

**RENDERED,
REDEEMED &
TRANSFORMED**
**The Social History of Whale
Carcass Disposal on
Northwest Shores**

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Senior Thesis

PREFACE

On December 1, 1997, President William Jefferson Clinton signed the 50 States Coin Program Act, ostensibly “to promote the diffusion of knowledge...about the individual States, their history and geography, and the rich diversity of the national heritage”¹ but really as a cheap ploy to control inflation by encouraging jingoistic Americans to collect worthless coins and thereby voluntarily take them out of circulation. But did I care? Heck no! I was literally ecstatic the first time I saw Caesar Rodney galloping off to the Continental Congress on the obverse side of a Delaware quarter. It was from the Denver Mint, and my father was sure to see that we got one from Philadelphia too before the month was out. Next came Pennsylvania, followed by New Jersey and Georgia; and by the time the Mint had reached my native State of Connecticut we were already beginning to debate what symbol should have the honor of decorating the impending currency of Oregon.

Though we were somewhat strapped for ideas, early on we decided that our state’s quarter had to at least be cooler than Mississippi’s magnolia blossom or Iowa’s schoolhouse on the prairie – much less – Wisconsin’s cheese advertisement or the quarter from the State of Michigan which was literally a map of the State of Michigan. Though there was constant disagreement, for me, the choice for Oregon was obvious:

Imagine a picture of a man sitting in his car while pulled up to a gas station, his head pivoted to the right and facing out the passenger-side-window as he patiently waits for someone to come pump his gas. In the next lane over, Tonya Harding – brandishing a baseball bat – is seen beating the shit out of a parked station-wagon while a visibly shaken Sasquatch frantically dials 9-1-1 from the convenience store pay-phone.

By early 2003 I had worked up the courage to email it off to Governor Ted Kulongoski as a suggestion. Several weeks later, either he or one of his assistants later wrote back, briefly saying “Dear Mr. Van Vechten. Cute, but no. Sincerely...” and then placed my email address on the governor’s official “monthly report” which I have still yet to free myself from.

Undaunted, I next designed – what I believed to be – the second most historically/socially significant representation of the State of Oregon:

Imagine a grass strewn beach seemingly evacuated save for a solitary figure erupting from the sands. It was the Nov. 1970 “whale bombing,” and in the corner I scribbled the phrase “*sic semper tyrannous*” before later learning that Virginia still laid claim to that motto, even after Lincoln’s assassination. Hastily, I replaced the wording with “*conservation and progress*” and, again, sent it off to Governor K. This time, there was no response.

You can thus imagine my sheer outrage upon later discovering that Crater Lake – a solitary body of water buried at the bottom of a dead volcano miles from any city of even respectable size – was selected to represent MY state. Outraged, but hardly surprised.

I’d never deny that Crater Lake is stunningly beautiful, but it is also a freak! Like Yellowstone and Yosemite, it doesn’t represent what is typical of the region, nor the

¹ 50 States Commemorative Coin Program (Enrolled Bill (Sent to President)), S. 1228, Sec. (1:B), <http://www-cs-students.stanford.edu/~erikr/S1228.html>

“universal charm” of the Pacific Northwest. At its best, Crater Lake is nothing more than an anomaly. Whale bombings, on the other hand – along with a series of other rendering mishaps and adventures – reflect a peculiar pattern endemic to our region which I believe is of far greater social significance. That conviction prompted me to embark upon a seventh-month journey to prove that – just as the business of hunting whales played a tremendous role in forging the identity of the American Northeast – the experience of disposing of whales shaped the character of the Pacific Northwest.

This thesis is the byproduct of a journey into uncharted waters. It was inspired by a people’s notions of collective identity as forged by nature, geography, religion and dynamite. It was propelled by story-telling, myth, mystery and memory. To my knowledge, there has never been a study quite like it before.

I must state upfront that I’m an Oregonian. I wasn’t born in the Pacific Northwest but I am committed to die here. This is my home, and therefore I must alert my readers to be on guard for regional biases and prejudices.

INTRODUCTION

Herman Melville once said that: “to produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme,”² and surely Man’s special relationship with whales has proven as resilient and indeed mighty a theme as any. In popular fiction, myth and even religion, whales traditionally have played the role of great sea-monsters. Whether their intended purpose is to serve as metaphorical foils to a narrative’s greater theme or simply to swallow people, prophets and even pathological puppets alive – these super whales have long served to remind us of the awesome power of nature and the ultimate futility of trying to defy a higher power. The whales of *Jonah*, *Moby Dick*, and *Pinocchio* are classic examples of such super-cetaceans that seemingly spawn maelstroms in their gaping mouths and typhoons with their massive tails. But in recent years the super-whales of lore have been relegated to the ranks of the nearly domesticated anthropomorphized animals of Man’s seemingly controlled natural world. The pop-culture whales of today generally serve as symbols of a fragile environment or – in the unique case of the Makah Indians – a lost people’s redemption. Nature, it would seem, is a multifaceted force that is as capable of manipulation as it is of being manipulated.

As is Man. For more than a century and a half, venture capitalists and land speculators have struggled to use environmental illustrations to promote the Pacific Northwest. It traditionally has been a hard sell. While tacitly acknowledged as stunningly beautiful, time-and-again the region’s dreary, monotonous climate has proven enough to depress even the most weathered Midwesterner: inevitably sending at least some immigrants to an eternal rehab in Southern California. Even the legendary Sir Francis Drake – possibly the first European to explore the Oregon Coast – proved no match for a land enveloped in what he later called “the most vile, thicke and stinking fogges.”³ But despite poor reviews, the region has never failed to produce and attract bold men eager to promote the Northwest cause. And when investors fail to capitalize on

² http://thinkexist.com/quotation/to_produce_a_mighty_book-you_must_choose_a_mighty/208339.html

³ http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761558216_9/Oregon.html

the region's economic or cultural climate,⁴ they have always been able to use a pristine "natural setting" to compensate.

This pattern, however, can be a tad deceptive. As James Lyon – author of *Selling Seattle* – cautioned:

It is important to recognize the historical specificity of particular conceptualizations of nature, and to acknowledge the constructed and contingent nature of their formation... for most of the region's history nature has had to fulfill an increasingly uneasy double function. On the one hand nature helped sell the Pacific Northwest to settlers and investors as an area of abundant, exploitable resources, providing "profits and jobs" in logging, fishing, mining and other ancillary industries. On the other hand, it has been "revered as a source of aesthetic pleasure and outdoor recreation."⁵

This shifting dualistic "ecotopia" Lyon describes, however, wasn't really a trademark of the region until the nation was hit by the dramas of the 1970s: specifically the rise of a new national environmentalism that coupled with an influx of ultra-Left immigrants to the Pacific as the Age of Aquarius drew to a close. Urban centers like Eugene, Portland and especially Seattle were dramatically transformed in the process. As one observer later noted "...in recent years Seattle has become the first big city...in the history of big cities...where people have come to the city in order to get closer to nature."⁶ And closer they did. So close in fact that today many Northwesterners openly associate any assault on nature to be – at the very least – an assault on their way of life. When it comes to managing the environment, both capitalism and conservationism ultimately become ideas entwined with identity. Man's shifting relationship with whales is a paradigm example.

It could be argued that few places today are as militant about "saving the whales" as the Pacific Northwest. In addition to being the cradle and former headquarters of Greenpeace – the Northwest has led the charge to establish marine sanctuaries, abolish Sea World style aquariums, outlaw and then regulate "humane" whaling rights for Native Americans and – in the case of the State of Washington – adopt the orca as the U.S.' first official "state sea-mammal."⁷ Indeed, one would be hard pressed to dispute that the consensus view of the Pacific Northwest is that cetaceans – as a zoological order – are exceptionally majestic creatures whilst in their "natural habitat" but simultaneously exceptionally vulnerable to even the indirect – "unnatural" – activity of Man. And at no time is this perceived vulnerability more clearly demonstrated than when one happens to wash ashore.

Unlike so many other sea-creatures, when a whale beaches itself, its size and girth make it an inescapable distraction that ultimately disrupts the modern fantasy of an unspoiled ordered wilderness. Often it generates concern among well-meaning observers who too often conclude that man-made pollution – toxic, sonic or otherwise – is to "blame." But while certainly Man has had a less-than-benign impact on the health of our oceans over the past two-hundred years, the truth of the matter is that whales beach themselves. Nobody really knows why, but throughout recorded history it has been a constant phenomenon: so common in fact that until the twentieth century it wasn't even

⁴ See Jesse Applegate in Kent D. Richards', *In Search of the Pacific Northwest: The Historiography of Oregon and Washington*, *The Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 50, No 4. (Nov., 1981) 416 JSTOR.

⁵ James Lyons, *Selling Seattle*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 43

⁶ Lyons, 40

⁷ The Northwest also remains the only stronghold of the American Cetacean Society outside of California.

seriously questioned; much less met with any concern.⁸ In fact, according to Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum, during both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the most popular images on the "print" or "shelf-paper" that decorated the homes of the common Dutch people were: "successful sea and land battles, broken dikes and beached whales."⁹ One study from the early 1990s suggested that more than 2000 members of the cetacean family beach themselves around the world every year,¹⁰ and at least 76 different species of whale have been found on Oregon's beaches alone: though the gray whale remains the most common.¹¹

Yet despite the perfectly natural act of beaching, humans – and perhaps residents of the Pacific Northwest in particular – have become uncomfortable with this disruption, a fact which ultimately unmask the modern mystique of our fictitious wilderness lifestyle. It is an irony worthy of our age that, in our attempt to reconnect with nature, we have become less aware of what is natural.

I contend that this aforementioned transition from *Monstro* and *Moby Dick* to *Shamu* and *Keiko* largely paralleled the rise of an urbanized environmental culture in the Pacific Northwest. I also demonstrate how whales have always served as symbols of shifting significance for the region, and that they are often assigned a commercial significance related to either the collection or conservation of natural resources. I go on to suggest that the previously unexamined process of disposing of beached drift whales on Northwest shores is a revealing lens through which to analyze the Northwest's relationship to nature. And I ultimately conclude that, as artificial symbols of both regional identity and "environmental irregularity," **beached whales subconsciously encourage Northwesterners to seek moral/material redemption, whilst concurrently spurring a broader regional transformation.**

Since April of 2007 I have gut through a proverbial whale of research developing this thesis. Now, as I sit down to prepare my final draft whilst so much previously unexamined information remains at my disposal, I feel that at least some unstructured overlap is both inevitable and acceptable in presenting my argument. I will begin by examining the early symbolism of whales in both indigenous and immigrant societies of the Pacific Northwest before jumping to the rise of a commercial whaling industry that dramatically altered the demographics of the region before going into a slow decline that subsequently obscured the cultural significance of whales in the region. The final three sections will examine the awkwardness of whale carcass disposal during the twentieth century and the clashes of culture that subsequently developed through such movements as urbanization, environmentalism, and tourism, which – together with the media – dramatically shaped the modern identity of the Pacific Northwest.

SECTION I FISH STORIES & FACTS

⁸ Although apparently the ancient sage Aristotle took time to record whale strandings in his *Historia animalium*.

