

## Scrimshaw Art

THE article most commonly made by whalers when they "scrimshawed" was the decorated sperm whale tooth. Large ivory teeth, sometimes weighing over five pounds and over nine inches long were cut from the jaw of the sperm whale. Before the tooth could be decorated, it had to be smoothed and polished as much as elbow grease could make it. This polishing was long and arduous, for the ivory was hard and polished slowly. The whaler would first scrape down the tooth with a hand-made tool, fashioned from a broken harpoon or an old file. This scraping took off the deep grooves, and then the sailor polished the ivory with his substitute for sandpaper, dried sharkskin. The lustrous-high polish was obtained by more hours of rubbing the tooth with the palm of his hand, which he first covered with wood ashes. When these three steps had been completed, the tooth was completed, or scrimshawed, and ready for decoration.

An artistically inclined sailor would draw a picture on the broad side of the tooth with his pencil, then with a sail needle, go over the lines, scratching the design into the ivory. The cut-out would then be filled in with paint pigment or dry india ink mixed with whale oil. These were rubbed into the ivory with the fingers, then washing off the surplus around the design or picture. Oftentimes, the pictures were varicolored and exceptionally beautiful. If the sailor could not draw "free-hand," he would select a magazine picture and, pasting in on the tooth, would use a sail needle to prick out the design on the ivory, the picture removed, the dots were connected, and the picture, ready to be cut into the ivory.

The pictures and designs used on the "scrimshawed" articles were many and varied. Home medicine and theology were close-scenes and pictures of beautiful women were used by those who longed for home and familiar faces; from 1812 to 1816, the war years, the pictures were patriotic—flags, eagles, frigates, cannons and the like; after the war, the men turned to religious pictures, some taken from Biblical characters and stories; then came the famous Godey's magazine, with its lovely women, and these appeared on the scrimshawed articles.

## Whales Are Not Fish

FOR many years people believed that whales were gigantic fish inhabiting the seven seas. Scientists years ago proved from dissection, that whales are warm-blooded, air-breathing mammals which have adapted themselves to life in the ocean. It is an accepted fact today that the prehistoric ancestor of the present day whale was a land mammal wandering about the earth about 200,000,000 years ago. Just why it took to the water, and when, is not known by scientists. One theory is that the animal was so enormous it had difficulty obtaining enough food on land and took to the sea for food. Another theory suggests that the prehistoric whale had trouble supporting its great length and its many tons of flesh on four legs, and thus went to sea so that the salt water would help buoy up its mammoth body.

Many interesting facts discovered in the dissecting of present day whales prove beyond doubt that the whale's early ancestor lived on land. For example, in dissecting the pectoral (side) fins of the whale, one finds all of the bones of a forearm or front leg. These fins contain a ball and socket joint connecting the fins to the shoulder blades just like those of present-day land mammals. The upper and lower arm bones are present and even the wrist and finger digits. In many whales, however, one of the finger or toe digits is missing, generally the first or thumb. Because these fins are no longer in use as forelegs,

the joints at the elbow, wrist and finger digits have all fused together making one long, solid bone from the shoulder joint to the tips of the fingers.

If the whale's ancestors had forelegs then they certainly must have had hind legs. These are likewise found in many of the present-day whales but they do not extend out from the body. They are found as tiny vestigial bones within the body located about halfway between the sex organs and the backbone, and are attached to the backbone by two minute cords. As the whale became adapted to life in the water it had no use for hind legs as its motive power was furnished by an enormous tail with two large flukes attached to the end. Little by little the hind legs disappeared until now all that remains are these two tiny bones, and in some species of whale, such as the fin-back of New England waters, even these bones have disappeared.

The early whale breathed through nostrils on the end of its beak. After it took to the water, these were moved by nature from the end of the beak to the top of the head thereby making it easier for the whale to breathe in air when coming to the surface after a deep dive. Today these nostrils are called "blow-holes." Through them the whale, after being under water for some time, exhales foul air from its lungs, and takes in fresh air before descending. These blow-holes are connected to the lungs only, thus making it impossible for a whale to breathe through its mouth as other mammals do. This unique construction prevents the whale from getting-feeding in the water with its mouth open.

## "By Guess and By God"

"WHALING was hard under any conditions, but doubly hard in the frozen north. There were no charts of these waters then, the gyro compass had not been invented, so they sailed blind, or 'by guess and by God.' But the Arctic was a good place to get whales, the bowhead or Arctic whale produced the most bone, and year after year the whalers fought their way into the ice floes. The season for taking whales in this region was from June to early September, but the trips north were so long that the ships would stay two or three years,

waiting through the bitter fall and winter months.

