Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Old Whalers

The ship Natalie, which was supposed to be the one that had taken Napoleon to Saint Helens, lies at the bottom of Monterey Bay, very far down in the sand by this time. But not so many years ago it could be seen very easily at low tide, and many souvenirs were made from the teak wood salvaged from its cabin. Captain Rush was in command of the ship when it came into the bay, loaded with wheat. No one could understand, according to my informant just how the ship came to be wrecked. Captain Rush settled down to a peaceful life in Monterey, and was thereafter known as Captain Trigo – the Spanish word for wheat. Funny, no!

Monterey Bay can really stir up a storm that could wreck a better ship than the Natalie. The winds shriek into the bay and with the help of a high tide, the piled-up waters perform some strange tricks, as witness the time when the roofs of the sheds on the old wharf were blown entirely across the railroad tracks. Way back in '76, just such a gale came at the flood tide of the year, and blew for three days. At that time the high sand dunes that separate the Del Monte grounds from the bay came all the way down to the depot, then the terminus of the narrow gauge to Salinas.

The waters started to swirl around and cut in under the warehouse filled with grain, and to relieve this danger, someone suggested that they cut through the tracks so that the waters could flow into the lagoon that came down from Washerwoman's Bay. This was done and the warehouse was saved, but the waves continued to cut away the high sand dunes, until the entire hill was washed away and the sands were left fairly level as far as the bath house, as they remain today.

As the dunes melted away, three coffins were exposed to view, and some old timers recalled that some 20 years before, a vessel had put into the harbor to bury in the sand hills the bodies of three sailors who had died of smallpox.

The Montereyan who told me these stories relates one concerning the whalers. "In my first recollections of Monterey, there were big iron cauldrons standing along the shore near the present breakwater, and a runway of broad pine planks ran from the high ground to the water, reminder of the days when whaling was one of the principal industries of Monterey."

The whaling industry then was entirely in the hands of the Portuguese, one crew under Captain Pray in Monterey and another crew under Captain Pedro in Carmel Bay. For some time the Monterey crew had had poor luck. So to change the auspices, the whalers met and chose another captain, Manuel Lewis. The change seemed to work well, for very soon the lookout, stationed with his glass up by the old gun near the fort, spied a whale and gave the signal.

Captain Lewis with his men put out two boats and came upon the whale sleeping upon the surface of the water. Lewis ordered the boats to approach one on each side of the whale, and advancing softly, they planted their harpoons. The whale lashed about in the throes of death, and as one boat was splintered by his head, his tail finished off the other. Whalers were never swimmers, so the fishing boats returning from the banks rescued the men. All very well, but the whale was lost, and being a sulphur whale, it was a serious loss.

A few days later, the report came in that the Carmel whalers had brought in a sulphur whale, and one of the Monterey whalers went over to investigate. He found a bit of bomb with the Monterey mark on it and the Monterey whalers put in a claim for the whale. This claim was hotly contested in court, for several years, costing both sides a pretty penny. The whale, whose original value was perhaps $5,000 was finally awarded to the Monterey crew, but by that time it had passed its usefulness and all that was left of it, a splendid skeleton, still stands on the hill above the cove where it was first beached,

How many have looked with wonder and admiration upon the whale skeleton, mounted upon many posts and much lumber, at Point Lobos and wondered whence it came?