

WHALING AT PORT HOBRON:  
CONNECTING TOTAL CATCHES WITH PRODUCTION

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## Introduction

In 1964, Fred Ogden took a walk through what remained of Kodiak Island's only modern, shore-based whaling station, Port Hobron. As he reached into the rafters of one of the dilapidated buildings, he discovered the American Pacific Whaling Co. Weekly Manufacturing Log. The Log was well preserved given the circumstances in which it sat for 27 years. The Ogden family presented the Log to the Baranov Museum for proper preservation in 1976. It was accessioned into the museum's collection in 2000.

Less than a dozen whaling stations operated throughout Alaska and British Columbia in the 1900s (Bower and Fassett 1914, Kellogg 1931, Kirchoff 1984). The American Pacific Whaling Company established the only modern, land-based whaling station on Kodiak Island in 1926 at Port Hobron, on Sitkalidak Island. Whaling operations took place predominantly off the southeastern shores of Kodiak and Afognak Islands with no evidence of whaling in the Shelikof Strait (Reeves *et al.* 1985).

There were three principal whaling vessels operating out of Port Hobron from 1926-1937: the Moran, the Aberdeen and the Tanginak. Each had a large, bomb-loaded harpoon mounted to its bow. Once a whale was killed, it was pumped full of air and marked with a flag so that the crew was able to continue hunting for the rest of the day. Whales had to be processed within about 24 h in order to ensure a high grade of oil. This time constraint restricted whaling activity to a radius of approximately 241 km from the station (Brueggeman *et al.* 1986). Once at the station, whales were moved onto flensing platforms with steam winches for processing.

Port Hobron operated every year from 1926 until 1937, with the exception of 1931. It was decommissioned in 1937 due to financial difficulties, decreased number of whale stocks and increasingly strict whale protections.

## Methods

The Log contains 174 pages of records, each summarizing catches and production for one week for a total of 10 years. All 174 pages of the Log were digitized into JPEG format by Larry Cornett with a Fujifilm X-S1. The purpose of this was to minimize handling of the Log and to allow for remote analysis. Each page of the Log lists weekly totals for the following categories: Whales Caught, Weather and Steamers Movement Report, Production, Products on Hand and Shipments. Certain subcategories were selected for analysis based on their scientific relevance and ability to augment previously published reports. Subcategories summarized in this analysis include: whales caught, tanks charged, whale oil produced, sperm oil produced, fertilizer produced, gill bone and whale tail packed.

Certain standard weights and measurements were printed into the Log's sheets to allow for quick estimates of what a whale would yield. These standards indicate that 1 cubic foot of blubber and meat weighs 60 lbs., 1 cubic foot of bone (steamed) weighs 10 lbs., 1 barrel of oil weighs 400 lbs. and that 1 cubic foot of whale yields 57.68 lbs. of oil. The record does not specify what part of the whale yields 57.68 lbs. of oil. Due to the precision of the value, we assume it is an average for oil yield over the entire whale.

Results were compared with Reeves *et al.* (1985) who compiled data from multiple sources, including the William S. Lagen Collection stored at the University of Washington Archives Division at Suzzalo Library, Accession No. 2292. Reeves *et al.* was able to extract information on total catches, total lengths of whales caught and distribution of catches at Port Hobron during the entire history of the whaling station.

Questions regarding illegible handwriting and inconsistent use of decimal points in this analysis were directed to the Anjuli Grantham, Curator of the Baranov Museum, for a second opinion and are addressed in the footnotes of each table.

## Results and Discussion

### *Operation Period*

Reeves *et al.* (1985) reports that the whaling season at Port Hobron lasted from May-October. Based on the pages of the Manufacturing Log analyzed in this study, the operation period extends from April to November. A full comparison of operation periods from the Manufacturing Log and the findings in Reeves *et al.* is provided below. The length of each whaling season was highly variable, ranging from 8 weeks in 1933 to 23 weeks in 1928. While variability in season length is also demonstrated in the Reeves *et al.* analysis, we cannot eliminate the possibility that pages have been removed from the Manufacturing Log prior to analysis.

There is no data in the American Pacific Whaling Co. Weekly Manufacturing Log for 1927. Since data on catches in 1927 appears in the Reeves *et al.* analysis, we conclude that these pages are missing. The Log is bound with a detachable cover and pages are easily removed. Neither report has information for 1931, as the station was not operating.

While it appears that the Manufacturing Log contains fewer days of data overall, the operation periods per season are not always shorter than those found in Reeves *et al.* In 1926, the Manufacturing Log actually extends 6 days past the operation period reported in Reeves *et al.* In 1932 the season extends 9 days past the end of the operation period reported in Reeves *et al.* It was not just production that took place during these extra days. Two humpback whales were killed in the last week of 1926. We were not able to explain the discrepancies in operation periods between these two reports however they do need to be reported so that underestimations of catches and production may be considered.

