

SEA HUNTING

Whaling

"If a man is to do something beyond human power, he must have more than human strength for the task."



A Makah fisherman, carrying paddle and bird spear. He wears a poncho of seal gut, bearskin robe and spruce root hat.

That is how a Makah whale harpooner felt and moderns may well agree with him. It seems almost incredible that a whale, fifty feet long, could have been killed by eight men in a canoe, with a harpoon of mussel shell and a rope of spruce root. Yet two whales a summer were the usual catch for each crew. They prayed for spirit power, said the whalers, or it could not have been done.

Several kinds of whales went up the "sea trail" past the Olympic Peninsula, bound for a summer in the Arctic. They traveled near the shores of Vancouver Island and the Nootka, who lived there, were famous for their whaling canoes and their whaling skill. On what is now the American side, there were only three villages which ventured on the dangerous hunt. These were all neighbors of the Nootka and sometimes bought canoes from them. Perhaps they also learned some whaling skill, for one of the three, the Makah, was actually a Nootka group which had migrated to the Washington mainland. The other two were Quilleute and Quinault, south of the Makah along the Pacific. The Klallam, over on the Straits of Juan de Fuca, would go after a whale if it entered their inland waters but the Chinook and others to the south, only took dead ones which drifted to them.

Not that they did not have the magic to produce this! A Chinook with spirit power could set up a pole on the beach and say: "Here a whale will drift ashore." Then he would sing for five days, with most of the village helping him. On the sixth day, they would send a man to look. And there would be the whale.

Even in the three seagoing villages, there were very few harpooners. The harpooner was the man on whom the whole hunt depended. He generally owned the canoe and the equipment—property which it took years to make or much wealth to buy. He invited his crew of seven and assigned their places. He did the killing of the whale and it was he who must have the magic on which depended success or failure.

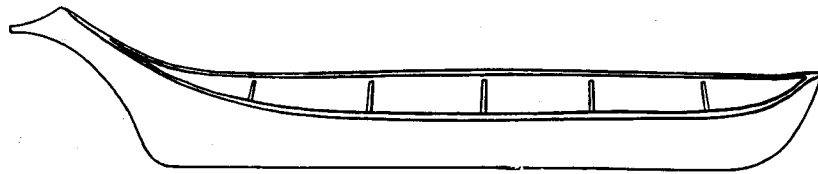
The Harpooner's Training

He began very young to acquire this magic. Of course, as a later chapter will tell, most coastal men went out in their youth to get the help of some spirit animal. They dived into cold, lonely pools and rubbed their bodies warm with rough cedar branches, working up so much fortitude that a spirit would speak to them—nor so much determination that they would think it did. The future whaler needed a particularly strong spirit helper. He was instructed to stay long in the icy water, rolling and spouting like a whale. He would rub himself with branches till the blood came. Tales say that one man had himself dragged over the barnacles on the beach until all the skin was rubbed off his body, first in back, then in front. After that, the wolves took pity on him and, being great hunters themselves, they gave him an unbeatable hunting power. Generally the whaler's spirit was the little stormy petrel, the seabird which is said to fly along above the whale. Occasionally, it was the whale himself.

This spirit taught the man songs to bring the whales near his canoe; songs to make them gentle when hit and songs that would bring them safely to shore. The youth might already have learned some of these from his father, for very few men ventured on this dangerous career without older relatives to give them a start. Songs which he learned from his own spirit helper were so much added wealth, which he would pass on to his own son. The spirit gave him secret herbs with which to rub his body after diving, and make it strong. There were tales of even blacker magic, for the tremendous power needed by a harpooner could be obtained only from some dreadful thing, like human bones or corpses. People said that future harpooners stole human flesh and hid it in the forest. They danced with skeletons on their backs. They kept skulls and bones in their canoes.

