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ON THE WATERFRONT:
AN ORAL HISTORY OF RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

Pratt Peterson

A FISHERMAN AND WHALER: RECOLLECTIONS OF THE RICHMOND WHALING STATION, 1958-1972

An Interview Conducted by
Judith K. Dunning
in 1986

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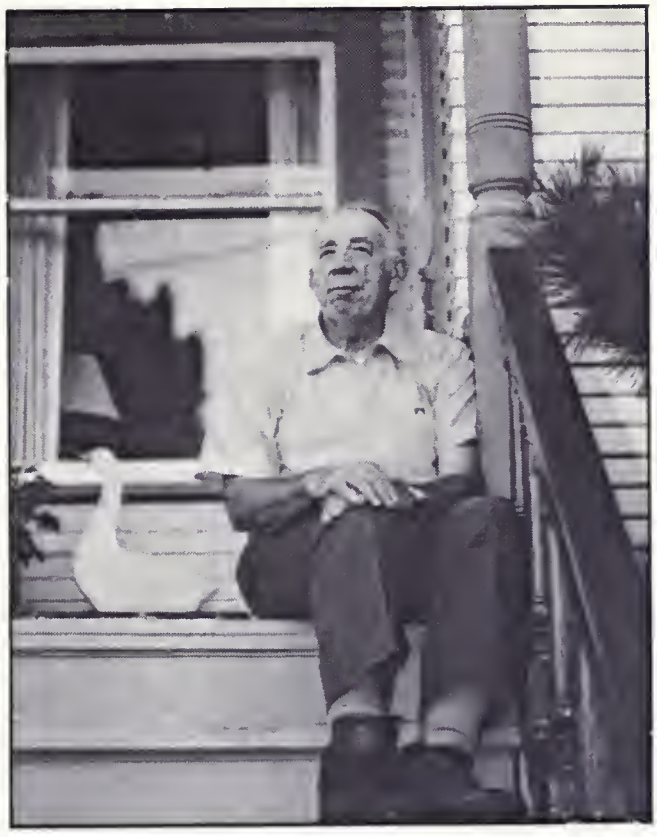

Pratt Peterson at his home in Point Richmond, September 1990.

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PREFACE

ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

"On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," began in 1985. Interviews were conducted with twenty-six Bay Area residents including early Richmond families, World War II Kaiser Shipyard workers, cannery workers, fishermen, and whalers.

I was first attracted to this shoreline industrial town located sixteen miles northeast of San Francisco in 1982 while enrolled in a documentary photography class. For ten weeks I concentrated on the Richmond waterfront, often accompanying the crew of the freighter Komoku on its nightly run from Richmond to C & H Sugar in Crockett. It was then that I began to hear colorful stories of Richmond's waterfront and the City's World War II days.

The question which captivated me in 1982 and still does is--what happened to Richmond when World War II transformed this quiet working class town into a 24-hour-day industrial giant? With the entry of the Kaiser Shipyard, the number of employed industrial workers skyrocketed from 4,000 to 100,000. An unprecedented number of women entered the work force. The shipyards set speed and production records producing one-fifth of the nation's Liberty ships. By 1945 Richmond's shipyards had launched 727 ships.

There were other enormous changes. During the wartime boom, Richmond's population rose from 23,000 to 125,000. The ethnic composition of Richmond and the entire Bay Area changed dramatically with the influx of workers recruited from the South and Midwest. There was little time to provide the needed schools and community services. Housing shortages were critical. Twenty-four thousand units of war housing were built but they were soon filled to capacity. People were living in make-shift trailer camps along the roadsides and the all-night movie theaters were filled with sleeping shipyard workers.

James Leiby, professor of Social Welfare at UC Berkeley, called Richmond a "spectacular" case of urban development. What happened to other communities over a period of decades occurred in Richmond in a few years.

Some of the questions I wanted to explore in the interviews were--who were these newcomers to Richmond and were there reasons, beyond the promise of a job, which brought them in steady streams by trains, buses, and automobiles hauling make-shift trailers? And was this destination of Richmond, California, all that they had imagined?

Other questions were just as compelling. After the war ended and Kaiser and fifty-five other industries moved out of Richmond, leaving this new population suddenly unemployed, what made people stay? And for those who left Richmond and returned home to their families in the South and Midwest, what made them come back to Richmond a second time, often bringing relatives with them?

As intrigued as I was by this new population, I also wanted to know how Richmond natives experienced these changes. In a sense, as others moved in to find new homes in Richmond, the longtime residents were losing their once small and familiar home town.

Initially, I tried to locate people who were living and working in Richmond before the World War II boom. They worked in the canneries, at the Chevron Refinery, or made their living fishing in San Pablo Bay. Most of these first interviewees were California natives, born and raised in Richmond. But the majority of the interviewees for this project came from other places--Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Iowa, Idaho, Utah--all to start a new life in California. Each one had a story to tell. Armed with a tape recorder, a camera, and lots of unanswered questions, I set out to record these local residents.

INTERVIEW SETTING

With few exceptions, the initial interview took place at the narrator's home. Because I was recording a diverse group, the interview setting varied dramatically. One day I might be in a neighborhood where residents, fearing stray bullets, keep their curtains drawn and their lights dimmed. Another day I would be in a home with a sweeping view of the bay, built by a former cannery owner during the Depression.

When possible, I recorded additional interviews and photographed at locations where the narrators had lived or worked. Some of these included the former Filice and Perrelli Canning Company, Ferry Point, Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor, and the last remaining World War II shipyard structures...since torn down. I also spent many days off shore. When interviewing Dominic and Tony Ghio, fishermen for over sixty years, I accompanied them on dawn fishing trips in San Pablo Bay. However, following a turbulent twelve-hour whale watching excursion to the Farallon Islands with former whaler Pratt Peterson, I vowed to continue my research on land.

When I asked some project participants to give me a personalized tour of Richmond to see what landmarks were important to them, all too often I was shown vacant lots where a family home, church, or favorite cafe once stood. The downtown, once bustling with movie theaters, dance halls, and department stores, is eerily quiet for a city of 82,000. I found that local residents are still angry over the loss of their downtown district during the 1960s redevelopment era. Longtime residents spoke emotionally of the city losing its center. Hilltop Mall, built on the outskirts of town and accessible by automobile, was no substitute for a shopping district in the middle of town. The struggle to rebuild the downtown and to attract new businesses is an ongoing one for the City of Richmond.

After the interviewing was completed, there were photo sessions in the narrator's homes and former work places, as well as meetings in which we went through family albums and trunks. Some wonderful photographs and the stories behind them were uncovered during this process. Copies are included in the individual volumes.

PUBLIC USES OF THE ORAL HISTORIES

From the early stages of this project, both the text from the oral histories and the collection of photographs, have been used in community events. Examples include photo panels and maritime demonstrations at Richmond's Festival by the Bay, 1985, 1986, and 1987; and Oakland's Seafest '87. An exhibition, "Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers," produced in collaboration with the Richmond Museum in 1988, was developed from the oral history interviews with Dominic and Tony Ghio.

In an effort to present the oral histories to the public in a form which retained the language, the dialects, and the flavor of the original interviews, I wrote "Boomtown," a play about the transformation of Richmond during World War II. "Boomtown" was produced by San Francisco's Tale Spinners Theater and toured Bay Area senior centers, schools, and museums in 1989.

A new direction for the oral histories is in the field of adult literacy. Nearly fifty years after the recruitment of men and women from the rural South and Midwest to work in the Kaiser shipyards, some former shipyard workers and many of their descendents are enrolled in LEAP, Richmond's adult literacy program, where the students range in ages from 16 to 85 and are 70 percent black.

Our current goal is to make a shortened, large print version of the oral history transcripts for use by adult literacy students and tutors. We think that by using the true stories of local residents as literacy text, there will be an additional incentive for adults learning to read. The characters in the oral histories are often their neighbors, friends, and families speaking in their own words on such topics as the Dust Bowl, the World War II migration of defense workers, waterfront industries, family and community life.

THANKS

"On the Waterfront" project has had many diverse layers, including the University of California, the advisory committee, a wide range of financial supporters, and of primary importance, a large group of interviewees. I want to thank all of the project participants who donated their time, enthusiasm, and memories to this project.

Special thanks is due Jim Quay, Executive Director of the California Council for the Humanities, who has been a source of good advice and inspiration from the beginning. The Council's grant in 1984 got the project off the ground, kicking off the campaign for matching funds. Jim Quay's counsel last summer set in motion the completion of the oral histories by introducing me to the California State Library grant programs.

Bay Area historian Chuck Wollenberg and labor folklorist Archie Green have been my primary advisors, as well as mentors, from the early planning stages. Chuck provided insight into how Richmond's transition during World War II fit into the larger picture of California history. Archie Green reinforced my belief that as chroniclers of history we must continue to document the lives of working people.

From the preliminary research to the completed project, Kathleen Rupley, curator of the Richmond Museum, has been enormously supportive. Working in collaboration with Kathleen, and Museum staff Paula Hutton and Joan Connolly on the "Fishermen by Trade" exhibition was an invigorating experience as well as an excellent example of how two organizations pooled their talents and resources to create a popular community event.

Stanley Nystrom, a Museum volunteer and lifelong Richmond resident, has been a continuing resource to me. A local history buff, with a great sense of detail, he assisted me often.

Finally, I want to thank Adelia Lines and Emma Clarke of the Richmond Public Library, Sharon Pastori of the LEAP program, and Rhonda Rios Kravitz and Gary Strong of the California State Library for their support in making possible the completion of these oral history volumes and their distribution to several Bay Area public libraries which serve minority populations.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In my work I am most interested in recording the stories of people who are undocumented in history and who are unlikely to leave written records behind. For me, the strength of this project has been seeing the transformation in how the interviewees view their relationship to history. They came a long way from our first contact when a typical response to my request for an interview was, "Why do you want to interview me?" or "What's important about my life?" And "Why Richmond?" With some encouragement, many became actively involved in the research and the collection of photographs, and began recommending others to be interviewed. "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California," became <u>their</u> project, with a life of its own.

This set of oral histories is by no means the whole story of Richmond. It is one piece of its history and one effort to generate community-based literature. I hope that it will encourage others to record the stories, the songs, and the traditions of our community members. They have a lot to teach us.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

February 23, 1990
Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library
University of California
Berkeley, California

INTRODUCTION by Jim Quay

It is a great pleasure to introduce "On the Waterfront" to you. I myself was introduced to the project in September 1983, shortly after becoming executive director of the California Council for the Humanities. Both the Council and its mission of bringing the humanities to out-of-school adults were relatively new to me when Judith Dunning came to my office to talk about her proposal. Ms. Dunning wanted to document an important period in the life of the Richmond, California waterfront, but she didn't want to write a study for scholars. Instead, she proposed to interview most of the oldest surviving waterfront figures, collect historic photographs of the port and its workers, and to create from these an exhibit for the public. Would the Council be interested in supporting such a project?

Happily, the two dozen scholars and citizens who sat on the Council then <u>were</u> interested and, convinced of the project's importance, voted to fund Ms. Dunning's proposal in early 1984. Six years later, I now know what I couldn't have known then: that "On the Waterfront" had all the features of a typical public humanities project: a powerful subject, caring scholars, a resourceful and dedicated project director, and uncertain funding.

You can appreciate why even the best public humanities project--and "On the Waterfront" is one of the best--doesn't easily attract funding. In a state focused relentlessly on the future, the next quarterly statement, the next development, the value of such a project doesn't show up in a cost-benefit analysis. Who would care about the lives of Californians past? Who would care about a waterfront whose boomtime is passed?

The answer is: thousands of people, as Judith's project proved. First and foremost, Judith, who didn't just <u>study</u> Richmond, but moved to and lived in Richmond. Like so many project directors, she gave time and life to this project far beyond the amount budgeted. In the language of accounting this is called "in-kind contribution"; in the language of life it's called devotion. Those of us privileged to know Judith know that the project both exhausted her and enriched her, and she has won the admiration of those who supported her and the affection of those she has interviewed and worked with.

After Judith came a handful of interested scholars--historian Chuck Wollenberg, folklorist Archie Green, and oral historian Willa Baum--who gave their time and expertise to the project. Next, a handful of people at organizations like CCH, Chevron and Mechanics Bank, who thought enough of the idea to fund it. Finally, eventually, came the thousands of visitors to Richmond Festival by the Bay during 1985-87 and saw the photographs and read the excerpts from interviews and realized that they too cared about these people. And now, you, the reader of these interviews, have an opportunity to care.

In its fifteen years of supporting efforts to bring the humanities to the out-of-school public in California, the Council has seen two great themes emerge in the projects it funds: community and diversity. "On the Waterfront" embodies both. I think such projects are compelling to us because in our busy lives, we often encounter diversity more as a threat than as a blessing, and community more as an absence that a presence.

"On the Waterfront" gives us all a chance to experience the blessings of diversity. The life details that emerge from these pictures and voices make us appreciate how much the people of the Richmond waterfront are unlike us, how much attitudes, economies, and working conditions have changed. Yet because the portraits are so personal and intimate, we can also recognize the ways in which they are like us, in their struggles, their uncertainties, their pride, and their fates. What seemed like difference becomes part of a greater sense of who "we" are.

In the lives of waterfront people, we can also glimpse how a community grew and waned. Busy with our own lives, we often neglect the activities that knit communities together. Judith Dunning's project allows us to see what we are losing and how communities are created and destroyed. And so, "On the Waterfront" fulfills the oldest promise of the humanities: that in learning about others, we learn about ourselves. For the gift of these twenty-six lives, we can thank Judith Dunning.

Jim Quay
Executive Director
California Council for the Humanities

March 2, 1990
San Francisco, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Pratt Peterson

In the spring of 1986, I met Mr. Pratt Peterson, a former whaler at the Richmond Whaling Station, and we taped three interviews at his home in Point Richmond. Mr. Peterson, raised on a Utah farm, came to California with a friend in the early 1940s at age nineteen and found work on a small fishing boat. It was the beginning of a lifetime at sea. Gaining the reputation as a strong fisherman and a hard worker, he had no trouble finding work. Skippers sought him out. Before starting work at the Richmond Whaling Station in 1958, Mr. Peterson fished in Alaska, Mexico, off the California coast, and worked the last season of sardines in Monterey Bay.

The first interview covered his family background and his Mormon upbringing. Mr. Peterson and his wife have been married thirty-eight years and have four children. The family is still active in the Mormon Church. In the initial session we also talked about his decision to leave Utah and his beginnings in the fishing industry.

The second and third interviews focused on the Richmond Whaling Station, the site of the last whaling operation in the United States, where Mr. Peterson worked until its closure in 1972. The politics of whaling changed dramatically during Mr. Peterson's career as a whaler. When he began, he saw whaling as a job and as a day's work. He admits that he was attracted to it because it was a freer life, "Your whole life was determined by the weather and the whales." He described the whaler's life as "out of the ordinary, always with an element of surprise and adventure." When I asked him about some of the best parts of whaling, he talked about the excitement and told me that everything else paled compared to that.

He spoke of the short stints at sea by those who were drawn to whaling by some romantic vision. He recalled men who would get no further than the Golden Gate Bridge before the boat hit a little swell and they became deathly ill. Mr. Peterson knows that a whaler is a rare breed. He explained, "If you could get maybe ten American whalers, you would be lucky. Out of the ten, maybe you would get four or five that shot." Mr. Peterson was a gunner.

Mr. Peterson recalled the blue whales as awesome creatures, "The blue whales were the biggest thing that ever lived on the face of the earth. Shooting one of them is like shooting twenty elephants in one shot, because they weigh up to a hundred and ten tons." He hopes that the blue whale population comes back after nearly being wiped out by the Japanese and Russian "killer boats." He said that with the factory ship operation the whales didn't have a chance. Mr. Peterson believes that the Richmond Whaling Station ran a limited business, "We weren't anything, just a speck out there compared to those guys...when we got so many, we had to stop and come in with them."

In addition to describing the different species of whales, we talked about some details of being out to sea--the vessel, the crew, the routes, the hunt and the kill, towing whales, and accidents aboard the whaling vessel. The hands were particularly susceptible to accidents. He gave examples of a bomb blowing up in a whaler's hands taking two of his fingers. Mr. Peterson remembered breaking a finger and continuing gunning. It struck me that the whalers often ignored their injuries and continued as usual. But this lack of attention to occupational hazards seems related to economics. The whalers were paid only for what they caught, and, if there were no whales in tow, there would be no paycheck.

The whalers were of tough stock but the daily exposures to risk did take its toll. At the time of the interview, one of Mr. Peterson's hands was still numb and his legs were in braces from his knees to his feet. When I asked about salaries, Mr. Peterson said that it varied widely. Some years he made $3,000 and other years, $10,000. He remarked that he was in whaling for the adventure rather than the money. His wife, never trusting his whaler's income, always worked outside the home.

When the Endangered Species Act passed in the early 1970s, which meant that the Richmond Whaling Station was going to shut down, the whalers received no warning. One day he saw news reporters and TV crews waiting on the dock to interview the returning whalers. This was the first they had heard about the loss of their jobs. When I asked Mr. Peterson how he felt when he learned that this was going to be the end of his whaling career, he told me, "Well, I kind of got an empty feeling. But it was a shock the way they did it. We had absolutely no forewarning."

Mr. Peterson did say that if the laws were reversed to allow whaling, and if he were younger and in good health, he

probably would not do it. In his interview he said, "I could see the whaling population going downhill. I figured that sooner or later they would have to do something if they were going to preserve the whales. They're a very beautiful animal and powerful...Whales are the biggest thing that ever lived on the face of the earth."

At the time of the interview, Mr. Peterson had not been out on a boat since 1972 when the whaling station closed. That summer Mr. Peterson and I were invited guests on a ten-hour whale watching expedition to the Farrallon Islands. With no exaggeration I will say that day in August was the longest day of my life. Like the would-be whalers, filled with romantic visions that Mr. Peterson had described, this interviewer became deathly ill once the seas got choppy outside the Golden Gate Bridge. I never got to see the magnificent blue whale that passed by our boat but Mr. Peterson did. Once again he was impressed by its enormous size; I was more impressed by Mr. Peterson's ability to withstand seasickness. He called it a "gift."

I did not get to tape record or photograph Pratt Peterson on our whale watch, but I did feel as though we became friends. As soon as the boat pulled into the pier, I felt like a new person. I smiled for days, knowing that my future research would continue on dry land.

Judith K. Dunning
Project Director

March 1, 1990
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Room 486 The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly or type. Use black ink.)

Your full name Pratt Nelson Peterson

Date of birth 1/30/23 Birthplace Ephraim, Utah

Father's full name Pratt Nelson Peterson Sr.

Occupation Security Guard Birthplace Ephraim, Utah

Mother's full name Eva Draper Peterson

Occupation Housewife Birthplace Moroni, Utah

Your spouse(s) Delores Peterson

Your children Terri, Mark, Michael, Jeffrey Peterson

Where did you grow up? Provo, Utah

When did your family first come to California? 1958

Reasons for coming Whaling

Present community Richmond How long? 32 years

Education (and training programs) High School, one year College

Occupation(s) Commercial fishing, whaling and
Plant operator

continued on back page

Special interest or activities Politics - current events.

Ideas for improving Richmond's image Get it from crime and drugs.

What do you see for the future of Richmond? Unable to answer.

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Family Background: Ephriam, Utah

[Date of Interview: April 1, 1986] ##

Dunning: What is your full name?

Peterson: It's Pratt Nelson Peterson, and it used to be junior until my father passed away. Then I dropped the junior.

Dunning: What year were you born?

Peterson: 1923. A long time ago.

Dunning: Where were you born?

Peterson: Ephriam, Utah.

Dunning: What about your parents? Where were they born?

Peterson: My father was born in Ephriam and my mother was born in Moroni, Utah. They're about twelve miles apart.

Dunning: Do you know where your grandparents were born?

Peterson: My grandfather was born in Ephriam. He was the first of Norwegian ancestry born in Utah, the first boy. So it goes back quite a while. His parents were sent to establish the town and surrounding area by the leaders of the Mormon church.

Dunning: And your family background was Mormon?

This symbol indicates that a tape or segment of a tape has begun or ended.

Peterson: Oh, yes. Everybody was Mormon there. I didn't know there was any other religion until I was about fifteen, sixteen years old. I though everybody in the world was Mormon.

Dunning: That must have been a major part of your upbringing?

Peterson: Yes. Of course, my immediate family and extended family were all Mormons, as well as friends. Ephriam was a small town and Mormonism was all that I knew. My father was a rancher. He had sheep, and they grazed on the mountains. Then he had farms to support it, the feeding part of it.

[tape interruption]

Family Loses Farm in '29 Crash

Move to Provo, Utah

Peterson: Then the crash came in '29 and so my father lost everything he had. The farm, the sheep, everything. So he was looking for work like millions of other people. We moved to what we considered the big city. We moved to Provo, which was probably a mistake. Then I went to school in Provo, graduated from high school in Provo. Eventually my family moved up to Salt Lake. My mother lives there now.

She's eighty-seven years old. I stayed in Provo for a little while after they moved up to Salt Lake, and then eventually a friend of mine wanted to go to California. You know, that's all I heard about was California. He wanted to go to California. So I went down with him and knocked around. Of course, this was

Peterson: wartime and there was a lot of work going on in aircraft industries. How fast do you want me to go through that?

Dunning: It's good for me to get a general picture, but I would like to come back to your childhood. I was wondering how many sisters and brothers you have?

Peterson: I have one younger brother, two older sisters. My younger brother died about eight years ago now. I have a sister that lives in Denver and the other sister lives in Seattle, and of course, my mother is in Salt Lake.

Dunning: Your mother has lived to a ripe old age.

Peterson: Yes.

Description of Parents

Dunning: What was your mother like? Could you describe her?

Peterson: In what way do you mean?

Dunning: Well, could you describe a typical day for her when all the children were little and you were still living on the farm? Things that you remember her doing the most?

Peterson: It was mostly just housework, just taking care of the family's needs: cooking, eating, doing the laundry, house cleaning, and the kids. She never worked outside of the home. Even now at her age she has a guy come around and cut her lawn, and if he doesn't do it just right then she goes out and cuts it more and trims up after him. But she's had trouble. She was pretty heavy but has lost weight. She's had a little heart trouble. But for her age she's in good shape.

Dunning: Do you feel that there area certain things that your mother tried to teach you or hand down to you?

Peterson: Well, basically just everybody then, as far as being honest, good-working people, and I think that's about it.

Losing the Family Farm During the Depression

Dunning: What about your father? What was he like?

Peterson: He was quite a guy. He loved people. He was an extrovert. He loved to go out and talk and visit with people. Everybody liked him. He was just a likeable, all around good guy. There was a difference there between my mother. Where he was the extrovert and optimistic, my mother was kind of the other way, an introvert and looked at life differently.

My father had a tough time after he lost everything, being that he had been raised on a ranch and ranching was the only thing that he knew. To come and get work after that, and especially around Utah where it hit really hard, that Depression--you know how long it lasted. I tell people or my kids about that now and they won't believe me about how tough it was.

Dunning: Do you have any particular memories that really stand out from that time when your father was losing the farm?

Peterson: Oh yes. I can remember the first time the bank came around. Of course, we owned the house, so they took the house, too. And how my mother cried when they came around and said, "Well, the home goes, but you can stay in the house if you pay rent."

Peterson: Then moving. My oldest sister, it was really tough on her. To me it was a great adventure. You know, from one town to the other town. It didn't affect me that much but it did my older sister, my one older sister.

Dunning: How did it affect her?

Peterson: Because she had to get new friends when she moved and she was--

Dunning: Was she a teenager at the time?

Peterson: Yes, she was in high school. I don't know if it really affected her later on or not, but she had a tough time adjusting to it. But the rest of us, we adjusted pretty well.

Dunning: Did you see real personality changes in your parents?

Peterson: Not that I would notice at that time.

Dunning: Yes, you were only around eight years old.

Peterson: Yes, I wouldn't have known about that, so consequently I didn't really notice anything like that except it was a tough time. I think everybody was going through it.

Dunning: How long a period before there was the foreclosure and you had to leave?

Peterson: Well, it wasn't that we really had to leave. My dad was just looking for something that he could make a living at. He thought that in Provo there would be a little better chance. But a lot of other people thought the same thing. Consequently, it took a little while. I guess you're familiar with it, how long it took to come out of the Depression. We really didn't come out. It left a permanent mark on our family. With the beginning of the war, everything opened up. Life became better but we never fully recovered.

Dunning: What kind of work did your father get in Provo?

Peterson: We were almost like migrant farm workers.

Dunning: You were hired help?

Peterson: Yes. Well, we went out and worked on farms. Even the farmers at that time didn't have hardly any money, so we would work and then they would pay us off in whatever we were working on. It was a great fruit producing area around there. Then you would take the fruit and try to sell it if you could. A lot of times you would throw it away because nobody had money to buy it. That's about what we worked for then.

Dunning: Did you do it collectively as a family? Did everyone work?

Peterson: Yes, it started out that way, but it didn't last that long. I mean, we were all working as a family initially. But then it eventually ended up that I worked on it a lot. My brother worked on it. Myself, my younger brother and father worked at it consistently.

Dunning: What would you do? What was your job?

Peterson: Just go out and pick whatever there was to pick. Stoop labor. I didn't enjoy it too much, but it was something to earn a living at, put food on the table.

Dunning: Was your mother out there also?

Peterson: No, Mom didn't go out then. It was usually me and my younger brother, maybe one of my sisters would help sometimes. But it was me and my dad and my younger brother. He was really young then. Then my dad got into other things later on, so that didn't last that long.

Dunning: Now at that time that you were working, were you also going to school?

Peterson: No. It was summer. It was in the summertime.

Dunning: That you would be working?

Peterson: Yes. Because there was nothing in the winter. It was pretty tough winters up there. I thought it was anyway.

Dunning: I'm sure it was. That's why a lot of us ended up out here.

Peterson: Yes. Where are you from, then?

Dunning: Boston.

Peterson: Oh, Boston.

Dunning: Are you Norwegian on both sides of the family?

Peterson: No, on my mother's side I'm Swedish. My grandmother could speak Swedish fluently. Then English. Her maiden name was Johanson. In fact, there was another old man in this small town that was Swedish, also, and he would come around to talk with my grandmother.

