

Whaling Industry



Whalers - primarily American vessels - began arriving in Hawai'i in the early 19th century. At this time, whale oil was used for heating, lamps and in industrial machinery; whale bone (actually the baleen strips suspended from the whale's upper jaw) was used in corsets, skirt hoops, umbrellas and buggy whips. Whaling ships visiting hunting grounds in the Japan Sea, the South Pacific and later the Arctic, usually finished twice a year with stops to restock provisions (food and water), replenish their crews (men to work) and sell their whale oil. For Hawaiian ports, especially Honolulu and Lahaina, the whaling fleet was the most important business in the economy for 20 years. More than 100 ships stopped in Hawaiian ports in 1824. Over the next two decades, the Pacific whaling fleet increased so much that 736 whaling ships arrived in Hawai'i.

Whalers' did not like the traditional Hawaiian diet of fish and poi so new trends in farming and ranching were started. Hawaiians began growing potatoes and a wider variety of vegetables to supply the ships. Paniolo Hawaiian cowboys were created to slaughter herds of wild cattle that were left by Captain Vancouver's to provide beef for hungry crews. Fresh water was also in high demand, and the volume required to supply the ships in Honolulu made them install pipes running from upper Nu`uanu valley to a storage tank at the base of the harbor. Other businesses sprang up to service the ships, including sailmakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, laundries, bakeries, shops and boarding houses. Four of the Big Five - companies that later dominated the Islands' economy - got their start as merchants or suppliers to whalers.

The influx of sailors also created a conflict with the missionary community. Sailors were eager to get their hands on Polynesian women. Chiefs and missionaries were eager to maintain order and established laws to regulate drinking, gambling, prostitution, dancing and even horse riding on Sundays.

A sailor's life was rough and hard and thousands jumped ship (quit their jobs) every year to stay in Hawai'i. Ship captains were constantly recruiting replacements, Hawaiians were popular recruits, being naturally adept in the water and superb boatsmen. Called "sailamokus," these Hawaiian sailors traveled all over the world and sprinkled Hawaiian names in places where they settled - Kalama, Kanaka Bar, Aloha, Owyhee River - particularly along the West Coast.

In 1859, the discovery of petroleum oil in Titusville, Pennsylvania, started the end of the whaling industry. It was dealt another major setback by the American Civil War when Southern warships destroyed many Yankee whalers. A final blow came in 1871 when 33 whaling ships were crushed in Arctic ice; no lives were lost, but a sizeable portion of the fleet was destroyed. For Hawai'i, the whaling boom was soon replaced by profits in the sugar industry.

Hawai'i Becomes a Hub of Pacific Trade - Whaling

American traders carried precious silks, teas, and porcelains from China to Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. But the Chinese were dissatisfied with the American products offered in trade.

The American traders soon discovered that the Chinese had a taste for the luxurious furs of sea otters, ermines, bears, and seals. What could be more convenient than stopping off in Hawai'i for fresh provisions on the way from North America to China and back?

The Chinese taste for another product soon affected Hawai'i again. They sought the prized sandalwood to carve into delicate boxes and sacred objects. They wanted it for incense and for oil, which they used in medicines, perfumes, and cosmetics. Traders discovered that the forests of Hawai'i were thick with this precious tree. Hawai'i's chiefs did not hesitate when they found they could acquire American products – New England clothes, billiard tables, carriages, and sailing ships – in exchange for sandalwood.

By 1830 the forests were gone, and the chiefs could not pay their debts. It took years of prodding by the American government and three threats from U.S. warships before all payments were wrested from the chiefs.

About 10 years later Hawai'i hit another trade bonanza. Whaling! It had started in the Pacific as early as 1776, when whalers plied the whaling grounds off Chile and Peru in South America looking for the ocean giants that provide oil for Western lamps and whalebone for Western women's corsets. When these areas were exhausted, the whale fleets moved on to New Zealand and New South Wales, Australia.