⁹ Prints in the Dutch Golden Age: from art to shelf paper, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Found at <http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/tentoonstelling/van-kunst-tot-kastpapier?lang=en>

¹⁰ Anthony R. Martin, *Whales and Dolphins*, (London: Salamander Books, 1991)

¹¹ 25 grays were found at 25 separate locations in 2000 alone. Paul Linnman, *The Exploding Whale: and Other Remarkable Stories from the Evening News*, (Portland: WestWind Press, 2003) 57

By January of 1806, the spirits of the Corps of Discovery were perhaps at their lowest ebb. To these juxtaposed Jeffersonians¹², the Pacific Northwest was cold, wet and rotting away at their collective morale like the ever constant mildew in their buckskins. Isolated at Fort Clatsop, there was no buffalo to hunt. The elk and deer herds had been quickly exhausted and all there was to eat came from the newly discovered Naturals: roots, berries and dog meat.¹³ And then, on the third of January, something new arrived: whale blubber.

To the appetites of men whose diet had long since become bored beyond exhaustion, the whale meat was like a God sent.¹⁴ The Clatsops told them it came from the neighboring Killamooks¹⁵ to the south, where a whale had apparently been thrown from the sea and floundered on the shore.

With their stomachs now piqued by the prospect of more blubber, Captain William Clark quickly organized a scavenging party and prepared himself for the two day journey to where the whale was reported to have landed. In his diary, Captain Meriwether Lewis recorded that the evening before they set out, Sacagawea appealed to the captains to be allowed to accompany the men on their journey to see the whale. The explorers were apparently at first ambivalent about allowing the Shoshone woman to go with them, but allegedly Sacagawea – in one of the more forceful declarations of her own individuality – complained that “she had traveled a long way to see the ocean and had not been able to visit the coast, and now with this big fish on the beach she should be permitted to see both.”¹⁶ For whatever reason, the captains uncharacteristically relented to this indigenous slave woman’s request. Unfortunately, by the time the Corps actually reached the whale – two days later – the Natives had already stripped the carcass literally clean to the bone, leaving only a skeleton behind for Sacagawea and the explorers to admire.

From the earliest days of European exploration, through the advent of permanent White settlement, this was surely how drifting whale carcasses were “disposed” upon washing ashore on the beaches of Oregon and Washington; meat would quickly be salvaged, oil processed, guts and bones preserved and cured before either being sold to neighboring tribes as raw material or refined into manufactured goods and other useful tools. More importantly – and this is key – wherever a whale washed ashore, it would briefly become the nucleus of indigenous economic and cultural exchange. Clark and Sacagawea may have been too late for the whale, but they were just in time to take part in the spontaneous economic boom its disposal created.

From up and down the Oregon coast, Clark recorded that Native merchants had congregated to exchange everything from baskets and furs to arrows and clubs. Trade

¹² Yes, I recognize I am applying an inaccurate ethnocentric classification by blanketing the Corps of Discovery with catchy terminology like “Juxtaposed Jeffersonians” when in reality Sacagawea and York would never have qualified or subscribed to any political affiliation while Charbonneau was not even an American citizen. What can I say, I’m a raging bigot.

¹³ Captain Clark’s 11/24/1805 entry, found in Gary E. Moulton, ed., The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, 13 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 6:85-86

¹⁴ Captain Lewis’ 1/3/1806 entry, found in The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, 6:162-164

¹⁵ Also known as “Tillamooks.”

¹⁶ From the journal of Captain William Clark – recorded by Stephen E Ambrose, Undaunted Courage. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 328.

was active, bartering was fierce and the prices were apparently exorbitant.¹⁷ Yet this brief anecdote, forever preserved in Clark's journal, was more than an example of intercultural commerce. It was also an example of whale culture exchange. For both the explorers and the Killamooks, the whale was a symbol of both tremendous spiritual and historical significance.

For Clark and his compatriots, the whale was subconsciously a symbol of redemption. Schooled in the basics of the Bible, they were all familiar with the story of Jonah.¹⁸ In this parable, the whale is often read as a symbol for a world that is out of order, a world that has been disturbed by Jonah's failure to comply with God's commandment thus upsetting the natural order of creation.¹⁹ Ultimately Jonah is a fable with a moral: fail to obey the Lord, become fish-bait. By the time God finally orders the whale to free Jonah by vomiting him onto a beach, some three days later,²⁰ his previous fears of persecution by the people of Nineveh have vanished and he has seemingly been redeemed as a holy crusader for God.²¹

This was the whale culture the visiting Virginian's brought with them. As Captain Lewis later recorded in his journal:

Small as the store is [of whale meat] we prize it highly, and thank the hand of providence for directing the whale to us, and think him much more kind to us than he was to Jonah, having sent this monster to be *swallowed by us* instead of *swallowing of us* as Jona's did.²²

But for the Native Northwesterners, the whale was not only rich in symbolism, it was also fundamental to their societies' core understanding of creation. From British Columbia to Northern California, the whale – a creature of the sea – was paradoxically tied to the Native's interpretation of the land, including its history, geology, and the vast extremities that formed its natural identity.

In fact many tribes, particularly those residing in northern Washington through southern Canada, believed that all of creation rested on the back of a giant whale and that when such things as earthquakes or flooding occurred, it was because said whale was

¹⁷ Before returning to Fort Clatsop, Clark was able to persuade the Natives into supplying the Corps with some 300 pounds of meat and a few gallons of oil – both of which he must have considered exceedingly valuable as they were purchased at what Ecola State Park officials have since described as “a very high price.” <http://lewisandclarktrail.com/section4/orcities/seaside/ecola/index.htm> For his part, Clark concluded that the high price was related to the Natives natural penchant for greed (see Captain Clark's 1/8/1806 entry)

¹⁸ The prophet called by God to preach against the evils of Nineveh only to disobey his lord and flee to Tarshish where he was intercepted and safely consumed by “a big fish” (commonly interpreted as a whale.) See: “Jonah and the Whale,” King James Version, at <http://www.jesus-is-lord.com/jonah.htm>

¹⁹ Whales do not eat people. In fact, for centuries they've been hunted to provide man with sustenance. That is partially why Jonah's consumption seems so strange to us: we might – for example – relate it to being swallowed by a cow.

²⁰ The number “3” is similarly significant in the Christian tradition as a symbol of redemption and transformation. Jesus, for example, rose from the dead precisely three days after his crucifixion having undergone a transfiguration through his dissension (and subsequent conquest) into Hell.

²¹ In 1883, Italian author Carlo Collodi drew on this theme of transformation when he composed his timeless children's classic *Le avventure di Pinocchio*. In this story, the pathological puppet is swallowed by a great whale named Monstro who has also consumed the marionette's maker: Geppetto. It is only after escaping from the whale and rescuing Geppetto that the previously corruptible Pinocchio undergoes a moral transformation that convinces the Blue Ferry that he has earned enough merit to become “a real boy.”

²² Ambrose, 328

battling with its arch enemy – Thunderbird (the sky) – who was concurrently trying to harpoon it with its talons (lightning).²³ Among the northern tribes, the orthodox interpretation of these epic battles between Whale and Thunderbird usually concluded with Thunderbird driving his talons deep into Whale’s back, but somehow always failing to kill the great sea mammal with them. Instead, upon contact, Whale cleverly drags Thunderbird (whose talons are now caught in Whale’s flesh) to the bottom of the ocean where Thunderbird is subsequently drowned.²⁴

This story has been called “unique” to the Northwest but it is far from homogenous. In fact, for the people residing in the Puget Sound area all the way south to what is today northern California, the conclusion to this story was/is dramatically different. Among these tribes, the land did not rest on the back of Whale but was rather *transformed* by Thunderbird’s battles with him. In their version, Thunderbird – having just driven his talons into Whale’s back – courageously takes flight, heaving Whale out of the water in the process. Thunderbird then drops Whale on dry land where a final desperate battle ensues. During this struggle, Whale violently thrashes his tale and fins about, beating what was previously a shapeless earth into today’s prairies, slopes, valleys and ravines.²⁵ Finally, Whale is slain. Over the following years, the blubber from his massive corpse melts into the soil, leaving only his bones – the modern Olympic and Cascade ranges – to testify to his onetime greatness.²⁶

While the contrasted conclusions to what is otherwise a facsimile story may be interesting, with regard to the issue of whale carcass disposal, there is at least one observation that can be made: to the pre-colonized coastal Natives of the Pacific Northwest, the world *was* a whale carcass. One which, just like the occasional corpse that happened to wash ashore at Ecola in January of 1806, provided them with an abundance of resources²⁷ that both shaped and sustained their societies.²⁸

Not surprisingly, as Lewis and Clark observed, the Clatsops had developed a refined whale culture that consumed every element of their identity – right down to the clothes

²³ “Dating the 1700 Cascadia Earthquake: Great Coastal Earthquakes in Native Stories,” *Seismological Research Letters* – Volume 76, Number 2 March/April 2005, 144.

²⁴ This is often cited as a testament as to why the sky is not so full of lightning and thunder as it was before the battle with Whale.

²⁵ Once viewed as pagan superstition, seismologists today now use indigenous stories of Whale and Thunderbird to explain a host of geological activities that rocked the pre-Lewis&Clark PNW. (See: Tom Paulson, “When Thunderbird battled Whale, the Earth Shook” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer Reporter*, 2 Mar., 2001. Found at Seatlepi.com & “Thunderbird and Whale; a Cascadia Megathrust Earthquake in PNW Indian Legend,” *The Pacific Northwest Seismic Network*, [Online collection of scholarly works and primary sources] University of Washington Dept. of Earth and Space Sciences: Dec. 2, 2002.

²⁶ “Dating the 1700 Cascadia Earthquake: Great Coastal Earthquakes in Native Stories.” 144-145. Some stories also say that the Rocky Mountain’s are Whale’s bones.

²⁷ Victor B Scheffer, “The Whales and Dolphins of Washington State,” *The American Midland Naturalist*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Mar. 1948) p261

²⁸ A later Thunderbird figure in Native mythology is credited with teaching mankind how to hunt whales and survive by them. In this version, Thunderbird is no longer a competitor with Whale, but instead a master who, more-or-less, commands the great sea monster’s obedience in the same way God commands the whale that swallowed Jonah. (See: Reagan, Albert B. and L.V.W. Walters, “Tales from the Hoh and Quileute,” *The Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. 46, No. 182 (Oct.-Dec. 1933.)

they wore.²⁹ In short, the whale carcass – and the stories of hunting and salvaging that surrounded it – was, in one form or another, a visible pillar for everything in Native culture ranging from politics to social etiquette – religion,³⁰ economics, art and music.³¹

Clark, however, was unimpressed. Inevitably, he nonchalantly summarized the significance of this three-day adventure³² in a single convoluted sentence:

I proceeded on a Short distance to the whale which was nothing more than a Skeleton, of 105 feet long, we took out a few bones and returned to the Cabins at the mouth of the Creek, and attempted to trade with thos people who I found Close and Capricious, would not trade the smallest piece except they thought they got an advantage of the bargain, their disposition is avertitious, & independant in trade, they offered to trade for Elk of which we had not.³³

On the surface, this account suggests that Clark’s interest in the whale was predominantly commercial and perhaps partially zoological. That is to say, he obviously appreciated the carcass as a source of sustenance and was interested enough in its dimensions to bother measuring it, but he was otherwise uninspired and unimpressed. Unlike Lewis, for whom the whale inspired thoughts of Jonah that subsequently inspired a subconscious desire for redemption, Clark apparently failed to see any kind of higher significance in the carcass. Furthermore, Clark – a civilized man of science – did not feel any kind of personal affinity with the skeleton like the Clatsops and Killamooks may have. Such sentiments were reserved for lesser men, and for Charbonneau’s: “Indian woman [who] was very impatient to go with me, and was therefore indulged.”³⁴ And yet, there is a problem with the aforementioned account.