Upbringing in the Mormon Church

Dunning: I know in the last ten years there's been a whole lot of emphasis on ethnic roots and traditions. Thinking back, do you feel like there were certain traditions that your family carried on?

Peterson: Not really.

Dunning: In terms of celebrating holidays, or certain foods, or--?

Peterson: Whatever it was was American. You know, Fourth of July, not anything as far as the Norwegians were concerned. My church [Mormon] does a lot of genealogy work. My aunt was into it for years. In fact, she made a trip back to Norway. She claims that she can trace our family tree back as far as Leif Erikson. But, you know, you can miss here and there and miss quite a bit if you just miss one person. But she always thought that the sea was flowing in my veins. I would eventually get there. She was a writer, kind of. She wrote poems, and like I say, she studied genealogy a lot. I have a couple of books about the family tree that she's written. Well, the family continues to do genealogy work today. People from all over the world go to Salt Lake to the church genealogical library to trace their family trees.

Dunning: It's amazing, the records that they have. I would like to hear about your Mormon background if you would care to talk about it.

Peterson: Of course, I was raised in the church. Everybody else around me was Mormon, so I didn't think it was anything unusual. The one thing that did shock me was when I got out into the world and people would say, "There goes those Morons--No, I mean Mormons."

I thought, "Wow." That was a shock, but otherwise it wasn't really that bad. Are you familiar with the church?

Dunning: I'm not a Mormon, but--well, you hear of certain stereotypes, mostly, I think, from non-Mormons. You hear about what Mormons aren't supposed to do.

Peterson: Oh, yes. You run into that a lot.

Dunning: Certain restrictions.

Peterson: I have run into that quite a bit. Like I say, that was the thing that shocked me when I got away from Utah, how people would look at you kind of funny when you said you were a Mormon. But I didn't pay any attention. After a while it didn't mean that much to me.

Dunning: Are you still a practicing Mormon?

Peterson: Yes. And my family is all quite active in it. I'm not really that active now. But the rest of my family is. My oldest son spent two years in Germany as a missionary. My other two sons served on missions at home. These missions are called stake missions. Women go on the missions, but my daughter didn't go. All my children are quite active in the church.

Dunning: Are there certain values that you feel you have that stem from your Mormon background?

Peterson: Oh, yes. You couldn't help that.

Dunning: Could you describe some of them?

Peterson: I think honesty and the work ethic, and a whole purpose to life. Of course, I could go on a lot more and give you a whole book about it.

Dunning: One of the reasons I touch upon that in Richmond is because people from so many different religions came into this area as a result of the war years. There is the Pentacostal, and a lot of different churches, so it makes it very interesting.

Peterson: There are a lot of Mormons still around. People don't realize that there are many Mormons around the Bay Area.

Dunning: Were there certain prohibitions that your church enforced?

Peterson: Like--?

Dunning: Well, I remember growing up back east. There were only a few Mormons at our high school, and they weren't allowed to go to the dance.

Peterson: I don't know about that. They hold dances, and they always have held dances in the Church. Of course, smoking and drinking and that part of it is what we call the "Word of Wisdom." But really it is just a healthy thing for you to do.

Dunning: Have you continued that? Do you not smoke?

Peterson: No, I don't smoke.

Dunning: You don't smoke or drink?

Peterson: No. Being around all them wild whalers, you would think.

Dunning: I know. Was it difficult at times? Now you're really in vogue because people are on a more healthy regime. There's more orientation, but from some of the stories I've heard of the war times, it was very different.

Peterson: Well, I tried to resist temptation. There was a period in my life when I didn't follow the Word of Wisdom. I kind of backslid. But I gave it up a few years ago. I'm much healthier. But there's a lot of smoking and especially drinking going on now in the world.

Dunning: Do you feel like you're healthier because of that?

Peterson: Yes. You would have to be.

Dunning: You certainly don't look your age.

Peterson: Well, thank you.

Educational Background

Dunning: I would also like to hear about your education, how many years you went to school and what you studied?

Peterson: I was a high school graduate and had two quarters of college. Living in Provo and graduating from there I went up to the BYU, Brigham Young University, which was a very small school then. They had a student body of fifteen hundred. Now, it's thirty-two thousand, something like that. But I found when I attended that I had wasted all my time in high school. I was a great guy for picking subjects that I could get by easily in. Although I took college preparatory course, when I got up to college, I had to take bonehead english.

My father became ill, and I had to drop out of school to help support the family. I played a couple of sports when I was in school--I was that stereotype athlete. I played football, basketball, the whole thing. I wasn't a triple threat man, but I did earn my letter in football.

I was a very good swimmer. I thought it was a shame that just before I entered high school, the swimming pool at the high school was covered over and a girls gymnasium built over it. It was a beautiful tile pool.

When I entered high school the only competitive swimming took place at our annual school picnic. I won the swimming event three consecutive years. We

Peterson: would have to swim three lengths of the pool doing free style swimming.

I really excelled in swimming, more than anything else that I tried athletically. Now I doubt I could float.

Dunning: You're not a familiar face from the Richmond Plunge.

Peterson: No. I should go down there because of my legs. It would be really good exercise for me.

Dunning: You see a number of people with braces and all sorts of situations come there, and certainly of all ages. It's quite a well-used place.

Peterson: I went down there, but I couldn't use my legs on the swimming so then I stopped it.

Dunning: Did your parents want you to follow a certain occupation?

Peterson: Not really at that time. It would have been nice if I had went ahead then and finished college. I wanted to go into forestry. That's what I wanted to go into then. Of course, if you got through school then you were assured of a job--but like I say, when my dad got ill then I went to work outside and helped my mom along until my dad finally got well. He had a rough time until he finally died. He died of cancer. It was a long illness. It was a long bout.

Dunning: And at that time you were supporting the family or helping to support?

Peterson: I helped. I helped support for a little while, not for a long period of time. Then he would come out of the hospital. He would come out and go to work and he would have to go back in the hospital. So I tried to help him when I could.

Dunning: Was he still in farming at that time?

Peterson: Oh, no.

Dunning: What business did he end up in?

Peterson: Finally, when he moved to Salt Lake he went to work on a civil service job for the navy. They had a big naval supply depot there. He worked there until he got too sick to work. At the last he was like a security guard where you just have to be there. But then he was in the hospital for so long before cancer finally got him. He was in the veteran's hospital in Salt Lake.

It was ironic, my younger brother died here in Richmond of cancer. I hope that's not hereditary--I tell that to doctors and they all go, "Aaaa." I hope it doesn't attack me.

Dunning: As a teenager, do you remember some of your ambitions, what you wanted to do in your life? You mentioned forestry and I just wondered if there was anything else? Did you have any visions of what your life was going to be like or what you wanted?

Peterson: No. That was probably my problem. I never really thought that far ahead on any goals. I did want to travel a little. I would get the feeling sometimes like I was crowded in one little spot and I wanted to get out of it so I finally broke out. Outside of completing school and forestry I really can't think of any others that I sat down and really consciously said, "Well, I'd like to be this." Not that I can recall.

Coming to California: First Fishing Trip

Dunning: You mentioned you reached a point where you finally broke out. When was that, and what happened?

Peterson: I was working in Provo at the steel mill, building Geneva steel, and I worked on the construction part of that. Then I had this friend of mine that was coming down to California. He had some family in California so he wanted me to go with him. I thought sure, I'll go with him.

Dunning: Do you remember how old you were?

Peterson: Let's see. I was about nineteen then, I think. So we both hopped on the bus and came down to California. He went to work in the shipyards and I goofed around at a few things. I drove a cab down in Long Beach for a little while. That wasn't too great a job. That's where I started fishing though--down there.

Dunning: So your first place in California was Long Beach?

Peterson: Yes. I went into Los Angeles. For somebody coming out of Salt Lake and Provo that was really a frightening experience. Because the Trailway bus that I came in on went down on Sixth and Main, I think, in Los Angeles, into the cruddiest part of town you could get in.

Right across the road they used to have these electric trains. They were trolleys. Anyway, they had this big depot across from the Trailway depot and you could ride a trolley to all parts of Los Angeles then, and to Long Beach. So I went across the road and hopped the first train to Long Beach.

Peterson: I went out there and got a job as a parking lot attendant. I stayed and never went back to Los Angeles. In the meantime I bumped into friends that were in the fishing business and they got me on a small boat that was going down into Mexico, fishing, hand-lining. From Boston you should know about that. All those schooners going out on the Grand Banks and hand-lining. In fact, I went with a man from Nova Scotia.

It wasn't a very big boat. They called it "Golden Gate," of all things. We would go down almost to the tip of lower Baja California. We used to go down to Magdalena Bay, which used to be an old whaling station. We would try all these little spots on the way down to Baja. We were fishing jew fish, cabrilla, and grouper. We would clean them on the boats, ice them, and then bring them back for the fresh fish market. We would be gone about fifteen or twenty days.

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Dunning: Had you ever even been on a boat before?

Peterson: No, that was the strange part about it. That's what they always say. You know, the farm boys come out and get on boats. The guys that are on the boats, they put an oar on their backs and start walking inland. When they say, "What's that?" they say, "This is where I want to settle."

I was lucky. I didn't get seasick. I got airsick. I soloed, and I got so airsick it was terrible. I had to do spins.

Dunning: So you had your pilot's license?

Peterson: I had my student's pilot. I never got my private. I had about fifteen or twenty hours in the air. I soloed before I even had a car.

Dunning: Just as an aside, how did you get into that?

Peterson: I figured that I would like to fly. You know, that was up in the blue sky yonder. Of course, they had a lot of films then. So I went out and they said, "Well." They signed me all up. They said, "Terry will be your instructor."

So I walked out. It was a small airport. They had a couple of hangars. I walked out there and I said, "Where is this guy Terry?"

They said, "Right over there." It was a gal instructor I had.

We got the eight hours in and I didn't solo. Then they were soloing in eight hours. I thought, "Well, I'm a dumb pilot. I can't solo."

I got eight and a half hours in and we came down, landed the airplane. She got out and she said, "Go ahead and take it. What goes up has got to come down."

I said, "Thanks." [sarcastically]

So, it was no problem. Then I took another ten hours, just a combination of instructor and by myself, solo. I got through the spins and stalls. I used to slip around the corners when I would fly. You know, when you're supposed to bank and come around like this, but I was sliding around. I got seasick, or airsick, whichever.

Dunning: Airsick.

Peterson: So when I got on the boat I thought, "You're not going to make it." But I never did. I never got seasick.

Dunning: You had your air experience before you went on the boat?

Peterson: Yes. And I got out in some awful rough weather right to start with, too. That was a comedy of errors. This guy from Nova Scotia, he loved to drink. He was a little short Irishman. Meagher was his last name. He would take a lot of sea stores when he would go. So when we would leave, they would divide this whiskey evenly among everybody.

Dunning: You used these for sea stores [stash of liquor]?

Peterson: Yes. He was usually pretty well wound up when we left. By the time we got to San Diego, or the next one below--that was Cape Colonet--Joe had almost finished all his sea stores. So I would take mine and bring them down to the engine room and stash them someplace. He would never come down in the engine room.

I was down there one time working and so he comes down and he said, "Pete, where's that wrench?" real loud so everybody up there could hear it. Then he would come back to me and he said, "Do you want to save an old man's life?"

I would say, "What do you want, Joe? The bottle?"

He would say, "Yes, yes."

So he would always see where I stashed the bottle again when he was down.

Dunning: And he knew that you didn't drink?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: There must have been a lot of pressure on you throughout your life, I would think, both to drink and to get your allotment of liquor.

Peterson: Yes. So anyway, he finally got all my sea stores. I had, I think, three or four bottles in all, fifths, that were my share.

We took off one time. We would load with ice. We had a new engineer on the boat. We started to take water in between San Pedro and San Diego. It was coming in. They had a deck pump. I don't know if you've ever seen these deck pumps. They work with a handle and it has a rubber diaphragm in it. Anyway, we started pumping on that. We all had to take our turns. That's how fast the water was coming in.

Finally we busted one of the rubber diaphragms. We wore it out, really. Then we had another one. We put it in, wore that one out. The boat had an old diesel engine in there. Diesel will keep running until water gets up those snifter valves. So the water was getting up on the engine. I'm down there with buckets, bailing it out to the guy up above me.

So this Joe Meagher, he goes down and he says, "Pete, go up and hoist the flag, union down."

So I went up. That's supposed to be a distress signal. Here come a whole bunch of navy boats. Not one of them stopped. They went right by us. But we finally got into the dock before we completely sank, and came to find out this engineer had a three way valve down there, and he had turned the valve so what he thought was pumping water out of the boat was letting water run into the boat.

So they were about ready to kill him.

Dunning: Was he doing that because of inexperience?

Peterson: Right. It was just ignorance. He didn't know any better.

Dunning: Deadly ignorance.

Peterson: Yes. But he was a character, that Joe Meagher. He liked to take me around with him and he would go into a place and throw his arms open and he would say, "Hello everybody."

Everybody would turn around and look at him. You know beer joints. They would think, "Who's that nut?" But he would take me around and I would take him home when he would get so far along.

Then he would go in the house and his wife and he would say, "Honey, I've got Pete with me." Take the pressure off from him. He was quite a character. I was with him for I would say almost a year doing that.

Dunning: How did you manage to get out of the draft at that time? It seems like you were at the perfect age.

Peterson: Yes. I had my football experience. I had a trick shoulder and a trick knee. This one shoulder of mine, I used to wear a brace on it. When I would get the shoulder above my head like this, it would fall out of joint. So they classed me as a 4-Fer.

People would look at me and they would say, "Well, what's wrong with that guy?"

But most of the time I worked in some related war industry, like that steel mill. Of course, when I got out of the steel mill, then it was getting along to the latter part of the war then.

Peterson: So it was kind of winding down. A lot of ships were starting to come back. In fact, we just came back from Mexico with one trip and right away there was a fish buyer who comes down and says, "Well, we'll have to drop the price of fish."

I said, "What?"

He said, "Well, the war is over. Now you can't get as good a price for fish."

That was about the last trip I made down there, too.

Dunning: But that was your very first experience on the boat?

Peterson: Yes, on the Golden Gate.

Hand Lining

Dunning: How did you get your training? Was that on the job?

Peterson: Oh, yes, that was on the job training. The hand lining was kind of an art.

Dunning: Could you describe that?

Peterson: We would just have a big hook and we would go along and we would troll for smaller fish with bait. The hook was about four inches long this way, the shank of the hook, and then of course the hook itself was bigger. We used to call it the shark hook. Then we would bait that with these smaller fish that we would catch trolling for the bigger ones.

Peterson: We would have to have a certain bottom. It had to be a hard shaly bottom. We didn't have a fathom meter on this boat. We had a lead. We would throw a lead. You've seen these old pictures where they throw it and say there's so many fathoms.

You would put grease in the bottom part of this lead weight and as it hit the bottom, whatever the bottom was, it would pick it up whether it was sandy or shaly or whatever as you would pull it up. We would sound all day to get just a spot, because these fish seemed to congregate in just one spot.

Dunning: Could you describe that spot?

Peterson: It would be hard, just hard bottom: rock. Rock bottom. Then, when we would get it we would flag it or put a buoy on it, because like in one spot we got fourteen tons of fish.

Dunning: How big would this spot be in area?

Peterson: It would be a small, comparatively small area.

Dunning: About an eighth of a mile, or--?

Petrson: Yes. If you would get half a mile off of this spot you wouldn't get any fish. You had to be right on the spot. You would throw the sounding lead again and again, while this Joe Meagher would have cross bearings on land where he would line up a point such as a short line and a tall hill, and when he got them both pretty well in line it would be on the spot. He would use his hands for sighting. He was usually pretty good at it. He could get us right on the spot.

Then we would fish and we would move off the spot when we cleaned the fish, because if you cleaned the fish on the spot the fish would leave. So we would move to deeper water.

Dunning: So you would get all your fish first?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: And then go to another spot to clean it?

Peterson: Yes. We would usually just run out someplace and drift in deeper water and clean them. Well, you would cut the heads off. But these fish had huge heads on them. Especially the jewfish. I caught one that weighed, with the head off and dressed out, weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. I used to have a picture.

Dunning: You caught that with a hand line?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: How?

Peterson: It was a hard laid about maybe three quarters of an inch, hard laid line. There was no playing it or anything like that. When you got it you just started to pull it. If we were fishing on say eighteen fathoms of water, as you would pull the fish up, if you would pull him up pretty fast then he would inflate. The change of the pressures, see. He would just blow up and float up sometimes.

But when he got alongside the boat you had to be very careful of getting him when you put the gaff hook in him. One that size we would have to put a block and tackle on him to get him on the boat. If you put the gaff--the roofs of their mouths was all bone, so the hook would either go this way in the bottom or that way. When you would gaff them you would gaff them that way, but then the gaff hook had a rope on it.

Peterson: As soon as you gaff it--I made the mistake once and I lost a gaff. You hold on to the gaff while they start twisting like this. So you would gaff them and then hold the rope which would take the twisting.

Then when we got through with that we would cut the heads off and the insides and then we would ice them down with ice in the stomachs and the bellies, and put a layer of ice over them.

Innate Ability for Fishing

Dunning: Was that pretty difficult for you at the beginning?

Peterson: No. I picked it up pretty fast, really. In fact the old-timers got mad at me because I could outfish them. You would take your position on the boat. They would usually have two guys on one side and two guys on the other side and they would have maybe a couple of guys on the stern of the boat. And that would be your position.

So I would start catching fish and they would say, "Oh, he's lucky. Beginner's luck." Then they would say, "Change positions."

So I would take the other place. And I would beat them back there. They would say, "I don't know."

Then one time I said, "What's the matter with you guys? If I catch a lot of fish you're sharing in it anyway." It was all on a share basis. We didn't get paid any wages. If we didn't catch any fish we didn't make any money. Anyway, they were kind of envious of my ability to catch fish.

Dunning: And did that ability continue?

Peterson: Commercially, yes, but as a sport fisherman I'm terrible. I can't catch anything. My brother loved to fish trout. He used to take me out and I didn't get any kick out of that.

That's why my mother laughed when I went commercial fishing, because she said I would go out with Tony just for the ride to get out in the country with him. She said, "The last thing I ever thought you would do would be to go into commercial fishing."

But I was in it for quite a while. I did just about everything there was to do in it. Except halibut. I didn't do halibut fishing.

Dunning: To what do you attribute your ability to fish that first time around?

Peterson: I just had a feel for it, I guess. The fish would come up. The big ones, they wouldn't really grab the bait and take it. They would come up and they would suck it. You could feel them. You would take it away from them and they would come after it. I would just tease them. I would take it up and down and finally I would set the hook. You just have to jerk real hard and set the hook on them. Then it was a fight for a little while.

If you caught one that was really a big one, it would be like a cowboy, how he breaks his rope when he lassoed a bronco. That's the way you would break it over, either the rail, you would either drop it and step on the line and then hold it with the right hand to cause some friction where it would go down underneath your boot and up over the rail, and that way to hold him or slow him down.

Peterson: Of course, that was nothing compared to what I finally got into.

Dunning: Yes, the whales. That's a whole other story. But the two hundred pound fish, would you actually get it on board yourself?

Peterson: No. Usually one that was that heavy, anything from say seventy-five pounds--they didn't like that big a fish. The market didn't like them because the smaller fish they could filet them out and cut them down. They looked nicer in the display windows and to sell them. But anyway, everybody would rush over and get two or three gaffs in them and pull them aboard.

But with that big one that I caught, they had to use a block and tackle on it. I lost that picture. Because nobody would ever believe that story.

I used to sit around and listen to all these fish tales, and then I would reach in my wallet and bring this out and say, "Could you catch one like that?"

When we were down into the Gulf of Baja, we used to drag two lines behind with these feathered jigs on them to catch tuna. This was when I was on a live bait boat. Do you know what a live bait boat is?

Dunning: Live bait?

Peterson: Yes. We would use anchovies to chum up the school and you would get in to schools of tuna. They used to have them but I don't think they have any boats like that anymore. Then you would throw them on with poles. Did you ever see that in movies?

Dunning: No.

Peterson: Anyway, we would drag these, and when we would get a strike on these lines with tuna, we would make a circle and start chumming to get the school up and then you would get into the racks.

These marlin down in the gulf--that's where we used to get them--they would come up to try to get these lures. If they got the lure they would take everything. They would take your line and lure. We had them tied onto a post on the boat, and then we had like a rubber that would act like a shock absorber. But if one of those things hit it it didn't mean anything.

Anyway, they were coming up to get this lure. First, because it was right on top of the water, they would get their snout out of the water. I could see them and I would pull the line away from them so they didn't take our gear. But I went to the back of the boat once and two of them struck at the same time, taking both lines. They hit and both lines just went wham up in the air and broke them.

They have one that is really a great fighter. They call it a dolphin. Not the porpoise dolphin. It has a big head and then it sloped back to the tail. That fish is a great fighter. It would hit our jigs the same way. That fish would come completely out of the water.

I went to the stem one time and I didn't want to stop the boat because the dolphin was on the line. Usually you would holler at the shipper and he would make the boat go in a circle. So I thought, "I'll pull the fish in."

You would backhand it with both hands. You would usually have canvas gloves on so it wouldn't cut your hand. I got the fish in quite a ways. This dolphin came out of the water. I was so fascinated watching

Peterson: this fish jump out of the water I just sat there looking at it, still holding on this line. When it came back down and hit the water it was just like throwing a bucket into the water. I still had a hold of this line, and it dragged me right down on my knees. I was hanging over the back of the boat like this. That time was a close call.

I got knocked overboard in Cape Colonet.

Dunning: Cape Colonet, where is that?

Peterson: That's not too far below Ensenada. We were setting for bait for the boat. They call them anchovies. What they would do is throw a barrel out and then they would set the net out around where they spotted birds diving around these schools of anchovies. You'll see them when the herring come in the bay here, too, the same way. We happened to be setting for anchovies. Then they would bring the boat around in a circle and they would run and pick up this barrel, which was the other end of the net.

But sometimes they didn't get close enough to the barrel and they would have what they call a running line. Then they would let that line go out until they could pick up the barrel, and they would pull the running line until they got both ends together and pull it in.

I was on the back and when the running lines started to go there was a knot in it that fouled up. It got really a lot of tension on it. It's like dragging a parachute in water. I reached down to grab it and get it loose, and I pulled on it, and as it came loose the tension of that hit me and knocked me completely over the back end of the boat and I landed flat on my back with my feet up. Here I am, hip boots, oilskins, and it was cold.

Dunning: Taking in water.

Peterson: Yes, so down I went. It didn't scare me really, but I went down and came back up, and here's the boat going. They're all interested in picking up the barrels.

Dunning: Did they actually see you go over?

Peterson: None of them saw me go over. So I'm there, and my boots started filling up with water. Here we are a couple hundred miles down into Mexico and me with one pair of boots. I didn't want to lose my boots, so I turned my feet up, you know, my toes on end, so they wouldn't go off.

Then somebody finally saw me. Well, then they all got excited. So they start backing up the boat, and I thought they were going to back over me when they came back. They finally got me and started pulling me out. They all grabbed me and were going to pull me out. Well, all this wet and my boots full of water, I thought my arms were going to come out.

This Joe Meagher said, "Pete, when I looked back there the first time I thought you were a seal."

Then one other time I dove down and cut the net out of the wheel. We were setting the same way and--I was crazy to do that. I would never do that again.

Dunning: You volunteered to do it?

Peterson: Yes. It was surprising. The water down there is really cold. When I dove over, they sharpened this knife up and they said, "Pete, get down there and you can cut it out."

The net had wrapped around the propeller. I said, "No, no, no. I don't want to go down there with that sharp knife."

Peterson: So I got down and I started going down underneath the boat. I started with this shoulder, my bad shoulder. I went like that underneath the boat and my shoulder went out. I just barely got underneath, so I came up.

My uncle who was a doctor taught me how to put it back in place. He came up one night all prepared to put me under with ether, and said, "I want to try something before I do it." He showed me how to move my arm a certain way to put it back into place. Before this I had to be given ether three times to have my shoulder put back into place.

Anyway, I came up with my arm up like this, and they said, "Ah, he can't do anything. He can't even stay underwater. He can't stay under long enough."

So I said, "Wait a minute. I got the shoulder back in, so I went down again."

Dunning: You showed them.

Peterson: I went down. Now, here's all this web from the net, floating, and me down there kicking around. It was crazy. If I had gotten my foot tangled up in that web--but anyway, I got this three bladed propeller, and I got the net cleared on one side. And down on underneath it still wouldn't come loose. I got down the other side.

Now, I was staying down. So anyway, I came up, got air, and I went down again. I couldn't figure out where this thing was fouling up. Finally, I put my feet on the bottom of the boat, stood upside down, and pulled down on the thing and it cleared. Just a little rip in it.

I came up and there was one guy who says, "Pete, you had me worried on that last one. I was ready to come down after you."

Peterson: Here he's standing up there. He's fully clothed, he's got his oilskins boots and all. I said, "Yes, you look like you were ready to come after me."

Dunning: Were you the youngest on board?

Peterson: Oh, yes. So they were always pulling any kind of tricks they could on me to get a laugh.

Dunning: Were there many rules in your workplace on the boat that you were instructed about immediately, or found out rather soon?

Peterson: I can't think of any really.

Dunning: Maybe some of them are such second nature to you--? Were there special things that you couldn't do that would endanger anybody?

Peterson: I guess it was just more or less common sense.

Dunning: Well, when you first started fishing you really didn't know anything, and I'm just wondering how they taught you or how you learned.

Peterson: Oh, the guys were good to me. They would teach me about fishing, how to make gear, or if I did some things they would say, "No, no, don't do that." But I can't remember what they said, "No, no," not to do.

##

Superstitions of the Sea

Dunning: I was asking you about your on-the-job training and wondering if there were certain rules.

Peterson: One thing you never did, you never left a bucket full of water on the deck because it was bad luck. You never talked about horses, because that's bad luck. Now, I say, "Harses," because I'm from Utah. And you never leave on a Friday.

Dunning: Any Friday?

Peterson: Any Friday. You never began a fishing trip on a Friday because that's bad luck. I wouldn't take up your tape telling you the whole story about the English navy on that one.

