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SCRIMSHAW

All they brought home
for Christmas was
a whale's etched tooth!

by ELEANOR EARLY

When Jackie Kennedy bought a whale's etched tooth for the President's collection of scrimshaw—that curious hobby of Yankee whalers—antique dealers upped their prices on scrimshaw. And women along the Yankee seacoast began looking up attic for jagg wheels and busks—scrimshandering pieces that went out of fashion along with whales' teeth, about the time of the Civil War.

Although several New England museums have important collections of old scrimshaw (sometimes called the only art form indigenous to America), it is a pretty specialized thing. And etched whale bone was nothing, until recently, to get excited about. Just a sort of coast-town curio.

The President, a sea-loving man, bought his first scrimshaw (circa 1830) in a Cape Cod antique shop.

Jackie bought hers, a sperm whale's tooth (9½ inches long and 4½ inches in diameter) from Milton Delano of New Bedford, Massachusetts who spent 160 hours etching the Presidential seal into the ivory and another eighty hours polishing it.

Modern scrimshaw—as, for example, the Delano piece—commissioned by the First Lady and added to the Presidential collection, has a vaue all its own. But it is the old-time stuff that enchants the collectors. And hardly anybody, except the experts, knows the fascinating story of this almost forgotten art of New England Whalers

Scrimshaw has been defined as an art practiced by Yankee whalers, practiced by virtually all of them, and practiced only on shipboard. Ships stayed out, chasing and killing whales, until they got a full cargo. And sometimes it took four years.

Crews were made up, mostly, of young men and boys. When in actual pursuit of whales, life aboard a whaler was dangerous and exciting. But most of the time there were neither whales nor wind. Then the ships floated in deadly calms, uneventfully, on silent seas and life was a complete and terrible bore.

Old logs tell the story: "We ain't whaling. We are sailing." For weeks, sometimes for months, it was like that. "Ugly faces aft today. The men have nothing to do but look at each other."

To kill the empty days, the boys made gifts for the folks at home. Gifts of whale bone, etched and



The Mora of Life.

