

# HISTORY CENTER

## SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

### Whaling in San Luis Obispo County



Several people scattered on the rocks look at a beached whale on its back. Photo taken at San Simeon beach - Undated

### **Our Whale Fisheries**

**How the Monsters are Captured  
The Method of Obtaining the Oil  
Further Notes**

*Originally published January 21, 1887 in the weekly San Luis Obispo Tribune*

One of the most interesting localities in the vicinity of Port Harford is Whaler's Point, situated about three-fourths of a mile from and very nearly south of the wharf. For a number of years past it has been a whaling station and from its location and the barren, rocky formation of the land in the immediate vicinity, it is not probable that it will be put to

any other use. To reach the point by land is an arduous and difficult undertaking, and once performed will effectually cure the tourist of venturing upon a similar exploit. The only comfortable and rational route is by water from the wharf, which can be accomplished at a trifling cost. It is rarely that the whalers have visitors, but when favored in this respect they are courteous to a degree and extremely liberal in dispensing small presents in the way of whalebone, sharks teeth, and other articles of a like nature that figure in the make-up of the denizens of the deep.

The view from the Point, if one finds satisfaction in gazing upon water, can not be rivaled. To the left lies the spacious and splendid harbor of San Luis Obispo, walled in on three sides by lofty and rugged mountains that stand as a barrier between the placid waters and the strong northers that occasionally spring up inland. Facing the point reposes the mighty Pacific, which stretches away in the distance until the restless waters seem to blend with the azure sky.



Breakwater and Whaler's Island at Port San Luis - Aug. 1913

The aromatic atmosphere, however, which hovers over the point, interferes considerably with a proper appreciation of the grand panorama which nature's showman has unfolded. In fact, the air about the point is the "rankest compound of villainous smells that ever offended human nostrils." The odors have doubtless been accumulating for years and age has only added to their pungency. They have now become so pungent that a person whose olfactories are delicately strung would not long linger in the odorous locality. After a short time, however, the disagreeable smell becomes less noticeable and the curiosity of the visitor, in examining the paraphernalia of the whalers, soon leads him to forget the matter.

The calling of a whaleman is replete with danger, while the profits accruing from it are far from being commensurate with the perils run. An old veteran at the point, whom the writer interviewed, stated that he had been lifted skywards a number of times by wounded whales and once narrowly escaped being swallowed by one while on a cruise in the arctic regions, but the fascination attendant upon the life held him to the harpoon.

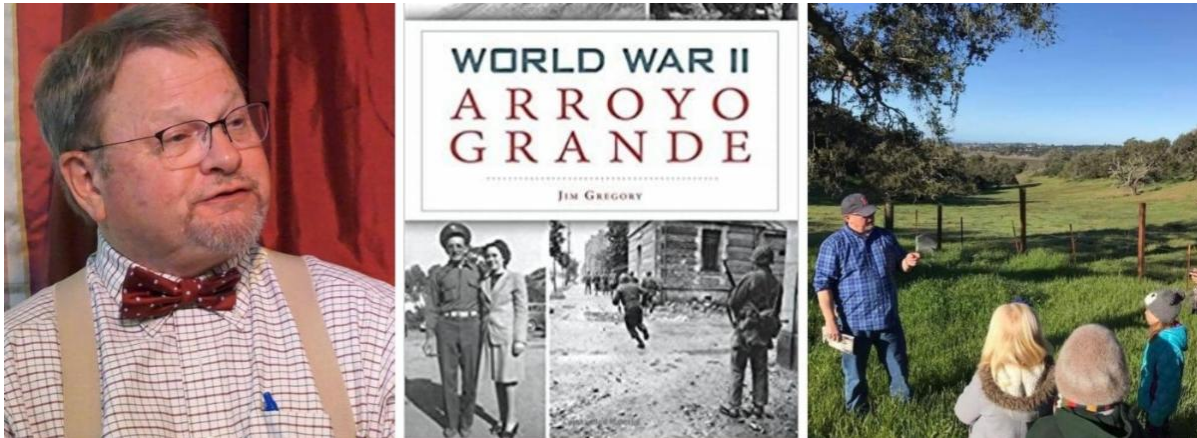


The present force at the point consists of twenty men under command of Captain John Oliver, who has followed the calling the greater portion of his life. There are also two ladies at the station, one the wife of captain Oliver and the other the wife of the lighthouse keeper. The whaling season lasts about four months, commencing with November and ending about the last of February. During the summer months the whales go down the coast, but not in sufficient numbers to pay to hunt them. Last season was a very unprofitable one to Captain Oliver and his men, they only capturing three whales. This small catch was not sufficient to pay expenses. So far, the current season has been quite satisfactory. Five have been taken, the largest netting seventy barrels of oil. The others yielded, on an average, fifty barrels each. The profits this year are greatly diminished on account of the low price of oil, which at present is worth only 22 ½ cents a gallon, or \$6.75 a barrel.

The species of whale caught at this station are of the bowhead of variety and have no commercial value aside from their oil and sinews. The latter is used principally in the manufacture of strings for musical instruments, and sells in the market at seventy and eight cents per pound. The bones of the bowhead are valueless and no pretense is made at saving them. When a sperm whale or right whale is captured the whaleman generally celebrate the event and grog is portioned out quite liberally. The bones of these whales are quite valuable and they sometimes yield as high as twenty tons of pure oil. It is very rarely that either the sperm or right whale is seen in the vicinity of Port Harford. One was taken at San Simeon last year, while at Monterey they are frequently espied. They net the fishermen from \$1200 to \$2000.

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{ed. note: strange as it is to consider, petroleum was an environmentally friendlier alternative to whale oil, and its widespread adoption by the turn of the 20th century helped save numerous whale species from extinction.}



## Arroyo Grande's Place in American History

In 1869, Arroyo Grande consisted of one school, one store and one smithy. As late as 1940, the town's population was only 1080. But every American town, including Arroyo Grande, has ties to the great themes of American history.

Author, teacher, and historian extraordinaire Jim Gregory will be teaching a six-week course through Cuesta College - planned for in-person at Arroyo Grande High School - on Thursday evenings from March 3 through April 7.



[Click here to learn more or to register.](#)

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**Sun., Feb. 20th, 2-3:30 p.m. SLO Historic Walk: The Mission, Chumash, and Gold-Rush Renegades.** Come on an easy, guided stroll past the Mission courtyard, three adobes, the old stagecoach stop, and other landmarks to hear stories of the early days of San Luis Obispo. Meet under the clock at the corner of Monterey and Osos Sts. No reservations, free. Masks required if not vaccinated. Rain cancels. Leader: Joe Morris, 805-549-0355.

Thomas Kessler  
Executive Director



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