Dunning: Actually, if you do know any of the origin of those superstitions, I would be real curious.

Peterson: Well, it's been going for a long time, even in the English navy, but the admiralty thought, "Well, we'll do away with that superstition."

Dunning: Which one?

Peterson: About beginning a trip on Friday. So they laid the keel of this boat on Friday, they completed the work on a Friday. I think the skipper was named Friday. It left on a Friday with a hundred and some men on this boat. It was never heard from again. So they really did that good.

Dunning: Is that still enforced today?

Peterson: No, I don't think so. I don't think the younger guys follow it. There was a Norwegian guy by the name of Stemlin. I fished with him later on. He was very superstitious. Now Joe, Joe Meagher, he was superstitious, too, about that. A bucket of water was the worst.

Dunning: The bucket of water seems like a practical issue. Do you know where that came from?

Peterson: No, no I don't. It was just one of his ideas about bad luck.

Dunning: Did you ever ask?

Peterson: I would say, "Why?" And they would say, "Well, it's just bad luck, that's all." Because you don't ask why too many times.

Dunning: What about the horses?

Peterson: I don't know where that one would come from. This buddy of mine, he went out to a bar. You know, in these bars they used to have pictures of these famous racehorses on the backboard. So he got one of those and he took it down and nailed it up in the pilothouse in this boat that he was on.

Stemlin saw that and he just shook his head. He said, "We're in for bad luck now."

Peterson: I can't think of any other superstitions.

Dunning: Any about women on board? I know that's sort of a tradition.

Peterson: I've heard that one, yes, but I didn't. They had women on board, yes, but I didn't think it was bad luck. I hadn't heard too much about it.

Dunning: You mentioned that on this first fishing boat you would be gone for twenty-one days?

Peterson: Twenty, twenty-something days. It all would depend. We were down into they called it--have you ever heard of Seatris Island down in Baja California? That's about halfway down the peninsula. Right inside of there is a place called Turtle Bay, and we used to go in there and anchor when it was bad weather. There was nothing there when I was down there.

I understand now the whole thing has changed since they built that road. There used to be just a village of these what they call lobster fishermen. They were crayfish, really.

We were anchored in there one day, and so this guy on the boat, this Joe Meagher, he's telling me, "Pete, could you get off the boat? Go in there and walk so far inland and you'll see a big lagoon in there."

I said, "Yes, yes." You know, the youngest guy on the boat, here goes another story. Anyway, me and another guy got off. About the only thing we had to walk in was hip boots, so here we get off. It was okay when we were out on the water. It was cool. But we got in there and started to walk. Got a little ways away from the water and it starts to get hot.

Peterson: We walked two or three miles and didn't see anything. I said, "This is enough. Let's go back."

Anyway, that's where that Scanlan Lagoon is. Have you heard of that, where the gray whales go?

Dunning: Yes.

Peterson: Well now, Scanlan is some sort of relative to this guy I was fishing with, this Joe Meagher. We used to fish right outside of the entrance to Scanlan Lagoon, which is a very narrow entrance. The gray whales, we used to see them.

I can remember seeing them jump then. I would see them jump and come down and I would say, "What's that?" Because you would see them at a distance.

They would say, "That's a sunfish." Sometimes those sunfish get huge.

I said, "Oh, it's a sunfish." But I guess that lagoon is huge. I would see it afterwards on films they had about whaling down there. Then when I went ashore down on Magdelena Bay. If there was nothing to do, I would just take the skiff and go ashore. They had still the old boilers and some of the old equipment they had left at that whaling station they had there. So I guess the grey whales got down that far.

Dunning: But the whaling station was closed at that point?

Peterson: Oh, there was nothing left. Just a few old rusted boiler parts would be about it. That was a beautiful bay in there, too. There wasn't much there either. Of course, I scratched my name on the side of that old boiler for posterity.

Sightings of Whales

Dunning: Where those the first whales that you saw?

Peterson: Yes, but after that I saw a lot of them. The biggest one that I've seen was in Alaska. We were coming out one night. We had been into the cannery. We were coming out. We were fishing outside in the open ocean. As we were coming out of this inlet the sun was just setting. That's all you could see was blows in the air. I don't know how big that one was. Now I know they were finback. I never saw that many finback when I was whaling. There must have been a couple hundred at least.

Then here in San Francisco when I was fishing I saw a lot of humpies. There were a lot of humpies around there at one time. I guess they're starting to come back again.

Alaskan Salmon Fishing

Dunning: Do you call them humpies?

Peterson: Humpbacks, yes. There's also a humpback salmon. I fished them, too.

Dunning: Not quite as big as the humpback whale?

Peterson: Yes, I fished humpback salmon. I think I was up in Alaska five salmon seasons.

Dunning: What would the season be?

Peterson: It would be about two months. It was about two to three months that I would be gone. Because we would go up there early and hang our nets and then we would go up to Icy Straits, which was close to Juneau, to try our nets out and to work out the bugs in the nets. We never really caught that many salmon; it was just more or less to work the bugs out of the gear.

Then we would go down to what they call Haystack and then we would start fishing there in earnest. I went up there one year and I ate like a horse and I lost twenty-two pounds in six weeks.

Dunning: Because you were working like a horse.

Peterson: Yes, that was a workhouse. Because we would start our first set just when it got light, maybe around two thirty, three o'clock. And then all day we would be going.

It used to be they would wait until they saw the salmon before they would make a set. But this friend I was with, he didn't believe in this. He believed in what they call blind hauls. You would just set it up. You wouldn't see anything. You would just set it out where there was a probability of fish being there, then just set it out and haul it in. The more hauls you made, the more sets, the greater percentages, plus you would catch more fish. That's the way it was.

Then we would come in sometimes at maybe ten, eleven o'clock at night to deliver to the scows.

Dunning: You would have been out since before dawn?

Peterson: Well, that would be dawn up there in the summertime. It was only two or three hours of darkness, real darkness, even in southeastern Alaska. So then we would be delivering to the scow late, and if it happened to be your turn where you were in the hold to

Peterson: pitch the fish, then you would have a workout there and then you would go in, usually come out and have something to eat, then lay down maybe for a couple of hours, and you're up and you're going again. It was hard work.

Dunning: Were you a very young man?

Peterson: No, I wasn't that young then. Let's see. I was in my thirties. Yes, because I would leave my wife up at her mother's place. She's from Idaho and her folks have a ranch up there. So she would usually go up with them with the kids. They were small then, so I had started my family. All my children were very close together, so I was an old married man then.

Dunning: How did you even manage to have time for a social life when you were out fishing?

Peterson: You didn't.

Dunning: I didn't think so.

Peterson: The thing of it was, we set up nets so many times that we wore it out, actually wore it out, the hangings on the nets. We did. We would fish until noon Saturday. Then we would have Saturday afternoon and Sunday off. Usually we would go into the canneries and do our laundry and rest a little. But we wouldn't rest, because we had the net to rehang. So on Sunday we would be hanging the net. It was really a workout.

Dunning: And you would be on a schedule like this for two to three months?

Peterson: No, not that hard. It would be about six weeks where it was really that schedule. Because you couldn't keep it up that long. You were lucky if you had good weather. One season I was up there and it rained for twenty-five straight days, and the least it rained was

Peterson: one and seventy-five hundredths of an inch. It was usually two inches or better a day rain. It was just constantly, twenty-four hours a day it was raining so hard that it would splash. And we were working in that all the time.

Dunning: Did the weather ever stop you?

Peterson: No, but it got a little--what would you call it?--close, or a little tension there after about the twentieth day.

Alaska Limit Boat

Dunning: Cabin fever?

Peterson: Yes, because we were on what they call the Alaska limit boat. Southeastern Alaska limit. You couldn't be over fifty feet keel length. So they would build it as close to that--say forty-nine and a half feet--as they could get and still have a boat. This one that I was on looked more or less like a scow with a bow on it. But then you cram seven guys or nine guys down in the fo'c'sle [forecastle], small cramped living quarters, and having that kind of weather. I'm surprised we didn't kill each other in that time.

Dunning: Were there ever any murders aboard?

Peterson: Had one at Waterfall when I was out there. I understand now that they have made a resort out of that. It used to be a big cannery for ANP [Atlantic and Pacific].

Dunning: In Alaska?

Peterson: Yes. A couple of guys got in a fight one night and one guy fell off or got knocked off the dock onto the boat and it killed him.

Of course, they would come in and they would have booze on the boat--that was sea stores again. This one boat went up, I don't know how many cases of beer that guy had on board. I think he had a whole boatload of it, and booze.

But then on Saturday night it was--well, it got so wild that the superintendent refused to let him come in or do any drinking. He called out the gendarmes from Ketchekan. They had to fly out a hundred and something miles to get out there. There was a little town called Craig, Alaska. Have you ever been to Alaska or seen anything of Alaska?

Dunning: I've only been at the Anchorage airport on the way to Asia. It's a place I definitely want to go in the future.

Peterson: Of course, all these little towns have canneries, or did at that time. This Craig, they called it Little Chicago--the main street was one block long. When I went in there, here's all these cars sitting around, and no roads for them to go on. It was mostly Indian village. But right at the end of the main street they had a ramp that went up into this bar. It would get wild in that town on a Saturday night. Waterfall wasn't too far from there, maybe twenty-five miles. So a bunch of these guys got on the boat and were going over for a Saturday night's entertainment.

This one guy was telling me about it. He said, "The fights started up at the end of the street. And it was one like these rolling things, you know."

Peterson: It comes down the street towards him. He said he wasn't going to have anything to do with it. He didn't even want to get into it. So he said there were these two buildings that had about a foot's clearance. He said he would crowd in there and get out of the way. So he crowded in there. He said that wasn't good enough. Some guy pulled him out and still whacked him.

Dunning: Did you ever get caught in any of those fights?

Peterson: No. I was lucky that way. Lucky or good, I don't know which.

Creek Robbers in Alaska

Dunning: Did you ever get into the position of having to take your drunken friends back to the boat, being the sober one?

Peterson: That was a pastime. Everybody got up and told what great fishermen they were and lied to each other. The first time I ran into what they called creek robbers in Alaska.

Dunning: What is that word?

Peterson: Creek. I call it a "crick." Creek. You weren't supposed to fish within so many feet of the entrance to any creek. But these guys would go right up and take it out of the creek and drag them down. They used to have grass in them and everything else.

They hated the traps in Alaska. Of course, the traps were all owned by the big canneries. The traps would get millions of salmon, hundreds of thousands of

Peterson: salmon, which took it away from the fishermen. They tried to get rid of the traps when Alaska was still a territory but they never did.

They said, "Well, we'll take so many traps, but it will be a year until they're all gone." But what they would do was they would have these locations for traps that were no good. They didn't have traps on them anyway. So they would say, "Well, we took this one out, this one out, and this one." So it didn't really mean anything.

I was talking to this guy about fishing. He was doing pretty good. The rest of the boats weren't doing anything. You could always tell these creek robbers because they had their boats painted. They were camouflaged, like during the war, so they would blend in with the background.

I said, "Yes, you're a creek robber."

He said, "Yes. I'll be a creek robber until the traps are gone."

That's the way they all felt up there, the Alaskans. They had never convicted any guy for trap robbing. Of course, that used to be a thing, too, up there. They call it trap robbing, but usually they were in cahouts with the watchmen on the traps. He would let them come out and grab a boatload out of the trap.

But they had never convicted anyone until the year I got up there when they finally convicted one, but they had to get an outside jury to do it. Because none of the Alaskans would convict him. They sent him to McNeil. McNeil, that was the favorite place for trap robbers. That was the federal prison.

Peterson: You weren't supposed to set in a bay up there either. But you would set and watch. These bays would be loaded with salmon, but you couldn't get inside. So there was this guy and his brother. The Fish and Game boat was out there patrolling all the time. So there were these two bays that were fairly close together. So, his brother was the diversionary action. He runs into this bay and acts like he was going to make a set. Well, the Fish and Game runs over to check on him. While he's gone, this other guy knows where the fish are. He sets, and he catches around ten thousand, fifteen thousand salmon in one set.

The Fish and Game boat comes back after him and he says, "I set outside the line and drifted in." But they wouldn't take that story. So they wrote him up and he still had to appear.

Dunning: They didn't confiscate the fish?

Peterson: No. He had to pay a fine, very minimal, I think. $1,500 or something like that. But he caught almost $15,000 worth of fish. It should have been more than that, really, because for the humpies then they had all these fish and there was a different pay scale for all the fish. We were getting forty-five cents apiece for the salmon, for a seven pound salmon. For sockeyes, we would get a dollar and a quarter. For dog salmon I think it was eighty cents, and for king we would get two and a quarter. This is apiece.

They would count them. They had counters. Usually the skipper and the cannery man would be on the hatch with counters. They would both count as you pitched them in. There would be two guys in the hole and you had to pitch every fish into this net. That's a brailling net. Then they would take them up out of the boat, swing them over onto the scow, and dump them, and then back. But they would count.

Peterson: The only thing we would sell to them on king salmon was what they called a jack king. It was just a small one like this. [About a foot long.]

They were just like a miniature king. Usually a king gets up to sixty or seventy pounds. But we would take them and sell them to the fresh fish market for two dollars a pound and split it. We were on a company boat.

Dunning: Who hired you? Were you actually hired by one of the canneries?

Peterson: No, the skipper, he had that. That was his boat and he picked his own men. But I never wanted for a job because in fishing they were always after me.

Dunning: Was it kind of like a network?

Peterson: Yes. And I was foolish enough to be a good worker. So I never really wanted. I always had guys that I could go with. I happen to be a very good web man on nets, hanging gear and that.

Dunning: Hanging them? Does that mean also weaving them or repairing them?

Peterson: Repairing and building them. We used to just start. What they would do, when they got through with the season they would strip the net. There goes my accent again. A corkline would be stripped off the net, and the leadline. In between is just web. Then they would store the web in a bin for the wintertime. In Seattle you couldn't dry them out so you would have to salt them down. You would put in the web and then salt them.

So in the springtime, or when you started the season, you would pull out the corkline, leadline, and the web. All this had to be attached again, and sewed

Peterson: together. All the strips of net had to be sewed together and the leadline and corkline hung. Usually you hung the leadline in what they called ten percent. We would hang on a ten fathom stretch. You would stretch the net for ten fathoms on the corkline, but just nine fathoms on the leadline. That would give you a balloon effect that would be smaller. Do you understand what a purse net is?

Dunning: Well, I've been recently interviewing the Ghio brothers. Did you know Dominic and Tony Ghio?

Peterson: I think so.

Dunning: They've been fishing in Richmond since the thirties and they talked about purse seining quite a bit. In fact, they do a lot of repairing of nets for people in the area. They are among the last fishermen that know how to work the nets. So we've been talking about that.

Peterson: I wonder what they're working on. Are they working on seiners or drag nets?

Dunning: We're not quite to that part of the story yet.

Peterson: Weren't they the same fellows out here that had the boat?

Dunning: They were out at Point San Pablo. They have an old Monterey fishing boat.

Peterson: They were probably working on bottom drag gear. First thing was basically they had rings on the bottom with a rope through it that you would wet it slack and when you get the fish inside then you just pulled all the rings together and pursed it up, closed up the whole bottom of the net. It wasn't quite that simple but--and then you would pick all the rings up on the deck,

Peterson: so what you would have is all the leadlines onto the boat, and then all of the corkline was out around, with all the web in between. We worked on that.

We came in one night. I was really fortunate on this boat that had four exceptionally good web men on this one. It was Akim Strand and his son, and Johnny Quamie and myself. Akim was a great fisherman. He didn't think that the net was working properly. He figured it wasn't hung right, so we came in one evening and pulled the net off. As we pulled the net off, we stripped it from the corkline and the leadline. We got up the next day. Akim and his son were on the corkline hanging, and me and John Quamie was on the leadline hanging. Now, you do hanging about that far. You pick up so many parts of the web until it looks like it's hanging the right way, and then you tie it. But you tie it about that far.

Dunning: That's about nine inches?

Peterson: Yes, about eight or nine. It depends. You used your own judgment on it. We hung that complete net and put it back on the boat in one day.

This Oly Oldson had been around for years, and he had worked with a lot of guys hanging nets. He said he had never seen a net done that fast and put back on the boat. It was ready to go on the next day.

Dunning: So you got your reputation early for being a good fisherman and a good net hanger.

Peterson: Well, mostly. I don't know. There used to be a guy on the boat. He was talking to me one day. He said, "When I die and they come and look at me while I'm laying in the casket they'll say, 'There was a good worker.' I'd just as soon have them call me a jackass."

Salaries in the Fishing Industry

Dunning: What were the salaries like to start with? Your first job, how did you get paid?

Peterson: It was a share deal. It used to be a percentage. They would take thirty-three and a third perentage for the boat and gear.

Dunning: The maintenance, and---?

Peterson: Yes. Then the ice and the fuel and the groceries came off. First they would take the cut for the boat. Then the ice and the fuel would come off. Then they would split it however many people there were. Everybody would get an equal share. Except one time I started to go onto the tuna clippers down in San Pedro. Those guys were a bunch of crooks.

Dunning: You found people that were cheating?

Peterson: Oh yes, they would take you out on a try. This was after I had been fishing for quite a while. This original Chicken of the Sea. I don't know if you've ever heard of them. Well, the tuna. But they also made a tuna clipper of that name, *Chicken of the Sea*, which would haul around four hundred and fifty or five hundred ton of tuna at that time, which was a huge boat. Now it's a small boat.

But this fellow that I had worked for on a smaller boat told me to go see this guy. He was getting out and they were laying the boat up, and he said this guy may need somebody. I can still remember the guy's name, Captain Dickerson. First he asked me, "Well, do you know anything about fishing?"

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Peterson: Captain Dickerson is probably long gone by now, but of course they were always throwing their chests out. They felt very important. I was still fairly young then, so the first thing he asked me, he said, "Well, you know how to set for bait." Well big deal, setting for bait. Any dummy could have done it.

I said, "Yes, I know a little about setting for bait." Because he knew I had been on smaller boats.

He said, "Do you know anything about web, mending nets?"

I said, "Yes, I know it."

So he asked me all these things. "Well," he said, "We've got an opening, but you'll have to start at a quarter share."

I said, "A quarter share? You gotta be kidding."

He said, "Yes. Then if you make a trip and you can prove yourself, we may raise you up to a half a share." And then so on. It was the standard practice, and by the time you got to a full share they would fire you and hire somebody else. In the meantime they were pocketing the money that you were supposed to have gotten.

Recollections of Other Fishermen

Peterson: It was predominantly Portuguese on the tuna clippers. I don't know how Dickerson got in there. I don't know what name that would be. But then it was very clannish. If you weren't Italian, Slavonian--well, naturally Peterson fell in with the Norwegians--you just didn't get in unless you were an engineer. If

Peterson: you were an engineer or somebody that had some sort of technical knowledge. Then you just didn't make it otherwise.

Dunning: There was no way you could break in?

Peterson: No. They were importing their relatives from back [in the old country] if they needed somebody. In San Pedro they call them Slavonians. Up in Puget Sound they call them Austrians. So I don't know where they get the name--but they were good fishermen, great fishermen. They had beautiful boats, clean boats, but they were ruthless, man.

We came down from Alaska. Up in Alaska you had to behave yourself or the natives would take care of you. In other words, we used to do what they would call "hold open."

This Haystack was nothing but a rock, but they called it Haystack. But the salmon was going by there constantly, just a constant stream of salmon. So what you would do is you would run your boat and let the skiff go here. You call it hooking off. Then you would run the main boat out here. Now, they had a power skiff, and you would hold open. They let you hold open, because these boats were in a line.

They would let you hold open maybe fifteen minutes. By that time you would see the fish starting to come in the net. Well, then the skiff came over to the boat and you picked up your net. Then you had this current coming from the haystack and it went out like this. Then it came back in onto the beach. You had that time to get this net onboard and the fish before you were on the rocks. So you had to work like heck. But if you held open too long, they would come out and what they call "cork" you. They would set right inside of your net. So you were a gentleman there.

Peterson: But when we got down on Puget Sound the Slavonians had one spot that they claimed that they owned. This was out on what they call Salmon Bank. If any other boat came in they would cork you right away.

So we were looking around and this was opening day for salmon season. They have the Fish and Game boat. Now, he's supposed to fire a gun. They got three hundred boats out there ready to set and he fires the gun and then everybody starts setting.

This Floyd, he's kind of excitable, so the gun's fired. So this boat would set and the other boat would set, just about when we were getting ready to set. Floyd, he got overanxious and he let it go. So we started to haul in, started to purse up the lines.

Well, the thing started to chatter on the winch. We knew we were up against something, but the current runs there strong, so anyway, we couldn't pull anything. The corkline was still out. Well, the corkline starts to come together and collapses. We're hung up, we're asnag of something.

One of these Austrian boats comes by and like they're laughing at us. They said, "Hey, you're hung up. You set on the biggest snag in Puget Sound." Of course, they all knew about it. We're from Alaska.

This one guy came by. He was a pretty nice guy and he said, "Well, the best thing you can do is just hold it until the tide changes."

So we sat there. It would take around six hours for the tide to change. So this old Oldy, that guy was a character. He's an older guy, too. He was over sixty, but he was a good worker for his age. He sat there and he told us. He said, "If I was you guys," this was the way he always started out, "what I would

Peterson: do is start picking those rings up, as many as you can get, from the purse line, because down there is just tight as a fiddle string."

So we started working it up, picking up as many rings as we could get. Well, we finally got all the rings we could get, and the tide changed. We pulled it off there and we only ripped about maybe sixteen, eighteen feet of web. We really lucked out on that thing. We had it ready to go in nothing flat.

This Akim Strand was such a good web man that he would come down. You would have all these shreds of torn net, and he would come down and match them like this. He would just match them, and then he would stop and he would say, "You start here." Well, once you start mending a web, it's just only one way you can go. But if you miss it then you have to cut it all out and start again.

Well, this happened in Alaska, the one I'm talking about now. I was in a skiff then, and we were setting the net. Out of the back of the boat we had a ring. It was screwed into the deck of the boat, but the ring was there for lifting. It was a lifting ring. It went off the table where the net was on.

The net fell down and got caught on this ring, and it was acting just like a knife. It was slitting this net. We could see it was just cutting it right in half. They can't see it on the boat because it's going over like this and behind the table. We're screaming, and finally they got about half the net, which is around three hundred fathoms. Say a hundred and fifty fathoms was cut in half and that was practically split like that.

That's the way that Akim would start on that whole net. He would go like this and he would say, "You start here." Then you would sew what you could

Peterson: sew and bring in the ripped parts from the side. He did that whole thing to the end of that net. If he had missed one little bar we would have to start over. He did the whole thing.

Dunning: He was quite a craftsperson.

Peterson: Oh yes. He was really an excellent webman. And his son.

Dunning: You certainly had to know a lot of skills.

Peterson: Yes. They would expect you to do whatever you're called to do. I even went as an engineer one year, and I don't know much about it. I'm not much of a mechanic.

Dunning: You made it back.

Peterson: Oh yes. We had some trials though. But we made it okay.

Dunning: On most of these crews did you have a cook?

Peterson: Yes, we had a cook.

Dunning: That could probably make or break a trip, I would think.

Peterson: Yes. We had a guy, an old Norwegian guy. He was from the northern part of Norway. He said, "Where they used to raise cantaloupes and watermelons." I don't think the ground ever thawed out where he was at. Of course, that was his story. He was a good cook.

The first time I tasted sweet vegetable soup I said, "Sweet vegetable soup?" But that's Norwegians. They like that that way.

Dunning: Well, I promised that we would stop, and we've gone a little bit over this time, so I thought we could close for today and perhaps set another meeting and begin with your time in Richmond at the whaling station.

Peterson: Okay.

Dunning: I've gotten a sense of your background today.

Peterson: In the meantime, let's see, I was out on salmon trawlers, drag boats, sardine boats, fish shark--that was interesting, fishing shark. They were all kind of interesting. I fished the last season of sardines down in Monterey Bay. Of course, do you know what a bottom drag boat is? They had these doors that go out like this and then you drag the net on the bottom and get bottom fish. I was on that, in fact, when I got married. I was fishing out of Bodega Bay.

Dunning: What year did you get married?

Peterson: [calls out] Honey! When did we get married?

Dunning: About how old were you?

Peterson: Let's see. I have to take my ring off to see my anniversary day.

Dunning: Well, you can answer it later.

Peterson: We better have been married thirty-three years, anyway--thirty-four years. That was a long time ago. You talk about San Francisco being a different town. When I was fishing shark I lived on a boat at Fisherman's Wharf. Fisherman's Wharf wasn't what it is now. There were a lot of vacant lots. You know where Sabella's is now? J.C. Henry's used to be there. That was a ship channeler. I used to be right next door to them where that Wax Museum is now. There was nothing there.

Peterson: We used to hang our nets in the vacant lot behind there, our shark nets. Of course, DiMaggio's and the parking lot is there now. There was nothing there. How long have you been around here?

Dunning: I first moved out here in the late sixties.

Peterson: It would have been gone then, but they used to haul in--I call them spaghetti boats up there. That's where they would haul up and do work there. They had a slip. So that port had changed. Then that was vacant lots over there. Of course, it was still Ghirardelli Chocolates then. So it has really changed. Of course, I was gone for a little while and it changed a lot.

Dunning: Yes, I've been getting quite a few stories from the Ghio brothers because they were brought up in North Beach, and many people from Genoa would be in that same area.

Peterson: Yes, well they're an exception, because most of them over there are Sicilians. The fellow I fished with, Tullinardi, he was from Bari, Italy, the city of Bari. I fished with him on a small little boat.

I started out with one of his partners, a guy with the name Verner Banni. He was the youngest guy that held a master's licence in the Merchant Marines when World War II started. Me and him were out on this little forty-eight foot boat called Seal. It was a little trawler. We were down in Mexico chasing albacore. He wanted to be on this fishing boat so he could be home more, because going to sea all the time he was away from his family. Well, when he got on this one, we went down to Mexico. When we got back we really didn't make any money.

Peterson: He said, "Well, I might as well go back to sea as this, where I can make some money." So he went back to sea.