When a boy was sure he would have whaling power, he began to learn to throw the harpoon. He worked at it for years, while his visions still went on. He practiced going without food, since he would often be hungry on the hunt, and he stayed awake at night knowing that whale hunters sometimes did not sleep for three or four nights together. Perhaps he was invited to be one of the crew of some other harpooner and learn the quickness and skill necessary when a canoe faces a whale. Meantime, if he hoped to be a harpooner-captain himself, he was getting his equipment together. Some of it might be already in the family but much had to be made new. Whaling equipment must be in the prime of condition. Men's lives depend on it.

Seagoing canoe
of the Chinook



First came the thirty or forty foot canoe, with its prow like a Viking ship. (See Chapter 8). Very probably this was not made in the village but obtained in a trade from the Nootka, who built famous canoes from the huge straight cedars of Vancouver Island. It held eight men, besides food, water, canoe bailers, harpoons, spear, ropes of graded sizes, and eight or ten floats. Sailors call a vessel shipshape when every piece of equipment is in repair and in its proper place. They would use this term for the dugout canoe, where skin floats, bark ropes and bark bailers were as orderly as tools in an engine room. The six crosspieces or thwarts on which the paddlers sat, divided it into six sections, with, usually, two men in each. Under their feet was a cedarbark mat which was bent up and over the thwart, thus walling off the space from the one behind it. In the compartment thus formed were kept certain parts of the whaling gear arranged in the order of use from bow to stern and each piece in charge of the paddles sitting above it. Each man knew his job and when a whale was lashing about, he had to work like lightning.

The front space was reserved for the harpoon, a huge staff, tall enough for a canoe mast, with an intricately made head of shell and bone. It was the whaling tool and all the others were its accessories. Very few other Indians used the harpoon, which was one of the most important inventions of early men. Its supreme virtue was its detachable head. Some hunter of the stone age had noticed that, when a spear is thrown, the heavy handle or shaft is likely to drag it out of the wound so that the animal gets away. Or the handle breaks. In one way or another, the hunter may lose both spear and animal. But suppose the spear head were loose, so that the shaft would fall off when it struck! Then the spear point would stay in the wound but the animal might still move far away before it died. The answer to that was to tie the spear point to a cord which the hunter held in his hand. Then, if the cord were long enough, the animal could swim or run far beyond the hunter's reach and still not escape. The tool was a combination of the spear with the hook and line and White men use it still though they shoot it from a gun.

The dugout canoe had a notch cut in its high prow, so that the harpoon shaft could be laid there, sticking out like a bowsprit. Behind it lay coiled its 12-16 feet of fine sinew rope, which would have more line attached as needed. Safe under the bow were extra harpoon heads and perhaps a skull or other powerful charm. The only man in this section was the harpooner, the captain of the boat. He did not paddle, nor did he sit down, at least after the canoe had reached the deep sea, where the whales might be. He stood up, scanning the horizon. If he had prayed and bathed regularly, he would see a spout or a black, rolling back.

IV-THE WHALING HARPOON

MAKING THE HARPOON

The Head

In making the harpoon head, the first move was to put the two elkhorn pieces together and tie them. Then the lanyard or cord which kept the head from being lost, was attached. This was of whale sinew, composed of many fine strands, twisted together. The strands were untwisted for a little way and each one wound separately around the elkhorn pieces in the area from (b) to (c). The notch which shows at this point kept the twisting in place. Over it, a tough string of wild cherry bark was wound round and round as shown in sketch C, leaving the pincers projecting.