Then, in 1819, rich whaling grounds were discovered off the Japanese coast. But Japan had closed its ports to foreigners, so the whaling ships, mostly American, sailed south to Honolulu and Lahaina (Maui) for reprovisioning and recreation. They would come in the spring and fall, stay 2 or 3 months, then head back to the chillier waters in the northwest Pacific.

By the 1840s and 1850s whaling outstripped all other commercial activities in the Pacific. And Hawai'i was the principal base for this industry.

Because the whaling fleets would stay away from their home ports for 3 or 4 years at a time, they came to Hawai'i for provisions, refitting, and repairs. From 1843 to 1860 whaling ships stopped in Hawai'i's ports about 400 times a year. Hawai'i, because of its ideal location, soon developed a tremendous business from this trade.

Also by 1840, the Hawaiians found themselves becoming adept at Western-style trading. Honolulu bustled with wholesale and retail stores where they could buy American goods, with boarding houses and hotels where sailors and traders stayed, with grog (rum or other liquid diluted with water) shops and bowling alleys where they played, and with vegetable markets that supplied the ships and the growing community. Ships' carpenters, blacksmiths, physicians, tailors, sailmakers, and printers – all had come to take advantage of the trading for wealth that characterized Hawai'i at this time.

The whalers' visits stimulated farming. The seamen needed meat, vegetables, and fruit, which the Hawaiians brought to the port towns from the rural areas. Wood, water, salt, and rope were also in great demand. In return the Westerners gave the Hawaiians precious Western goods – firearms and ammunition; cloth, clothing, furniture, and utensils; chisels, knives, and axes; and rum.

So that the Hawaiians could produce a greater variety of food for the seamen, the traders gave them seeds for such crops as corn, cabbage,

melons, and Irish potatoes. And they brought cattle, goats, and sheep to the Islands.

But these were not the only changes the whalers brought with them. Imagine hundreds of sailors suddenly disembarking in Hilo, Honolulu or Lahaina after many months at sea – months of poor food, strict discipline, and backbreaking work. What do you think might happen? Honolulu and Lahaina, and to a lesser degree Hilo, became, noisy, crowded boomtowns. Shops, dance halls, and grog shops were open every night. The Hawaiian government passed laws to control prostitution, but they were ineffective.

Unfortunately, the seamen brought diseases to which the Hawaiians had no immunity: influenza, measles, typhoid, smallpox, and venereal diseases. Many Hawaiians died and many young people left the Islands on whaling ships. About two thousand enlisted as seamen from 1845 to 1847. During the 1850s, four to five thousand young men signed on.

Whaling depended on the population of whales. No one could know if a year would be profitable. Sure enough, the whaling grounds soon became depleted, one after another. Some people worried and suggested raising crops for export instead. But as long as the ships continued to visit the Islands, people continued to cater to the needs of the whalers.

Then, in 1859, oil was discovered in Pennsylvania. It soon replaced whale oil in importance. By 1870 the whaling era had ended.

Hawaiian Sailors

From the last days of October to the first days of this month, a great number of whalers from the north have been seen entering here in Honolulu harbor reaching the total of forty-four.

Most of the ships were successful in obtaining hundreds and thousands of barrels of oil and whalebones, which they do season after season.

On these ships were hundreds of Hawaiian sailors shipped from this port, last season. When the fleet returned, they were allowed to leave the ship, four hundred eighty-eight Hawaiian sailors. They were paid as they were dismissed, forty seven thousand five hundred dollars for their labor, debts⁺ and other things.

It is understood that this is a season in which the sea-faring lads have been fortunate, more than in the seasons that have slipped into the past. This season has given hope to others.

At the time these sailors were being released others were being contracted to take their places. In this way over 450 were contracted for these whalers and these newly contracted ones have been paid twenty-seven thousand dollars. If the amount received from the office of the Harbor Master is added, it would reach seventy thousand dollars.