Some of the whaling equipment was not able to withstand severe winter weather and thus, each whaling season was terminated in fall (Brueggeman *et al.* 1986).

## Based on Manufacturing Log

Year	Operation Period
1926	1 Aug - 6 Nov
1927	N/A
1928	6 May - 13 Oct
1929	25 May - 6 Oct
1930	3 May - 10 Aug
1931	Not operating
1932	21 May - 2 Oct
1933	1 July - 20 Aug
1934	14 May - 15 Sept
1935	5 May - 7 Sept
1936	26 Apr - 19 Sept
1937	2 May - 7 Aug

Based on Reeves *et al.* 1985

Year	Operation Period
1926	17 July - 31 Oct
1927	24 May - 9 Oct
1928	9 May - 10 Oct
1929	23 May - 13 Oct
1930	8 May - 15 Aut
1931	Not operating
1932	17 May - 23 Sep
1933	26 June - 11 Sep
1934	15 May - 13 Sep
1935	7 May - 26 Sep
1936	25 Apr - 15 Sep
1937	6 May - 13 Aug

*Whales Caught*

The four primary species of whales harvested at Port Hobron were blue (*Balaenoptera musculus*), fin (*B. physalus*), humpback (*Megaptera novaeangliae*), and sperm (*Physeter macrocephalus*) whales. However, other species including gray (*Eschrichtius robustus*), right (*Eubalaena japonica*), and sei whales (*Balaenoptera borealis*) were also taken. More humpback whales were caught than any other species. While the eastern Pacific stock of gray whales does migrate through the southeastern waters of Kodiak Island during its spring and fall migrations, only four gray whales were harvested at Port Hobron. This is most likely due to the fact that the whaling season generally landed between these two migratory windows and that the majority of animals had already passed Port Hobron before the season started and then again after it finished. Right whales were highly sought after until 1935 when they were given international protection. According to the Manufacturing Log, a total of 1,969 whales were taken at Port Hobron from 1926-1937 (excluding 1927 and 1931).

Year	Sperm	Blue	Fin	Humpback	Gray	Right	Sei	Total
1926	0	0	5	201	0	0	0	206
1927	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1928	8	15	47*	178	2	6	0	256
1929	3	26	21	169**	0	0	0	219
1930	4	25	20	178	0	0	1	228

1931	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating
1932	2	78***	60****	128^	0	1	0	269
1933	1	1	27	98	2	1	0	130
1934	3	15	79^	138^	0	0	2	237
1935	32	34^	30	31	0	1	0	128
1936	16	11^^	53^^^	107^^^	0	0	0	188~
1937	12	3	53~~	40	0	0	0	108
Total	81	208	395	1268	4	9	3	1969

\* Two fin whales labeled as S1 and we were unable to determine the meaning.

\*\* "Calf 20" is written and an arrow is pointing to the "1" for Friday. This could indicate that the calf is 20 feet long.

\*\*\* Three whales verified as a being a calf.

\*\*\*\* One fin whale reported rotten but still included in this total.

^ One whale reported to be a calf.

^^ One whale reported to be in bad condition.

^^^ Two fin whales reported to be rotten.

^^^ One humpback found dead by Aberdeen, another rotten.

~ One whale recorded but no species information provided. It is counted here in the total but not under any specific species.

~~ One fin whale in bad condition but still included in these totals.

### *Tanks Charged*

Three types of tanks were charged at Port Hobron; blubber, meat and bone. We speculate that the charging of tanks occurred before tissue was rendered into oil and that the process relates to the softening and degradation of tissue prior to further treatment. A total of 5,459.62 tanks were charged from 1926-1937 (excluding 1927 and 1931). Most of the tanks contained meat with the least number of tanks containing bone.

Year	Blubber	Meat	Bone	Total
1926	126.25	305	94.75*	526
1927	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1928	142	339.5	117.5	599
1929	128.25	352.25	113*	593.5
1930	121	306	114.5*	541.5
1931	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating
1932	188.75*	579**	177.75*	945.5
1933	56.25*	139	52.75	248
1934	118.77	394.63	102.22	615.62
1935	92.62	301.93	88.68	483.23
1936	107.74	346.1	102.11	555.95***
1937	63.66	220.35	67.31*	351.32
Total	1145.29	3283.76	1030.57	5459.62

\*Value was miscalculated on record and has been corrected here.

\*\* Value was miscalculated on record and has been corrected here. Also, one of these tanks is made of mixed meat and bone.

\*\*\*One entry should have been on report for July 18th but included here for this summary.

### *Whale Oil Produced*

Four grades of whale oil were produced at Port Hobron. A total of 75,175 barrels of whale oil were produced from 1926-1937 (excluding 1927 and 1931). Results by year and by grade are reported below in barrels.