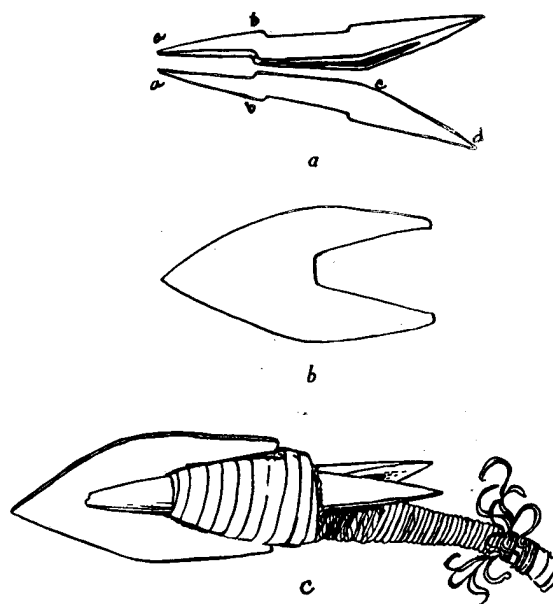
After the lanyard was fastened to the elkhorn, the cutting point was inserted between the pincers, as seen in sketch C. Then the whole was covered with pitch pine glue, so that elkhorn, shell and string formed one smooth surface. Then the glue was cleaned off the edge of the shell, to leave it sharp.

The Shaft

The handle or shaft of the harpoon was a pole of tough, elastic yew wood, about 18 feet long. To keep it from bending too much, it was made in two sections tied together in the middle. Each section was cut on a long slant so that the area of the joint covered 9 or 10 inches, tied with braided cord of cedar bark. At the ends where the shaft fits into the head, it was tapered so as to enter the groove on the inner side of the elkhorn points between (b) and (c).

Lanyard and Ropes

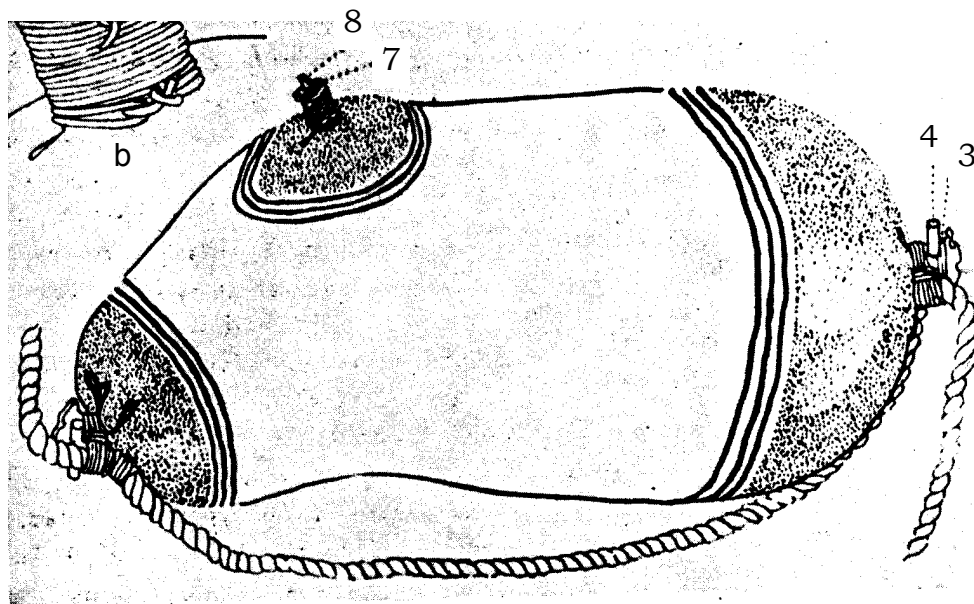
The lanyard, attached to the harpoon head, was a rope of whale sinew, about an inch thick and some 12 to 16 feet long. It was wound with nettle cord to keep it dry and this, in turn, was covered with a spiral winding of cherry bark. The end not attached to the harpoon head was furnished with a loop, to which other lengths of rope could be tied.



The cutting point of the harpoon was of mussel shell, shaped as in sketch b. This could not be socketed to receive the shaft, so it was held on with two pincers of elkhorn, shown at a. These were so shaped that, when brought tight together, they left a gap from a to b, just wide enough to hold the shell point. On their inner sides, from b to c, there was a groove where the handle or shaft would fit. From c to d, they tapered into points or barbs, which would stick into the animal's flesh and prevent the harpoon head from falling out.