Do you know where Guadalupe Island is? It's about 200 miles off the Mexican coast. I think it used to be a penal colony. Anyway, we were out there like a couple of nuts chasing albacore. We got outside of Guadalupe. We had a grey marine diesel. It's a jimmy engine. We got up one morning and went to start the engine and the engine wouldn't start. The solenoid on the starter somewhere had fouled up and we didn't have any spare.

Verne someway jammed the solenoid and got the engine started. We never shut the engine down until we got to San Diego. We kept right on going. We didn't have anything. We had, I think, less than a ton of fish and we had been out quite a while, and out a long ways, too. But we were fearless. We didn't know any better. He should have known better, but I didn't. It didn't bother me.

Then we came back here. That's when he got off the boat and then me and Artulio took it and changed it into a drag boat and went up to Bodega Bay. He was a tough old Italian, that guy. Italian [gestures].

Dunning: The hands?

Peterson: Yes. He was telling me about his experiences in Italy. He was there when Mussolini was in power. He couldn't get here on a visa so he went to South America and couldn't get there. He still had family in Italy. Finally he got in here someway, by hook or crook. They call him Capitan, though, Artulio Capitan. Then he would--you know--

Dunning: Make gestures?

Peterson: Yes. They would talk to him and he would come over to me and he would say, "I don't understand them people."

I said, "You don't understand Italian?"

He said, "Some of the people I can't understand."

Dunning: There are many different dialects.

Peterson: Yes. He spoke very broken English. I met a lot of characters in that game.

Dunning: Also, next time if there are any particular characters, especially in your experience in Richmond that stand out in your mind, I would really like to hear about them. I think this is probably a good time to stop.

Peterson: This is my daughter, Terri.

##

Fishing boats returning to the cannery.

The cannery in Alaska.

Pratt grabbing some sleep while on deck. He said that they only got three to four hours of sleep every night, so he would sleep whenever else he could.

Pratt and his friend Adolf with their steelhead.

Anna, who used to clean fish at the Richmond Whaling Station, circa 1950s.

View of rendering plant and old whaling station from Point San Pablo Yacht Harbor, Richmond.

Photograph by Judith K. Dunning, 1985

Rendering plant near Point San Pablo, Richmond, where whales were processed between 1958 and 1972.

Photograph by Judith K. Dunning, 1985

Fishing off Point Molate, Richmond.

Photograph by Judith K. Dunning, 1985

Former whaler Pratt Peterson and interviewer Judith Dunning on whale watching expedition to the Farallon Islands, August 1987.

Photograph by Mark Palmer

Beginning at the Richmond Whaling Station

[Date of Interview: April 4, 1986] ##

Dunning: During our first session we documented some of your background in the fishing business. I'm going to have to jump ahead a little bit because of the restrictions of the project. I'm wondering what brought you to Richmond?

Peterson: A friend of mine that I had fished with in Alaska was on the whaling boats and I was living in Boise, Idaho. I went from there to Morrow Bay to get on a drag boat with the guy I used to fish with. It was Pete Burton. So I got down there, and we didn't get along very well. I had been with him before and he was pretty good. But in the meantime, as I had passed through here I had stopped to talk with Adolph Larson and Earhart Nielson. They were both Danish from the old country. I went down on the whaling boats with them and made a trip. Then I went to Morrow Bay and that's when I found out that me and Pete didn't get along too well.

I was staying on a boat there and I came off the boat one day and this guy came out and asked me what my name was. I told him and he said, "Well, there's a guy from San Francisco that called and wanted to talk to you." He gave me the number to call back.

So it was Adolph. He had called and asked, "Would you be interested in going on a boat?"

I said, "You timed it just perfect because I'm just climbing off the other one." And that's how I came up and got started on the whaling boats.

Dunning: What year was this?

Peterson: It was the late fifties. That would be '58 or '59, I think. Because I was in whaling approximately twelve years. And I started where I'm working now in '72.

Dunning: Do you have any first impressions of that Point Molate area, and the Richmond waterfront?

Peterson: Yes. It seemed a long way out the first time I went out. If you've been out there you know how it is.

Dunning: I've been out there a lot.

Peterson: It's tucked away out there. Of course, we were just in a very small building at that time. It was alongside of--you know Red Rock that's there now?

Dunning: Yes.

Peterson: They just had a little two room building where the people would stay and eat and have their lunches, and then there was the rendering plant. When I got there the rendering plant wasn't handling the whales. But the whaling plant was next to the rendering plant.

Dunning: And that building doesn't exist right now?

Peterson: Yes, it's still there.

Dunning: Now, the rendering plant is there, and then Red Rock is there.

Peterson: It's the one that's further up, the big one. That's falling down, but where they used to pull the whales up and cut them up. That's still there. The rendering plant has taken over that building.

Dunning: Okay, but it's the same building as the rendering plant?

Peterson: Yes. The slip is still there where they pulled them up, and some of the winches are still there. A lot of the equipment to cut the whale up is still there. Of course, it's all rusted out now, but they haven't moved it out. The rendering plant kind of uses it as a storage place. They've knocked out some of the walls. There used to be a solid wall in between but they've knocked the walls out so they can go back and forth. But that part of it is still there.

Dunning: Was there much activity in that area? I know after the sardine boom things closed down.

Peterson: Yes. Well, of course, if you've talked to the Ghio brothers. They probably told you about the sardines, didn't they?

Dunning: Yes.

Peterson: And how they came in there. They had an aerial photograph where they brought in fifteen thousand tons of sardines one night out there. So it was busy then, but no, when I got out there it was very quiet. The whaling business, that was it, except where I'm working now.

Dunning: For Pak Tank?

Peterson: Yes. It was pretty busy when we got a run of whales. There was a lot of activity out there. Then there were two plants there.

Dunning: Golden Gate and Del Monte?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: And which were you employed by initially?

Peterson: Well, I was employed by Gib Hunter, and he owned the two boats that I was working on. He supplied the whales to the whaling plant. It was a contract where he would supply the whales. So it was two different things. I never actually worked for the rendering plant itself. I worked for this Gib Hunter.

Dunning: So you weren't employed by Del Monte or Golden Gate?

Peterson: No.

Dunning: Just by Gib Hunter?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: And he was the captain?

Peterson: Yes. He ran the boats. He started up in the whaling operation up in Eureka. He went on there for a few years. I don't know whether it was very successful up there or not. I imagine there's plenty of whales, but I don't know about the market. Then they were doing it out at Field's Landing and they had an open platform where they were rendering the whale out. I guess some of the local people didn't appreciate it too much. So mysteriously the thing caught a fire.

Dunning: I've been hearing about quite a few fires in the fishing business.

Peterson: Anyway, it went up. It was soaked pretty well in oil. When it got started I guess it really went and made a great fire.

Using Whale Meat for Dog Food

Peterson: They were killing wild horses in Nevada and Oregon for dog food. That area up in there had a lot of wild horses. Anyway, they had killed them down until there wasn't too many left so they had to have another source of supply for the meat. So that's where the whaling started down here. That was one of the primary reasons, in fact. Kal Kan took most of our meat. They had special people up here that would inspect the meat to make sure that it was good and then they would ship it to Los Angeles.

It used to be listed on Kal Kan's cat and dog--I don't know so much the cat, but the dog food. It would be listed as ten percent whale meat. Now, ten percent in those cans is very little, like just a drop in there. We supplied them a lot of meat. It could have taken care of a lot of dog food. That is, I think, why it started.

Rendering the Whales

Peterson: Of course, we used it all, though. The blubber was rendered out. The skeleton, the bones, were crushed and cooked and made bone meal out of, very high protein for stock feed. So everything was used. The only thing that was kind of hard to run through the cooker was the baleen. They tried to cut the baleen out and get rid of it some other way. Then they would try to save the jawbone of the sperm whale. Yes, I know you didn't want to get into the processing today, but I'm getting into it.

Dunning: Well, we can get into it in a little more depth next week, but the outline is fine today.

Peterson: On the sperm whale they would try to save the jaw, the teeth, try to recover some of the teeth that were in it. Otherwise, everything was used. When they get through there would be nothing left.

Dunning: Except for the scent?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: Which I've heard lingered for days and years.

Peterson: Oh, yes. People would come down and they used to get quite a few visitors down there, especially when they were cutting them up. The scent would hit you a little, but not really until you got right at the door. It would look like they had run into a brick wall. They would just stop and start backing up. But some of the guys there, they would work around it and they got used to it. You would see them out there with their sandwiches eating it right there. It seemed like they had just as good an appetite as anybody.

We had two boats tied up at Red Rock. There wasn't any space for the third boat down there, so we tied up right outside the rendering plant. We got the smell most of the time when we were down working on the boats. It wasn't too bad after a day or so, and there were no whales coming in. Then it wasn't that bad. They would wash it down pretty good.

Dunning: I want to backtrack just a little bit. Was Gib Hunter up in the Eureka area right after World War II?

Peterson: Yes, I think so.

Dunning: I'm just wondering when that horse issue began.

Peterson: I don't know exactly the year that he came down. But then of course, the other two boats, they were in Peru. It was for Golden Gate.

Dunning: They had been in Peru?

Peterson: Yes. They were down there whaling. So Herman Foulum, who was a partner of Gib's, came up and wanted to get into the Del Monte operation, but they never had room for that many boats. So that's why he started the Golden Gate. He went down and started the Golden Gate up and then they had the Lynn Anne and Sioux City down there, too. So there were five boats all combined.

Dunning: So the Sioux City and the Lynn Anne were the Golden Gate boats, and Golden Gate started in '58.

Peterson: Is that when it started?

Dunning: Well, that's as far as I've heard. And it sold out to Del Monte in '66. Then I heard that Del Monte started in '56 and operated right until the end.

Peterson: Oh, yes? I must have been pretty much on the ground floor then. Are those fairly reliable figures?

Dunning: I wouldn't be able to tell you. There are so few figures available that I can't say if it's reliable or not. It's approximate. Maybe that's the best.

Peterson: I know this Robb Casebeer was in with Herman Poland. He lived right over here on Montana Street in Point Richmond.

Dunning: He's still around?

Peterson: Yes. He's getting up into years, though. Older than I am, anyway.

Dunning: What were the names of Gib Hunter's boats?

Peterson: They had the Alan Cody and the Dennis Gale, that was named after two of his children. Dennis was his boy and Gale was his daughter. It was a combination of the two. Then his uncle had the Donna Mae, and that was named after his daughter. I don't know why they always named boats after girls.

Dunning: Do you know where the Alan Cody came from?

Peterson: Alan Cody was the guy that, I think, owned that boat before Gib got it. So he put his own name rather than a girl's name on that one.

Dunning: How many were employed when you first started?

Peterson: When I first started there were five to a boat. Let's see, starting with the lowly ones first, they started up, there's the deckhand. That's how I started.

Dunning: Even with all your experience you had to start as a deckhand?

Peterson: Yes, because it was something different. Like I said, everything was totally different. Then there was a deckhand, cook, engineer, skipper, and gunner, was the five. Skipper and gunner. See how I put that gunner first? Then, as they went along, they started dropping them off. When I finally wound up there was only three of us on it. I was fishing with Kenny Humai--he was a little Japanese fellow--and Roy. They were both from Japan.

Dunning: Do you remember Roy's last name?

Peterson: Roy Yama--golly, I've forgotten what his last name was.

Dunning: Were they from the area?

Peterson: Los Angeles.

Dunning: Do you know if they are still around here?

Peterson: Ken is up in Eureka. I think he's running the Dennis Gale up there now.

Dunning: Still?

Peterson: Yes. They converted the boats into draggers. They converted both of them, I think, the Alan Cody and the Dennis Gale. And they converted the Donna Mae, but they put her on the rocks. She sunk. One of the better boats, too. That was the one I was on when I was shooting. I bounced around. I started out on the Alan Cody. Then me and the guy on there had a little disagreement and then I went to work for Hunk--that was what they called him. Harold, I think, but his name was Hunk Hunter. It was Gib's uncle. So I went to work for him.

Dunning: On a different boat?

Peterson: Yes, on the Donna Mae.

Responsibilities as a Deckhand

Dunning: Your first job as a deckhand, what were your responsibilities?

Peterson: Outside of taking care of the boat and the gear. Well, we all jumped into it really, when it got busy. Everybody did everything. Loading the gun, coiling the lines, tying up the whales, anything there was to do. See, whaling was mostly hunting. You were a hunter rather than anything. Primarily that's what you do, is hunt most of the time. So you set out there for days looking for a blow. It gets kind of boring at times, especially if you go for maybe four

Peterson: or five days and don't see anything. I had troubles staying awake. A lot of the others did, too, I think. Because you would just set up there and you were looking all the time.

Dunning: Would you take turns looking?

Peterson: Oh, everybody.

Dunning: Everybody was looking?

Peterson: Yes. They would get mad if you went down into say, the galley to get a cup of coffee, and you stayed too long. Then they would say, "What are you doing down there? You're supposed to be up here looking for whales."

But then you would have to take your turn up in the crow's nest. It was a little tricky to get up into that thing with the boat rolling.

Description of Whaling Vessels

Inter-Island Vessels and Mine Sweeps

Dunning: Could you describe the boat in as much detail as you could?

Peterson: Darn. I was going to have my daughter draw a picture, because what do they say about one picture worth a thousand words?

Dunning: Could you do a diagram? We may be able to use that picture in the final volume. For someone who has never been on a whaling vessel or has just seen some pictures, could you describe it?

Peterson: There were two types of boats. Are you familiar with--these are World War II vintage boats.

Dunning: I heard that they were mostly cargo vessels.

Peterson: These were small inter-island freighters, the ones that I went on, the three that we were with. The other two that were with Golden Gate, they were mine sweeps. They were larger boats, a little longer, and they had a raised bow on them so gunning was easy. The gun platform was further up, elevated above the water so you got really a better shooting position from there.

These were approximately one hundred and five feet long. Two of them had heavy duty superior engines in them. The width of them, I would judge must be twenty some feet. They drew maybe fourteen feet of water on the draft. They weren't that deep.

They had a big house midship. It used to go from say a little back of midship on the boat completely to the stern, but when they originally got these boats they chopped the house off so there was some area on the back where they could work. In fact, they were using them for fishing then so they wanted to use the back hold so they could store fish back there. It was easy to get at.

Then they had one deck. No, then the house was completely out to the side of the boat, to the gunnels, so if you went from the stern to the bow, you would have to go through the house to get back and forth. Then it went up one deck, and then a wheelhouse was built there on that one. That's usually where you stood in. They had the automatic steering.

Peterson: Then they had the flying bridge on top of that where they had controls. Right in front of that they had the mast for the crow's nest. Then they had--I would have a hard time explaining this to you--for the way the gear went to control the whale after you shot him. They had two pipes that were big enough--you've seen the springs on these railroad cars?

Dunning: Yes.

Peterson: Well, the pipes were big enough where they could put springs inside of those, these railroad springs. They were alongside of the mast. They were almost as tall as the mast. I would say twenty-five, thirty feet. Down through the center of these springs they would run a heavy cable and then make it solid down at the bottom. At the top of these pipes they had a pulley where this cable ran over these wheels and they had huge blocks on them for it. Then the cable came from the winch that held all the wire to run it out.

In other words, these were like shock absorbers, only super shock absorbers. Because if you can think of what the power is to compress one of those railroad springs, it was something. And I've seen them pull them down seven feet, six or seven feet, with the power of those things.

Anyway, then the cable went through there. We set the winches right in front of the deckhouse. Then the cables went up. We usually had maybe three hundred fathom. We tried to get as much cable onto the drums as we could. They went up through these blocks and they went down towards the bow of the boat and went out the bow of the boat. Two of the boats had holes in the bow, and they would go out through the bow.

Peterson: On the Donna Mae, the cables would go underneath the gun platform. When I was shooting, these cables went right over the top of the gun platform. So when I was up there I had to be light on my feet. I had to dance over these cables all the time.

Then as it went out the front of the boat we tied a nylon that is called a forgoer or rope. It was coiled on the bow. Then when you would shoot, the first thing to go out was your forgoer. Then it was tied onto the harpoon in the gun. Now, we had cables that were onto the harpoon. How can I explain it? I lost you someplace here. I can't describe things very well.

Dunning: Do the best you can and we'll supplement it with diagrams.

Peterson: Probably what I'm telling you now, even when I show you a picture of it you won't recognize what I was talking about.

Dunning: No, I have a pretty good imagination.

Types of Harpoons

Peterson: Anyway, you would shoot that out. We had two types of harpoons. We had the old muzzle loader and a breach loader. On the muzzle loader you would have to tamp everything right in the front part of it. Then we had the breech loader where it had a mechanism where you could throw the handle and it would open up and you would take this copper shell out of the rear end of the gun. On the muzzle loader, first you would swab the barrel after you shot--it was just like the old civil war days. You rammed this swab in the barrel to make sure there were no sparks that were still left in the cannon.

Peterson: Then they had the plug about a foot long. It had rubber compression rings on both ends of the plug so when you put it into the barrel of the gun it would compress so when you got the explosion you would keep as much of the explosion in there to send the harpoon out as you could. On the back part of this, then you would put your powder bag, which is about as big as your fist. It would start out with a fast-burning powder and then it went onto a slow-burning powder for the final boom, because the slow-burning had more power to it to send out the harpoon.

Then we used to use just blanks. We started out with twenty-two shells and then we got up to thirty-two, and then we got up to thirty-eight. We got them out because it would have to go through the back end of the gun about two or three inches to get to the powder bags.

It had a small hole there. As you fired this blank, then it would go in and set off this powder bag. You used to get what they would call hang fires. Well, they got them, too, in the old days.

Dunning: Would the blanks make a really loud explosion?

Peterson: The blanks? No, not that bad, but the other one would. It would shake the whole boat when that thing went off.

The thing that would kind of unnerve me a lot is the hang fires. You would hear the bang of the cartridge or the blank and nothing would happen. Somewhere along the line they had this wadding in the blank that would hang up in there and it wouldn't set off the powder. A couple of times it would fire like that and it would go bang. Nothing would happen. Then I would go to look.

Peterson: Well, as I would look the gun would come up because I would always balance the gun so it was a little heavier on the back. The gun would be up like this. Then I would get looking and boom, it would go off, so I would be shooting up in the air.

That's what that plug was for, to balance the gun. The harpoon wouldn't go in all the way anyway. If you didn't have that there would be too much--after you fired the gun the gun just boom, goes down. You didn't want to make the mistake of holding onto the handle because it would take you right down. When the harpoon left you couldn't hardly lift the gun up.

Dunning: How large was the gun? Could you give me an idea?

Peterson: It had a recoil, the whole recoil action in it, and I would say the back part of the gun was maybe this big.

Dunning: You're stretching your arms to about four feet?

Peterson: Yes, I would say it was that long. The barrel would go inside of the other one. It was just a regular cannon. The back part of it that had the handle on it was up and it was anchored into both sides of the cannon. It came back like this and around the back end of it to give the firing mechanism room. Then it had a curved handle on it like that. You would hold this handle with both hands when you were firing. Then it had a long adjustable site on it.

Dunning: Could you give me an idea of the dimensions, because your gestures don't come out on tape. That looks about two and a half feet?

Peterson: Yes, about like that. Two feet maybe. You were supposed to adjust that site. But I found that after I had shot for a while that I didn't hardly use it because you had to develop a feel for it. There's so many things involved when you're shooting. First you

Peterson: get the whale this way, up and down. The boat is up and down. You're going this way. In other words, everything has to come just about right when you pull the trigger or you miss it.

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Dunning: You were talking about the variables in shooting the whales.

Peterson: Well, that's what it is. So finally I would site the whales. It was an open site on the back and then of course the one on the front. It was impossible to sight down the thing and kind of hold it. You would use that as a gauge. I got so used to the gun on the Donna Mae.

Later on I could see the handwriting on the wall, what was happening to the whaling industry, so I went to work at the place I'm working now. Then I broke out all over like I had poison oak. I was allergic to some sort of chemicals they had there. So I had to quit for a while.

That's when I went back with Kenny Hamai. I went and he said, "Well, this is great. You're shooting and I'm running the boat. I know how to chase the whales. You can shoot and I'll chase the whales."

So I got on that boat. I couldn't hit the broadside of a barn with his gun because it was different. See, I got so used to the other one that it was second nature to me. Then it was lower. It was built for short people to shoot, not tall guys. I just couldn't adjust to that.

Dunning: Did you ever adjust to it?

Peterson: No. After I missed a few times Kenny said, "I'll go back to shooting."

Dunning: They'll make you the cook.

Peterson: That's what he did, too; he made me the cook.

Dunning: You were a deckhand to start with. How did you advance to be a gunner?

Peterson: Interesting story.

Dunning: I would love to hear it.

Peterson: Well, we had a pretty good run of whales.

Dunning: What kind?

Peterson: These were finback, our better paying whales.

Dunning: We're talking about the late fifties?

Peterson: No, we're into the sixties then.

Dunning: Okay. So you were a deckhand until the sixties?

Peterson: Yes. Let's see, I was four years on the Alan Cody. Anyway, when it came down to us two having an argument, when it came to choose between the gunner and the deckhand, you know who left. So it was me. This guy that was shooting, they had imported him from Canada. He was supposed to be a top notch gunner. He was. I'll give him credit.

Dunning: What was his name?

Peterson: Ed Hollaway. He was gunner and skipper, so he would be on the bow giving the guy up on top instructions on how to chase a whale. He really had that down good, I'll have to give him credit for that. And he was a good gunner. Of course, when he came down from Canada we all stood around like here's really something great

Peterson: coming down. Of course, all gunners figure they've been born under a special star. They were like prima donnas.

First_Experience_as_a_Gunner

Peterson: Anyway, getting back to how I got into gunning, we had this run, so we met down at the boat. We were going to leave say at eleven o'clock at night. That would give us time to get out beyond the Farallones at daybreak, and from there on out anyplace you could run into whales. So we waited and we waited. Now this Hunk [Harold Hunter] that I was with, he was a pretty hard-nosed guy, too. Of course, he was skipper.

We sat around and sat around and waited for Carl, who was gunner at that time. We waited and we waited. It got around three or four o'clock, and waited. By this time, Hunk is steaming. So he says, "We're going out."

I said, "Oh yes? Who's going to shoot?"

He looked right at me and he said, "You are."

I said, "Oh yes?" So although I had seen a lot of shooting, I had never done it, and there's a lot of difference from looking at it and then actually doing it.

So we went out. We got out below the Farallones. It was in between the Farallones and Half Moon Bay and we spotted two humpies and got close. Well, I tell you, if you've never done that, it's really something, because when you get up there you are--that's why they get that expression--the gunner.

Peterson: I got up onto the gun platform, checked it all out, what I knew. I knew it pretty well up to the actual shooting part of it. But we got out to these two, which I was lucky. They would get the porpoise, these bottlenosed porpoise would follow them just like hunting dogs. The whales would be underneath but the porpoise would be up here breaking the surface all the time. So the whale would go this way, and the porpoises go that way, so you just got behind the porpoise. You knew sooner or later that the whale was going to come up.

Dunning: How would you know that?

Peterson: The porpoise, they like to play around the whales. They were just having a great time out there. But when the whale was getting ready to come up, to break the surface, then they would really get all excited. You almost knew when the whale was going to come up.

So I'm standing there. My palms were sweaty. I'm going, "Oh."

Anyway, here comes the whale. I know it's going to come up. So I'm pointing the gun right where the porpoises are breaking the surface--so the whale came up. I reached down. I wasn't used to the trigger. It was the first time I ever fired it. I wasn't used to the trigger on it, and the trigger was not like a little trigger like that. It's a long thing. It's like a handle like this, see.

Dunning: It was about a foot long?

Peterson: Yes, about like that. It comes up and then it's hooked to a bunch of chain in here. A lot of the guys, rather than pulling it with a finger they would hit it. They would hold it with one hand and hit it like that.

Peterson: So I'm watching and watching and here it comes up. I got the thing right on it and I went to touch it and it was like a hair trigger. It went off before I was ready. So it shot underneath the whale.

Hunk's up there. He says, "Well, you might as well pull it back in." You know, pull.

The rope was kind of slack. We went to pull it in and the rope wasn't slack anymore. I said, "Well, we must have hit one of them porpoises because--" Of course, we couldn't have hit the porpoise. We would have blown them in half. The thing was leading out in front of the boat. I had hit the whale. I couldn't figure out how I had done it.

Now, really, the tough part comes, the second shot, what they call the lance shot. You bring that back, the whale. Now, the original harpoon has flukes on it. It has four flukes on it. As it enters the whale it goes in like this, and then as you pull on it the flukes go out like this and you can't pull it back out. It also has the head which is detachable, this part of it. You tie it down and pound it so the head is solid when you're shooting, but as it goes into the whale it will go loose so you don't bend the harpoon or pull it out. It also has an explosive head on it with a detonator in it. You tie that. They had two types of detonators. They had four second detonators or they had instant pull fuses at one end.

Now the lance shot doesn't have those flukes on it. It's just a solid shaft with a bomb head on it and the detonator. When you pull it back, here is the line out. The whale is really wild and in front. The line goes back and forth.

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Peterson: The line is holding the whale. If you shoot and break that line then you've lost a whale because you have no way of holding him. Once the lance shot goes in it will go in and the bomb will go off sometimes. Sometimes it doesn't. But then it would come right out and you would lose the whale. So you have to wait and wait and wait until you get the whale just coming up in the right way before--you had better wait.

Dunning: Before you do the second?

Peterson: The second shot, yes. On a finback I shot one six times and still didn't kill him.

Dunning: You shot six times and it--

Peterson: It was still swimming.

Dunning: And it landed? You actually shot him?

Peterson: Yes. I think six. Yes, six times. They're such a powerful animal. Anyway, I still couldn't figure. I finally killed him. That was the first one I killed. I couldn't figure out where I hit him. Of course, we don't know until we get into the plant because we can't take that harpoon out. The harpoon stays in the whale until they take it up into the plant and cut it out. Then they would give us our harpoon back.

In the meantime, the foregoer, we send that up into the plant, too. They usually used to cut it out for us, or unshackle it. Anyway, we got into the plant. It was a good-sized humpie. They started hauling it up the slip. I was watching and I still couldn't tell where that was at. So I went up into the plant and finally I saw I had shot underneath the whale. Just as I shot it went like this and it went underneath and shot him in this flipper over here. It

Peterson: was the only thing that held him. It went completely under him to the opposite side and hit him. And that flipper is only about that wide there.