Year	No. 1	No. 2	No. 3	No. 4	Total
1926	5620*	1947	89**	0	7656
1927	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1928	7603***	326****	286	180	8395
1929	8196^	0	398	56	8650
1930	8562	0	54	188	8804
1931	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating
1932	13514^^	0	197	675^^^	14386
1933	4120	0	0	106	4226
1934	7669	142	15	78	7904
1935	5180	114	37	9	5340
1936	5960	10	380	8	6358
1937	3300^^^	36	42	78	3456
Total	69724	2575	1498	1378	75175

\*The number 150 is written and circled and has arrows pointing to the No. 1 and Total columns. No. 1 oil total is higher than Total oil. These have not been accounted for since we cannot assume their meaning.

\*\* 61 has been subtracted from No. 3 whale oil as indicated by record.

\*\*\* "10" is written in No. 2 and circled and subtracted from 101 in whale oil produced

\*\*\*\* In one week, there is an arrow with "164" going into whale oil No. 2 but it is not in total so it is not included here

^ No. 1 whale oil was miscalculated in Log and is corrected here.

### *Sperm Oil Produced*

Five types of sperm whale oil were rendered from whales harvested; head oil and four grades of body oil. A total of 4,870 barrels of sperm whale oil were produced from 1926-1937 (excluding 1927 and 1931). Yearly totals are reported in barrels below.

Year	Head Oil	No. 1 body	No. 2 body	No. 3 body	No. 4 body	Total
1926	0	0	0	0	0	0
1927	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1928	0	412	136	80	14	642
1929	0	152	59	41	0	252
1930	0	164	88	6	0	258
1931	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating
1932	0	82	54	0	0	136
1933	0	52	38	0	0	90

1934	117	69	14	0	0	200
1935	1202	461*	0	30	10**	1703
1936	605	254*	0	5	0	864
1937	0	615**	0	0	0	725***
Total	1924	2261	389	162	24	4870

\*Sperm oil value for one week this year was written in blank column next to No. 1 oil so we have counted it as No. 1 oil.

\*\*Sperm oil value for three separate weeks during this year were written in blank column next to No. 1 oil so we have counted it as No. 1 oil.

\*\*\*Total sperm oil produced in 1937 is 110 barrels greater than is reported in individual oil grades.

### *Fertilizer Produced*

Three separate combinations of whale tissue were rendered into fertilizer: meat and blood, meat and bone, and bone meal. From 1926-1937 (excluding 1927 and 1931) a total of 3614.73 tons of meat and blood fertilizer were produced, 124.89 tons of meat and bone fertilizer were produced, and 1337.988 lbs of bone meal fertilizer were produced. In total, 5077.065 tons of fertilizer were produced according to the weekly records in the Manufacturing Log. Yearly totals are provided in in table below. Fertilizer values are presented in tons.

Year	Meat and Blood	Meat and Bone	Bone Meal	Total
1926	188.57	0	0	188.57
1927	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1928	447*	0	240.77	687.227
1929	407.3	0	255.312	662.612
1930	383.9	0	0	383.9
1931	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating	Not operating
1932	733.15*	0	131.924*	865.074
1933	222.15	0	137.812	359.962
1934	431.6	0	221.18	652.78
1935	311.1	124.89	77.14	513.13
1936	318.21	0	193.35	511.56
1937	171.75	0	80.5	252.25
Total	2434.58	124.89	1206.064	5077.065

\*Weekly total in record was not added up correctly and has been adjusted here.

### *Gill Bone*

Only 4 of the 174 pages of weekly data have recorded any information for gill bone (baleen) production. For the week of September 2-8, 1928, 1,691 lbs. of right whale baleen were produced. During the week of August 26-September 1, 1928,

3,034 lbs. of right whale baleen were produced. During August 12-18, 1934 it is indicated that there was a 273 lb. "cash sale" of humpback whale baleen. Lastly, from September 1-7, 150 lbs. of right whale baleen were produced. This information is not shown graphically because the amount of baleen produced was so scarce. We were unable to determine the whereabouts of baleen harvested in other years but not recorded in the Manufacturing Log. For example, a total of 395 fin whales were harvested at Port Hobron from 1926-1937 but there is no record of fin whale baleen being used or sold.

#### *Whale Tail Packed*

Only 8 of the 174 pages of weekly data have recorded any information for whale tail packed. For the week of June 24-30, 1934 each row (indicating each day of the week) has 62 written in it. It is unclear whether 62 lbs. of whale tail were produced each day of that week or if 62 lbs. is meant to be a weekly total. It is also unclear which species the whale tail originates from. During the week of July 22-28, 1934 1,295 lbs. of humpback whale tail were sold to "Kraft," the local grocery store in nearby Kodiak, AK. An additional 1,225 lbs. of humpback whale tail were packed during the week of August 19-25, 1934. Two hundred pounds (not indicated which species) were packed for the week of July 28-August 3, 1935, August 11-17, 1935 and August 18-24, 1935. During the week of September 1-7, 1935 762 lbs. of whale tail were packed and from August 30-September 5, 1936 779 lbs. of whale tail were packed (in both weeks the species was not specified).

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