These other ropes were of spruce root or long slim cedar shoots, twisted in three strands. The canoe carried lengths of these in varying thicknesses, from 2 1/2 inches wide to an inch. These were tied to the lanyard, one after the other, with a float attached to each. A very thick rope, 3 or 4 hundred feet long, was used for towing the whale.

V - THE HARPOON FLOAT



The material was the skin of the hair seal, taken off with as little cutting as possible. The head was first cut off, then the front flippers, then the tail section, including the rear flippers. The worker then took hold of the skin from this large rear opening and peeled it off, inside out. He scraped off the grease, smoked the skin over a fire, then plugged up the holes.

There are three plugs shown in the picture. These are light pieces of wood, shaped like a cork. They are inserted in the openings, then the skin around them is gathered up tightly and tied with a gut string. The little sketch, b, at the top, shows how it was fastened. There was an extra peg to keep it from slipping off, as shown at 4 in the rear opening of the large sketch.

One of the holes had to be left partly open so that the float could be blown up with air. This was generally at the place of a front flipper (7 and 8 in the diagram) and here the plug was like a modern spool, with an opening down the middle. The maker blew through this and, when the float was inflated, stoppered it with a piece of wood. (Shown at 8).

A spruce root rope was attached to the float at front and rear. Its ends were lashed to the rope holding the whale.

The float was sometimes decorated as shown in the picture. The color was red ochre, ground up and mixed with salmon eggs.

Killing the Whale

Whales come out of the water to breathe. First the black back shows, then it goes slowly under. A moment later, it appears again, further along the same course and a large jet of water is blown up by the air expelled from the whale's lungs. The Indian canoe shot forward at the sight, so as to cut across the whale's track. It would be near when he came up to spout but the thing to do was to wait until he was almost under again, so he would not turn and ram the boat. The harpooner grabbed the heavy spear and stood high in the boat, one foot on a thwart, one on the boat's edge. Perhaps he prayed:

"Whale, when I spear you, I want my spear to strike your heart.
Harpoon, when I throw you, I want you to go to the heart of the whale.

Whale, when I throw at you and miss you, I want you to take hold
of my harpoon with your hands. Whale, do not break my canoe.."

The steersman brought the canoe up so that the whale was at the harpooner's right (unless he was left handed). The paddlers backed water furiously to brake their progress. The man behind the harpooner yelled: "Now throw!" The harpooner raised his huge weapon, so as to stab straight down. If the spirits were helping him, the spear point hit just behind the whale's head or shoulder and went several feet into the blubber: It broke, probably. You could break a mussel shell in your fingers if you tried. But the force of the throw sent it far into the whale even while it was cracking and the elkhorn barbs, stretching back from it in swallow tail shape, prevented it from falling out. Sometimes it pierced a lung, or even the heart.

The moment the point struck, the man behind the harpooner threw a float into the water. This was a sealskin, blown full of air, like a sausage balloon, four feet long. It was out of the canoe and floating before the harpoon had finished penetrating.

The harpoon cord whipped out along the water and, with another lightning motion, the float man caught its end and tied it to the float. Now, even if the whale got away, the float would impede its progress and mark its position. But even as the whale was starting to dive (sounding, the whalers call it), the float man had thrown over the end of a longer rope and was tying this to the float. As the whale sounded, thirty feet of tough spruce root rope uncoiled and meantime, the man next behind was ready with another float and another length of rope.