Dunning: It's only about a foot and a half?

Peterson: Yes. But it was just like shooting a guy in the arm. Well, you've seen the pictures of them. So that's what held him. I held him enough so I could finally kill him. It sounds terrible, but that was the first whale I shot. Then after that I shot quite a few of them.

Dunning: So that was your first day out as a gunner?

Peterson: Yes. But I never got over being a gunner--I would always go down, regardless of how many I shot, I would go down to get on the platform, and I would always get this feeling. It was the most exciting thing I ever did and will probably ever do. The old adrenalin would start pumping. You could tell right away. Anyway, it would with me. When I first started I made some unconscious shots and hit them.

Anyway, while this is going on the other two boats didn't know that our gunner was ashore. They didn't know I was shooting. So we had run into a bunch of finback after that. Of course, we were in and right back out again.

The other boats had finally found out after they had delivered some. They said, "Oh well." They had us on a limit of how many we could bring in, according to how many the plant could take. So the men on the other boats said, "Well, Pete's shooting. He's just starting. We can bring in all the whales we want to. He won't get any."

Peterson: But I was getting them right every day. So I just got lucky to start with, but like I say, I was making these unconscious shots. I'm telling you. After I got a little into it I would never make those shots again.

We got up off of Point Arena and we ran into a bunch of whales. Here this whale is coming crosswise. It's pretty rough weather. The whale is riding the crest of this wave when he's coming across the front of the boat. Now normally for a gunner to shoot into the water, you just don't do it because the water will deflect the harpoon one way or the other. But anyway I shot clear through the wave and got the whale.

Then I got some that were out in front of me. I've also had one day I shot five times and didn't even scratch one in rough weather. It's so hard to judge it then.

Dunning: It sounds like your early days as a fisherman. You started catching fish immediately and were the best fisherman aboard.

Peterson: You mean--?

Dunning: Your success as a gunner.

Peterson: I think that I was just blessed with a little coordination and timing. That was really what you had to have. Other guys had tried it, a lot of them and didn't make it. Anyway, I wound up with that run when I first started, I think we brought in about eight or nine whales right to start with.

Dunning: In what period of time?

Peterson: It was about ten days we had a run there.

Daily Schedule

Dunning: I would like to hear about your daily schedule, everything you remember about from the time you would leave the dock at the whaling station, and especially the route.

Peterson: It was sort of a ritual. Each night you would listen to the weather report to come on at nine o'clock. I used to have an old Zenith radio here that had the coast guard band on it. So we would listen to see how the weather was outside. If it seemed fairly good then we would usually leave around, like I said, ten, eleven o'clock. We would be out around the Farallones at daybreak. Of course, we would leave down and go through Raccoon Straits and out.

We would go down past Red Rock Marina by the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge and down through Raccoon Straits and then out through the Gate. Usually, if it was fair weather we would travel on the north side of the channel going from what used to be the lightship. Now they have the buoy out there. But we would stay on the north side most of the time because that would keep us out of the ship traffic. The bar pilots all got to know that.

Then we would go on out to the Farallones and usually the hundred fathom curve isn't too far outside the Farallones. By that time you would get a pretty good idea of what the weather was going to be. Then we would run out and we would just start looking, looking for feed.

Usually along the hundred fathom curve there would be sperm. So we would start. Then they had a couple of places that were canyons that we would go. We would go down in Monterey Canyon later on, but right to begin with we didn't have to go that far.

Peterson: When they first started whaling out here they thought outside of the Farallones was a long trip because there were so many whales around, but we finally got going about sixty or seventy miles outside of the Farallones straight out.

Dunning: So your radius would be about a hundred miles from Richmond?

Peterson: Yes. We had to keep it down on the towing part of it because the whales would generate the heat and by the time they got in they would be spoiled, the meat would be spoiled. So then we would get a half price for our whales so we didn't like to do that.

Dunning: So you would really try to stay within this area?

Peterson: Yes. We were limited to how far we could go.

Grey Whales at Point Reyes

Dunning: What was the season? Something I read, I think it said May until November.

Peterson: Yes. We were six months on the baleen whale. We had eight months on the sperm to begin with. That sounds about right, too. Then they let us take some gray whales. For I don't know how many years we took those. Among three boats they let us take a hundred gray whales.

Dunning: In a one year period?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: Was this part of the biological research study?

Peterson: Yes. That's the only reason we got them is because they wanted to study the grey whale. So that was just out at Point Reyes most of the time. We would get maybe four or five miles offshore, at the most. If it was blowing real hard we could get around--you've been at Point Reyes?--in the protection there. In a northwest wind we could just lay in there and these whales would come around the point close to the land.

In fact, they would come around and go in behind into Drake's Bay there. I shot one whale in there by Drake's Bay. So that wasn't too far out. That was fairly simple there except if you went around the point. See, Point Reyes can be very rough because you've got two currents that meet there, one from the north and one from the south. It gets rougher than heck there.

But this one day we three boats were there messing around trying to get them. Well, we weren't getting that many whales so this Hunk, he said, "Well, I'm going to go outside." Because we could see the water was clear outside.

So we went outside, and it was clear. Then you could see the whales underwater, which gives you really a lot of advantage. So we're chasing this one. I told you about this boom boom? And the cables. So this whale comes up like this and the boat comes up, right.

Finally we got it to where they were both the same, see. So I shot, but I neglected to step off this cable. I shot completely out to the end of the foregoer. When that goes out, it snaps. So with me standing on this cable, it snapped a steel cable and my feet went up in the air like this. I was concentrating so much on the whale that I can still remember looking through my legs and seeing the whale. Then I came down on my back.

Peterson: We got the whale. We got three of them that day, while these other guys laid in behind the point and I think they got one apiece. We split it up to thirty whales apiece, thirty-three and a third. We didn't get to the third part of it, but say thirty-three apiece.

Dunning: Was there much competition between the boats?

Peterson: Yes, there was.

Dunning: Would that spur you on?

Peterson: I guess we were kind of money hungry more or less.

Dunning: You would get paid by the whale?

Peterson: Yes, by the foot, so much a foot. I know there were times where they would get into finding whales, not grey whales, but the other whales. They would get into them and they wouldn't tell each other, and then they would get mad at each other. "Why didn't you tell us where you were at?"

"I haven't got nothing to do about it. You've got to talk to Hunk. He's the guy."

But when I was on the Cody and Dennis Gale we kind of--well, the owner wanted us to share information like that because it was to his advantage that we both got whales. In fact, we started out one time to share the deal. We were going to shoot and then we would share in the total amount between the two boats. They would share it, but that didn't work out too good because we wound up getting all the whales. That was with this Ed Hollaway. He had just come down and he was, like I say, good at it.

Best Hunting Grounds

Dunning: What would be the best place for you to hunt whales?

Peterson: Well, it all depends. Sperm would be right in along the hundred fathom curve. If you've ever looked at a chart it goes in and out. Then they used to call it "The Finger," and it looked like a finger of land that was out into the ocean. We used to go out there and for some odd reason the whales were around there. That was below the Farallones, sort of like south of the Farallones. Not directly south. It would be more like southwest of the Farallones. Then we used to hunt up off of Point Arena, and then like I say, Monterey Canyon and up along there.

Legal Size Limits

Dunning: What kind of whales would you hunt around Point Arena?

Peterson: Finback, usually. Because right at the last they didn't allow us to take humpbacks. Then we could only take sei whales, finback, and sperm, right at the last. Sperm had to be thirty-five feet. Humpbacks had to be thirty-five feet. Finback, I think, was fifty-five feet they had to be to be legal. Sei whales were like a small finback, but they had to be I would say just thirty-five feet on the sei whales. But then they only paid us three quarter price for them.

Dunning: So you would try to go for the biggest?

Peterson: Yes. There was this one time we went out and I happened to be in the crow's nest that day. We went by the Farallones and we kept on going. We were going out. Then Hunk, he liked to get finback.

Peterson: So I was looking back towards the Farallones and it was just one of those days where everything was just right and I saw this high blow. I said, "Hunk, there's a blow back there."

So he looked and he said, "I can't see no blow. There can't be no blow back there."

I said, "I saw it." In fact, I saw a couple of them. He didn't want to turn around and go back. He had finbacks on his mind.

We kept on going and didn't get anything that day, so we drifted. The next morning we woke up and what did we run into right away? It was a finback. We went out there and got pretty close to it and this--Carl was in. I wasn't shooting then. Carl was there and he shot and missed.

When the finback gets your boat right they can stay just out of range. They know it, too. We chased that thing all day and never got close enough to get it. It wound up that time we were out I think ten days. That's the longest I've ever been out without getting any whales.

Dunning: Would you go back in during that time?

Peterson: No.

Dunning: You would be out completely, then?

Peterson: Yes. We would drift when we didn't get it. So what I had spotted on the inside were sei whales. These other two boats took around twenty-five sei whales in the same length of time that we were out.

In fact, this Gib phoned up his uncle and he said, "What are you doing out there? Get in here. This is where the whales are at, in here."

Peterson: We didn't find this out until we got back in.

Dunning: Then you were probably real mad.

Peterson: Oh, there was a mad crew then. Do you know what we finally wound up coming in with was a sei whale?

Different Species of Whales

Dunning: Do you feel like you got to know the different kinds of whales?

Peterson: Oh, yes.

Dunning: Could you talk about some of the different ones and how you would sight them and if there are any different behaviors that you would notice?

Sperm Whales

Peterson: Well, let's see. You could start with sperm. Sperm is very easy because he's down so long. They'll stay down for an hour. The most I've seen is maybe an hour and twenty minutes it'll stay down.

Dunning: It will stay down without--?

Peterson: Blowing. When they come back to the surface they have to recharge their blood system. So they'll just lay there and blow and blow and blow. If you're fortunate to be fairly close to them, there's no problem about the sperm. The only problem is when you approach them. You never approach from the side because if they see you then they'll go down. They look out this

Peterson: way. You've got to come up from behind them. Usually they just lay there. You can get really close to them.

Humpbacks

Dunning: When you're saying really close, how close is that?

Peterson: You can run over them practically. Then humpbacks, they're the smartest of the whales. They'll drive you crazy trying to chase them. They will double back under the boat. Well, that's why they call them the humpie, because they hump like that when they go down. And they vary from maybe eight minutes, six minutes, five minutes, depending if you're chasing them. Then of course I just got onto the latter part of the humpbacks.

Finbacks

Peterson: But then the finback, he will stay up a little longer. He'll maybe make three or four blows, stay down maybe the same amount like a humpie, stay down until you get him timed right. But if you over run them, then that can spook them awfully easy, and they start going this way, that way, behind you.

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Blue Whales

Dunning: You were just starting to tell me about the blue whale.

Peterson: Of course, those were the biggest things that ever lived on the face of the earth. Shooting one of them is like shooting twenty elephants in one shot, because they weigh up to a hundred and ten tons. But they're almost awesome, they're that huge. They will blow, and they have a very high blow.

Dunning: What would their blow be shaped like?

Peterson: It depends on the weather. If you have calm weather they'll go up and they said they remind them of a palm tree. And really high. They had almost been killed off when I got into it. We ran into these blue whales, and that was when you could still take them. They will stay down maybe fifteen minutes, and then they come up and then they'll blow three or four times. But they're very slow like this.

The reason they call them blue whales is because most of the time they're in blue water. They're actually a grey color. But when they get underneath the water, then they appear to be blue.

This was the first time I had shot one, so here this big blue whale comes up. We're following right along behind it. It comes up as a perfect shot. It comes up not too far away. I'm there, and I get a hangfire. I went to look at the thing and boom, the harpoon shoots off in the air.

So this Hunk, he's trying to teach me, or acting like a coach, "Now Pete, now don't get excited. It's just like shooting a finback. The same thing."

Peterson: The one I told you I shot six times, there was maybe that many, too, at that time, but that was unusual because we would go out of Point Reyes and we would run right up eight hours off of Point Reyes. The ocean would be dead. You wouldn't see anything and all of a sudden the seabirds would start, life would start to show on the ocean, and then the whales.

Dunning: Would that be one of the signals, when you would see seabirds?

Peterson: Yes. And life. You know, the birds were feeding, and the whales would be looking for feed, too, so it was a good indication.

Dunning: Any other indications other than the obvious sightings?

Peterson: I'm sure you've seen programs on humpback whales in Alaska. They used to feed on balls of small shrimp or krill, they would call them. When whaling first started they had balls of shrimp out around the Farallones. Then the humpies were easy to take because they would be laying there rolling around in that shrimp feeding and they wouldn't pay any attention to anybody then.

Sperm, of course, would come up. Have you seen squid? The small ones or the big ones?

Dunning: I've seen them about to a couple of feet and then I've seen photographs of longer ones.

Peterson: Of course, this is the gory part of it. The sperm whale would get sick after you shoot them, so they would throw these squid up. Squid were huge. The sperm were bottom feeders.

Peterson: had to switch it from one wire to the next wire and then slow it in order to get the foregoer on the drums.

Anyway, we finally got the winch to start pulling it. Well, this nylon foregoer is very strong, but it stretches. It would stretch like a rubber band. That's why we liked them. But the thing was maybe an inch and a quarter in diameter and then it would come down to about like that with the pressure on it. So we got it up almost to the point where we could put air in him.

We were in the process of switching over to the other cable where we could roll it onto the drums and the foregoer broke. So we lost the whale. And that thing just goes down then. So I felt, everybody was feeling bad about it. So we shut down. It was dark when we got through so we shut down for the night.

We woke up the next morning and saw a bunch of sperm. I went out and shot two sperm with very little trouble and made more money on the two sperm than I would have made on that blue whale.

Dunning: Was that right in the same area?

Peterson: Yes, right in the same area.

Dunning: Do you think the sperm whale were attracted at all by the blue?

Peterson: No, they just happened to be coming along. There is a herd of blues down around this hemisphere that the Russians and Japanese didn't know anything about. There were about two hundred. Otherwise they would have wiped them out, too. See, I think the last year that the Japanese and Russians were whaling in the Antarctic they had them down--with all their killer boats--they had them down to five blue whales.

Peterson: On how Humphrey got in here? No, I think if they had left him alone he would have probably went out by himself. But they raised so much fuss.

Dunning: People were so fascinated.

Peterson: I kind of missed him after he was gone.

Dunning: Did you go out and see him?

Peterson: Yes. If fact, he came up right along the dock out there where I work, came in close. I could have probably jumped on him.

Effects of Outboard Motors and Some Equipment on Whales

Peterson: They hate outboard motors, humpbacks. They get wild, too. In fact, they almost chased him up on the beach up there with outboard motors, because they hate that bzzzzz, that buzzing sound. Because we tried it. We thought it would be a great idea if we got the small boat in conjunction with the bigger boat. You could kind of maybe chase him over to it. Well, they put this small skiff over with an outboard motor on it and then the whales went crazy. You couldn't even get close to them.

Another thing that they didn't like was the sonar. Our fathom meters. And gray whales. They all didn't like that. Because that signal it sends, bing, bing.

Dunning: Your sonar equipment.

Peterson: Yes. It sent out and bounced it off the bottom. We were out hunting these grey whales one day and we couldn't get close to them. We were messing around for four or five hours.

Finally this Hunk, he went down and came up. He was laughing and he said, "I left the fathom meter on." We couldn't get close to them.

Dunning: What is your theory on that?

Peterson: They just don't like the sound. The closer we got to them they would just move away from us. In fact, if we wanted to louse somebody else up, we would just turn the fathom meter on.

Scanning Equipment

Dunning: Would you do that occasionally?

Peterson: If we wanted to be mean. No, we wouldn't do anything like that. Not to our buddies. But Honeywell put out a scanner. I think all the Russian boats have it on. They can actually trace a whale underwater. Even the sperm. A sperm down maybe three thousand feet, they actually go down that deep and they can trace them on the bottom. They just wait until they come up.

Dunning: The scanner picks up all the sounds?

Peterson: Oh, yes. Well, the guy that's operating the scanner has to know what he's looking for or how he's doing it. It has a head on the bottom of the boat that you can turn in different directions and up and down like this, and like this, so you can trace it. The whale really doesn't have a chance with one of those.

Peterson: You could just run into the whales anytime. Sometimes we were running along looking for whales way out and one popped up almost right in front of the boat. So you never knew exactly where they were going to show up--you would go to places they were likely to be, but you could run out there and never see anything and then find them in the most unlikely place. Of course, inshore you wouldn't find them very often.

Dunning: What was the most unlikely place you've ever found a whale?

Peterson: Well, that went in to Point Reyes, or in on Drake's Bay. In fact, we were coming in. We had thirty whales. We had a chance to take a couple more whales, say thirty-one whales. So we went out and we didn't see much on the outside. Most of the whales had gone by. It was a beautiful day so we thought, well, we would just come in along the beach.

Here we started in by Drake's Bay. Who should show up right in front of us in this kind of coffee colored water but this grey whale that jumped up right in front of us. It surprised us. You shouldn't be that surprised about grey whales. Of course, we weren't too familiar with them anyway because they'll get in here every so often, too, like that humpy did. Mostly I was surprised that humpback ["Humphrey"] got in here and got lost.

Humphrey, the Lost Whale

Dunning: This is a little bit of an aside, but do you have any theories on that one?

Peterson: Yes. But with the mother's and the calves, I didn't like that at all. I had that experience when I first started, that we shot one of the mothers. The calf was big enough to take care of itself, but still there was that relationship between the two of them.

Dunning: Were you able to observe that behavior?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: Could you talk about that?

Peterson: The calf would try to hold the mother up. It would get underneath it and push it up. Of course, the mother was dead at that time and we just had her on the front end of the boat ready to put air in it. You see, we couldn't handle them unless we blew them up. They weighed too much. So we would have to put air into the stomach of the whales.

Killing with Air

Peterson: That was the one time. Another thing I didn't like to do was to--you could kill them with air. You could take the air holes that we blew them up with. It was a gun barrel that was cut at an anchor and then you would keep it really sharp. You would just sharpen this one plane of it. So when you would have to go through maybe six inches of blubber to get in where you could put the air in. So you would hit it and you would go through the blubber, so we would keep it sharp.

Anyway, you could take that and if they weren't dead and you didn't want to waste another shot or that, you would put the airholes right next to the blowhole and it would paralyze the muscles in the

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Peterson: One of ours had it on. We didn't have it when I was on the Alan Cody. So we demanded equal treatment with the scanner. Because those guys would say, "Oh, no, no. We never use the scanner."

We knew they were lying because we would watch them. We would see the boat going this way and this way and this way for quite a while. Pretty soon the whale comes up right in front of them. Then we would ask them when they got in, "Were you using that scanner?"

"No, no, no. That scanner's broke down. We haven't used that for a long time." Finally it did break down and he never fixed it again. So we gave them at least what little chance they had, we gave them that chance. Quite a few of them got away, too, especially if I had an off day and I was shooting a lot of holes in the water.

A Mother and Her Calves

Dunning: Did you ever try to let one get off?

Peterson: To get away?

Dunning: You know, like a mother and calf, or--?

Peterson: No. I didn't like to do that either, shoot a mother and a calf. I was really soft hearted for doing what I was doing. This one guy I knew, he used to live here, Bill Brown. I don't know if you ever heard of him or not. He used to be an editor for the Tribune. He used to call me the gentle killer. What a name.

Dunning: That's quite a nickname.

Peterson: Yes. But with the mother's and the calves, I didn't like that at all. I had that experience when I first started, that we shot one of the mothers. The calf was big enough to take care of itself, but still there was that relationship between the two of them.

Dunning: Were you able to observe that behavior?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: Could you talk about that?

Peterson: The calf would try to hold the mother up. It would get underneath it and push it up. Of course, the mother was dead at that time and we just had her on the front end of the boat ready to put air in it. You see, we couldn't handle them unless we blew them up. They weighed too much. So we would have to put air into the stomach of the whales.

Killing With Air

Peterson: That was the one time. Another thing I didn't like to do was to--you could kill them with air. You could take the air holes that we blew them up with. It was a gun barrel that was cut at an anchor and then you would keep it really sharp. You would just sharpen this one plane of it. So when you would have to go through maybe six inches of blubber to get in where you could put the air in. So you would hit it and you would go through the blubber, so we would keep it sharp.

Anyway, you could take that and if they weren't dead and you didn't want to waste another shot or that, you would put the airholes right next to the blowhole and it would paralyze the muscles in the

Peterson: blowhole. In reality you were just choking them to death. That I didn't like. I would rather get a nice clean kill shot and have it over with.

Once I had about twenty-five straight kill shots, which is good. In fact, the lance started to get rusty, we hadn't used it in so long.

Incident_with_Killer_Whales

Dunning: I've heard that sometimes other whales would chase the boat after a whale had been killed. Is that true?

Peterson: Killer whales, yes. We would kill the finback and these guys must have really been hungry because we had it up. Usually they were around fifty-five feet. You would get them up to sixty-five, seventy, so as a rule of thumb you would figure they were about sixty-five feet. When I'm talking about them I usually say sixty-five feet. It's a pretty good sized whale. You put it up on the bow of the boat.

Anyway, we had the whale hanging. It's just hanging by the harpoon. We got it up enough where we can reach down and put these airholes in it. Sometimes, if you get them in the back you have to roll them. You hit them down so far and then as the air starts to go into the whale you kind of relax it a little so it will roll up on its stomach so you can give it to it in its stomach.

We're doing this, and a couple of these killer whales come. First thing they do is they grab the tail of this whale. They're powerful. They grab it and they just kicked real hard. When they got through kicking they kicked the whale completely around like that so it was almost right alongside the boat.

Dunning: Someone from the Oakland Whale Center may be interested in looking at it and perhaps they could make a copy.

Peterson: Well, they say if you can put it on tape it will last a lot longer. There's part of it where they film me shooting one whale, and then I've gotten it where the whale's alongside the boat, towing it in, and also when they're pulling it up the slip out here. I've got films of that, and then of a blue whale. We were going into Santa Cruz one night and ran into a big blue whale. Of course, we couldn't take him, but I got a few shots of that. And some sperm whale.

Bottlenose Whales

Peterson: The most surprising thing was the little bottlenose. That thing surprised the heck out of us. It's a bottlenose whale, and we were running out and ran into this one bottlenose and they said, "Well, should we take that?" Because they would only pay us three quarter price for it.

Hunk said, "Oh yes, go ahead. We'll get something."

So we shot that thing and it took off. I didn't realize they were that powerful. The only way we stopped it--it was in shallow water--and that thing bounced off the bottom. That was the only way we stopped that whale.

##

That's another one that I had to kill with air. Hunk didn't want to waste another shot on it so we killed that one with air. But it was a surprise to me

Peterson: the strength that thing had for a small whale. It was thirty-five feet, but small, and the body of it is very small.

Recollections_of_Whaler_Earhart_Nielson

Dunning: I read that Earhart Nielson once said, "Once a blue whale towed us around for sixteen hours, and some would tow us as fast as ten mile per hour." Would they?

Peterson: Oh yes, yes. I knew Earhart very well. He was a great little gunner, too. And a clown. He was a typical clown. He got part of his hand blown off. I'll tell you what kind of a guy he was. They got a guy from Eureka who came down that had been on a boat in Eureka. He came down. Gib loved to whale. He had his business in Eureka. He would just come down here on these whale boats because he just loved to whale and leave his whole business up there. But Gib was a very nice guy.

So the crew was all used to this Gib. So this Bill Bartle came down now. He's completely different. He's throwing his weight around. So he's telling Earhart there's a whale come up and he's trying to tell Earhart how to shoot from up on the bridge.

Well, that didn't set too well with Earhart. So he says, "When I tell you to shoot, shoot." So Earhart just reached over and hit the trigger on his gun. The guy said, "What did you do that for?"

He said, "Well, you told me to shoot." So Earhart Nielson was a crazy little guy. He did finally commit suicide. I don't know if you knew that or not.

Peterson: four. That's heavy planking. It had caved that one in, so it was busted in like this. Not quite enough to let the water in because it was a little above the water line, but we were afraid to fire the gun again. Maybe it would shake the whole thing loose. So we went down and shored it up as good as we could and took the one whale in, cussing all the time because we couldn't get another one.

Towing the Whales

Dunning: Would two be the maximum you could tow in?

Peterson: With finback, yes, being that far out. Because they would slow us down. You got two big finback, if you were making four or five knots you were lucky. If you got into the bay and you had a big ebb you would just sit there and chug. It would take forty-five minutes to get in. One time we had a pretty good sized ebb and I had a couple on and it took me forty-five minutes to get underneath the bridge. I could have gotten out and walked a lot faster.

Dunning: Did you ever take any film of the tow? A number of people have told me how they remember the whales coming in under the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge.

Peterson: Yes, I've got some, but I don't know what condition they're in. My film faded on me. I should have had that thing copied.

Dunning: Sixteen millimeter or--?

Peterson: Eight. And it faded. They tell me you can take it and have it videoed now.

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He said, "Well, you told me to shoot." So Earhart Nielson was a crazy little guy. He did finally commit suicide. I don't know if you knew that or not.

Dunning: Oh no?

Peterson: Yes. He went to work for one of these tug companies then. He got in the bite of a line and the line came loose and threw him up against the barge and busted his back. So he was in quite a bit of pain. I don't know what it all wound up to, but he finally shot himself.

Me and him were going over to Sausalito one day. He had bought a boat, one of them little clipper bow boats. He thought maybe he would go salmon trolling or something like that. Anyway, we were on the way over and we got talking about people jumping off the bridge. His solution to it was that what they should do is get a springboard and try to capture them all and save them for Saturday afternoon where they could get a big crowd and let them all jump off at once. Little did I know he would finally do it himself, see.

But he was just a little nut, that was all. He would walk down the street and then he would act like he stumbled and fell down. He wouldn't. It was just clowning. He was a character. And also a great little gunner, too.

##

Sea Stories

Towing Finbacks

[Date of Interview: April 30, 1986] ##

Dunning: During our last interview we covered your coming to Richmond and getting the job at the whale station and the everyday experience of becoming a whaler and being a whaler. I would like to talk today a bit more about some of the sea stories. Before we turned on the tape you had told me a story about the towing of the whale and I was wondering if you would repeat that on tape?