If we were to average the amount of money per person from this amount, it would be a little over a hundred and fifty dollars a year each.

On these ships, a Hawaiian is given a place to sleep and enough of everything he needs. There is nothing important to complain

about except, perhaps, some very small trifles.

This is a port that is very well liked by whaling ships and it seems that they will make this a regular place to gather, season after season. It is not because of the lack of other sailors that they get Hawaiians but because they like them for pursuing the whale, for working most patiently in the cold and because men are available here without much expense and trouble.

Because most of the men have gone whaling, for it seems that they comprise one third of all the sailors on whaling ships, some people are trying, through the government newspaper, to keep them on shore so that there will be workers to till the land. Who are these people who are trying to keep them back? Their names were not mentioned but they can be guessed. They are those who wish to work them like oxen. They receive their grass and water but poverty remains forever theirs, for the pay received is very small on sugar plantations.

How strange for the government newspaper to think of retaining those who receive larger pay for working on whalers. Perhaps they wish to keep them on sugar plantations, for a mere pittance of five, six, seven, up to ten dollars a month.

We think that an independant person should not be blamed for accepting work for wages suitable for the work done, instead of work for those who complain of the lack of laborers.

The sugar plantations deny that they are able to increase the pay of a laborer, because there is no money to do it with.

If the plantation would consider [the problem], the labor and effort put in by a person for a single month or year, for the exceedingly small pay they give, they would have flown away a long time ago. If they know it is a money-less project, why do they put all of their efforts in it; the plantation lets the sweat gather on the brows of others, while they gather the round fruits.

Palaoa—Sacred Whale

Whaling was an integral part of the development of many countries in the early nineteenth century. Whale blubber produced oil that lit the lamps and greased the machines of many of the most “modern” inventions of the time. It was said that whale oil was the light and oil of the Industrial Revolution. As the traditional hunting grounds of the Atlantic began to be fished out, whalers turned to the plentiful waters of the Pacific. Some of the best fishing spots were found off the coast of Japan. Japan’s ports however, were closed to foreign vessels, and with these whaling fleets needing a place to dock in order to replenish supplies, repair the ships and rest the crews, Hawaii’s became a perfect destination.

Whalers began arriving in Hawaii’s in 1819, and by 1822 over sixty ships were docking annually. This was the same period in which the Calvinist missionaries arrived in Hawaii’s and the two groups had vastly differing ideas about how these port towns should be run. The troubles at first were relatively minor but with the missionaries gaining more influence and making laws against the sale of beer and liquor and the taking of women being enforced, serious battles started. Lāhainā and Honolulu both saw several whaler uprisings and the Baldwin family home in Lāhainā was even the target of cannon fire from an angry ship captain.

By 1846, the number of whaling ships arriving in Hawai’i had reached an astounding 596 and was now a major problem that was bringing much conflict to Hawai’i. Sailors were the carriers of the diseases that seemed to spread through the Hawaiian population very quickly. With the massive influx of people, and their money, a commercial market trade based that replaced the substance (no money—live off the land) lifestyle of the ancient Hawaiians. The sailors, and their ships needed supplies, food, tools, liquor and many more goods that often newly arrived “businessmen” were ready to supply. Some of the most influential businesses in modern Hawaiian history got their start from the opportunities of this time. Hawai’i also saw the loss of young Hawaiian men who traveled aboard these ships to the northwest coast of America and other destinations, never to return.

Prior to the arrival of whaling crews, Native Hawaiians (Kānaka Maoli) had a much different relationship to the whale. Whale ivory that washed ashore was considered sacred. One of the most powerful symbols of status was the whale tooth lei or lei niho palaoa. The beaches of Kualoa on O’ahu were a major collection point for whale ivory and as such this ‘āina was considered the spot to control in order to possess all of O’ahu.

Short Films on Whaling

Go to the Computer and Insert the Disk and Watch the short films included.

- 1) The Leaping Whale
- 2) The Whale Rider

Do not forget to take notes!