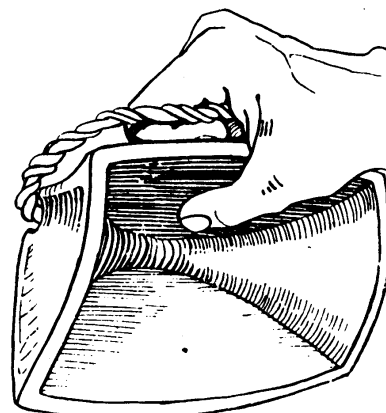
These were tense moments, for all the time, the whale was lashing about and the paddlers were backing water to keep out of his way. Nevertheless, each went about his work as accurately as a machine. The float man had some fourteen floats, which he threw out, one by one. The man in the next space behind had coiled lengths of cedar rope, of different thicknesses, heavy ones to go near the whale, lighter ones further away. He threw the rope ends over and tied them, while the man beside him saw that the floats were properly blown up. Men in the section behind bailed water, as the canoe tipped and plunged. Each person while attending to his special job shipped his paddle for a moment while the steersman, alone in the rear section, guided the canoe with expert paddle movements.

Sometimes the whale was too quick for them. The rope whipped out of the float man's hands and whale and floats started out to sea. Then the canoe paddled after, watching to see the line of floats appear. It was hard for the whale to dive with all those airfilled skins attached to him. They slowed his swimming and usually the boat caught up with him. More often, the end of the long line of floats was fastened in the canoe and then the paddlers were taken for a ride. The whale dived, it twisted, it raced. Sometimes it turned straight out to sea. There were tales of men who had been towed thus for two or three days, glad enough that they had practiced going without sleep and food.

"Whale," prayed one more northern harpooner, "I have given you what you wish to get—my good harpoon. And now you have it. Whale, turn toward the fine beach of my village of Yahksis and you will be proud to see the young men come down to the fine sandy beach of my village of Yahksis. And the young men will say to one another, 'What a great whale he is! What a fat whale he is! What a strong whale he is! Whale, do not turn outward but hug the shore and tow me to the beach of my village!'"

There were times when the men, in desperation had to cut their prize loose. At other times he turned and rammed the canoe. Or his huge tail broke the craft in two, spilling the men into the water. In view of such dangers, it was usual for several canoes to go out together, ready to help each other.

The wooden canoe bailer was cut out of a single piece, so that it is triangular in cross section, wide at the top and narrowing to a wedge at the bottom. The same result was often obtained by folding a piece of bark, tying the two ends so it made a dish shape and tying on a handle.



Meantime, the harpooner made ready to throw again. He had leaped down instantly after his first throw or the jerks of the whale would have thrown him overboard. There are stories of a man who was thrown like this, grabbed the harpoon line, was carried down with the whale and at last got up and into the boat again. Unless the harpooner had a very powerful spirit it took several stabs to kill a whale or even to slow him up. The staff of the harpoon had been attached to a line of its own, so that it could be pulled back to the canoe but if it was lost, he had another staff. He threw again but this time only a few floats were attached to the line. Then, perhaps, he called the other boats to hasten the work.

"Come and throw a harpoon. I will give you the whale's tongue. I will give you the strip of blubber behind his middle." Unless there were grave danger, no canoe would throw until it was invited and only the harpooner could give the invitation and promise the pay. Each of the other canoes threw only a short line with one float.

When the wounded whale was worn out with dragging the floats, the canoes approached to kill him. This time the harpooner did not throw but came close and used a long lance with nondetachable head. If he was skillful, one thrust behind the whale's shoulder blades did the work. Then came the time for towing him to the beach, in triumph, like an honored guest.

Bringing the Whale Home

It was no easy matter to tow a creature about the length of the boat, with a great open mouth several feet across which could fill with water and make him heavier. Each canoe carried a diver who sat with the first floatman in the section behind the harpooner. It was his business to go down with a light, strong line and tie this into the whale's lower jaw. Then, he made a hole in the upper lip, pulled the line through it and fastened the end to the heavy rope which would be used in towing. Thus the whale's mouth was held shut by the tow line itself. Several more harpoons were thrust into the head, each with a float attached to make the whale lighter in the water. Then the canoes got in line, with the rope passing through three or four of them and the harpooners sang their spirit songs:

Go into that bay,
That is the path
Use your other flipper
Paddle toward our home

The idea was that the whale, like the salmon, was not really dead but had played this drama of the fight only so that he might be invited to the village. He was an honored guest and he enjoyed the singing.