Peterson: Well, we had two finback which was a tough tow. It was a strong ebb tibe. Like I say, we just couldn't make it underneath the bridge with the two whales. One whale would slow you down to about five knots if it was a big whale. So we went out and tied one of them to the marker buoys up on the entrance channel and came in with one whale.

In the meantime some people on the beach, thought it was a boat that had turned upside down and called the coast guard, so when we got back, there was the coast guard. But like I say, they didn't do anything to us. Threatened a fining, that was about it.

Dunning: But they said it was against their regulations to tie anything to a buoy?

Peterson: Yes. You shouldn't tie to a navigational buoy. We got by with that pretty good.

Dunning: How slow would the tow be if the tide was off?

Peterson: the boat. You probably can't understand my directions on the tape. I talk a lot with my hands. I'm not Italian.

Injuries_on_Board_the_Whaling_Boat

Peterson: I shot and the guy was a pretty good sized grey whale. It was a heavy seas, too. Out of Point Reyes you usually get that. Or you would get this, like I told you before, up and down motion. It was pulling and this was really tight. He started to pull, but he never had enough wraps on the winch.

I think I told you about the nylon rope, how it would stretch like a rubber band. I was watching this line. I could see it. Finally something gave on it. I'm standing like this. This is running right alongside of me. As it did, I pulled my hand up instinctively. I just kind of pulled my hand up. This thing comes in and by me like a shot. But as it went by me it hit my hand, just the end of it. I looked down at my hand and my hand went [whooshing noise]. It just swelled up right now, almost immediately. I thought, wow, I had broken every bone in that.

So here's the whale out there. I'm the gunner. We're in bad shape. Hunk, the captain, says, "How about your hand? What can you do? It didn't tear your arm off did it?" If it had wrapped around my arm it would have torn my arm off. He said, "Do you think you can do anything?"

I said, "Well, have them load it and I'll try to use one hand and shoot it."

Peterson: Yes. We had to let it go because the only way we could tow the whale was tail first. That's the only way we had of towing them. But if you got in bad weather, and depending on which way you shot the whale, the harpoon would be sticking out. So we had to tie the whale up so the harpoon would be away from the boat. Otherwise it would work. It could cut the planks right in two on the boats. So if you had to tie the whale to the weather side then you would get this--I should have had some pictures to show you. Have you ever seen anchor chains?

Dunning: Yes.

Peterson: Well, they have small ones, but these were big ones for big ships. The reason we used those is because the bigger they were the less chance you had of cutting the tail. Then we used to wrap them. Anyway, it would work back and forth like this as the boat would get into the weather. It would go like this, and finally it would just jerk the tail off of the whale and that would be it. We would go out and cut back on the tail and take another bite around it.

We did that twice on one whale. We were pulling the tail off. We went back, cut back, moved the tailchain back and started again, and it just pulled the tail right off and that was it.

Dunning: Which meant you lost the whale?

Peterson: That was it, yes.

Dunning: And there was no other way to get the whale?

Peterson: No, we couldn't tow it any other way, especially in bad weather. Being that it was the prevailing northwest swell out there, we were always running crosswise to it, so we would always get this, boom, boom, boom, in and out.

Lance Shots

Peterson: I think I've told you about that one time when we were out hunting grey whales. Didn't I tell you that, where I would give it the second shot, the lance shot? You understand what the lance shot is now?

Dunning: Refresh my memory.

Peterson: Well, the first shot when you shoot them in, it has four flukes on the harpoon, flukes that were kind of on the harpoon. When it goes in, it goes in like this and when you pull on it these flukes come out and that's what holds the whale. But if you haven't killed the whale, then they have what--it's almost the same as the old whalers, only the lance shot they used to use was a big long knife. They would get up and stab it in the whale and then work it back and forth. But we would shoot it in and it had a bomb on it. It's kind of gory details.

Dunning: It's okay. I want every gory detail.

Peterson: We would shoot it in with a fuse on it. The flukes were off this one, so it was a straight shot and then we would pull it back out. Sometimes we shot up as high as six times in one whale.

So I'm up on the gun platform. We would usually take it up on the winch rather than pull it on the normal winch we had for winding the cables up. I shot this. I think I told you on this boat where I was shooting the cables went on top of the gun platform so it was there rather than underneath, which was a dumb idea.

It was my job usually to tell them what was happening with the line, if it was going back this way or that way or out in front of the boat or in back of

Peterson: Yes. He comes back and hears about the other guys out there catching whales and he said, "We're going to go whaling."

He came down with that. He put a bandage around his hand like this and he went out whaling.

Whalers: Tough or Crazy?

Dunning: Are whalers a tougher breed?

Peterson: I don't know if they're tougher or crazier. Probably crazier. But we never paid that much attention to injuries.

Dunning: It seems like you took the injuries in stride. Was that true?

Peterson: Yes. If it had been in private industry they would have probably had you out for two months with a bad hand. I busted this bone right here in my hand.

Dunning: On your little finger?

Peterson: Little finger. Yes, here I am showing you. This isn't a television.

Dunning: I wish it were video.

Peterson: But I broke that one and went out. Now this is another thing. I said, "Man, that hurts."

Because I did it letting the boat go from the dock. I had it wrapped around a lot of wraps and there was a lot of pressure on it. It was a small iron we used to turn the boat. Hunk was going ahead

Peterson: So they loaded the gun and the whale's out there, still fighting. I shot and he's still out there. I didn't get too good a shot into him. Finally then we had to just cut him loose because we couldn't do anything with him. Those were the two times where we had to cut the whales loose.

Dunning: What happened to your hand?

Peterson: When we got in they said, "We'll send you up to Brookside Hospital."

They took me. I didn't see the doctor right away. They took me in and x-rayed my hand. Then they said, "Wait and the doctor will be back to see you."

The doctor came in and I was kind of sitting like--he couldn't see my hand. He was looking at the x-rays. He said, "Well, I don't see anything broken. Let's see your hand."

I said, "I'll have it right up."

He said, "Wow. You must have received a massive blow."

I said, "Yes, I did receive a massive blow." But I went back out shooting the next day or so.

It was crazy on those boats. This skipper, Hunk, he went down. We're hunting grey whales. I was bringing the boat in, he was taking the boat out. He's also the engineer. He was good. He was really good with engines. So I'm sleeping in the stateroom. I come in and Hunk is saying, "Pete, would you get up and take the boat in?" We had just started out into the North Channel starting out towards Ducksberry Reef.

Peterson: I said, "Eight days."

They said, "Forget it. It's healed now. We would have to rebreak it. The healing process has started." So, another one of those small injuries.

Dunning: Were there ever any fatalities on the whaleboat?

Peterson: No. Not deaths, no, but I think I told you about Earhart blowing his hand off.

Dunning: No, you didn't.

Peterson: This is going to be kind of a bad section here. I tell you about all the bad--

Dunning: No, this would be a major part of being a whaler.

Peterson: This Earhart Nielson I was telling you about, a little gunner, you've heard about him before I think.

Dunning: Yes.

Peterson: Well, this was the same thing as the lance shot. They had shot the whale, had it out in front, and it shot the lance. They had gone ahead. He killed the whale. They had just left it hanging over the bow so they could blow up the whale and get it tied up alongside the boat. Well, after they got the whale tied up, there was three of them, I think, right up on the bow. They were going to pick up this lance and put it--we had these racks where you would stand a harpoon so it was up and down and you would have about six or seven harpoons back there, plus the lance.

So they picked it up and were going around to put it in the rack. The bomb didn't go off and Earhart had just part of his hand over the front part of it,

Peterson: Yes. He comes back and hears about the other guys out there catching whales and he said, "We're going to go whaling."

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Peterson: work. Then they picked him up and flew him into the marine hospital. That was probably one of the worst accidents.

Dunning: It seems mostly that the hands were caught in the mishaps.

Peterson: Yes. I can't think of any busted arms or legs.

Dunning: No one ever drowned?

Peterson: No. There was one guy by the name of Carl that quit and went with Standard Oil. Somehow he fell off one of the Standard Oil tankers and drowned.

Dunning: He should have stayed on the whaling boat.

Peterson: Yes.

Storms--Blowing So Hard It Was Smoking

Dunning: Were there any major storms that stand out in your memory?

Peterson: Of course, this was a long time ago, though. The one I was out in was the first time the Golden Gate Bridge swung and they had to stop traffic.

Dunning: What year would this be? Or decade?

Peterson: This would be way back, thirty years or more.

Dunning: Okay. This was well before the whaling station?

Peterson: Yes. That one there impressed me, but otherwise it was thirty-five, forty mile an hour winds. We were on boats that would stand the weather pretty good.

Peterson: Nothing that we got really afraid of, except we would run into a southwest wind--it was tough coming in on the bar when the wind was blowing, the southeast winds. We came down one time and got to the light ship. I keep calling it a light ship, but you understand now it's just a buoy out there, a big buoy.

We were wondering about going across the bar it was blowing so hard. There was a little troller over in front of us and he got inside by Point Bonita or the Cliff House, that far in. We talked to him and he said, "Ah, come on. It isn't that bad."

So we started out and it was blowing so hard that the wind would pick the water up. They used the term it was blowing so hard it was smoking. So we went across and there was another big navy tug that was right in front of us. We more or less followed him. We had the radar on. That's the only way we could see the marker buoys going in.

You know how the scan goes, or the sweep on the radar. It would go around until it hit the wind and it would go [imitates grinding noise] like it was in low gear. That wasn't really that bad. Most of the time what we got out in, if it got blowing very hard we would run either for Point Reyes or the Farallones or Santa Cruz. I was down to Santa Cruz for six days, maybe longer than that. I forget. I got sick of staying down there. That was a week we were down there, that was it.

Dunning: And you were on the boat the whole time?

Peterson: Yes. And it was blowing so hard we couldn't go out. I told Hunk, "I'm tired of sitting here looking at the bright lights and I can't get in there." I could go in there, but I didn't have any money with me. I said, "Either we go or I'm going to catch the bus and go home."

Peterson: and then the bomb went off. Somehow the fuse pulled. It was an instant fuse or someway somebody pulled it enough just to spark it and it went off.

He was lucky. Usually inside of this it was a piece of pipe down about two inches. They were about ten inches long. And from the one end maybe two or three inches inside of it they would weld this plug in there to keep the explosion. Well, it wasn't a good weld. That's the only thing that saved those three guy's lives, was that the weld was bad. It blew that plug out, but it also blew that part of Earhart's hand off, two fingers and this part of his hand off.

They called the coast guard and the coast guard came out. They had taken such a load of gas that they couldn't hover over the ship. They said, "We'll, get him out in your skiff."

Angelo was there, Angelo Gianni. He took Earhart out into the skiff. They tried to get over the skiff. They said no, they were too heavy, they couldn't hover. They finally did, the coast guard actually picked him up.

They got out and got over the skiff and they put this harness around him underneath the arms. There goes that wave action again and the helicopter, it was pretty hard to keep it steady so as they went to pull up Earhart, he's kind of standing up a little. They pulled him right out of the skiff into the water. He said that was what hurt the most. Instinctively he went to grab the cable and he grabbed it with this bad hand. This finger here was blown clear back here. But they saved it after they got it in.

They flew him over to an aircraft carrier that was nearby. They went in and they took him down in the sick bay there and did some of the preliminary

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Peterson: I got whatever I could, but it got along to the last where we would go into the gray whales--it started out at eight months, and then it would be almost ten months. It wasn't really that much time off between after we got through with the grays. We got part of the grey whales when they were coming down in January. Then we went back out after the first of the year and got the other part of them. That would take a month. That would be into February. We would open up again in April or May. That would be about all. We wouldn't do anything really in the whaling until about July, it would be such bad weather.

Dunning: So there really wasn't that much time off in between?

Peterson: No, not much lapse time.

##

Reflections on Being a Whaler

Dunning: For you, what were some of the best parts of being a whaler?

Peterson: Well, I think I told you it was exciting. For me it was. Like I say, everything else paled, really, compared to that. I told you about all these whales that were out in front of you, how many you would get there. You really have to experience it. All that part of it, and the people that worked on the boats.

It was sort of a closed little group that they had because somebody else would come down and they would kind of look at them sideways. Of course, we were getting a little static from Greenpeace. At the end some guy came down on the dock one time and started raving about killing whales or something. We thought he was some sort of a nut.

Peterson: No. If you're a registered boat--you had to be a registered boat. I guess it was one of those things that they had a medical program for the seamen. We qualified under that program as long as the boat was certified.

Attempt to Join the Towboat Union

Dunning: Did you ever belong to a union, a seaman's union?

Peterson: No. We tried it down there.

Dunning: You tried it with the whaling station?

Peterson: Yes, we tried it. What we wanted to do was get into the towboat union. Not because we wanted a union but because then we would have a chance in the off season to work on the towboats. But as soon as the owners heard about it they said, "We'll close the place down."

You know that threat, if you join the union we'll close the place down. It scared the guys out. We had to have better than fifty percent that would take part. We couldn't muster the fifty percent so we didn't join it.

Dunning: Was that when it was Del Monte, or Golden Gate Fisheries?

Peterson: I think both of us were talking about it, both companies. Eventually quite a few of the guys did go to work on the towboats. In fact, I think Bud Newton is the guy that was running one of the whaling boats down there, and Don Gamble. They both went to work running other boats. They both had small licenses, I think, two hundred ton licenses. I think Bud Newton

Peterson: Of course, anyplace you would go you were talking shop all the time. I was talking. People asked, "Well, Pete, how are you doing?" And I would give them two or three whaling stories just as an opening.

This one guy I think I told you about tried to get that gun, that whaling gun. I was going to make a mailbox out of it. This guy said, "Well, what you should do with that, Pete, is have it chromed and have it out in front of your house."

Anti-Whaling Sentiment

Peterson: There was a truck driver the other night that I was loading down at work and he was asking about whaling. Naturally we got into the whaling part, and he said, "That was terrible what they done, terrible what they done. How could you do that?" to me.

I said, "Well, I thought it was a job at the time. I was just going out and doing a day's work."

Well, he couldn't accept that. A lot of other people can't accept that, and I guess maybe that's how I rationalize it. I never thought about it then, really, until now. Now I think about how it was. But to see some of my films, maybe you would know what I was talking about. That would be the greatest films if Greenpeace could get to show them. They are kind of gory. In fact, my kids won't look at them anymore.

Dunning: Well, the times have really changed, too. I mean, it was a job for you.

Peterson: I've often thought about that, how you rationalize. Of course, there were very few films about whales then. Now they're lots of films about whales, and the

Peterson: I got whatever I could, but it got along to the last where we would go into the gray whales--it started out at eight months, and then it would be almost ten months. It wasn't really that much time off between after we got through with the grays. We got part of the grey whales when they were coming down in January. Then we went back out after the first of the year and got the other part of them. That would take a month. That would be into February. We would open up again in April or May. That would be about all. We wouldn't do anything really in the whaling until about July, it would be such bad weather.

Dunning: So there really wasn't that much time off in between?

Peterson: No, not much lapse time.

Reflections on Being a Whaler

Dunning: For you, what were some of the best parts of being a whaler? It's one of those general questions you can take anywhere.

Peterson: Well, I think I told you it was exciting. For me it was. Like I say, everything else paled, really, compared to that. I told you about all these whales that were out in front of you, how many you would get there. You really have to experience it. All that part of it, and the people that worked on the boats.

It was sort of a closed little group that they had because somebody else would come down and they would kind of look at them sideways. Of course, we were getting a little static from Greenpeace. At the end some guy came down on the dock one time and started raving about killing whales or something. We thought he was some sort of a nut.

Peterson: Finally we got up and ran him off the dock. We said, "Get out of here. You're on private property."

Dunning: Was this towards the very end of the whaling station in the early seventies?

Peterson: Yes. Well, really it was nothing that was scheduled. Your whole life was determined by the weather and the whales. That was it. That was why it was so hard for me to go back and go to work for eight hours a day.

Dunning: On a regular schedule?

Peterson: Yes. That was tough for me when I went back and got a job. This one night I was up in the change room and I sat there and I thought, "What have I gotten into?" My life really was free before, and I got into this schedule, eight hours. You know, boom, boom, boom, it's time off for lunch. Every day I would be there. It was hard for me to adjust after that.

I would come home and say, "I'm digging myself in a trench. I'll never get out of it." And I didn't. I stayed with it. But at my age at that time I was lucky to get the job that I have now.

But that's what I liked about whaling. I never really made a lot of money at it. They always said that I had my hobby or avocation, whatever you want to call it, and I had retired. I was enjoying my retirement years early. But that's what I really liked about the whaling. It was a lot freer. Sometimes, when you would leave, it was like leaving everything behind and getting away from it all.

Dunning: There's no way you can really take that job home.

Peterson: Of course, anyplace you would go you were talking shop all the time. I was talking. People asked, "Well, Pete, how are you doing?" And I would give them two or three whaling stories just as an opening.

This one guy I think I told you about tried to get that gun, that whaling gun. I was going to make a mailbox out of it. This guy said, "Well, what you should do with that Pete is have it chromed and have it out in front of your house."

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Peterson: divers going down and seeing them. They've studied them a little, what a gentle animal they are. This is what the truck driver said, "How could you do that to such a gentle creature?"

I thought to myself, "I should never have said anything. You're making me feel bad."

But at that time I didn't think anything about it. I mean, I didn't think that much about it. I kind of thought it was like maybe killing cattle or anything else, any other food animal, because actually we were supplying the cats and dogs. Now the cat and dog lovers needed food for their pets.

I would say that would about cover it. I just enjoyed it. I liked the life and like I say, the excitement. There were boring times about it if you would go four or five days without seeing any whales. But it was nice to come back.

Dunning: How did it affect your family life?

Peterson: Not that bad. My children seemed to survive it okay. And my wife seemed to survive it all right. She was working, too. She didn't think too much of whaling anyway. It was too hit and miss more or less. I was gone a lot of the time.

Dunning: And she wouldn't really know how long you would be gone when you would go out?

Peterson: No. I was just thinking of something, but I shouldn't mention that.

Dunning: No, go ahead. You can always edit things out.

Peterson: Sometimes they were glad to get out, but they were glad to get back, too, because the meeting place was the first local bar that they hit.

Dunning: Was there a favorite bar that the whalers would go to in Richmond?

Peterson: It used to be down at the Four Hundred Club. It was up there at Fourth and Macdonald. You know what that is now, but it wasn't. Let's see, how long did you say you've been here now?

Dunning: I've been in the area close to five years.

Peterson: Well, downtown Richmond was gone way before then, but downtown Richmond used to be fairly decent. So they would meet up there at this one bar and go in there and lie to each other like all fishermen do, and whalers. They talk about their women at sea and when they get in on the beach they talk about sailing, just the opposite.

Dunning: Were there ever women on board? I heard once the captain brought his wife--

Peterson: Oh, yes, Grant had his wife on. He also had his two fairly young kids at that time. Of course, they're adult now, grown up. Once in a while they would take a gal out for a trip, but not too often. Whalers and women. Now that deal about women on the boat?

Dunning: Yes, we had talked about that.

Peterson: It isn't true. It didn't bring us bad luck. In fact, we had pretty good luck. But Grant's wife was a very nice person, Maggie. They later got divorced. I don't know whether it was because of whaling or not.

Dunning: Did your wife ever express any interest in going out with you?

Peterson: That wasn't on the boat. It was in an off season that he came up with the deal. He was one of those ornery drunks. You know, when he would get a few belts into him then he would get mean. That's the only problem I ever really had with the guy. Of course, it really hurt him when I went out and started to shoot. I was beating him shooting. I was quite friendly with him up until that time. He had been to the house here and had dinner and knew my family.

Then he pulled that stuff on me. He would say, "You really hate me, don't you Pete?"

I would say, "Yes." No, I didn't really hate him that much. I got over it after a while because I think that anybody that carries a grudge like that it hurts the person more than it hurts the other guy.

Anyway, he went on to working over on oil rigs. Grant, he has a restaurant here in town.

Dunning: What's his name?

Peterson: Grant Yost. And Doug Campbell, I think he's retired. I think he's living in a trailer park out here. These guys I haven't seen for years, a lot of them.

Dunning: You should have a whaling reunion.

Peterson: Yes. I was thinking about it the other day, and say out of a hundred and thirty million people in the country, if you could get maybe ten American whalers you would be lucky. Out of the ten, maybe you would have four or five that shot. Whalers are really a rare breed.

Dunning: That's why it's important to get your story.

Peterson: Oh, I'll be around for a little while.

Drinking_On_Board

Dunning: Well, I've heard some stories off record about the captain, and I don't know which one, having quite a drinking problem, and sometimes the boat would be weaving around. Is that true?

Peterson: Well, that was Ed Hollaway. I know that he was the worst driver in the world when he got drunk. I don't know how many 502s he got here. Just say it was one of the guys. I don't know whether I should mention his name or not. But they almost ran the boat in on Stinson Beach one time. Boy, that is dynamite out there, drinking on the boat. Usually because there's only one guy at the wheel. If anything goes wrong, he's got four other guys he has got to worry about. It's your responsibility. I think I told you about almost going on the beach, didn't I?

Dunning: You mentioned it briefly.

Peterson: That one down at Monterey. Two of us were up that time. This guy was kind of inexperienced, but that had nothing to do with drinking. That was just inexperience.

Dunning: Were there any informal restrictions? If someone started drinking too much, would somebody else say something or try to stop him?

Peterson: Yes, for their own good. They used to do that enough when they got on the beach. So you kind of more or less watched it. That's the only time I know of where the drinking problem--probably there was a lot of them that had a drinking problem, but they didn't carry it onto the boat with them.

Dunning: I would think if you were out there for over week and there were no whales, you might drink out of boredom.

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Dunning: Did your wife ever express any interest in going out with you?

Peterson: No. I took my one son out, Mike. He went out with me twice. But now Mark, you remember him? He got carsick, so I wouldn't dare to take him out. My youngest son, I never attempted to take him. I took him on a ride where we were going from Oakland over to here. Then I got him on and took him, but that was about it. Pardon me, I let Mike steer the boat and he thought that was great, a big wheel. He wouldn't care which way he went.

But I had him down with me to Monterey. We went down afterwards and tryed to salvage a sunken purse seiner down there. We had this old coast guard boat that Gib had bought, so I took Mike with me. We were out for three days and we anchored out where this ship was at. The wreck, they had it buoyed, so we anchored close to it.

Mike said he was seasick, but I don't think he was seasick. He was homesick. He wouldn't eat. I got worried about him. These divers were going in and out to Monterey. They had a small boat they were coming out in each day. I ask this one diver, "Would you mind taking my boy in and putting him on a bus for San Francisco?"

He said, "No, I'll take him in." He was happy he got to leave. He had enough of that ocean life. Three days was enough. They took him in and put him on the bus. I had him phone his mom and then she met him over in San Francisco. But that was enough for him.

Dunning: None of your children ended up in sea careers?

Peterson: No, I don't think any of them will, either.

Dunning: You're the last generation?

Peterson: Yes, last of the old Nordic seamen.

Peterson: He's still fishing. He was a very good whaler, too. He just had the knack of it. I understand he's a great little fisherman, too, on the boats. I haven't talked to him for a long while. When he went up to Eureka they converted the boat from whaling to dragging; he had to go out and learn a completely new trade. Like I told you, each part of fishing is a different trade in itself. Of course, bottom fishing is no exception. It took him two or three years to learn it, but once he learned it he started bringing them in. He made pretty good money. I know when we were making about what we though was a pretty good year down here, with $18,000 or something like that, he's making $35,000, $40,000 up there.

Dunning: This is when you were finishing? At the end you would make $18,000?

Salaries in Whaling

Peterson: No. I say when I went to work with this company down here. If I made $15,000, $18,000 a year, which I thought was a pretty good yearly salary at that time, I think Kenny would come down and talk to me afterwards and he said he had made $35,000 that year in fishing up in Eureka.

Dunning: This is after you left whaling?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: What would your salaries be in whaling? Would they vary quite a bit?

Peterson: Oh, would they vary. I think one year I made $3300.

Dunning: That was a big year.

Peterson: I think he had a stroke, he was saying, so he said he has trouble remembering things, so I don't know whether that would put him out.

Dunning: That would be a short interview. Then you mentioned a Japanese man who's up north?

Peterson: Oh, Kenny Hamai, yes. I think he's still running a boat up there, but he lives in San Francisco. He commutes between here and Eureka. I think he goes up there and stays--now, I know he's been with this woman. I don't know whether he's married to her or not, but I think he's been with her for quite some time. In fact, when he moved up to Eureka she went with him, but I don't think she liked it up there.

I think I told you about Roy, but I don't know about Roy. I think he went back to Los Angeles. Roy is from Japan. Kenny, I think I told you about how he got here. He was born in this country and his father took him back [to Japan], and then he came back. He didn't know that he was an American citizen.

He went through all this trouble to get visas to come to this country and after he went through it they said, "Well, you're already an American citizen. You were born there." He couldn't speak a word of English.

That's where he said he came, and the first thing they did was make a Japanese gardener out of him. He said, "I didn't know anything about gardening, but I'm Japanese."

He was out with his pruner. In the wintertime he was pruning off these poinsettias. This woman came out and said, "What are you doing?"

He said, "Oh, I'm just cutting them back a little. They'll look better."

Peterson: He said, "I got by with it because I was Japanese. They thought I knew everything about gardening. I didn't know anything."

Dunning: He knew more about whaling.

Peterson: He had come from a fishing village, see. He told me how he would go out for so long--he would fish four or five months. They would buy rice in three hundred pound bags. It would last him for so long. He would work five or six months for the bag of rice. That was right--let's see, was that after the war or during the war? See, they must have known about him being an American citizen so they wouldn't accept him into the Japanese army because they were a little suspect of him, although he was very small when his father took him back to Japan. But anyway, Kenny Hamai was a smart guy.

Dunning: He sounds like he might be a character.

Peterson: But he was quite successful down in Los Angeles. He had his own business. What did he tell me he had? Five or six people working for him? He had mechanics. He had the whole complex down there.

Dunning: Now what business?

Peterson: He had one of the highest producing service stations, I think it was, down in that area. I forget for what company. But on the side he had these mechanics that worked for him. Also, he had a laundromat and a bunch of other things going along with it. He just went [makes swishing sound] and came up here and went whaling. That's why I say they're a little crazy.

