

WHALING ON TEXADA

The frequent sightings of humpback whales and other cetaceans around the island this summer bring to mind Texada's own whaling history. Very little information has survived, however.

Huge "black kettles" seen on the beach at Blubber Bay by Texada's first homesteader, John Edwards (1847-1929), were evidence of a small local industry. Whales would be harpooned, lanced, then towed to Blubber Bay and hauled by block and tackle onshore for "trying out". Strips of blubber would be cut off ("flensed") and boiled in the "try pots" to extract the oil.

The product was stored for shipping in 55-gallon wooden barrels and was used in lamps, lubricants, soap and even margarine!

It seems that whale carcasses were often "anchored" in Blubber Bay until there were enough to tow to a larger processing plant - either across to Whaletown on Cortes Island or to Whaling Station Bay on Hornby Island. Elijah Fader was said to be the last Texada whaler to cut up whales in Blubber Bay (1890) until he went broke.

The adoption of steam-powered boats and explosive harpoon heads spelled a quick end to whaling in the Strait of Georgia as the whales soon disappeared. Sun-bleached bones were sometimes found on nearby beaches. (The museum has a vertebra on display) These and the "kettles" remained as the only evidence of the past industry.

Whale sightings became rarer in succeeding years. In 1922 the beaching of a humpback on the Gillies Bay sand flats was an occasion for a first-hand science lesson. Teacher Miss Fee brought her Upper Gillies Bay District School pupils down from the "Snoose Valley" farm settlements to view the whale (see photo). One family obtained whale oil and used it to make soap whose odour unfortunately caused some degree of social isolation.

Unlike industrial times when the "worth" of a whale was measured in oil production, today the fascination and simple joy experienced by everyone at unexpected sightings make them priceless.