Clark’s measurements placed the whale’s skeleton at 105 feet in length. While he didn’t bother to identify the species, the statue marking the incident at what is now Ecola State Park is of a gray whale: a common cetacean to Northwest waters which still washes ashore to this day. Yet the largest gray whale ever recorded, in any ocean, was just a few inches over 50 feet long³⁵ – less than half the size of Clark’s specimen. Sperm whales, also common Northwest cetaceans, have not been measured at more than 59 feet.³⁶ And although they’ve never been known to swim much further north than Monterey Bay California – blue whales – the largest creatures on the planet, do not generally exceed 80 feet in length.³⁷ This leaves the modern Lewis and Clark supporter with the unenviable

²⁹ As Clark Recorded: “They wear a hat of a conic figure...on these hats they work various figures of different colours, but most commonly only black and white are emphasized. These figures are faint representations of whales, canoes and the harpooneers striking them.” LewisAndClarkTrail.com

³⁰ T.T. Waterman, “The Whaling Equipment of The Makah Indians,” (University of Washington, 1955) 38-40.

³¹ “The man danced and became a great shaman. For ten days he danced, and the people feasted. Then he told them where he had been and what he had seen, and said that whenever they wanted to have a whale he would get one.” From a Tillamook legend of how Thunderbird taught man to hunt whales, recorded by Franz Boas.

³² Which he had initially dubbed the “quest of the whale,” as though scavenging of this sort was somehow a heroic pursuit worthy of some classical knight-errant. (See Captain Clark’s 1/5/1806 entry in The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, 6:167-168.)

³³ Captain Clark’s 1/8/1806 entry, The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, 6:180

³⁴ Captain Clark’s 1/6/1806 entry, The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, 6:171

³⁵ Keith Banister and DeAndrew Campbell, eds., The Encyclopedia of Aquatic Life, (New York: Checkmark Books, 1985) 322.

³⁶ The Encyclopedia of Aquatic Life, 316

³⁷ The Encyclopedia of Aquatic Life, 330 – though some sources claim that they have been measured as much as 110 feet and a few Lewis and Clark historians have hypothesized that the whale that washed

task of reconciling exactly how Clark was able to stumble upon the skeleton of a creature that was 25 feet longer than any known to man.³⁸

Possibly Clark had simply mismeasured the carcass³⁹ – though it’s difficult to imagine exactly how a man with so much experience, expertise, and equipped with the finest field technology of his day, could make such an egregious error. Clark was a competent soldier who had distinguished his frontier prowess countless times over the course of his life. He would have read the instructions President Jefferson had outlined for the Corps in detail, including the President’s blatant insistence that “observations are to be taken with great pains & accuracy.”⁴⁰ And yet, Clark had observed a creature that probably did not exist.

In a chapter called *Being First*, Thomas P Slaughter – author of *Exploring Lewis and Clark: Reflections of Men and Wilderness* generalized that:

The explorer, as a European, is both assertive and insecure about his superiority to whatever and whomever he discovers. If he were not the product of a culture at once curious, restless, and greedy, he would have stayed home...The longer he is away from home, the less sure he is about his self-worth, the more violent he becomes, and the more mistakes he makes. The “facts” he brings with him and the “facts” he reports are often untrue. He is far from objective, frequently miscomprehends interpersonal exchanges – language being only one of many barriers to communication – and is a poor judge of people, especially himself. His all consuming desire to be first, to find people, places and things that are new, overwhelms his judgment and often leads him to exaggerate and lie.⁴¹

Clark, like Lewis, had wanted to discover a northwest passage, an *El Dorado*, a lost tribe of Israel – but all had eluded him. Instead, he had found a whale – or at least the skeleton of one. A whale which he honestly couldn’t even have claimed to discover, as seemingly every Native on the Oregon coast knew about it before him. But still, he was a genuine explorer. And as such, Clark could become the first to record the skeleton for posterity. In doing so, he could exaggerate the size of the carcass in order to embellish its significance.

Perhaps Clark was attempting to attract whalers to the region by promoting its shores of plenty. It wouldn’t have been the first time an explorer used whale carcasses to attract settlers to new lands⁴² and both Clark and Lewis had already gone to great lengths to recall the ease with which beaver and otter could be trapped on the Oregon coast; though whatever enthusiasm their journals’ may reveal about a burgeoning fur trade, their emigrant sales-pitch was literally dampened by their consistent condemnation of the region’s climate.

ashore might indeed have been a blue whale that had drifted into warmer currents than what exist today. Since no blue whale carcass has landed on an Oregon beach since Clark’s entry, my professional opinion is that these theories are rubbish.

³⁸ And 40ft longer than any carcass ever to wash ashore in Oregon.

³⁹ Paul Russell Cutright, author and defender of [Meriwether Lewis: Naturalist](#), has suggested that conditions may not have been conducive to take exact measurement.

⁴⁰ Jefferson’s Instructions to Lewis, June 20, 1803, found in Professor Sackman’s History 369 course-pack for the Spring of 2007.

⁴¹ Thomas P. Slaughter, [Exploring Lewis and Clark](#), (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 30-31.

⁴² In 1614 John Smith, founder of Jamestown, had successfully marketed the coasts of what is today Massachusetts to a hodgepodge of would-be English settlers – including the Puritans who eventually emigrated to the region – with tales of shorelines littered with the bones of dumb and docile whales who would make easy pickings and high profits. (See Eric Jay Dolin, [Leviathan: The History of Whaling in America](#), 25-29)

More-likely, as Slaughter suggests, Clark felt insecure about what he was doing so far out West, and had already stumbled upon a path of cultural convergence. Just like the “primitive” Killamooks he had come to despise, Clark was actively associating his own sense of identity – and even self-worth – with that of a dead whale. In effect, the carcass had become a monument to the explorer, and at the time it somehow seemed essential that it be as big as the expedition Clark thought he was leading. In other words, it was an attempt at redemption.

That Clark is guilty of telling a fish story is inconsequential. That Clark came to the Clatsops with one whale culture and left with something other is vital.

Ultimately, the modern historian is left to accept either one of two conclusions.

A: The incident on January 8, 1806, was ultimately a clash of cetacean cultures. When it was over, the Clatsops had disposed of a whale and Clark had designed a carcass. In the process of inventing this sea-creature, Clark had inadvertently faltered into the realm of the local savages who associated whale carrion with creation. He would now use said carcass to help create a myth of discovery that would remain with the Corps into modern times.

B: The conditions on the ground were such that Clark accidentally mistook the skeleton of whale that was probably 60-foot-long or less for the deceptively precise length of 105 feet.

SECTION II ORIGINS & TRANSITIONS

Nominally, if less authentically, Clark – like the rest of the explorers in the Corps of Discovery – was a Christian. So too were the majority of pioneers that proceeded him. But whatever their theology, the morality of these newcomers was increasingly coming under the influence of British economist Adam Smith, who in 1776 had argued in *The Wealth of Nations* that:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chuses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow citizen.⁴³

As economist Robert Reich later observed “With several strokes of a pen, Smith thereby provided a moral justification for motives that had been morally suspect in Western thought for thousands of years.”⁴⁴ Henceforth, to be an unproductive dependant was morally reprehensible.

Though anthropologist have recently suggested that neighboring tribes may have followed their example, the Makah remain the only indigenous nation of what is today the continental United States whom archaeologist have been able to confirm hunted whales before the arrival of Europeans. The remaining coastal tribes, as Clark observed, were primarily marine scavengers.⁴⁵

⁴³ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 15.

⁴⁴ Robert Reich, Introduction to Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), xviii.

⁴⁵ “Their food is principally fish that is thrown on the Shores by the Seas & left by the tide.” Captain Clark’s 1/8/1806 entry, *The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition*

While of course there were more whales in the ocean in Clark's time than there are today, exactly how many happened to beach themselves on Northwest shores would naturally have fluctuated from year-to-year. Because entire communities very likely depended on these chance events, the inability to find any sort of pattern in the whales' beaching behavior must have confounded the Clatsops to no end, much as it continues to confound modern biologists. In 1973, for example, only four whales happened to land on Washington's beaches over the course of an entire year.⁴⁶ Six years later, however, 41 sperm whales washed ashore on a beach near Florence, Oregon, over the course of a single day!⁴⁷

Such instability fostered a religious dependence on the spirit world's good graces. Many nations erected specially housed shrines in their communities where prominent individuals – most often chiefs – would spend long hours praying and ritually purifying themselves in order to attract beached whales to their shores.⁴⁸ For the Natives, these shrines reflected their unwavering faith in a spiritually enthused universe that would always provide for them as long as they continued to live a pious existence. But for the Euro-Americans, such shrines were only further evidence of an already widely held belief that indigenous Northwesterners were lazy dependants of Mother Nature who were greatly in need of moral redemption. As contact with Whites led to trade, many tribes did assimilate European whaling technology into their culture and subsequently adopted more capitalist-driven sentiments by, for example, converting their shrines into holy places for devout whalers: rather than scavengers.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, scavenging continued – even in the face of growing disapproval from dominating outsiders.⁵⁰

In the decades following the Corps' visit, intruding White populations began to challenge the centrality of the whale carcass in the region's indigenous coastal civilizations: threatening to destabilize entire societies in the process.⁵¹ Among these invaders was frontiersman James G. Swan. Swan, who kept extensive diaries of

⁴⁶ Two of which were subsequently salvaged by the Slater Museum of Natural History at the University of Puget Sound. Gary Shugart, *Gray Whale (PSM 24093)*, Slater Museum, <http://www.ups.edu/x11833.xml>

⁴⁷ "Son of a Blubber." *TranScript*, July 1994. The Oregon Department of Transportation employee magazine.

⁴⁸ The harvesting of such whales was – spiritually speaking – a tricky task. Most tribes attributed the advent of a beached whale to a Thunderbird hunting expedition. Often Thunderbird would allow the people to take the whale meat it did not want or couldn't carry. But those who proved too greedy and thus offended Thunderbird could expect nothing less than fist size hail to rain down on them before being turned to stone. See "Thunderbird Turns People To Stone" in *Tales from the Hoh and Quileute*, 321-322

⁴⁹ The most famous of these shrines is the Nootka Whalers Shrine, which – despite the stalwart efforts of native peoples to repatriate the artifact to indigenous communities, currently remains part of the American Museum of Natural History's collection. Douglas Hand, *Gone Whaling: A Search for Orcas in Northwest Waters*, (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1994) p170.

⁵⁰ When exactly White Americans developed a distaste for "drift whales" is unclear. During the colonial days drift whales were the subject of endless disputes between settlers, colonial governments and even ministries, all of whom attempted to lay claim to at least a portion of the beached blubber. Dolin argues that such disputes helped lead to the creation of some of the earliest formal legal jurisdictions in New England, and provided a stable source of tax revenue for colonial governments. (Dolin, p41-46) Lewis and Clark certainly appreciated dining on the drift whale that had landed at Ecola in 1806, so at least as late as the early 19th century cetacean scavenging was certainly not taboo.

⁵¹ This happened in countless ways. Everything from removing Natives from the shore where they could salvage whale blubber, to over-hunting, to introducing Anglo/Christian social standards and perspectives that taught Natives to reject the whale from their society.

Territorial Washington during the mid 1850s, once recorded a salvaging incident that took place between Toke Point and Grays Harbor following the conclusion of treaty negotiations between local chiefs and the Territorial Government.⁵² Observing the traditional economic and cultural exchange that spontaneously always flared up whenever a whale washed ashore, Swan found himself uncharacteristically appalled.