Dunning: Let's say different.

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Peterson: Yes. That was one of my bigger years.

Dunning: I can see why your wife worked.

Peterson: I think my tops was $10,000, $11,000. That was tops. So we really didn't make any money. We did it just for the love of the game.

The Process of Rendering

Dunning: Well, to the rendering plant. You talked a little bit about it the last time. I'm wondering how closely you were involved in the rendering, or how much you got to learn about it?

Peterson: Just what I would see from bringing in the whales and walking through it and being around it. I watched them cut up the whales.

Dunning: Could you describe the process from beginning to end?

Peterson: The first thing we would do was tie up the boat, and then we would take a line from the rendering plant and get it around the tail on the whale. It's a cable that they would put around it. Then when we got that around the tail of the whale then we had a pelican hook. It's a hook. It's like a big safety pin only it has this ring that's holding it there. But this is holding all the tension on the tail. Then you just hit it with a sledge hammer and it's immediate release. We release that pelican hooks, the whale drops down, and then the people in the plant, they start pulling it with this cable.

They pull it up to the float. They had a float that went out just at opposite angles from the boat. They would come out and get it lined up alongside the

Peterson: float, which was parallel to the slip, and then they would pull the tail up on the slip. Then they would bring down a huge chain and put it around the tail and they had a ring that would go around both of these chains as they brought them together, and as they pulled the chain it would cinch up onto the tail on the whale.

Then they would bring a big block down from inside of the rendering plant and hook it onto the chain. Then they would start towing it up. It was very slow because it was a series of block deals because they had to have it, and the winch turned slow.

But there was a lot of pressure on that tail, because once the weight gets out of the water you get sixty, seventy tons, or like that one blue whale they figured around a hundred and twenty tons that they were dragging up that slip. There's so much pressure on where it would go up the slip and break over that the sparks would fly from the chain going over, or the cable sometimes. Then, as they towed the whale up the slip, which was fairly steep, and as it got to the top of the slip, then it would break over onto the rendering floor.

As soon as they got the whale into the plant they began to cut it up.

##

Cutting_Through_the_Blubber

Peterson: They had what they called two flenchers. They were classified as flenchers. They would go up onto the head of the whale and cut some of the blubber away and cut a hole through the blubber.

They had a tool that was like a log or a piece of wood that was maybe six inches in diameter and four feet long, and in the center of this they had a piece of cable that was wrapped around it and the cable was about three or four feet long. They would cut the blubber away and then they would cut a hole in say a foot or so from where they had cut the blubber away, and they would string this cable from this piece of wood through the blubber and then they would hook this cable where they couldn't pull the log or piece of wood that it was attached to through. In other words, this would be what they could hold and pull the blubber with.

Then they would take a tension on the blubber. Of course, then the flenchers would walk up the whale and start cutting the blubber all the way. Then as they took the tension on the blubber these guys would just hit it with their flenching knives. There was this membrane in between the meat and the blubber and they would just shave that off and then it would just pull the blubber all off. They would peel it like a banana in other words. Then as they peeled it, they would take it over and put the blubber into the pre-breaker.

Before they got the pre-breaker, they would use saws. They had big circular saws, like chain saws. But it wasn't very successful. It was a crude way to cut up the blubber. They had all kinds of trouble with it. They would have a guy, a sawyer. You know what a sawyer is in a saw mill? He's the guy that

Peterson: I was doing some work on the boat. So when you would get a little time you would work on resplicing some of your lines or you would be working on the guns. Anyway, you had work to be done.

I was down the next day working, and I was up on the gun platform doing something. I was looking down at this one whale and it was getting air in it. The belly kept expanding, expanding. I thought it was going to finally just take off and float into the air. Finally I just happened to look at it and it just exploded, whamo. The whole thing was just like a balloon popping. It just sprayed the inside all over. One guy happened to be standing out on the float when that happened. He got just bathed with that insides.

Dunning: Pretty disgusting. What caused that?

Peterson: The heat in the whale and the heat of the day. It was a hot day.

Dunning: So the air inside expanded?

Peterson: Yes, we had already blown him up, so it just kept on expanding and expanding.

Dunning: Someone should have gotten a picture of that.

Peterson: Yes. If I could have only gotten one. Well, I think I told you that one that--Moby Dick, if I could have only had a camera on that one. There was quite a few times if I had only had a camera.

Dunning: Did you usually or almost never take a camera out?

Peterson: I did, but one time I thought--see, I have these ideas but I never follow through on them. I'm one of those kind of guys.

Peterson: No. It would foul up the cookers, so they didn't use it. I don't know what they did with that.

Dunning: I heard that it was used in umbrellas and--

Peterson: Oh, corsets.

Dunning: --corsets and girdles.

Peterson: Corset stays. At one time that was all they killed them for. They would just take the baleen out of the whale.

Dunning: That's sad.

Peterson: Yes. That was worse than what we did.

Dunning: Women would be a lot more comfortable without them anyway.

Peterson: Yes. But then of course they replaced baleen with what, steel? Put them out of business. But we didn't have any use for them. If I had been a real sharp business man I could have jumped in there and saved that baleen. I could have probably made a fortune.

Dunning: You would probably still be making money from it.

Peterson: Sure. Just advertise it in some magazine. One piece of real baleen from a whale. All the rest of the whale was used.

Dunning: How long would the rendering process take, from positioning the whale to cutting the blubber and the whole dissection?

Peterson: It would depend on how the guys felt.

Dunning: And how big the whale was?

Peterson: Yes. I think they give them some sort of a deal down there if they would go in and knock a whale out, they would give them say four hours of show up time. So if they had one whale they were fast. Sometimes they would knock a whale out.

What they would do, they would cut the blubber off and the meat off and put it into the cooling baths. Then they would come back the following day and put it into a grinder and sack it. Then they would--let's see, I think they would freeze it. They had racks anyway that they would put these bags in, and I think they went on to put it in this cold storage, and then they shipped it to Los Angeles to the Kal Kan factory.

But I would say if they really got on it they could knock a whale out maybe in two or three hours.

Dunning: How many men?

Peterson: They had a lot of guys down there. They had maybe fifteen, twenty guys anyway.

Dunning: Working on the one whale?

Peterson: Yes. They only had like a couple of flenchers, but then they had a lot of them that were cutting up the meat. One guy would stand with the meat hook and take a little strain on it and the other guy would cut it and they would throw it into the bags. So there would be quite a few people on there.

If we hit them with a bunch of whales, like one time we hit them with six finback. Each of the boats went out and got two finback. Then they slowed right down to a walk because they could see all that work out there. In fact, they stopped us and they wouldn't let us go out because we had them filled up with whales.

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I was down the next day working, and I was up on the gun platform doing something. I was looking down at this one whale and it was getting air in it. The belly kept expanding, expanding. I thought it was going to finally just take off and float into the air. Finally I just happened to look at it and it just exploded, whamo. The whole thing was just like a balloon popping. It just sprayed the inside all over. One guy happened to be standing out on the float when that happened. He got just bathed with that insides.

Dunning: Pretty disgusting. What caused that?

Peterson: The heat in the whale and the heat of the day. It was a hot day.

Dunning: So the air inside expanded?

Peterson: Yes, we had already blown him up, so it just kept on expanding and expanding.

Dunning: Oh wow. Someone should have gotten a picture of that.

Peterson: Yes. If I could have only gotten one. Well, I think I told you that one that--Moby Dick, if I could have only had a camera on that one. There was quite a few times if I had only had a camera.

Dunning: Did you usually or almost never take a camera out?

Peterson: I did, but one time I thought--see, I have these ideas but I never follow through on them. I'm one of those kind of guys.

Dunning: Little did you know that the whaling industry was going to stop, too. You probably thought you could do it for many years.

Peterson: I got an eight millimeter camera that wasn't very good. They guy told me, he said, "Get you a sixteen millimeter. If you take any pictures of good quality and you capture anything, you've got something you can sell. But you wouldn't have it with an eight millimeter."

So I was going to get me a sixteen millimeter until the guy gave me the price and then I changed my mind. And the price of the film. I didn't take any stills.

Dunning: You didn't take any?

Peterson: No. Except I have, like I said, maybe a couple hundred feet of movies, but it's fading very badly. That was about it. I don't know. I'll have to dig around and see if I can find some of the still photos that I took.

Dunning: That would be great.

Peterson: I don't know. One, there used to be a friend of mine that had some--I have some still photos here.

Dunning: Well, maybe at another time if you can unearth any of those, I would love to see them.

Peterson: There was a guy that went out on the boat that was a photographer and took some shots.

Dunning: And a whaler?

Peterson: No, he was just a photographer.

Dunning: Who was he photographing for?

Change_In_Equipment

Dunning: I want to ask you about the change in equipment. Did the technology change during the time you worked there?

Peterson: No. Same thing. In fact, I was shooting a gun I think that was made in 1921. It was an old muzzle loader. The other boats had breech loaders. I forget when they came out with the breech loader. This old muzzle loader I had was a good gun except you just had to go in the front of it. That was my gun. It was like my pool cue. I really knew it.

Dunning: You had to use that particular gun?

Peterson: Yes. I told you, with the other one I couldn't hit the broadside of a barn. But that one, well, I was just used to it. That thing finally wound up breaking the yoke in it just from fatigue, metal fatigue. It was lucky that it didn't get somebody killed.

I think I told you about that, about checking the glycerine end of the gun. Because if you shot that and it didn't have that glycerine in the gun it was like you took a huge hammer and hit it because bang, it would come back so hard. I think that's what happened with that one.

But the equipment that we used on the boat, they rigged the boats up that way and they never did change them, with the exception of using hydraulic motors for drive on the winches. Of course, they had radar when I went on there, but old radars. Bendix. Those things were so undependable that sometimes you wished you didn't have them because you would get depending on them, and all of a sudden, boom, they would go out on you.

Dunning: I was reading where it wasn't until '81 that cold harpoons or non-exploding harpoons were outlawed. Did you ever use those?

Peterson: No, we always used the explosive heads in them. They were talking at one time of having them with an electrical cord that was connected into the foregoer. Then when they hit them it would give them a shot of electricity to kill them. Electrocute them. I guess death is death. There's no way to make it very pretty or very humane. I guess there is a humane way, but I don't know.

That's why I told you I like to get kill shots, clean kill shots most of the time.

Closing of the Richmond Whaling Station

Dunning: When did you first become aware of the pending legislation to halt whaling?

Peterson: When did I--?

Dunning: When did you first learn about it? Did you know that the whaling station was going to be closing?

Peterson: No, it came as a complete surprise to us. In fact, we were working on the boats. We spend a little time in the wintertime. We would go down and work on the boat and the owner would pay us money then. Big deal. For working, which you never got the other way.

Anyway, we were working on the boats and all of the sudden here all these guys come running on the dock. We looked up and we wondered who are all these clowns coming down. First thing they had, the first one I recognized was Dennis Richmond from Channel 2.

Peterson: I recognized him and then I thought, "Well, I wonder what he's doing out here?"

And then here they come down from Walter Cronkite's program, national TV. Those guys were running over each other out there. Of course, the first thing they asked was, "What are you going to do now that they've stopped whaling?"

My favorite person, Maurice Stans, was the Secretary of Interior then, and Nixon's campaign manager. He thought to make a big splash about it he would stop the American whaler. You know, it would make front page material and it was a catching news item for one day. That was about all it lasted.

But anyway, I made the national news. They didn't say my name or anything. They just flashed my picture. People who had seen me the next day said, "Hey, I saw you on TV last night."

Dunning: And this was in '72? That's when the Endangered Species Act was passed.

Peterson: No, it was before that.

Dunning: Seventy-one, or--?

Peterson: Yes, '71, I think. Of course, he came out and said he was a big game hunter or something and he could understand what was--but it was all for naught. It didn't mean anything. I don't know if I told you or not that we were down to I think a hundred and sixty was our quota with three boats, which is very small. What they did was take and throw that hundred and sixty whales back into the allotment deal with the International Whaling Congress. The Japanese and Russians split it, both took it, so it didn't accomplish anything.

Peterson: The only thing it did was made us as an observing member, not an active member, so we lost, really, our voice in the International Whaling Commission. So they didn't really accomplish anything except for that one splash. It was a symbolic thing but it put a lot of guys out of work. With the other businesses that were related to the whaling there were maybe a couple hundred people out of work.

Dunning: What was your initial reaction?

Peterson: I was shocked. I thought, "Are you crazy? They're not going to stop whaling."

Of course, I thought that I would just keep on--maybe they did me a favor by stopping it. I thought they gotta be crazy, they can't do this. But they did it. They gave them a little reprieve, I think, for one year. I would be curious to know with the owners and the operators if they gave them any compensation for coming down and chopping them off like that, because the people that worked in it like me, we never got any compensation like severance pay or anything like that. We were out.

Dunning: But did you continue working in whaling for the next year? Was that part of the reprieve?

Peterson: Yes, they did, but in the meantime I found a job that was close by. I went to work for where I'm at now. Not very far away, just up the street.

Dunning: After you found out about the whaling legislation on that particular day that all the reporters came, when did you actually stop whaling?

Peterson: The next year.

Dunning: How did you feel when you knew that this was going to be the end of your whaling?

Peterson: Well, I kind of got an empty feeling. I was sitting there thinking it would go on forever. Not really, because that is why originally I went to work the first time for Dorwood. Because I can more or less feel this thing coming, the pressure coming, so it wasn't that much of a shock when they did come down.

But it was a shock the way they did it. We had absolutely no forewarning. Then there was a guy coming down and saying, "What are you going to do now that they cut you out?"

Dunning: Do you think the owners knew beforehand?

Peterson: I don't think so. I don't know if they did or not, but anyway they had a meeting afterwards, a hearing over in San Francisco, and they were there squawking. The owners were hollering and complaining about it but it didn't do any good, really. They were outnumbered.

Dunning: Did you know that it was a losing battle?

Peterson: Yes. I could tell. I went to one of the hearings. When they had people get up and talk I could see that we weren't making much of an impression on them. The one fellow that really got up and pleaded the case for our side the best was John Moore. He was the foreman down at the whaling plant. Ask him what they thought about just coming and chopping off the livelihoods for these people that were working out there. Of course, the people that were in the plant were mostly all black.

Dunning: In the rendering plant?

Peterson: Yes. They had this one Norwegian fellow I told you about who came down from Canada. He was in there, Torval. He was getting pretty old then. I think Torval was thinking about retiring anyway, because he finally went back to Canada, him and Anna, the wife.

Peterson: But John Moore is still working down there. He's working in the rendering plant. And his brother Robert is still there. Robert was a head flencher. And Little Joe, he's down there. And Willie is still down there. He's working for the rendering plant.

Dunning: So for the rendering plant there are still resources, and a number of people involved?

Peterson: Yes.

Dunning: But it must have cut the work down incredibly.

Peterson: Oh it did, yes. Of course, they went into picking up meat scraps. Their business is rendering. They started out in the rendering of just whaling, but then when the season got slack they started picking up meat scraps. They started rendering out. They would go to these fish houses and they would pick up the old carcasses after they had fileted the fish out and they started rendering that out. I'm glad they got rid of that; they were picking up cats and dogs and rendering them out. Yech, that was horrible. You talk about whaling, that was worse.

Dunning: Stray cats and dogs?

Peterson: No, the ones that they would put away at the pound.

Dunning: That would go for chicken feed, or--?

Peterson: They would render it out. I don't know. They threw it into one pile out there and that would stink.

##

Depletion_of_Whales

Dunning: Well, over the years since the Endangered Species Act was passed, have your feelings changed at all about whether it was good legislation or necessary legislation?

Peterson: I think that if it had applied to Russia and Japan. Because they were the people that were really depleting the whales. The Norwegians had gotten out of it quite a while ago. They used to be the leading country in whaling. They had gotten out quite a number of years before that. Some of their whalers had gone down to South Africa. In fact, I had a job offer to go over there.

Dunning: To South Africa?

Peterson: Yes. Down along the coast there as a gunner. This was a time when they kind of looked up to gunners. They thought gunners were something special, but they weren't really. If he had a knack to hit them it was okay. If you were talented in that direction.

Dunning: Were you ever tempted to go?

Peterson: No. This was another guy yakking so it probably didn't mean anything. Let's see. I got kind of sidetracked there, but as far as doing something to save the whales, I could see that the whales were getting depleted.

Russian_and_Japanese_Whaling_Ships

Peterson: But at the rate the Russians--I told you about Kenny's brother, how many he shot in a year's time. Kenny's

Peterson: brother was one of the top gunners in Japan. He himself shot a thousand whales. That's one boat. They had about seventy-five killer boats, so you can imagine the amount of whales they took in a year's time. That's just the Japanese. Multiply that by the Russians.

The sad part to me was that the whale really, with the factory ship operation, didn't have a chance. With the scanner I told you about they would get into the factory ship with two or three killer boats. We saw them just out here whaling. The Russian ships would get into a formation and make a sweep about a mile wide.

Dunning: You would see them out where?

Peterson: Out here.

Dunning: In the Farallones?

Peterson: No, out beyond that. They were staying outside of the limit. They would get into a bunch of whales and they would kill every last whale. They had them on the scanners and as soon as a killer boat would kill them they would flag them and take off and they would just go like that. And the factory ships would come along behind them and pick them up. With us we were fairly limited. When we got so many we had to stop and come in with them.

Dunning: You were really a small time operation?

Peterson: Oh, yes. We weren't even anything, a speck out there compared to those guys. Now I can imagine, like Kenny's brother over there, he was a highly respected man in Japan, you know, as gunner over there. He had his own home. He was a wealthy man, too. He was

Peterson: skipper of the boat, skipper and gunner. Now they're starting to cut back in Japan. I don't know about Russia. I haven't heard about Russia. Have you?

Dunning: No. The only thing I've heard about it is what's happened the last few days. [Chernobyl nuclear disaster]

Peterson: Isn't that something. If there's anything I would protest, I would go to the streets and protest against nuclear power.

Dunning: You can go on record as that. Yes, that's big stuff. It could wipe out the whole world.

Peterson: Yes. Someone was telling me on the news this morning there's two of them. They heard it may be two of them that have gone up over there.

Dunning: Whales are important for sure, but our conservation of human beings is pretty important.

Peterson: Do you ever watch these nature programs?

Dunning: I'm one of the one percent of the people in the United States that doesn't have a TV.

Peterson: You don't have one? My wife says, "Your whole life is ruined by TV." I'm an addict on it.

But I was watching this program about the elephants in Africa in this one particular area where they went in and started to protect them. The elephants raise Cain with the vegetation. They have stripped this one area. They've killed this whole forest. And they've also increased now to a point that they have to go in and kill them, where before they were protected. It's a sad thing to say, but they have to do it for their own good.

Peterson: Like I said, I was a very soft hearted killer. I didn't like to hunt deer. My brother hunted deer. I didn't like it. I couldn't shoot a deer. I went with him hunting ducks and I accidently shot a duck. I sat there and looked at the duck and said, "Why did I have to kill that poor innocent bird?" I was one of those kind of guys.

Respect for the Whales

Peterson: But yes, I'm glad it did end. I could see the whaling population going downhill. I figured that sooner or later they would have to do something if they were going to preserve the whales.

I have a lot of respect for the whales. They're a very beautiful animal, and powerful. I think I told you, like with one shot I would kill the equivalent to twenty elephants weightwise. Then in a lesser shot I would kill ten or fifteen in one shot, weightwise, with the equivalent weight of that many elephants. Whales are the biggest thing that ever lived on the face of the earth.

Dunning: Bigger than the dinosaurs.

Peterson: Oh, yes--of course, any time you see a picture of a dinosaur they're huge things sticking up there. But yes, that's it. I mean the size of them, the blue whale.

Dunning: This is kind of a fantasy question, but if the laws ever changed again, would you ever consider being a gunner?

Peterson: You mean if I was able to?

Dunning: If you were, yes.

Peterson: I don't know. I would have to think that one over.

Dunning: Do you think you'd try it again?

Peterson: I don't think so, really. I think I would be against it, really. Although, like I say, I liked it. I really did like it. Some of the killing I didn't like. I think I told you about killing with air, and the second shot deal where you had to really shoot them a lot of times.

I could get feeling sorry for the whales to see them struggling like that. They would struggle, man, to try and keep alive.

This one gunner, this little Earhart, the guys would be cussing this one whale because they couldn't get close to him, and he says, "Well, all they're trying to do is stay alive."

No, I don't think I would go back again. Maybe take a trip just to see them.

Dunning: I was going to ask you if you would be interested in going out to the Farallones. The Oakland Whale Center has offered a trip if you're interested. Now they're leaving out of Half Moon Bay, but I think beginning in June or late May they'll be closer to here. Would you be interested in that?

Peterson: My problem would be standing up on a boat now, with these braces on.

Dunning: How about if we bring a chair?

Peterson: Is it a pretty good sized boat? Have you been out on it?

Dunning: No, I haven't. I've never been. I don't know if I get seasick. The people from the Whale Center are interested in having a whaler go out. I don't know if you would like to be identified as a whaler out there. I don't know who else is going on this trip. But we could keep a low profile.

Peterson: I would wear my shades.

Dunning: It might be kind of interesting.

Peterson: Yes, I could--

Dunning: We'll keep it in mind.

Peterson: I couldn't see Half Moon Bay as going out on whale watching for gray whales. It's crazy. I told you about the place to leave from. The shortest distance is right there at Point Reyes because you just have to go around the corner and back.

Dunning: That's why I would like to wait until they're going out to the Farallones.

Peterson: You could be on the boat and you could be out seeing whales in fifteen, twenty minutes. But Half Moon Bay they've got to run quite a ways. Then by the time that they get down there they're kind of fanned out a little, too, where they're in there pretty well concentrated at Point Reyes. That's the grey whales.

Dunning: I'll find out some more about that and let you know. Maybe we can schedule an honorary trip.

Peterson: Now, are you a historian? Is it a history?

Dunning: Well, I'm doing a history of Richmond, a history of the Richmond waterfront particularly, but the Oakland Whale Center is extremely interested in the Richmond

Dunning: Whale Station, so I may be working a little with them. But my background is history.

Closing Remarks

Dunning: Do you have anything else you would like to add today, any closing remarks?

Peterson: No. I'm not that much of a deep thinker. We've covered it pretty good.

Dunning: We've covered a lot of ground beginning with your fishing story and probably there's lots of other details that we haven't covered, but we've done as well as we can for now. But I wanted to tell you if at a later time any stories come to your mind that you think should be recorded let me know, because I live in the neighborhood and it's easy for me to come down and tape it. It is pretty important to get it down. Do you have any special ambitions now, things you would like to do or places you would like to go?

Peterson: Being that I am mellowing out in the latter part of my life, no. I love it around here in the Bay Area. I don't really have that much desire to travel any other place. I've never had any desire to go back east. That's strange, isn't it? Foreign countries I used to want to see when I was younger. I always thought Hawaii, that was the place. Tahiti. But now it's all so commercialized. In fact, my wife's brother lives in Hawaii and we were supposed to go there and I said, "You go over. I don't really care whether I go over or not."

So I'll probably just spend the rest of my time around here. My remaining years.

Dunning: You have a lot of years to come.

Peterson: That's sounds like my wife who says, "Oh, you're always talking about you're going to die tomorrow."

Dunning: It sounds like you're a hundred years, but you're not.

Peterson: But as far as my doing anything, I'm getting pretty close to retiring now. From my knees up, I'm in pretty good shape. It's from here down that I'm in bad shape.

Dunning: Was that a result of an accident, or--?

Peterson: I just got worn out.

Dunning: You were on your feet a lot.

Peterson: I think I told you I have this problem with joints?

Dunning: Yes.

Peterson: It's a hereditary deal, I think, and it just finally caught up with me. I'm just lucky it's at that part of my body. Regardless of how bad you are, you can always see somebody that's a lot worse off than you are. At least I can get around and work without too much trouble. I think I told you they wanted to operate on my ankles, but I said, "No, no."

Dunning: Do you still feel an affinity with the sea?

Peterson: Kind of, but I haven't been out. That's a strange thing, I haven't been out there for a long while. I haven't been out since I quit.

Dunning: So that's '72.

Peterson: Yes. I haven't. I went out a couple of times. We used to go out all the time. I would say, "Well, where should we go?"

"Let's go up to Point Reyes, or up to Bodega Bay, or down to Half Moon Bay or someplace like that."

So finally the kids rebelled and said, "No more going out to the ocean. Let's go towards the mountains and do it that way." So we just switched around and went in the opposite direction.

I haven't been out there for a long while. I just was out to look at it, I think last winter.

Dunning: But not actually out on a boat?

Peterson: No. Oh, I've been on a ferry, the Larkspur ferry.

Dunning: Quite different.

Peterson: Yes. When you get outside of Angel Island you get into the trough a little there and get a little rocking. That's about the extent of it.

Well, let's see, I tried to talk my kids into buying me a sailboat. I've never sailed. But of course, Mark is working in a sail loft, and Terri, I think I told you she was working there too.

Dunning: They both are working for the sail loft?

Peterson: Yes. So I could probably get my sails at a fairly good rate, a reasonable rate.

But I never sailed. That's crazy. I've never been on a sailing boat and they tell me it's great. The old sailors used to look down their noses at them motorboats, called them smokers. Being from back in Boston you should know all about that then.

Dunning: I can't get into it on tape, but my heritage is in sailing. When my mother married my father, who was a traveling salesman, her sailing days were over. But all my relatives, they're quite the big sailors and have sailed in the American Cup. My grandfather designed sailboats.

Peterson: He did?

Dunning: I haven't been on a sailboat probably since I was eight, but this Sunday I'm going out sailing in the bay for the first time.

Peterson: Is it a very big boat?

Dunning: I think it's thirty-five foot. It's actually a boat builder that I'm going out with from Richmond. I'm hoping I don't get seasick. But I'm always watching the boats go by so it will be neat to be out there.

Peterson: Yes, on opening day the sailboats go up to Vallejo and back. I usually go out to work because it's a great place to watch them go by because they come right in and hug the docks. You can stand up and look down and talk to them on the boats as they're going by on Saturday, and they come back on Sunday. I don't know what happens up there Saturday night.

Dunning: Party.

Peterson: Whoop-te-do.