"The technique of 'setting' the ships for the winter, freezing them on an even keel, and covering the cabins with ice, is very interesting. Sometimes, however, the ice would begin to crush them and they would have to abandon the ship. There are many records of ships abandoned in the ice. The crew would either go aboard some other ship in the region that was in a safe position or begin the long trek to the nearest settlement. When ships were frozen in safely, whaling went on intermittently in the bitter weather. The men would hear the whales spouting under the ice and go out for them, chasing them for miles through the floes, returning snow blind, with frozen hands and feet.

## Whalers With Halos

THOUGH "tough as nails" ashore, the ordinary seaman, (a technical name for just plain sailormen,) was subdued by maritime law and the fists of skippers and mates aboard his ship. That is, such was the state of affairs in American vessels until Richard Harding Dana, author of *Two Years before the Mast*, writing out of his long observations as a Harvard man serving aboard ship as an ordinary seaman, brought about a reform in the law. Kicks, blows, the "cat o' nine tails" confinement in the ship's "brig," and being brought before the court when the ship arrived at port, were liable to be the lot of any sailorman who dared to complain about conditions aboard. To refuse any demand of hard, unscrupulous, perhaps sadistic skipper or mate was to commit an act of mutiny — or so the

officers would regard it. The "romance" of the sea was mostly in the minds of landlubbers ashore, writing for other landlubbers. Yet the sea did have men in command who were strict but just to their "men before the mast."

Ships have even put to sea with skippers of a pronouncedly religious turn of mind. Sir Hugh Willoughby, among other instruction issued by him to his crews, demanded that "no blaspheming of God nor detestable swearing in any ship nor communication of ribaldries, filthy tales, nor using un-Godly talk—neither dicing, tabling, or other devilish games" should be indulged in. And he required that "Morning and Evening Prayers—and the Bible or paraphrases (were) to be read devoutly and Christianly."

Men who attended church or meeting ashore were sometimes assumed to be equally godly afloat. Yet this was far from universally true of them. The story is told of a Cape Cod skipper who was, when in port, one of the most faithful attendants at religious services, but who hardly had given orders to up anchor for an outward voyage before he would burst forth in a torrent of ugly profanity. When a dismayed greenhorn aboard, taken aback at his sudden transformation, exclaimed about it, the skipper set him straight by saying that God was left behind at Highland Light.

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There are now 17 whaling vessels (all schrs.) owned in Provincetown, two of which are at sea in the North Atlantic Ocean, and the E. H. Hatfield, which sailed on the 30th ult. The other 14 vessels it is expected will sail in a month to six weeks on North Atlantic voyages.

Sch. Gage H. Phillips, 107 tons, of Provincetown, has been withdrawn from the whaling business, and is to be employed in the West India trade, under command of Capt. James T. Sparks.

- July 1854 -

## British Bestow Medal On Cape Ender For Saving Captain And Crew Of Bark

by Donald G. Trayser, Clerk of the Courts, Barnstable County

Mirror of the past, being notes of happenings on Cape Cod one hundred years ago this month.

Provincetown — Captain Young, of the whaling schooner Waldron Holmes, has been awarded a gold medal by the British government for saving the master and crew of the British bark Cairo several months ago and bringing them

into Provincetown safely. The medal was forwarded through the State Department and Barnstable Customs office.

## A Whale Of A Whale!

The great blue whale sometimes exceeds a hundred feet of length, and weighs three hundred thousand pounds—one hundred fifty tons of bone and blubber. It is thus several times larger than the largest dinosaur that ever lived. And it is the longest-distance champion among animals, too, for it easily travels thousands of miles, doing its own "fueling and refueling," and able to survive the most tumultuous of storms merely by going below the tortured surface of the sea.

## The Last Whaler

THE last whaler or rather whaling skipper of Provincetown was Captain John Atkins Cook. He retired in 1916. After he quit the sea Captain Cook wrote a pretentious account of his voyages and had it published. But his wife Viola will be remembered even longer. For it was she who lost her mind while on a voyage to the Arctic Sea with her husband. The cause was supposedly due to her husband's refusal to turn back from the frozen land and return to the Cape. Eugene O'Neill wrote one of his plays on that theme, taken from the real event. The title was "I, LE." Perhaps you have seen it.

Aunt Jennie (Cook)  
Woodworth's Uncle