This capped the climax of all dirty, greasy, filthy sights I ever saw among Indians...Toke, who was on the ground early, had taken up a claim near the whale's fin, and, having carved out a space to stand in, was securely housed, like Jonah of old, in the whale's belly, his head and arms projecting out between the whale's carcass. There he was, entirely naked, besmeared with blood and grease, and as happy as possible. Other Indians were cutting and carving away at the blubber, which they would pack on the backs of their slaves and retainers in pieces of about fifty pounds each, to be carried to their respective tents...I should as soon attempt making a meal off an old India-rubber shoe, dipped in train oil, as to attempt masticating dried whale blubber; but the Indians like it, and the whole party, children and all, were besmeared with grease from head to foot and had a most ancient and fish-like smell about them...I did not remain many hours about the whale; the sight and smell for about fifteen minutes satisfied me that I had learned all that was worth knowing about the Indian method of procuring whale oil.⁵³

Luckily for settlers who shared Swan's views on the subject, scenes like these would occur increasingly less frequently over the following decades as White industrialists rapidly depleted both the population of whales and Indians until both practically qualified as "endangered species." Sadly, there is little evidence to suggest that either's extinction would have derailed the general White population's train of thought. By the 1850s many settlers in the Pacific Northwest had converted to the creed of their Yankee brethren out east and essentially become slaves to the cult of efficiency. Many were, in fact, more appalled by the sloth the Natives seemingly exercised in their disposing of carcasses than the actual act of rendering itself. As one article printed in the Jan. 15, 1853 issue of *The Columbian* lamented:

The whale fishery off our coast is also, at present, carried on exclusively by Indians in their frail canoes, and with their imperfect apparatus – without any of the regular fixtures for extracting the oil; and with what success, the result of the last few years has given a very favorable evidence of what *might* be done by the experienced whalers of the Atlantic.⁵⁴

Another article, published in the same newspaper, reprinted a story that had initially been published in the *Baltimore American* – some 3,000 miles away. It excitedly described a new method of hunting whales via an electric harpoon "capable of throwing into the body of the whale eight tremendous strokes of electricity in a second...paralyzing in an instant the muscles of the whale and depriving it of all power of motion, if not actual life."⁵⁵

Such interest was partly inspired by an obvious abundance of whales in the Territorial waters; part of the region's "undeveloped wealth" Governor Isaac Stevens was sure to

⁵² What the understood political significance of this humpback whale's arrival on the shores of Natives – who had just signed away their lands to the U.S. Government – exactly was at the time, would be interesting to explore in future research.

⁵³ Swan, p360-364.

⁵⁴ "Fisheries off the Pacific Coast – ultimate importance to Northern Oregon, etc," *The Columbian*, 15 Jan. 1853, p. 2, col. 1. Found at The Washington State Library and State Archives.

⁵⁵ "Killing whales by electricity," *The Columbian*, 2 Oct.1852, p. 1, col. 3. Found at The Washington State Library and State Archives. Whether or not the Natives would have been as impressed as *The Columbian* with such novelties is doubtful. After all, they already had Thunderbird, who "makes lightning by his rapid flight through the air."

highlight when he made his 1854 trip back east to encourage wealthy speculators and investors to move west and enjoy “the best whaling grounds of the Pacific.”⁵⁶ But aside from profits, Stevens made it clear that Washington’s drive towards efficiency in whaling, as in other industries, was at least partially about giving the territory a national identity through commerce. Stevens repeatedly referred to Washington’s resources as “sources of *national* wealth” and closed on a personal note, telling the New England whalers that: “The union of this distant shore with my old New England home, in pursuing one of the greatest branches of trade, would be to me a sufficient result for my political ambition.” Stevens’ attempt to commercially nationalize Washington’s wealth and thus bring some sort of transcontinental cultural unity was not entirely successful. Nonetheless, commercial whaling did come to the Pacific Northwest: ultimately at the expense of the indigenous population.

This is not to suggest that all Washingtonians opposed Indian “inefficiency” with regard to whale carcass hunting and disposal. In 1854 a brief article published in the *Washington Pioneer* announced the sad drowning of Captain Wm. M. Rowland, during a whaling trip with “an Indian”⁵⁷ in the Sound. Either because he managed to swim to shore or because his skin was red, the article never bothered to identify “the Indian” whom Captain Rowland had chosen to risk his life whaling with, but his story nonetheless reveals that at least some Whites and Natives could cooperatively appreciate and exchange cetacean cultures: even in the midst of rapid change.

Nonetheless, as demonstrated both by Governor Stevens’ 1854 eastern tour and the mountain of whaling articles that had preceded it, the Washingtonians of the 1850s had come to identify themselves and the future of their territory with whale blubber. It was thus only a matter of time before whaling inspired a new phase of manifest destiny.

In the months following Stevens’ eastern tour, Natives increasingly became perceived as obstacles to progress and were subsequently removed in order to better control the coastline where fisheries and processing plants could be established. Even the Makah tribe, whom Stevens called “the most enterprising within the territory” before praising how “They take the whale with harpoons, spears, etc, of their own invention, and venture in their whaling excursions, in their light canoes, an almost incredible distance from land,”⁵⁸ were not spared the fate of resettlement. Smith’s self-love morality had trumped the Makah’s proven record of efficient “production.”

Yet, although its impact was long-term – especially for indigenous communities that subsequently underwent major demographic shifts – the whaling mania that swept through the Pacific Northwest during the 1850s was short lived. Crude petroleum was discovered in Western Pennsylvania just four years after the Makah were formally ejected from their ancestral homes at Neah Bay. By that point most major American metropolises were already lighting their streets either with cheap lard-oil or with a cleaner burning coal-based innovation called “kerosene.” Petroleum, however, was the industry’s death blow. As early as 1859, a single Pennsylvania oil-well could pump more

⁵⁶ “Letter of Governor Stevens to Hon, Jos. Grinnell, and Other Fisherman Engaged in the Whaling Industry,” *Pioneer and Democrat*, 6/17/1854, page 2, Column 2. Found at The Washington State Library and State Archives

⁵⁷ “Drowned,” *Washington Pioneer*, 28 Jan. 1854, P. 3, Col. 1, Found at The Washington State Library and State Archives.

⁵⁸ “Indian Treaties,” *Pioneer and Democrat*, 10, Feb., 1855, p. 2, Col. 5. Found at Found at The Washington State Library and State Archives.

barrels of lamp-oil in a day than the best Nantucket whaling ships could produce in three years.⁵⁹

Then, war broke out between the states.

For four long years Northwest seaman had nothing to read in the paper but gloomy reports of atrocities habitually perpetrated against whalers by one side or the other. In an attempt to enforce Lincoln's quarantine of the South, the Union Navy began buying up New England whale boats simply to sink them in Charleston Harbor. Meanwhile, enterprising Confederates outfitted a British-built privateer vessel called *Shenandoah*.⁶⁰ Launched in October of 1864, the infamous commerce raider became the only vessel to circumnavigate the globe while flying the stars-and-bars: sinking or capturing no less than 38 Yankee whale-ships in the process (including 21 that were sunk after Lee's surrender at Appomattox.)⁶¹ All told, at least 80 whale-ships were sunk by one side or the other over the course of the War, and the imposing cost of rebuilding such a fleet probably hastened the industry's decline.⁶²

So too did the increasing scarcity of whales. No figures exist regarding exactly what the population of commercial whales was but by all accounts by the 1870s it was becoming increasingly difficult to find worthwhile pods. One historian later attributed this decline to "civilized society's almost insatiable desire for whaling products, and its inventive capacity for obtaining profits, combined to bring about near extinction of almost every species of whale. The Pacific Northwest industry was a leader in this worldwide depopulation."⁶³

Amazingly, however, the Northwest's whaling industry would survive well into the next century, but it would do so primarily as a luxury trade that generated slim profits. Whale bone or ivory would be a key component to the industry's survival, but because it was so much simpler to trap and massacre seal or walrus herds once they came ashore, and often cheaper to import elephant, rhino or hippo tusks from Africa, the concept of financing extended overseas whaling voyages no longer made sense.

Lacking any apparent economic incentive to emotionally invest in the whale, the cetacean's cultural/moral significance seemingly evaporated – perhaps in favor of the more commercially lucrative salmon that has since become an enduring totem for the region. The extent of the region's indifference toward whales was perhaps best illustrated by a sardonically crafted 1890 editorial, published in the *Lyden Pioneer Press*. Using simple matter-of-fact language, the Northwest contributor summed up all that he thought to be reasonably important to know about whales:

The whale is a mammal...The female whale does not lay eggs like the fish, but produces her young alive, like the Piute Indian and other brutes. She nurses her own young, especially if help should be scarce, and sometimes becomes the head of quite a family. The father, however, is quite migratory and irresponsible to a degree. Whales live to a great age and lead a very wet and uneventful life. They are taken with the harpoon.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Caleb Crain, "There She Blew: The history of American whaling," *The New Yorker*, 23 Aug. 2007, p78.

⁶⁰ *Seattle Weekly Gazette*, "The Rebel Pirate Shenandoah – Terrible Destruction of Whalemens," 29 July 1865, p. 2, col. 1.

⁶¹ The CSS *Shenandoah* finally agreed to surrender in August of 1865, some four months after the termination of the Civil War, thus agreeing to suspend indefinitely its plan of attacking San Francisco.

⁶² Crain, p78.

⁶³ Donald C. Cutter, review of *On the Northwest: Commercial Whaling in the Pacific Northwest, 1790-1967*, by Robert Lloyd, *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3. (Aug. 1990): p367-368 JSTOR.

⁶⁴ Bill Nye, "The Jaws of the Columbia," editorial, *Lynden Pioneer Press*, 22 May 1890, p. 3, col. 4.

Thus whales, like the Piute and other Northwest tribes, no longer sparked much interest among the first residents of the newly annexed State of Washington, and so their cultural significance had been altered to oblivion. To the Euro-American mind-set neither creature seemed economically viable and so they were essentially ejected from both the region's past and present.⁶⁵

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the Native populations of the Pacific Northwest had almost completely been dislodged from what for centuries had been their scavenging beaches. Henceforth, whenever a whale happened to wash ashore or beach itself, it would be up to the White-man to dispose of its remains. During this period of transition, the whale culture of the Pacific Northwest would dramatically shift. And yet, much of the mystique about what had been there before would somehow survive into modern times: most notably notions of moral/material redemption spawning broader cultural/environmental transformations. But this would all transpire in the years to follow, for 1859-1913 was an age of whale-culture decline for the Pacific Northwest: and in a sense, it was subsequently an era of profound tragedy. As Eric J Dolin, author of *Leviathan*, noted, drift-whale carcasses had helped lay the foundation for colonial America's earliest notions of jurisdiction, taxation and public revenue. One need only review the countless magisterial cases heard throughout colonial New England, that reflect endless disputes over the ownership of drift-whales based on where carcasses happened to land or who was first to discover them,⁶⁶ to see that at one-time dead-whales were contentious sources of private interest. Yet although the earliest Pacific Northwesterners had once revered drift-whales as gifts from God, by the twentieth century they had gone from private interests to public inconveniences.