"... we will cover your great body with bluebill duck feathers," the harpooner had told him,

". . . and with the down of the great eagle, the chief of all birds. For this is what you are wishing and this is what you are trying to find, from one end of the world to the other, every day you are travelling and spouting."



Everyone came down to the beach to receive the whale. The wives of the harpooners were particularly glad to see him, for they had been helping their husbands by working a woman's form of magic. In some villages they were expected to lie still, without eating or drinking, all the time the hunt was on for this would make the whale gentle and quiet. If any wife had been unfaithful, the whale would have been lost and her husband might even have been drowned. Now, however, the harpooners and their wives were the most important people in the village. The whale practically belonged to the harpooner who had first speared him. Not that he kept the animal! Coast people, like most other Indians, honored a man more for giving away his wealth than for keeping it. The harpooner did keep the best piece but even then, he could not eat it. He feared to offend the whale so he traded it for a good price or gave it away. Still, he decided what piece everyone else was to have and, later, he and his wife were hosts at the feast which honored the whale.

Butchering

The huge carcass, as big as a motor boat, was floated up on shore at high tide. When the water receded, the people flocked around, with knives and ropes, to peel off the blubber. Sometimes they could not use the meat, which had spoiled by the time the canoes arrived, but the two foot layer of blubber furnished their grease supply. The whale was measured off, as a housewife measures a cake with regard to the number of guests to be served. Then men

mounted the whale's back and cut down through the skin and blubber with a strong lance. Ropes were thrown up to them and one of these ropes was attached to the top of each strip of blubber thus cut. Men below hauled on the rope, pulling off the skin and blubber like wall paper.

The harpooner, whose work was over, sat on the beach giving orders, while some old, experienced man measured off the cuts. He first attended to the harpooner's share, which was the "hump" between the head and the dorsal fin, with the fin attached. It was the best part of the whale's back and thought to be particularly rich in oil. Next came payment to the crew, all of whom had made their bargains beforehand. Then the canoes which had helped in the kill got a flipper, a strip near the tail, the tongue, according as they had been promised. The harpooner-captain of each boat received the pay and divided it among his crew, according to the fixed rules. Then the harpooner in charge decided about the rest. Terrible were the feuds and hurt feelings if someone was slighted or cheated.

Whale Feast

People took their blubber strips home and boiled them to extract the oil. Then they dried the blubber which, they say, looked like citron and tasted like pork. All but the harpooner! It was his duty to entertain the whale according to promise or else he might never catch another. He made a low rack for his blubber strip and hung it up, as in the illustration, with a wooden container under it to catch the drip of oil. Then he decorated it with the promised duck feathers, perhaps placing them in a design and adding a crown of eagle feathers. He hung the eyes to dry at each side, for they were to be his trophies. Four nights, he sat by this exhibit, keeping the whale company, while old men who knew whale songs came and sang. Now and then the harpooner danced around the blubber strip, rolling his body as a whale rolls. On the fifth night came the great whale feast. This is a description of one which the old Indians remember. The harpooner and his wife, they say, dressed in special headdresses, made to represent the strip of blubber and decorated with the same feathers. The blubber itself was boiled and all the people came to eat it and sing whale songs.

