

David E. Bertão, *The Portuguese Shore Whalers of California, 1854-1904* (San Jose, Calif.: Portuguese Heritage Publications of California, 2006)

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The definitive role of the American whaling industry in the Portuguese settlement of the United States is not as well-known as it might be. Before the mills attracted Atlantic islanders to southeastern Massachusetts, and before Azoreans began to settle in the agricultural regions of California, it was the presence of Azoreans and Cape Verdeans on American whalers sailing out of New Bedford and other ports of New England that promoted Portuguese settlement there. Similarly it was the large Portuguese presence on American whalers that facilitated the arrival of these islanders in San Francisco during the heady days of the California Gold Rush.

With his book, *The Portuguese Shore Whalers of California, 1854-1904*, David Bertão has produced an exceptionally well researched and comprehensive study of nineteenth-century shore whaling in California. While the title implies a limitation solely to the Portuguese, such is not the case, for — while the vast majority of these whalers were indeed Portuguese — there is also a sprinkling of individuals of various nationalities, whose participation is discussed as well.

In the first paragraph of the book Bertão graphically describes the realities of such an occupation:

“California shore whaling in the nineteenth century was a brutal and frightening way to make a living. Its reliance on small boats and primitive guns put the shore whalers’ lives at risk every time they attempted a capture. It was aboriginal whaling, with doses of Yankee technology and Portuguese ingenuity thrown in.”

In truth, whether practiced from a ship in mid-ocean or based on shore, the technique of whaling in the nineteenth century was essentially similar — a small boat manned by half a dozen men, armed with harpoon and lance, etc., confronting a behemoth of 30, 40 or even 100 tons. Bertão is careful to differentiate this traditional technique from the so-called “modern” whaling, practiced later, in the twentieth century, with “steamers, harpoon cannons, and sophisticated shore factories,” an industry that continued sporadically in California until 1972, and one that, in its pelagic version exists today among the few countries that continue to hunt the leviathan.

The book is divided into three sections that deal, in order, with the background of shore whaling itself; with the California counties in which it was practiced; and, finally, with the men who practiced it. Part 1, “The Business of Shore Whaling,” begins with a background on American whaling and the Azorean connection. Throughout the book, the text is richly illustrated with graphic images in

both black & white and color; and reference notes, placed alongside the relevant text, are easily accessible but non-intrusive.

Part 1 covers in great detail virtually every aspect of shore whaling: setting up the business, choosing a location, obtaining and paying crew members, the equipment needed, species of whales, types of whale oil and its marketing. As San Francisco, by the 1880s, grew to be the major US whaling port, it must have been a relatively simple matter to lure experienced whalers from that port to the various shore stations, for California shore whaling was a business ancillary to the more important pelagic whaling industry.

Part 2 examines each of the counties in which shore whaling was practiced during this period, from Crescent City in the far north to San Diego Bay near the Mexican border. Especially in this section, Bertão's work is a tour-de-force of local history methodology. He has not only located obscure publications dealing with shore whaling but has culled local newspapers of the period and various county archival records to present a comprehensive picture of each county's whaling activity.

In some eighty pages of Part 3, Bertão, after digging deep into federal, state, and local records, fleshes out the identity of sixty-four of these intrepid mariners in rich detail.

The Portuguese Shore Whalers of California is a book that I highly recommend for its wealth of information. It is a work of interest to the casual reader, just as much as it will be in the future for the serious researcher. Congratulations to Portuguese Heritage Publications of California for another fine offering.