Perhaps no one understood this better than Oregon's Democrat Governor Oswald West, who in 1913 re-classified beached-whales under the ignominious heading of coastal "debris" – subsequently assigning them to the State Highway Commission's operational jurisdiction.⁶⁷ Since there were relatively few automobiles in Oregon – or anywhere else for that matter – in 1913,⁶⁸ and even fewer paved roads and highways (hence the need to drive on beaches) one can only assume that Governor West's decision

⁶⁵ The Indian in particular remained an inconvenient and inescapable skeleton in the White-man's closet well into the 20th Century. In *Tacoma Invites You* C.E. Stevens attempted to re-write the history of his region to make it seem more palpable to like-minded entrepreneurs out east: "To this Garden of the Gods at last came the masters of civilization – the white man – who has transmuted primeval solitudes into habitations for his race; and there, inspired by the sublimity of nature on every hand, he has builded his vast cities, his great systems of railways and his mighty fleets which plough the waters of every ocean... There may be found precious relics of the earlier history of the state and nation gathered from all sources, not the least of which is the extensive and valuable collection of curious relics of that race now well-nigh extinct – the Noble Red Man. (C.E. Stevens, "Tacoma Invites You" *History 369 Reader* p16&22)

⁶⁶ "The clearest sign that drift whaling had become an important occupation in the colonies was the rise of government oversight... fights over who owned such whales were frequent enough that the Southampton General Court stepped in to keep the peace. On March 7, 1644, the court order the town be divided into four wards of eleven persons each, and when a whale was found, each ward was required to offer two people, chosen by lot, to do the honors of cutting it up... Generally speaking all the regulations focused on determining who would profit from the whales." (Dolin, p41-43)

⁶⁷ Paul Linnman, *The Exploding Whale: and Other Remarkable Stories from the Evening News*, (Portland: WestWinds Press, 2003) 11.

⁶⁸ It was not until the mid 1930s that the car replaced the horse as the primary method of personal transportation. Max Boot, *War Made New: Weapons, Warriors and the Making of the Modern World*, (New York: Gotham Books, 2006) 207.

to treat beached whales as “debris” not only reflected practical objectives, such as maintaining the flow of traffic, but also *transformative* ambitions, such as finding a way to convince enough people with cars (people with money) to move to Oregon.

SECTION IV THE HORNET WHO STUNG A DUCK

As already stated, prior to the twentieth century it had not been unusual for beached whales to inspire thoughts of redemption in the Pacific Northwest. But on at least one occasion, the carcass of a beached whale provided that fulfillment in itself.

In April of 1918, Prince Lucien Campbell – president of the infantile University of Oregon – sat down and composed a series of letters to friends and especially superintendents of public schools around the state. At least four of these letters have since been archived by the University, but the concern they reflect and the subsequent responses from previously unmentioned individuals suggests that he probably wrote more.⁶⁹ The letters all begin as follows:

I am told that some injury is being done the University in various sections of the state by a scurrilous propaganda of abuse which is being carried on by a Mr. Fullerton, who resides in the county a mile or two from Eugene. He has been printing for some time a small sheet called “The Hornet” devoted to vicious attacks on the University. We have absolutely ignored this publication, for the reason that any attention which might be paid to it would only dignify his campaign and bring him into the lime-light of publicity, which he so earnestly desires. I am sending this letter to a few personal friends to make inquiry whether there is any injury resulting to the University to which we ought to give attention. I shall greatly appreciate any information you can give and also any suggestion as to the best method of procedure as far as your part of the state is concerned.⁷⁰

As these letters suggests, President Campbell was defending a besieged University of Oregon – one which had recently become the target of a skilled propagandist of questionable sanity. That propagandist was James Hornet Fullerton, an ornery shadow from history whose legacy refuses to fade into the background.

Little today is known about him, and that which is known is spectacular in the least. Apparently Fullerton had first come to Eugene after having escaped from a mental asylum in Montana, “without having received his discharge.”⁷¹ Upon arriving in Lane County he took to farming, dabbling in muckraking on the side. For years he spent countless hours admonishing the Eugene Chamber of Commerce for not encouraging the construction of a loganberry factory in the community,⁷² simultaneously finding time to publish a scathing review of Teddy Roosevelt in the form of a self-published book that President Campbell later said defamed “Mr. Roosevelt with the most venomous abuse... a book which attacks him from every angle of his character.”⁷³ But it wasn’t until 1914 that James H. Fullerton – then 65-years-old – found his true calling in life when fate chose to have the body of a whale beach itself on property he owned.

⁶⁹ The four were addressed to the following: Mr. J.C. Conley, Superintendent Willowa County Schools; Mr. A.C. Strange, Superintendent of Baker County Schools; Superintendent FA Tieden, Marshfield Oregon; and Mr. J.E. Myers Superintendent of Crook County Schools.

⁷⁰ Letter to Mr. J.C. Conley, 24 April 1918, Office of the President, University of Oregon: File 00005, Box # 9, Eugene, OR.

⁷¹ Letter to Mr. J.C. Conley, 24 April 1918

⁷² Marvin Tims, “A dead whale is worse than a white elephant,” Eugene Register Guard, 15 Nov. 1970.

⁷³ Letter to Mr. J.C. Conley 4/24/1918

Already shunned as a crackpot before the tides chose to wash the dead sea-mammal onto his shore, the eccentric Fullerton actually interpreted the whale carcass as something of a gift from God. Had he been an Indian and the whale had washed ashore but only half a century earlier, he probably would have been right. Unfortunately for Fullerton, by 1914 such views were seen as archaic and primitive. Moreover, it wasn't long before Fullerton's whale desperately began to smell, which, as history would later demonstrate again and again, was how all the trouble started.

Fullerton believed the carcass had material, intellectual and perhaps even a kind of spiritual value, if "spiritual" can be divorced from religion. He thus concluded that the most appropriate thing he could do with the whale carcass was donate it to public academia – the modern "cathedrals" of the day. The natural choice was of course the nearby University of Oregon, which Fullerton believed would find the decaying carcass: "a fine addition to the... campus. Students could gaze at the mammal in wonder and the whale's bones could even be used as the framework for a campus teahouse."⁷⁴

In January of 1915, months after the animal had perished, Fullerton finally raised enough money from "friends of the whale" to transport it on a flatbed railcar to the UO. Unfortunately, he had neglected to contact the University before bothering to ship his donation, whose stench was apparently so incredible that the then 10,000 or so citizens of Eugene reportedly got the first unwelcome whiff more than a mile before the train even arrived. Needless to say, the University flatly refused to accept "the gift."

Fullerton was outraged by this snub, not to mention the subsequent lampoons that appeared in the local papers. In February of 1915 he wrote a scathing letter to Governor James Withycombe, in which he likely damned every facet of Campbell's character.⁷⁵ Campbell later wrote a letter of apology to the governor for the inconvenience. Still, Fullerton persisted with his donation.⁷⁶

On March 3, 1915, Professor C.H. Edmondson of the Department of Zoology wrote to inform President Campbell that: "the 'whale question' has presented itself again."⁷⁷ The University had finally agreed to accept Fullerton's whale – if only to shut him up – but only if he first cleaned and deodorized the remains. Fullerton was insistent that the University should do this and thus a stalemate ensued. "I do not have time to go out and clean the skeleton and I have doubts about getting students to do the work," Edmondson complained.

Finally, Fullerton was forced to abandon his prize in an unmarked grave. For the next two years he silently brooded with irrational rage. Then, at the outset of America's entry into "The Great War," an opportunity for revenge seemingly presented itself.

The University of Oregon – along with many other public colleges and universities – was publicly criticized for its decision to maintain German language and literature programs with tax-payer dollars. In a time when Uncle Sam was calling all Americans to "Halt the Hun," the University's intellectual allegiance was publicly called into question

⁷⁴ Tims

⁷⁵ I have been unable to locate said letter, only President Campbell's subsequent apology.

⁷⁶ Letter to Withycombe, 17 Feb. 1915, Office of the President, University of Oregon: File 00005, Box # 6, Eugene, OR.

⁷⁷ Letter from Edmondson, 3 Mar. 1915, Office of the President, University of Oregon: File 00005, Box # 6, Eugene, OR.

and attendance inevitably slackened.⁷⁸ Fullerton placed himself at the forefront of this assault by founding a newspaper called *The Oregon Hornet* whose sole purpose was to “get even” with the University.

Fullerton spent the entire War printing his tabloid newspaper⁷⁹ in which he made sensationalist claims against the university and its president. At one point he even accused him of turning the school into “a hotbed of Germans.”⁸⁰ As a journalist he demonstrated neither scruples nor restraint and even went so far as to charge President Campbell with embezzlement. Despite the lunacy of it all, Fullerton’s message of hate somehow reverberated across the State, effectively redeeming Fullerton’s credibility as a sane individual while prompting Campbell to assemble an ad-hoc committee of respected individuals to combat the Hornet’s threat.

Members of this committee often pledged to eradicate copies of Fullerton’s paper should they ever emerge in their respective counties. One Campbell ally – Superintendent Myers of Crook County – cheerfully declared: “The ‘Hornet’ has not as yet appeared here. If it does I will return a whole fleet of hornet nests.”⁸¹ Another – U.S. Atty. Clarence Reames of Portland – ordered Fullerton to discontinue his inflammatory press and in 1917 even went so far as to bar at least one issue from the mails.⁸² Still another – Superintendent Strange of Baker County – organized “several of our prominent citizens”⁸³ to formulate a response. One of those citizens was State Senator Strayer, a Baker County resident who was familiar with Fullerton’s writings. As Superintendent Strange recorded:

The Senator was a member of a committee which criticized the University in certain respects and he said that he thought that this man concluded from that fact that he would be interested in his propaganda against the school. Consequently Mr. Fullerton has sent Sen. Strayer several copies. Mr. Strayer says that he has read them but has destroyed them and has not even discussed the matter with anyone. He did say, however, that he thought this man ought to be sued for criminal libel, that he felt that his propaganda would do harm and that it ought to be stopped in some way.⁸⁴

Following Senator Strayer’s advice, the University brought charges against Fullerton who in February of 1919 subsequently became the first man Lane County ever convicted of criminal libel. Sentenced by Judge G.F. Skipworth to one year in jail, Fullerton was ultimately allowed to leave after having served only one month behind bars because the court chose to take pity on his age and deteriorating health. Thereafter, Fullerton retired to private life and the story of his whale all but disappeared from the records.⁸⁵

Just how much damage UO actually sustained by refusing to abandon the German programs that subsequently fed the flames of Fullerton’s angst is unclear. The simple assessment is that it failed to compromise UO long-term survival, not to mention

⁷⁸ Though this is probably because many students withdrew with the intention to enlist and fight, rather than to protest the actions of the U.

⁷⁹ Which, surprisingly, sold reasonably well in Lane County.

⁸⁰ It being 1917 at the time these charges were made, Fullerton was essentially accusing the University of collaboration with the enemy.

⁸¹ Letter from Myers, 27 April 1918, Office of the President, University of Oregon: File 00005, Box # 9, Eugene, OR.

⁸² Tims

⁸³ Letter from Strange, 26 April 1918, Letter from Myers, 27 April 1918, Office of the President, University of Oregon: File 00005, Box # 9, Eugene, OR.

⁸⁴ Letter from Strange, 26 April 1918

⁸⁵ Tims

President Campbell's reputation. Campbell had won, partly because he was in the right but also because he had been able to use the whale to discredit Fullerton and thereby redeem both himself and the University from libelous accusations. Fullerton may have been lying about UO's embezzlement and thus was rightfully convicted by the Lane County court, but it was ultimately the credibility of his sanity – as called into question by President Campbell and others via the whale incident – that earned Fullerton a more meaningful conviction in the court of public opinion. Were it not for the whale, Fullerton probably still would have gone to jail, but UO might still have been targeted for its support of German studies. Instead, the whale provided the public with a happy distraction that ultimately obscured the real issue which had bolstered Fullerton's support in the first place. As Superintendent Strange recalled:

I remember very distinctly the difference over the placing of the skeleton of the whale on the campus. I remember that the newspapers made a good deal of fun of the proposition and no doubt that Mr. Fullerton concluded that this ridicule of him and his proposition was inspired by the University faculty.⁸⁶

Underneath the humorous and indeed irrational circumstances that characterized this rather obscure incident from Pacific Northwest history is an important and perhaps overlooked observation about the region's culture of whale carcass disposal: it is often raked by inflamed emotions and seemingly unrelated politics. Throughout the century, similar phenomenon would repeatedly resurface whenever a Northwest whale happened to die a seemingly "unnatural" death that required human disposal.⁸⁷ In retrospect it would therefore be fitting to designate Lane County Oregon as the cradle of the Pacific Northwest's modern whale culture.