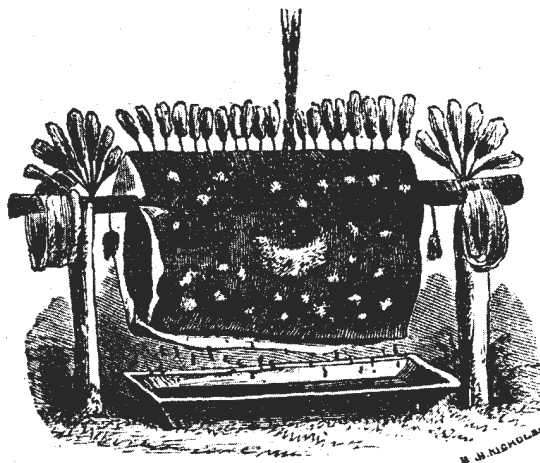
I come in.
I am rolling like a whale.
But I am a man.

So went one of the songs, taught to some dreamer by the whale himself.

Indeed, the whale was a man, just as the salmon was.

Here I come from far out
To the land.
To visit as many places as I can.

I am coming back,
To be caught again.



The harpooner's share of blubber, placed on display and decorated with feathers to please the whale.

As they sang, the people held one hand with thumb upright like a dorsal fin. When a song ended, they made this imitation whale dive suddenly.

So far, the harpooner's reward had been glory only. But now he had gallons of rich oil to trade. He had his seagoing canoe which he might take north after sea otter furs and slaves or he could paddle a smaller craft up the Columbia for deerskins. If he caught two whales a summer, he could soon be the richest man in the village, with eight or ten slaves, where most people had none. Everyone honored him. They gave him the best seat at ceremonies and the largest presents, but they feared him too. They knew that he was said to get his power from magic ceremonies with dead men and they were careful not to offend him.

He could not keep this position without effort. Every summer, before the whaling season began, he had to spend weeks in cold bathing, perhaps carrying a skeleton or a skull on his back. Sometimes he would tie a rope around his waist and let his wife hold it, as the whalers hold the whales. Then he would walk slowly around her, rolling his body and moving gently while she repeated. "This is the way the whale will act." Sometimes he tried to attract the spirits by pity, making a garment of nettles or of wild rose bushes, which would prick his skin. He would dance in this, singing his whale songs and calling on the daylight or other spirits to help him.

The Give-Away Feast

The harpooner saved the eyes of his whales and the dried tips of the dorsal fins. When his collection showed that he had killed about five whales, it was time to give a feast in honor of his luck. The feasts of the Northwest coast were

famous, for they were not only banquets but great donations, when all the guests went away loaded with gifts. The harpooner, of course, gave whale oil and one man is reported to have distributed 500 gallons at a single session. He had plenty of return gifts, when other harpooners gave feasts. The ceremony was also an honor to the whales, and if pleasant news of it went back to the whale village, there would be an even better catch next year.

One of the songs told how the whale spirit said:

I have come to see how great your house is.

Is it prepared for large crowds?

As this was sung, the guests pounded on cedarwood planks while one man shook a rattle, made of elk horn.

The harpooners all came, dressed in their prayer costumes of nettles, rose branches or whatever they used when calling on the spirits. The Indians remember that one man wore a bearskin, tied on with cedar bark. He held a rope, with four human skulls attached, as floats are attached to the whale. His wife held the other end of the rope and he moved around her, acting like a whale that has been speared. One harpooner who had failed to catch whales, went through the motions of eating and sleeping, to show that he had done this too often. Another, in later days, drank out of a bottle.

Finally the host came in. He had a long rope attached to him and held by twenty of the women of his family, daughters, nieces and even granddaughters. He danced like a whale, singing:

"Here I have come to the place where the people live."

All the people repeated the Song while the young women holding the rope danced. Then a large canoe was brought in and oil poured into it, filling it to the brim. This was the oil to be given away but the host did not merely ladle it out. Each of his twenty young women came up, wrapping on a new blanket over her costume. The host poured oil over her, spilling it on the floor, to show how much he had. Then she took the blanket off and gave it to an old woman, wife of someone whom the host wished to honor. After that, each person in the room came up with his container, which was generally the stomach of a sea lion or seal. The host ladled them full and the people went home.

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