Corwin was purchased in 1900 by the Corwin Trading Company, organized by Capt. Ellsworth L. West of Chilmark, for use in the Alaska coastwise trade. Captain West maintained a passenger, freight and mail service from St. Michael’s to Cape Blossom 1902-1910, the heyday of the Nome gold rush. The Corwin, which laid up in Seattle winters, was famed during this period as the first ship through the ice from “Outside” each spring.

—p. 15. Edwin Coffin was in command of the steam-yacht America chartered for the Fiala-Ziegler Polar Expedition in 1903.

Abstract of Protest — case of the Bark Vineyard in collision with the French Ship Joachim in the Harbor of San Francisco.

The Bark Vineyard arrived at San Francisco, from a whaling cruise, on the 31st day of September AD 1864.

“On the 17th day of December while lying at anchor in the Harbor of San Francisco, the weather clear and blowing a strong gale from the North, with a rough sea on, at 5 A.M. the French Ship Joachim and the Bark Vineyard swung together. Immediately every exertion was used to get clear and separate the vessels, but without success, when we obtained the assistance of a Tugboat; she having got a hawser to us, we then slipped our anchor with sixty fathoms of chain, having first buoyed it. The tug then took us in near the wharf, when she cast off and we run the Bark into the mud, as we had broken the stock of our remaining anchor during the collision and did not dare to let it go as it would not hold us on the rise of the tide. During the time that the two vessels were colliding together every possible exertion was made on our part to prevent their injuring each other, by putting in fenders, such as spare spars, bundles of rope etc. but such was the force of the wind and badness of the sea, causing so much motion to the ships, that everything was ground up almost as soon as put in. Lowered out our boats and veered them out with a whale line to prevent their being stove. The Tug in towing us got her hawser foul of two of the boats, sweeping them under parting the lines, so that we lost the boats and a large lot of whale line.”

December 18th. Informed that a steamboat run over the line holding the buoy to our anchor and parted it.”

“December 19th. Two of our boats have been recovered without oars.”

Signed: Thomas T. Caswell — Master
Gilbert L. Smith — Mate
John H. Chadwick — Seaman

Date, January 5, 1865