SECTION V THE EXPLODING WHALE

No history of whale carcass disposal would be complete without the Oregon Exploding Whale of 1970. Few incidents in cetacean disposal history have inspired more earnest requests for "redemption" than what happened on that beach near Florence. While some have tried to justify what happened, most prefer to revel in the humor hindsight offers.

By November of 1970, the Pacific Northwest had already accumulated a rich, albeit, largely unrecognized history of whale carcass disposal. But on the twelfth of that month – a day which will forever live in infamy – an incident occurred on an obscure beach in Oregon that would keep a disbelieving world speechless for the next 37 years. As KATU's Paul Linnman – the most famous journalist to document that event – would later say in his memoirs:

There was certainly no way we could have known upon arriving in this peaceful community on the Oregon Coast that, in a few hours, both of us would be running for our lives, trying to escape the heavy and potentially lethal pieces of whale blubber that rained from the sky. Nor could we anticipate that this one news story would be with us forever

⁸⁶ Letter from Strange, 26 April 1918

⁸⁷ Steve Hackstadt, founder of TheExplodingWhale.com website, has reportedly received death threats from Save the Whales activists who apparently misunderstand his interest in the exploding whale of 1970 and mistakenly believe that both he blew the whale up and that, in fact, the whale was still alive when it was dynamited – neither of which are true. (See: Bob Welch, "Tale of flying blubber keeps bubbling up." Eugene Register Guard, 10 Nov. 2005.)

and, in some ways, define our careers. And how could we ever have foreseen that for the next three decades and more, people around the world – individuals, government organizations, and officials of all kinds – would want us to tell them about Oregon’s exploding whale? Was it true, they demanded to know, or was this another of those ‘urban legends?’ And if it had actually happened, they were always quick to ask, could we see the video too.⁸⁸

The video, however, is an imperfect presentation of the people and events that culminated in that cataclysmic explosion: an in-depth background is necessary to fully appreciate the supposed madness.

On an unspecified date⁸⁹ in the fall of 1970, a 45 foot, 30 ton sperm-whale,⁹⁰ washed upon the shores of the tiny Lane County town of Florence Oregon. As in days before, when indigenous Northwesterners ruled Florence’s beaches, crowds of people from across Lane County – this time predominantly White Anglos – flocked to the shore in what became an impromptu revival of whale carcass cultural exchange. For weeks, the mood on Florence’s beach reflected that of a carnival atmosphere – one which in many respects resembled the spontaneous whale culture exchanges of the previous century. The novelty of the carcass even revived old habits that had long been abandoned, including scavenging.⁹¹ There were, however, at least two new additions to this very real form of whale culture exchange: explosives and the media.

The former was ultimately employed by the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT)⁹² to dispose of the whale’s remains via half a ton of dynamite. ODOT decided on this plan of action only after the smell of the carcass’ decay – again, the traditional White-man’s objection to whale carcass disposal – became such an extreme nuisance to the people of Florence that ODOT was pressured into doing something “immediate.” The chore fell to George Thorton, an ODOT engineer with a history of competency that was undermined only by his lack of leadership experience.⁹³

It had been years since a whale had washed ashore in Lane County; so long in fact that Fullerton’s rotten 1915 specimen may have been the last one. No one was quite sure how to get rid of it and failing to see any obvious practical solution to remove the body, Thorton decided to contact the US Navy. It was only after speaking with Naval officials that he resolved to use dynamite.⁹⁴

Thus the latter force – the media – came into the picture. In the time of Lewis and Clark, the closest thing to a “media” for whale carcass disposal was the Clatsops who, via trade, informed them that a whale had landed nearby. But had the Corps of Discovery made the journey to Fort Clatsop on November 12, 1970, and decided to turn south to

⁸⁸ Linnman, p12

⁸⁹ It is believed that the whale was dead for several days before it was discovered.

⁹⁰ Which was mistakenly identified as a gray whale at the time.

⁹¹ Several years later, a still shell-shocked journalist recorded that: “Some strong-stomached guy with a chain saw even cut away the bottom jaw, apparently hoping to make a killing in the ivory trade.” Larry Bacon, “Beached whale: Thar she blows,” *Eugene Register Guard*, 12 Nov. 1995

⁹² Then called the State Highway Commission.

⁹³ Prior to the exploding whale, he had never supervised a demolition. Not that it really mattered, as no one really knew how to deal with the situation at the time.

⁹⁴ Though whether or not the Navy specified exactly how much dynamite should be used is uncertain. Indeed, Thorton openly says in a video-taped interview prior to detonation: “Well, I’m confident that it’ll work. The only thing is we’re not sure just exactly how much, uh, explosives it’ll take to disintegrate this... thing, so the scavengers, seagulls, and crabs and what-not can clean it up.”

<http://www.theexplodingwhale.com/evidence/resources/transcript/>

Florence for “Whale Blowing Day” – as the media and ODOT chose to advertise it – they would have been greeted by an impressive array of citizens and journalists from across the Pacific Northwest. The most prominent of which was KATU’s Paul Linnman who, along with cameraman Doug Brazil, arrived in Florence via private jet from Portland. It was the first time their producer had ever awarded them such a privilege. Linnman would later recall that:

As I moved steadily toward the whale, I looked around and made some observations. A reporter likes to appear as if he or she knows what’s going on, so I tried to act nonchalant, like I had attended several mammal bombings.⁹⁵

In the proceeding years, hundreds of Oregonians would claim to have personally witnessed the debacle and exaggerated stories about the moments leading up to the blast would later add to the narrative’s mystique. Linnman acknowledged that on the beach “Occasional laughter and loud talking could be heard and there was definitely a sense of excitement in the air, the kind of anticipation felt by people awaiting darkness and a fireworks show on the Fourth of July,”⁹⁶ but estimated that there was no more than 75 people in all, including journalists and ODOT workers.⁹⁷ Among them was 24-year-old graduate student Bruce Mate. Mate was a marine biologist with an emphasis in sea lion migrations who was working on his PhD at the time the whale washed ashore. His natural passion for such things provoked him to drive up from Coos Bay, arriving just 30 minutes before detonation. Mate would later say that:

I asked if they [the ODOT workers] would give me time to get into the animal, retrieve the stomach contents, gonads and such...If you have these things you can tell if it died from trauma, its breeding habits and much more...Their response was ‘take a few measurements and then move back sonny, because we’re about to blow this mess up’...I also had some experience with explosives before then and could pretty much predict the outcome, but it was obvious to me that the input of a twenty-four-year-old “kid” was not going to carry much weight.⁹⁸

Nonetheless, Mate stuck around long enough for the eruption, “including the rain of red whale oil over the crowd. What a scene!”⁹⁹ Emerging relatively unscathed, he returned to Coos Bay where he finished his research. Over the subsequent thirty-seven years he rose to prominence in his field and is today widely considered to be the leading expert on whales in the world. He is also one of the most famous, and appears frequently in network and National Geographic documentaries. Dr. Mate is currently based at the prestigious Hatfield Marine Science Center operated by Oregon State University in Newport, Oregon, and has repeatedly played an influential role in directing latter-day Northwest whale carcass salvaging and disposal.¹⁰⁰ One can only speculate how his life might have been different had he not come to Florence and been transformed by the exploding whale that day.

There was no countdown before the eruption. The spectators and journalists were merely asked to move back to a distance deemed secure, and with the lowering of a flag, the charges were set. With that, the theory of using dynamite to dispose of beached whale carcasses was officially put to the test, and proved disastrous.

⁹⁵ Linnman, p32.

⁹⁶ Linnman, p57.

⁹⁷ Though certainly hundreds of people saw the whale in the days before it was blown up.

⁹⁸ Linnman, p61.

⁹⁹ Linnman, p61.

¹⁰⁰ Barry Lopez, Crossing Open Ground, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 125.

Instead of disintegrating the carcass, the blast merely blew chunks of whale meat as high as 100 feet into the air before falling upon a huddled mass of spectators and cameramen.¹⁰¹ As Linnmann remembered:

At first, there was nothing particularly surprising or significant about the blast, it looked like any explosion commonly seen in action adventure films, V-shaped and forceful, with great amounts of matter shooting rapidly upward. But as the material filled the sky and seemed to momentarily hang in the air, there were a few things that gave this explosion an odd look and feel...A tremendous boom caught up with us a second or two after detonation, but after several more seconds, we began hearing what sounded like something hitting the ground around us. One or two at first, then several at once, a series of hollow “think” noises, like the spatter of heavy rain falling on pavement, only somehow more serious and with greater volume...The next thing I knew, Doug and I were running. I don’t recall any communication between us, I don’t remember Doug removing the camera from its tripod or our picking up any gear, I only remember this tremendous urge to get away. The thinking noise, whale meat hitting the ground all around us, had not decreased in intensity. We were at full sprint, charging through the sand down the backside of the sand dune.¹⁰²

In retrospect, Linnman could only compare the experience to his service as a Vietnam-era National Guardsman.

...if anything ever gave me a sense of what it might be like to be in combat and under fire, it was the day Doug Brazil and I ran in terror to escape the blubber shrapnel. We could hear it pounding into the earth on all sides, both of us fully realizing that should either of us be struck by a sizeable piece it could be all over. What an ignominious way to go, taken out by a flying piece of dead whale meat.¹⁰³

Indeed, one of the whale’s 6 foot long (one foot wide) front fins, narrowly missed a car harboring an infant as it mercifully soared overhead and landed in a nearby marsh.¹⁰⁴ Pieces of whale meat were blown as far as three miles away and everyone on the scene was covered by “the snow.”¹⁰⁵ Luckily, the only real casualty was an Oldsmobile Regency 98 that had recently been purchased by a Mr. Walter Umenhofer of Springfield. The vehicle was struck by a three-foot-long piece of whale blubber that caved in the car’s entire roof and saturated the interior with “whale juices.” Ironically Umenhofer hadn’t even come to Florence for the sake of the whale, but rather for business reasons¹⁰⁶ and the only reason he happened to be on the beach that day was because that was where the local port commissioner had gone to watch the show. Eventually, the State did compensate him for his Oldsmobile, the most unusual example of “redemption” in social whale carcass history.¹⁰⁷

Still covered in greasy whale particles, Linnman and Brazil staggered back to their brand new private jet with only the thought of going home on their mind. Neither could have foreseen stardom coming out of all this, but the resulting documentary was something of a mini career coup for both Linnman and Brazil. The “Exploding Whale”

¹⁰¹ Larry Bacon, “When they blow up a whale, they really blow it up!” Eugene Register Guard, 13 Nov. 1970.

¹⁰² Linnman, p76-78.

¹⁰³ Linnman, p78.

¹⁰⁴ Bacon

¹⁰⁵ Particles of dead whale. According to some accounts, this “snow” immediately triggered the gag-reflexes of nearly everyone on the beach, before one woman puked and then half a dozen other spectators with her.

¹⁰⁶ The whale carcass was the center of economic exchange.

