

HISTORY

Portuguese Bend thrived as a whaling station

By **Dennis Plotrowski**
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From the Native Americans who inhabited the area for thousands of years to smugglers who thrived in the area during the Spanish, Mexican and Prohibition eras, Portuguese Bend has a storied history.

The name was derived from the Portuguese whale hunters from the Azores who operated in the area intermittently during the 1860s to the 1880s. Azorean men were known as competent and hard workers who helped establish California's first shore whaling company in Monterey in the early 1850s.

Whale stations with "try-works" (large kettles for rendering whale blubber) were established along the California coast. Small boats operating from these ocean-front headquarters pursued migrating whales as far as 10 miles out from shore.

The Portuguese Bend whalers primarily sought

gray whales. Gray whale oil, the most common along the coast, was used for such things as rope making and leather working.

Gray whale hunting was a perilous occupation. Whalers nicknamed these whales "devil-fish" due to their ferocious nature and penchant for charging small boats.

One whaler compared his prior time with the famous New Bedford, Massachusetts whaling fleet to whaling off California: "Whaling is a dangerous business, but it's just nothing compared to this California gray."

He said the crew at Portuguese Bend were "afraid of the whales, but they kept at the business until so many things got smashed that (it) didn't pay." There were many graves along the coast of those who had been killed during whale hunts.

In 1869, one of the first crews stationed at Portuguese Bend was named the "John Brown Whaling Company." They caught two gray whales in the first weeks of March 1869.

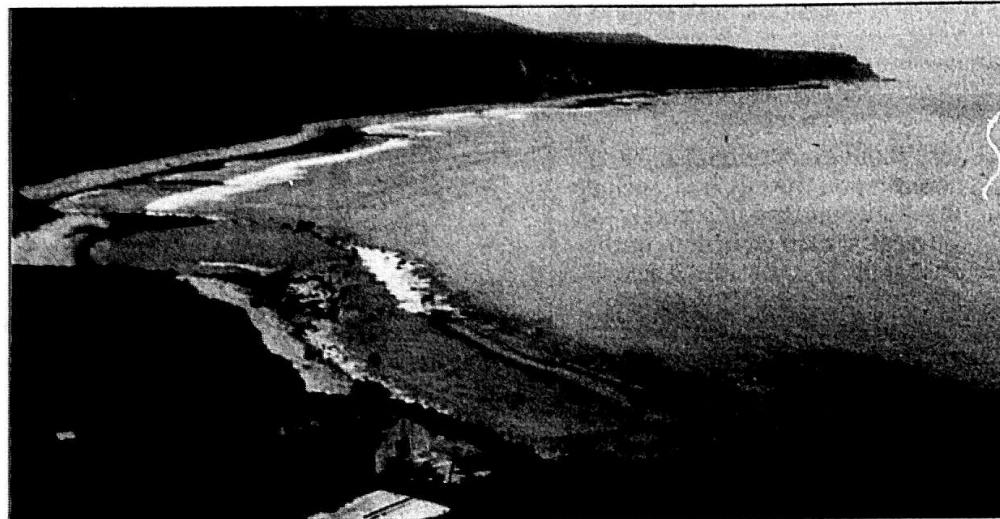


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This 1915 image of the Portuguese Bend whaling station appears in F.A. Carpenter's "Weather Journal" on pg. 204.

In November 1874, eighteen other whalers arrived in Wilmington with plans to operate near Portuguese Bend. According to the Wilmington Enterprise newspaper, they considered the Bend area one of the finest whaling points on the coast in the early 1870s.

By the end of their whaling season in April 1875, the crew had caught twenty-one

"monsters of the deep" that yielded 700 barrels of oil. From 1874-1877, 2,166 barrels of whale oil were taken.

Whalers at Portuguese Bend had much success in 1883. They harpooned and caught thirty-five whales that rendered 600 barrels of oil. Each barrel contained sixty gallons, and they earned seventy-five cents per gallon.

The last known whale hunts off Portuguese Bend occurred in the first months of 1885. Thirty men manned six whaleboats in addition to yawls and rowboats. They ended up catching nine whales.

Lack of wood and potable water were drawbacks at Portuguese Bend. By the mid 1880s, whales were scarce along the coast. Shore

whaling was thus no longer lucrative and whalers abandoned Portuguese Bend and other seaside stations.

Portuguese Bend wouldn't stay quiet for long. With the 1887 real estate boom in Los Angeles, a syndicate of businessmen and engineers descended upon Portuguese Bend determined to turn it into a harbor.

The group inspected the seascape for hours. J.K. Tuffree, one of the pioneers of Orange County, and his syndicate laid out plans for wharves and two railroad lines and a steamship line to stop at the new port.

The new harbor would have been called "Carolina Harbor" or "Port Carolina," named after Tuffree's wife.

However, the short-lived real estate boom soon ended, along with the grandiose plans for the new harbor, and Portuguese Bend would go on as is.

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