Dunning: Well, we probably both should eat lunch. Thank you very much, and I'll let you know about the whaling trip. Also if you can hunt up any old photographs that would be terrific. I would be real interested in seeing your film, too.

Peterson: Okay. I'll get it out and run through it, and see what it looks like. I haven't edited it.

Dunning: Thank you very much.

Peterson: You're quite welcome. I'll give you a buzz. I'll get out the films and go through them and you come over and we'll look at them.

Dunning: See the real story.

Peterson: See me in action. I'll see if I can get some of those still photographs for you. I think of all the stories that we've covered. Of course, I'll have to go back and listen to this and see.

Dunning: Me too, because it has been a couple of weeks since our last meeting so I didn't really have a chance to listen to the last two hours. But I think we've covered different things.

Peterson: Any continuity about the whole thing?

Dunning: I hope so. I think it will be okay.

Peterson: You're doing this in conjunction with what?

Dunning: With the Regional Oral History Office, which is part of the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley. I'm working in affiliation with them.

Peterson: Oh, for them. You were a history major?

Dunning: History and psychology.

Peterson: And psychology, oh.

Dunning: Mostly this is a field where you learn by doing it. You just do it.

Transcriber: David Pollock
Final Typist: Shannon Page

APPENDICES

Oakland Tribune
October 12, 1960

More Adventure May Be Only Hope for Whalers

By JIM DOUTHIT

RICHMOND Oct 12 — "Adventurous sailing job wanted."

That's usually the summer vacation goal of a college boy, someone without experience

But nobody can say Capt C. A Hunter and his Point San Pablo sailors are lacking in experience . . certainly not from the standpoint of adventure And adventurous sailing of other type during the off season months may be the only salvation of the whaling industry.

Their regular trade is whaling a calling synonymous with danger and thrills

Once one of the nation's leading maritime industries American whaling has declined until today there are but five boats and some 75 men actively hunting the globe's largest living animals These operate out of two Richmond whaling stations

GREAT DAYS OVER

The great days of whaling from New England ports ended when the development of petroleum curtailed the demand for whale oil and steel replaced whalebone in women's corsets

The last vestige of whaling in the U S is located in weathered wooden warehouses at Point San Pablo surrounded by huge "tank farms" and refineries of the industry which supplanted it

Hunter's two killer boats the Dennis Gayle and the Allen Cody plus three other similar vessels of the tiny whale fleet are licensed to hunt whales for a six month season, generally from May 1 to Nov. 1 They may be idle the rest of the year unless other jobs come up.

OUTSIDE GATE

They usually range the seas outside the Golden Gate from Monterey to Point Arena and as much as 100 miles off shore They tow their huge catches, inflated with air to keep them afloat, to loading ramps of the Del Monte and Golden Gate fishing companies

"We'll probably total about 70 whales for each boat this year," Hunter said. "They average 50 feet in length and 50 tons each.

"Whales are elusive as the devil They seem to recognize our boats maybe by the guns up front."

His vessels are former military, inter-island cargo craft, each 103 feet in length

3½-INCH GUN

They derive their lethal character from single 3½-inch guns in the bows which fire harpoon-tipped 165-pound projectiles about 100 yards. Each harpoon is connected with 4,000 feet of heavy nylon line and steel cable. The point, or warhead, contains a blackpowder charge designed to go off inside the whale

Lookouts still sound the traditional cry of "blows" when the snow white spout of the huge sea beast is sighted in the distance It's up to the skipper to bring the harpooner and his gun within range.

"I like to shoot about 100 feet from the whale," said gunner Erhardt (Eric) Nellsen, who's been killing whales from the Dennis Gayle since 1954.

"Eric shoots for the heart or lung cavity and kills outright about half the time," his skipper said. "Although that's a pretty big target—the heart weighs maybe 400 pounds—it's not easy to hit from a pitching deck."

"My stomach still feels like a bowl of butterflies and my knees like jellyfish every time I shoot at a Blue whale, the biggest of them all," Nellsen said "We've gone into dry dock twice after those big ones smacked the boat."

If the warhead explosion doesn't kill the beast, then the whole crew has to play it like a giant, fighting trout The strongest line is no match for the behemoth of the deep

The cook reels in with an electric winch The deck hand applies a brake to the cable The skipper and engineer maneuver the killer boat to hold the whale until it dies.

"A Blue whale towed us around for 16 hours once and some of them tow us as fast as 10 miles an hour," the gunner said. "Our best kill was two whales in 41 minutes, from sighting to tie-up alongside the boat."

42 YEARS AT SEA

The gunner hasn't always come off unscathed from his deadly deep-water hunts. He lost two fingers of his right hand in June when a warhead exploded as he removed the harpoon from a whale he'd killed despite the bomb failure.

Nellsen, who lives at 2009 Powell St, San Pablo, has spent the last 42 of his 54 years at sea. He claims his son, Paul, 9, is going to follow him as a whaler.

But the industry may not wait for Paul to grow up.

"Whaling's a gamble every year," said John Caito, who with his brother, Jack, manage the Del Monte plant. "It's only a modest business here and it depends upon fluctuating worldwide meal and oil prices, weather and elusive animals.

"We're competing with cheap foreign labor and may not make it next year."

Richmond Independent
March 2, 1971

Whaling Ban Closes Richmond Station

By JOHN ADAMS

Richmond became the focus of international attention today, with word of Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans' action banning the taking of whales anywhere in the United States.

Stans' action left the owner of the last whaling station anywhere in Yankee confines, the one here in Richmond, "flabbergasted."

The federal action, which owner John Caito was informed of last night by way of newsmen, lays to rest 300 years of tradition and U.S. seamanship. There will be no more Ishmaels, no more Ahabs, no men to carry on the traditions of New Bedford or Nantucket.

And in the words of cousin Chuck Caito, manager of the Richmond whaling station, "this will have no effect on the whale population. The largest whalers in the world are the Russians and Japanese, and this won't affect them at all."

His cousin, owner John, stated flatly, "If the government wants us out of business, let them buy us out." He said the company has $1.5 million invested in both ships and the Richmond Del Monte plant, not to be confused with the cannery of the same name.

The firm usually employs 40 persons at its "factory" and on it's three 100-foot ships, converted from Navy auxiliary craft. The ships operate up to a 100-mile radius of San Francisco Bay, and Caito maintains that converting them for any other purpose is unfeasible.

"The crews are on the boats now, painting and cleaning them," he sighed. But in the tradition of the sea fired back in the next sentence, "I'm going to talk to my attorney . . . we aren't going down without a fight."

The Del Monte quota of whales established at an international convention of whalers early this year was 42 mammoth finbacks, 75 sperm whales and 52 sei whales. These will now be saved.

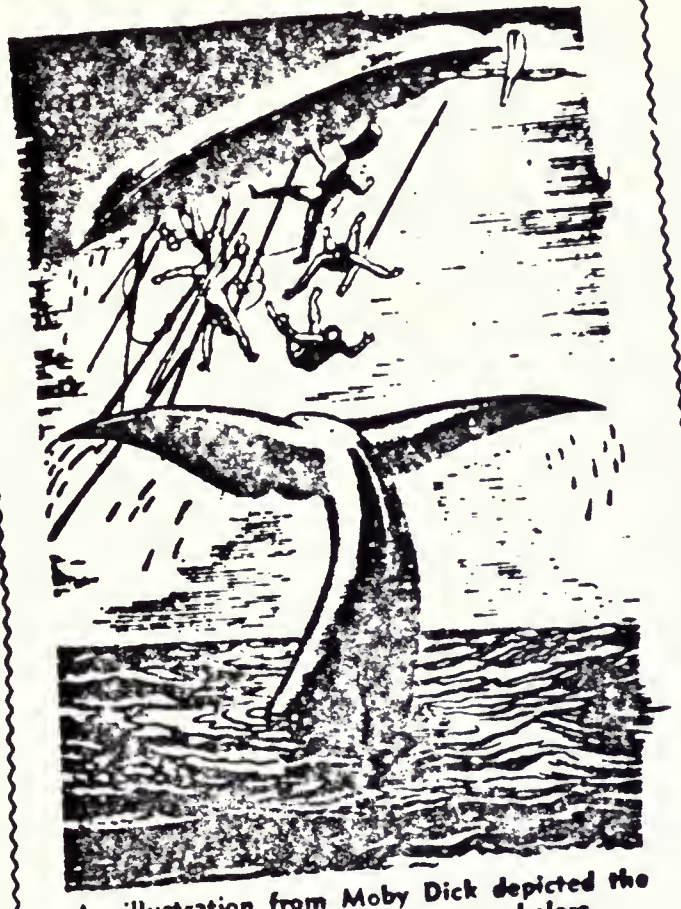
But the U.S. will continue to import whale products from foreign nations, such as Japan, despite the local bans.

Whale products are used by America for food for mink, dogs and cats, while blubber and other parts are rendered for oil and poultry meal.

Chuck Caito was left waiting this morning for official notice that he no longer had a license. He mused during his grim vigil, on fifteen years as a whaler.

Any appeal by America's last whaler, will have to be aimed at the same Maurice Stans who banned the operation yesterday. The situation looked grim to Chuck and John Caito in the early morning dawn, as they and the rest of America prepared to bid farewell to the traditions of old Nantucket.

San Francisco Chronicle
March 2, 1971



An illustration from Moby Dick depicted the danger faced by 19th century whalers.

U.S. Orders an End to Whaling

United Press

Washington

The government wrote the obituary yesterday for commerical whaling, one of the Nation's oldest and most colorful industries.

Fishermen operating from U.S. ports no longer will be allowed to kill finback, sei and sperm whales, the only species now hunted in or near U.S. waters.

Commerce Secretary Maurice H. Stans, an avid big game hunter and veteran of numerous African safaris, canceled licenses for commercial hunting of the three whale species on the list of

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rare and endangered animals.

Herman Melville wouldn't have recognized the industry he made famous in Moby Dick. Only one company was still engaged in commercial whaling and the activity was only a sideline for that firm.

That lone company is Del Monte Fishing Co., which operates out of Richmond, Calif.

American whaling began about 300 years ago from ports along the New England coast and reached its peak in the first half of the Nineteenth Century when whale oil lamps lit the new Nation.

But the industry has been on the decline since the beginning of the Twentieth Century. Whale oil is now used for limited machinery lubrication and whale meat goes into cat food.

Former Interior Secretary Walter J. Hickel last year placed the three species of whales, along with five even rarer species — bowhead, blue, humpback, white and gray — on the list of endangered animals.

Hickel's action barred importation of those whales but did not prohibit domestic hunting of them. The new rule halts even the hunting.

The United States will continue to import whale products from other species, mostly from Japan.

San Francisco Chronicle
March 2, 1971

Local Whaler's Angry Reaction

By Jackson Rannells

The owner of the Nation's last whaling station — Richmond-based Del Monte Fishing Co.—fought to control his anger last night.

"If the Government wants us out of the business, let them buy us out," snapped John Caito.

"I'm flabbergasted. We had no notice this was being considered." Caito added in reaction to a government order terminating his license.

He said the company has a $1.5 million investment in ships and its plant at Point San Pablo. He planned to employ 40 persons for the eight-month season, beginning on April 1.

QUOTA

Del Monte had a 1971 quota set by an international convention of 42 of the mammoth finbacks and 75 and 52, respectively, of the smaller sperm and sea whales.

Ironically, Caito said the company — not linked with the Del Monte Food Corporation — couldn't even bag that limit last year because of bad weather.

Caito, who resides in Corte Madera, entered whaling in 1956. His family-owned company has been the sole practitioner of the ancient craft in the United States since 1967.

It uses three 103-foot former Navy auxiliary patrol craft — each with five-man crews — to forage in a 100-mile radius from San Francisco Bay.

Harpoons are fired from 90-millimeter cannons.

"If you don't get a direct hit, those babies will still tow you around," Caito said. The finbacks range up to 72 tons, he said.

The carcasses are stripped at the Richmond plant. Meat goes into food for mink, dogs and cats.

The blubber and other parts are rendered into oil and meal for poultry feed at another Caito enterprise, Pacific Rendering Company here.

Caito claimed—and newspaper clippings verify—that Del Monte also provides something of a public service here.

"We've taken a lot of whales from off the beaches," he said.

CONVERT

He said it isn't feasible to convert the plant or the ships for other marine enterprises.

"The crews are on the boats now, painting and cleaning them," the dismayed whaler said. "I'm going to talk to my attorney tomorrow. We aren't going down without a fight."

Any appeal will be considered by the same man who issued the order—Commerce Secretary Maurice H. Stans.

Which may be the name of Caito's white whale.

Ban on Whaling Stuns Coast Company

POINT SAN PABLO, Calif., March 6—The last small remnant of America's whaling industry is reluctant to muzzle its harpoon guns on the killer boats and write "finis" to the 300-year history of adventure on the seas.

Officials of the Del Monte Fishing Company were stunned this week when Secretary of Commerce Maurice H. Stans announced that all commercial whaling by the United States would be prohibited.

Mr. Stans said the step was being taken to protect the remaining whales from being made extinct by commercial whalers.

Captain G. A. Hunter's four whale-hunting vessels, the Dennis Gayle, Allen Cody, Pacific Raider and Donna Mae, were being painted and readied for their first foray of the season into the Pacific.

Captain Hunter is especially saddened because he thinks the order ma[illegible]s neither ecological sense nor economic sense as long as the Russians and Japanese continue large-scale whaling operations.

"We feel it will actually upset the ecology," Captain Hunter said, explaining that whales eat vast quantities of shrimp and other small sea life which are also the food supply of salmon and other fish.

"There are a lot of whales feeding on the continental shelf of the West Coast," he said. "If we let them grow in numbers they will cut down the supply of food for those other commercial fish."

A 22-year whaling veteran, Captain Hunter is also hurt because he feels "most people think we are doing this for the sport of it, for adventure, like big game hunters.

"It's not like hunting elephants for sport," he says. "It's a job and our way of making a living."

Although whale oil no longer lights the lamps of the country, although it is no longer used in soap-making, and whalebone corsets are now relics, "there is a ready market for every bit of the whale," according to Captain Hunter.

"The meat goes into pet and livestock food. The oil is used in cattle feed and in industrial hydraulics and steel tempering. The meal (bony parts) go into poultry food," he said.

The conservation enthusiasts, whom he blames for the ban "don't really know what they are talking about," says the whaling skipper.

"They don't want to kill whales," he said. "Maybe it's bad to kill anything, but we kill cattle, we kill horses, and the Russians and Japanese will continue killing whales. It's so silly to put us out of business when we are such a small operation in comparison."

Captain Hunter said his fleet had killed a total of 150 whales last year, passing up the chance to take any of the species such as the gray whale, thought to be endangered.

The local boats ranged as far as 150 miles from this small San Francisco Bay port. When the traditional "thar she blows" cry rang out, the five-man crew of the killer boat scurried to the deck to track the whale, fire the harpoon gun and then tow the carcass back to a battered wooden shed where it was butchered.

The American whaling industry, which employed 40,000 persons in 1846, dwindled to almost nothing many years ago, and now Delmonte is the only United States whaler in the business. "It was not economically attractive enough for large companies," says Charles and now Del monte is the only are a small operation and can make a profit."

Mr. Catto says he is "not quite sure" what he will do about the ban. He said the operation here involved an investment of more than $1-million. He has not yet received formal notice that all whaling is banned, and he will have his lawyer look into the possibility of an exception for his business.

"We are not quitting without a fight," he said. Only a month ago we were told the season was 'go' for us." The International Whaling Convention has assigned Del Monte a quota of 169 whales for 1971.

The local whalers have not taken any of the huge 90-foot, 250 ton blue whales or several other species for some years. Their largest target has been the finback, which in its 20-year life span gets up to 60 tons.

New York Times
March 7, 1971

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
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WASHINGTON, D.C. 20230

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
MONDAY, APRIL 19, 1971

SECRETARY STANS REAFFIRMS DECISION TO HALT WHALING

Secretary of Commerce Maurice H. Stans today reaffirmed his decision to halt whaling from the United States, and fixed a final termination date of December 31, 1971 for such activities. This date conforms to the action of the Secretary of the Interior under the Endangered Species Act, whereby he terminated importation of whale products after the end of the year.

At the same time, Secretary Stans said "As Secretary of Commerce, I will do everything possible to soften the impact of this decision on the Nation's one remaining whaling company and its employees. I am directing agencies within the Department of Commerce, specifically the Economic Development Administration and the National Marine Fisheries Service, to see what can be done to alleviate hardships which may result from this action."

On March 1, 1971, Secretary Stans announced his intention to ban the taking of all whales on the Endangered Species List of the Department of the Interior. At that time, he directed the NMFS to publish a proposal in the Federal Register terminating the commercial hunting of such endangered species. A public hearing was then held in San Francisco, March 29, at which the affected whaler, Del Monte Company, Richmond, California and other interested parties were heard. Today's action followed.

Whales on the Endangered Species List include sei, finback and sperm whales--the only species sought by U. S. whalers--plus bowhead, blue, humpback, right and gray whales.

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By Judith K. Dunning

Editor's Note: For many years, the Whale Center has sought to preserve and present the history of whaling in the Pacific Ocean to the public. This history is a part of our heritage and a guide to where we might plan for the future relations of whales and people. Recently, the Whale Center has worked with Judith Dunning, an oral historian with the University of California at Berkeley, in developing a plan for oral histories of the whaling men of the last whaling station in the United States, and oral histories of the leaders of the "save-the-whales" movement that has been so successful in stopping the slaughter of whales. The Whale Center is seeking funding to develop this project. Ms. Dunning has provided the following interview from her Richmond project for the Whale Center Newsletter. Her Richmond, California project is funded in part by a grant from the California Council for the Humanities.

Mr. Pratt Peterson, raised on a farm in Utah, came to California with a friend in the early 1940s at age 19, where he found work on a small fishing boat. It was the beginning of a lifetime at sea. Mr. Peterson has been on salmon trawlers in Alaska, drag boats in Mexico, has fished off of Southern California, the Northern Coast, and worked the last season of sardines in Monterey Bay. In 1958 he came to the Richmond Whaling Station, site of the last whaling operation in the United States, where he worked until it closed in 1972. The following are excerpts from a forthcoming oral history volume in the series, "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond California, 1910-1986," conducted by J.K. Dunning, to be released Fall 1987 by the Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

What were some of the best parts of being a whaler?

It was exciting. Like I say, everything else paled, really, compared to that. I told you about all those whales that were out in front of you. You really have to experience it. . . . it was nothing that was scheduled. Your whole life was determined by the weather and the whales. That was it. That was why it was so hard for me to go back to work for eight hours a day. My life was freer before. I never made a lot of money at it. People always said that I had my hobby or avocation. . . . I was enjoying my retirement years early. But that's what I really liked about the whaling. It was a lot freer.

Of course, anyplace you would go you were talking shop all the time. People asked, "Well, Pete, how are you doing?" And I would give them two or three whaling stories just as an opening.

I would like to hear about your daily schedule, everything you remember from the time you left the dock at the whaling station.

It was sort of a ritual. Each night you would listen to the weather report to come on at nine o'clock. I used to have an old Zenith radio that had the coast guard band on it. So we would listen to see how the weather was outside. If it seemed fairly good then we would usually leave around ten or eleven o'clock. We would be out around the Farallons at daybreak. We would leave and go through Raccoon Straits and out.

I'm real curious as to how the crew got along on board the whaling vessel, since sometimes you'd be at sea for eight days at a stretch.

Some of them didn't. Now, there was the mainstay. The guys that had been with it most of the time. We had a lot of other guys coming in. They would hear about it. Of course, to them it was a romantic thing, *Moby Dick* and all that. A lot of them would get as far as the Golden Gate Bridge and get into a little swell and they would get deathly sick. That would be the end of the romance.

. . . I was thinking about it the other day, and say out of a hundred and thirty million people in the country, if you could get maybe ten American whalers you would be lucky. Out of the ten, maybe you would have four or five that shot. So it's really a rare breed.

When you were in the crow's nest trying to sight the whales, were there any signs that they might be in the area?

On an ocean, if when it's dead there are no porpoise around and no birds working, then you usually don't run into whales. We would go out about eight hours west of Point Reyes. The ocean would be dead. You wouldn't see anything, and all of a sudden the seabirds would start. Life would show on the ocean, and then the whales. The birds were feeding, and the whales were looking for feed too, so it was a good indication.

The porpoise like to play around the whales. Once, it was in between the Farallons and Half Moon Bay, we spotted two humpies. These bottle-nosed porpoise would follow them just like hunting dogs. The whales would be underneath but the porpoise would go this way, and the porpoise go that way, so you just got behind the porpoise. When the whale was getting ready to break the surface, then the porpoise would really get all excited. You almost knew when the whale was going to come up.

Could you talk about some of the different species of whales and how you would sight them.

You could start with sperm whales. Sperms are very easy because they're down so long. They'll stay down for an hour. The most I've seen is maybe an hour and 20 minutes. When they come back to the surface they have to recharge their blood system. So they'll just lay there and blow and blow and blow. You never approach them from the side because if they see you then they'll go down... You've got to come up behind them. Usually they just lay there. You can get really close to them.

Then humpbacks, they're the smartest of the whales. They'll drive you crazy trying to chase them. They will double back under the boat. Well, that's why they call them the humpie, because they hump like that when they go down. And they vary from maybe eight, six, five minutes, depending if you're chasing them. Of course, I just got onto the latter part of the humpbacks.

The finbacks will stay up a little longer. He'll maybe make three or four blows and stay down the same amount as a humpie. But if you overrun them, then that can spook them awfully easy, and they start going this way, that way, behind you.

Of course, the blue whales were the biggest things that ever lived on the face of the earth. Shooting one of them is like shooting 20 elephants in one shot, because they weigh up to a hundred and ten tons. But they're almost awesome, they're that huge. They will blow, and they have a very high blow. They will stay down maybe 15 minutes, and then they come up and they'll blow three or four times.

The reason they call them blue whales is because most of the time they're in blue water. They're actually a grey color. But when they get underneath the water, then they appear to be blue.

....They had almost killed them off when I got into whaling. There is a herd of blues down around this hemisphere that the Russians and Japanese didn't know about. There were about two hundred. Otherwise, they would have wiped them out, too. See, I think the last year that the Japanese and Russians were whaling in the Antarctic, with all their killer boats, they had them down to about five blue whales. Essentially, they had the blue whales wiped out. But like I say, they didn't know about this bunch up here. So I hope the blue whales come back. They probably will.

Well, over the years since the Endangered Species Act was passed, have your feelings changed at all about whether it was a good legislation or a necessary legislation?

I think that if it all applied to Russia and Japan, yes. Because they were the people that were really depleting the whales. The Norwegians had gotten out of it quite awhile ago. They used to be the leading country in whaling.... The sad part to me was that with the factory ship operation, the whale didn't have a chance. They would get into a bunch of whales and they would kill every last whale. They had them on the scanners.

With us, we were fairly limited. When we got so many, we had to stop and come in with them. We weren't even anything, just a speck out there compared to those guys.

How did you feel when you knew this was going to be the end of your whaling career?

Well, I kind of got an empty feeling. But it was a shock the way they did it. We had absolutely no forewarning.... There was a truck driver the other night—I was loading down at work and he was asking about the whaling station. Naturally, we got into the whaling part of it, and he said, "That was terrible what they done, terrible... How could you do that?"

I said, "Well, I thought it was a job at the time. I was just going out and doing a day's work." Now I think about how it was.... There were very few films about whales then. Now they're doing lots of films about whales and the divers going down and seeing them. They've studies them a little and know what a gentle animal they are.

I could see the whaling population going downhill out there. I figured that sooner or later they would have to do something if they were going to preserve the whales. I have a lot of respect for the whales. They're a very beautiful animal and powerful... Whales are the biggest thing that ever lived on the face of the earth.

Fire Destroys Former Whaling Station in Richmond

By Sharon McCormick
Chronicle East Bay Bureau

The odor of charred wood mixed with the stench of rendered fish scraps over Point San Pablo in Richmond yesterday as fire crews lobbed water on the blackened remains of what was once the nation's last active whaling station.

A spectacular waterfront fire broke out shortly before 9 p.m. Tuesday, destroying the 60-year-old three-story structure where whaling ships once unloaded their catch to be processed into "Moby Dick 100 Percent Whale Meat."

Nothing but blackened timbers remained of the condemned and empty building, which was closed as a whaling station in 1971 by the federal government at the prodding of environmentalists. The fire doused tentative plans to make the former station into a whaling museum, according to Richmond Fire Department Battalion Chief James Fajardo.

Fire crews from Richmond and neighboring communities joined with fire boats from San Francisco Fire Department and the U.S. Coast Guard to battle the stubborn blaze, which was fed by creosote-soaked piers. Crews had difficulty reaching the fire as it burned across the piers to the waterline.

The cause of the fire was under investigation and there was no estimate of the damage.

David Burgess, 34, who worked at a nearby fish company, called 911 when he discovered the structure burning Tuesday. He speculated that transients may have started the fire.

The last three U.S. whaling ships were former Navy patrol craft that operated out of the Richmond station. The whalers were docked when U.S. Secretary of Commerce Maurice Stans, bowing to public pressure, issued a ban aimed at protecting whales from commercial hunting in 1971.

The bulk of the catch of sperms, finbacks and seis hunted by whalers owned by Del Monte Fishery Co. was used for poultry and cattle feed. Other uses included pet food and oil, which was prized as a specialty lubricant for fine machinery.

San Francisco Chronicle, 24 August 1989

Judith K. Dunning

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Specialty in community and labor history.
Project Director, "On the Waterfront: An Oral History of Richmond, California."

Previous oral history projects: Three Generations of Italian Women in Boston's North End; World War I and II shipyard workers at the Charlestown Navy Yard, Boston; and Textile mill workers in Lowell, Massachusetts.

Photography exhibitions: "Lowell: A Community of Workers," Lowell, MA 1981-1984 (travelling).
Fishermen by Trade: On San Francisco Bay with the Ghio Brothers" Richmond Museum, 1988.

Play: "Boomtown" based on the oral histories of shipyard workers, produced by San Francisco Tale Spinners Theater, 1989.

Member Richmond Arts Commission, 1988-1990.

Currently adapting Richmond community oral histories into large print books for California adult literacy programs.