¹⁰⁷ “Flying blubber claim paid,” Eugene Register Guard, 23 Nov. 1970.

even won a regional award for journalism in 1970 and remains the best record of the history, humor and chaos of a day when Oregon State highwaymen proceeded to “blast blasted blubber beyond all believable bounds.”¹⁰⁸ But beyond the Pacific Northwest, the story of the Exploding Whale remained relatively unknown for the next two decades, appearing only sporadically on sensationalist shows that specialized in cop chases and such. Then in 1994 the story exploded onto the internet and in a sense internationalized the Northwest’s whale culture. The result is that today we have an incredibly popular story of whale carcass disposal that since 1970 has captured the imagination of millions.

“Anniversaries” for Whale Blowing Day are now informally celebrated each year on the beach at Florence. Several authors and comedians – most notably Dave Barry – have successfully used the incident as material for their routines.¹⁰⁹ The National Public Radio foundation (NPR) has run specials on the story,¹¹⁰ and a whale-blowing parody was recently used in Comedy Central’s summer hit *Reno 9-1-1: Miami?*¹¹¹ As in the days of indigenous whale scavenging, songs have been composed to commemorate the incident,¹¹² as have books, cartoons and countless short documentaries.¹¹³ It has even been converted into a low-budget theatrical production called *Countdown* which premiered in Chicago in October 2007: though – on stage at least – the Exploding Whale has thus far failed to generate much interest.¹¹⁴ The video, by contrast, was recently rated number 5 on the BBC’s “Top Ten Viral Video” chart.¹¹⁵ Having been viewed an estimated 350 million times online¹¹⁶ (as of 2006) it has earned the right to stand with such prestigious films as *One Night in Paris* (the Paris Hilton sex tape – 400 million views) while simultaneously retaining its unique status as the most popular news documentary on the world-wide-web. Surely it is only a matter of time before some enterprising individual begins manufacturing Exploding Whale coffee cups, commemorative plates, t-shirts and snow-globes. As long as the video remains accessible to the general public, it will be safe to assume that the story of the Exploding Whale will continue to grow as a cult-classic for years to come. To quote an article by Eugene journalist Bob Welch that was dedicated to the thirty-fifth anniversary of Whale Blowing Day: “No, no, no. This story is not about death. It’s about a whale that refuses to die. A whale that lives on. A whale that, thanks to man’s stupidity, will always have the last laugh.”¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁸ “Annotated transcript of the video.” Report by: Paul Linnman of KATU (Portland, OR). Film by: Doug Brazil. Date: 12 Nov. 1970. Transcribed by: Steve Hackstadt.

¹⁰⁹ Barry, Dave. “The Farside Comes to Life in Oregon.” (1990)

¹¹⁰ Reporter Tells Story of Exploding Whale, Again. Weekend Edition, NPR, 12 Nov 2005. Found at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5010529>

¹¹¹ “An exploding whale in the *Reno 911!: Miami?* movie.” Herald News interview with the actors.

¹¹² Shapero, Kay. Blubber. 1993. Lyrics and sheet music available at TheExplodingWhale.com among other sources.

¹¹³ Mike Bailey, “KATU newsman Paul Linnman plans low-key end to storied TV career,” The Colombian, 19 Aug. 2004.

¹¹⁴ <http://blubberblaster.com/>

¹¹⁵ “Star Wars Kid is top viral video,” BBC News, Nov. 27, 2006. Found at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/6187554.stm>

¹¹⁶ A highly conservative estimate in my opinion.

¹¹⁷ Bob Welch, “Tale of flying blubber keeps building up,” Eugene Register Guard, Nov. 10, 2005. Found at <http://www.theexplodingwhale.com/evidence/newspaper/rg-welch/welch-2005-11-10/>

But if indeed that blasted whale is laughing, then it is unfairly doing so at the expense of men like George Thorton, an otherwise competent highway engineer who was operating that day without any frame of reference upon which to make an educated decision. Thorton was later promoted to district highway engineer in Medford and retired in 1985. He has refused to comment on the explosion since the story of the Exploding Whale hit the internet in 1994.¹¹⁸

A somewhat less reclusive, though no less reluctant, victim of the story of the Exploding Whale has been Walter Umenhofer. During an interview for the twenty-fifth anniversary, Umenhofer lamented that: “it’s a hell of a note that the only thing you’re really famous for in your entire life is your car was smashed by a flying whale.”¹¹⁹

Indeed, inevitably everyone associated with the film has ultimately become a victim of the story’s success. Even Linnman, who – despite a distinguished career as a journalist that included hosting presidential candidates like Robert Kennedy, George Wallace and Richard Nixon – never was really able to escape his relationship to the story.¹²⁰ For those who were incriminated by what happened at Florence that day, redemption is seemingly impossible.

There is no easy explanation for why the story of the Exploding Whale is so popular or why so many Pacific Northwesterners have found a sort of regional rapport to the incident over the years. There has never been a shortage of “morals” to be found in the story: beware the dangers of excess, don’t put your trust in government competency and “into every true Oregonian’s life a little blubber must fall,”¹²¹ just to name a few. One latter-day commentator was even able to synthesize the story to nature when he described the barrage of whale blubber as: “Oregon rain – with a bloody twist.”¹²² And I would argue that perhaps this interpretation is most appropriate, as in some convoluted way, the appeal of the story of the Exploding Whale may be linked to the very same struggle to reconcile the blinding peculiarities of civilization with the ever fading realities of the natural world that has largely shaped the environmental history of the Pacific Northwest.

Whatever the significance of the Exploding Whale’s legacy, Paul Linnman’s prediction for Florence’s culture of whale carcass disposal was certainly nothing if not prophetic “It might be concluded that should a whale ever wash ashore in Lane County again, those in charge will not only know what to do, they’ll certainly know, what not to do.”¹²³ Nine years later, in an ironic twist of fate, a pod of 41 sperm whales washed ashore at almost the exact same location at Florence. State Park officials wisely chose to burn and then bury the carcasses, while a crowd of more than 3,000 looked on.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Bacon

¹¹⁹ Bacon

¹²⁰ Linnman is the author of two books: Oregon golf: the Oregon coast, southern Oregon, Portland & environs, central Oregon, Portland, Oregon: Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company, 1999. & The Exploding Whale: And Other Remarkable Stories from the Evening News (with Doug Brazil) Portland, Oregon: Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company, 2003. He retired from KATU in 2004 to begin a career as a radio talk-show personality on KEX 1190AM.

¹²¹ “Tale of flying blubber keeps building up.”

¹²² “Tale of flying blubber keeps building up.”

¹²³ “Annotated transcript of the video.”

¹²⁴ “Son of a Blubber.” TranScript, July 1994. The Oregon Department of Transportation employee magazine. For a detailed account of this incident, read Barry Lopez’s “A Presentation of Whales” which can be found in Crossing Open Ground, 117-146.

SECTION 6 SAVING THE WHALES

The decision to bury Keiko – former Oregon resident and star of the *Free Willy* series – in a Norwegian cow pasture following his death in 2003 was, in the greater context of his life as a whale, the irony of the decade.¹²⁵ After years of well publicized rehabilitation designed to enable him to return to the wild and live a “natural” life, Keiko’s supporters simply could not stand to see him “buried at sea.”¹²⁶ Nonetheless, despite the ironies that marked his symbolic life, Keiko and his *Free Willy* trilogy had a tremendous psychological impact on the environmental attitudes of the suburban Pacific Northwest. The celebrity status that he, and many other Northwest whales held in life, inspired a new and still unfinished chapter in the Northwest’s social history of whale carcass disposal in death. A new chapter, but written with ancient themes.

Keiko’s meteoric rise was hardly surprising given that the *Free Willy* trilogy was all but a propaganda film for the Pacific Northwest. To start with, all three movies in the *Free Willy* series were filmed in the pristine Pacific Northwest: the one marked by tourist towns like Astoria and the San Juan Islands. Second, the films repeatedly employed anti-California rhetoric into the script, subtly highlighting divisions between the natural Northwest and the Shamu culture of Sea World theme-park California. Third, all three films played on the same themes of redemption and transformation that have influenced whale tales since the time of Jonah. Whether it was a troubled boy in need of encouragement or an abusive parent who needed to be put in his place – Willy was always there to save the day. But he never killed; he only healed. His presence somehow always restored the shattered moral fiber of his adversaries because, underlying all the drama, it was Willy himself who was always seeking a transformation by becoming “free.” Four, co-stars like Randolph – the aquarium custodian who doubles as an Indian Shaman – added a certain spiritual element to the trilogy that harked back to the pre-Lewis & Clark whale culture of the region. And finally, Willy’s adversaries were, in order: a crooked California curator who wanted to exploit Willy for profit before attempting to murder him to collect insurance money,¹²⁷ an out-of-state oil-tanker executive who polluted Puget Sound before trying to sell Willy back to a theme park,¹²⁸ and – in the final episode – a local whaler who is inevitably convinced to abandon his profession after Willy saves him from drowning. He is therefore simultaneously “redeemed” and “transformed” by his encounter with Willy and the audience is subsequently encouraged to sympathize with him despite his tainted past.¹²⁹ In short, the villains of the *Free Willy* trilogy were generally out-of-touch outsiders whose pursuit of profit via the promotional exploitation of the Northwest’s natural resources led them down the path of moral depravity. It was a popular but ironic message for a region that had survived for centuries off fishing and logging, that had railed against Native

¹²⁵ “Keiko buried in secret ceremony.” Cnn.com, posted Dec. 15, 2003.

¹²⁶ Michael Hutchins, “Keiko Dies: Killer Whale of *Free Willy* Fame,” *Communiqué*, Feb 2004.

¹²⁷ *Free Willy*, 1993 Warner Brothers

¹²⁸ *Free Willy 2: The Adventure Home*, 1995 Warner Brothers

¹²⁹ *Free Willy 3: The Rescue*, 1997 Warner Brothers

inefficiency and subsequently destroyed or resettled virtually every coastal nation, a region that had – in fact – pioneered orca captivity itself.

And yet, the trilogy somehow encapsulated the psyche of the average 1990s Northwester who struggled to reconcile his region's troubled historical relationship with the natural world. It was during this period of unprecedented growth and development that many suburbanites ironically embraced both environmentalism and sustainability within moral parameters: and what the *Free Willy* trilogy offered was not only an affirmation of the righteousness of their cause, but also a sense of redemption. It was this subconscious need to be redeemed which many years later provoked Keiko supporters to bury their savior on dry, albeit foreign, land. It had taken nearly 200 years, but for the first time since Lewis & Clark had met with the Killamooks at Ecola, native residents of the Pacific Northwest were openly associating the whale – a creature of the sea – with their greater interpretation of the land. How had this happened?

To understand how this had happened, you must return to the early years of the 1960s. Immediately prior to this decade of change human/whale relations had hit an all time low, as exemplified by *Time Magazine*'s 1954 "Killing the Killers" article.¹³⁰ But change was on the way as a new wave of ecological conservationism emerged out of the fear and paranoia that the H-bomb and an increasingly industrialized globally-conscious world were creating. The whale would become one of many important symbols of this new movement, especially for the people of the Pacific Northwest where a new and unique whale culture subsequently developed. Yet these changes would continue to be dictated by a monetary mentality. And indeed, every organized effort dedicated toward whale preservation originated out of the pursuit of profits.

One of the more obvious examples of conservation originating out of the promotion and production of natural resources was the ironic rise of theme-park aquariums during the 1960s, many of which remain popular targets for critics to this day.¹³¹ But again, these developments were hardly revolutionary. In fact, the earliest known attempt to capture and keep whales occurred a century earlier in 1860 when legendary showman P.T. Barnum transported two belugas to New York City. They were placed in a freshwater tank and subsequently died after only a few days in captivity. Several failed attempts later, Barnum was finally able to capture and keep a pair of belugas which survived long enough to compliment his museum's "freak show," but shortly thereafter both perished in the Barnum Museum Fire of 1868. Crippled by the catastrophe, Barnum – perhaps the most daring showman of the nineteenth century – decided to give up on his belugas and subsequently the theory that live whales could be converted into viable business ventures effectively perished and was not revisited until almost a full century later.¹³² It was not until November of 1961 that Marineland California captured and attempted to display a killer whale. But the unnamed orca died just two days into captivity.¹³³

¹³⁰ "Killing the Killers," *Time Magazine*, Oct. 4, 1954. Found at

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,857557,00.html?promoid=googlep>

¹³¹ See Susan G. Davis, *Spectacular Nature: Corporate Culture and the Sea World Experience*, (University of California Press: 1997)

¹³² "History of Captivity," Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society:

<http://www.wdcs.org/dan/publishing.nsf/allweb/281C1D97F10E9573802568DD00306F2C>

¹³³ "The Deadly History of Captive Killer Whales," Orca Homepage,

<http://www.orcahome.de/orcadead.htm>

The first “successful” attempt to domesticate a whale happened by accident. In 1964 the curator of the Vancouver Aquarium in British Columbia – Dr. Murray Newman, an accomplished scholar and author of *Management of Wild Animals in Captivity* – hired local sculptor Samuel Birch to construct a life-size model of an orca for the newly finished British Columbia Hall. In need of a specimen to accomplish his design, Birch harpooned a small fifteen foot orca as it unsuspectingly made its way through the Gulf Islands. Amazingly, the orca survived the ambush and Newman insisted that they try to save it. For 55 days and nights the whale – named Moby Doll – circled the circumference of her converted dolphin pen swimming counterclockwise and refusing to eat. Once she¹³⁴ began to accept food, she survived an additional 30 days before succumbing to a skin disease. Within zoological circles, Dr. Newman achieved celebrity status almost overnight and was even recognized by the Vancouver Visitors Bureau as “Man of the Year” for his part in the capture.¹³⁵

The following year another orca named Namu was captured and brought to Ted Griffin’s private Seattle Marine Aquarium. Namu adjusted to his captivity far more successfully than Moby Doll, and Griffin was even able to dispel prevailing myths about killer whales as “savage sea cannibals” when he decided to swim with his captive attraction to the applause of thousands of daily visitors. But while Griffin’s gesture may have enthused his paying customers, it also inadvertently enraged protestors on the outside who demanded a premature end to marine mammal exploitation and abuse. Whale rights activists – the first in history – provocatively marched outside Pier 56 ordering Griffin to “Free the Whale: before he dies.” Their efforts, however, proved in vain as Namu, the first whale to be insured by Lloyds of London, died after one year in captivity.

The death of Namu marked a turning point in the history of Northwest whale carcass disposal because in many ways it represented the death of a celebrity, not a cetacean, and subsequently his remains became a subject of contention. Inevitably the Tawanka Camp Fire Girls were able to secure his skull and teeth, which they later donated to Seattle’s Burke Museum, while the bulk of his skeleton remained with his insurance underwriters.¹³⁶

The success of the Vancouver and Seattle aquariums provoked an international orca acquisition frenzy, inspiring a short-lived cottage industry for Northwest fisherman in the process. Between 1965-1973 at least 48 orcas were kidnapped from Northwest waters¹³⁷ and fishermen generally received no less than \$8000 per specimen.¹³⁸ Other small species of whale – such as narwhals – were rounded up and sold, though they generally adjusted less well to captivity.¹³⁹

In retrospect it is hardly surprising that the Pacific Northwest both pioneered and accelerated the appeal of aquariums. After all, their attractions seemingly offered visitors a previously impossible opportunity: to “reconnect” with “nature.” They in effect represented a powerful post-frontier Turnerian fantasy which many zoos and aquariums

¹³⁴ Moby Doll was really a boy, but that was not known until after his death.

¹³⁵ Hand, p31-33.

¹³⁶ “Captive Killer whale Namu arrives in Seattle on July 27, 1965.” Historylink.org

¹³⁷ Many more died before reaching captivity. Submerged dynamite and other explosives were often used to corral killer whale pods and, of course, accidents happened. Hand, p33

¹³⁸ Plus a transport fee that often exceeded the cost of the specimen.

¹³⁹ Hand, p39.

shamelessly exploited during this era, often explicitly marketing themselves to suburbanites as: “a last refuge for endangered species and as a ‘substitute biotope’ for the city dweller.”¹⁴⁰ Yet behind the environmental rhetoric was the hard realities of aquarium culture. As Douglas Hand noted in *Gone Whaling: A Search for Orcas in Northwest Waters*:

...the killer whale must be trained to perform “natural behaviors” on cue. It is one of the ocean’s greatest predators...but they are not shown hunting. The killer whale has been trained to eat frozen fish by the bucketful. Among zoo official the “bite-size” theory of eating live food states that, if it can be eaten in one bite, it is probably an acceptable spectacle for the public. If not, it would be distasteful.¹⁴¹

But there was one distasteful facet of the natural world that aquarium’s could not conceal or control: the death of the attraction.

On Feb. 2, 1991, The Vancouver Public Aquarium suffered the loss of its greatest star. After 23 successful years in “show business,”¹⁴² Hyak the orca, died of a collapsed lung. As Hand observed: “There are more than eight thousand animals on display at the Vancouver Public Aquarium, but only one warrants a headline when it dies.”¹⁴³ Indeed, Hyak received many headlines across British Columbia as well as letters of condolence and drawings from local school children.

The public was led to believe that Hyak would be “buried at sea” but within six hours of his death, he was removed from his pool and driven on a flatbed truck to the city docks. There, a team of biologist began dissecting his body and harvesting organs for research. After 8 hours of truly gruesome surgery, the headless, spineless remains of Hyak were wrapped in canvas and weighted with five tons of chain. He was then ignominiously loaded onto a floating garbage barge and bulldozed into the Strait of Georgia. Unfortunately, the canvas ripped and a few days later small pieces of blubber and skin – riding a southeasterly current – peppered a popular beach near Sechelt.¹⁴⁴

A few days later, Keltie Lee Byrne, 20 year-old trainer and champion swimmer, fell into a killer-whale tank at the Sealand of the Pacific aquarium in Victoria BC. Apparently mistaking Byrne for a new toy, the orcas tossed her around underwater until she drowned.¹⁴⁵

The gruesome deaths of Hyak and Byrne shattered the general public’s perception of zoos and aquariums. No longer did it seem “natural” to “reconnect” with nature on Man’s terms. Shocked and disgusted, animal rights groups mobilized. First they called for a boycott of the Vancouver Public Aquarium, but with Byrne’s death and subsequent reports of abuse from aquariums around the world, the movement embraced an international assault on all organizations that – in the words of one group: “insist on perpetuating the international marine mammal slave trade.”¹⁴⁶ Conservationists now called for the immediate abolition and liberation of all wildlife, emphasizing the need to establish and preserve clear barriers between nature and civilization in order to foster what they now understood to be peaceful coexistence and harmony. Concentrated in

¹⁴⁰ Hand, p54.

¹⁴¹ Hand, p55.

¹⁴² Quote from the *Vancouver Sun*. Found in Hand, p27

¹⁴³ Hand, p27.

¹⁴⁴ Hand, p28-30

¹⁴⁵ Hand, p30

¹⁴⁶ “No More Dolphins – No More Parkland: 33 Reasons to Boycott the Vancouver Aquarium,” The Life Force Foundation, May 2007, <http://www.lifeforcefoundation.org/pdfs/33REAS.pdf>

urban centers like Portland and King County – where booming tech industries had finally liberated the region from its traditional dependence on resource-based economies – these well organized groups effectively dictated environmental policy to the rest of region. Eventually, they were able to push environmentalism to the forefront of an ever expanding cultural divide between the rural and urban Pacific Northwest. It could be argued that perennial battles over salmon and spotted owls largely shaped the nature of Northwest politics during the 1990s. But at the end of the day, perhaps no issue enjoyed more positive publicity than Keiko’s “Free Willy” phenomenon. Through their deaths: Moby Doll, Namu, Hyak, Keiko and many other domesticated whales across the world, provoked the same feelings of redemption and subsequent transformation that have washed ashore with every carcass since the time of Lewis and Clark.

CONCLUSION

If someone had asked a Clatsop Indian 200 years-ago to write a thesis analyzing Man’s relationship with nature through the lens of whale carcass disposal, he almost certainly wouldn’t have been able to comprehend the question. After all – nature *was* a whale and the Earth a whale carcass. Today, science and popular wisdom suggest otherwise, though whale carcasses now serve as popular environmental indicators of severe disruptions in the “natural order” that supposedly drives our daily lives. Too often a beached whale gives people reason to pause and reexamine both their behavior and their relationship to the natural world around them. In some circles the fear that human activity could be responsible for a premature demise carries with it tremendous guilt, and ultimately a need for redemption (undeserved though it usually is).

Yet despite centuries of shared history and experience, in the final assessment, beached whale carcasses continue to confound coastal communities across the Cascade region. To this day, there remains no standard protocol for rendering, disposing or claiming dead whales. Nor has whale carcass disposal become any less news-worthy or more predictable in recent years. While local governments seem to be drifting toward establishing barriers between beached whales and civilians in the form of roped-off police/demolition lines, for some people the allure of dead whales remains too powerful.

In July of 2005 the body of a 22 foot gray whale that had washed ashore near University Place Washington became the subject of a minor investigation when parts of the skeleton – including the skull – which had formally been claimed by several Pierce County officials as the property of an unfinished environmental education center, were stolen by an unidentified person with “opportunistic purposes.”¹⁴⁷ One article published in the *Tacoma News Tribune* warned that Pierce County public works would “like to have the skull back, no questions asked” if the person in question were to voluntarily surrender the bones.¹⁴⁸ To date, the unidentified culprit remains at large and presumably in possession of the skull.

In May of 2007 the body of another gray whale – 40 feet long – washed ashore near Newport Oregon on Memorial Day weekend. Unable to dispose of it for 5 days, police

¹⁴⁷ Hunter T. George, “Whale Tale Grows out of missing 5 foot skull,” *Tacoma News Tribune*, Aug. 15, 2005. Found at: <http://dwb.thenewstribune.com/news/story/5102555p-4646812c.html>

¹⁴⁸ Yet another example of a whale carcass inspiring a need for redemption – namely, the redemption of the “opportunistic” culprit.

fought an unsuccessful battle to dissuade tourists from scavenging for souvenirs. Despite all efforts, several pieces of the whale were cut away, some of which later appeared for sale on Craigslist. Even the force of the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act and the threat of a \$10,000 fine proved not enough to stop Oregon's most determined vacationers.¹⁴⁹

For better or worse, whales that die on Northwest shores will probably continue to inspire a complex mixture of concern and curiosity for years to come. The process of disposal, meanwhile, will similarly continue to be shaped by economic factors as well as notions of regionalism and our ever shifting environmental mentality. Encounters with beached whales will probably continue to provoke feelings of redemption and transformation, though, considering that this is a theme that has repeated itself for the past 200 years, arguably nothing really is redeemed or transformed. Or perhaps the real disruption that inspires these themes is not rooted in the nature of the Pacific Northwest, but in the nature of Man.

This, however, is mere conjecture. All that is certain is that – just as beached whales have played a tremendous role in shaping our past – so too are they bound to shape our future.

¹⁴⁹ Bob Welch, "Dozer, not dynamite, eases whale's final passage," Eugene Register Guard, July 2, 2007. Found at <http://www.theexplodingwhale.com/evidence/newspaper/rg-welch/welch-2007-07-02/>

