

# ROCHESTER HISTORY

Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck, Editor

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Vol. LVIII

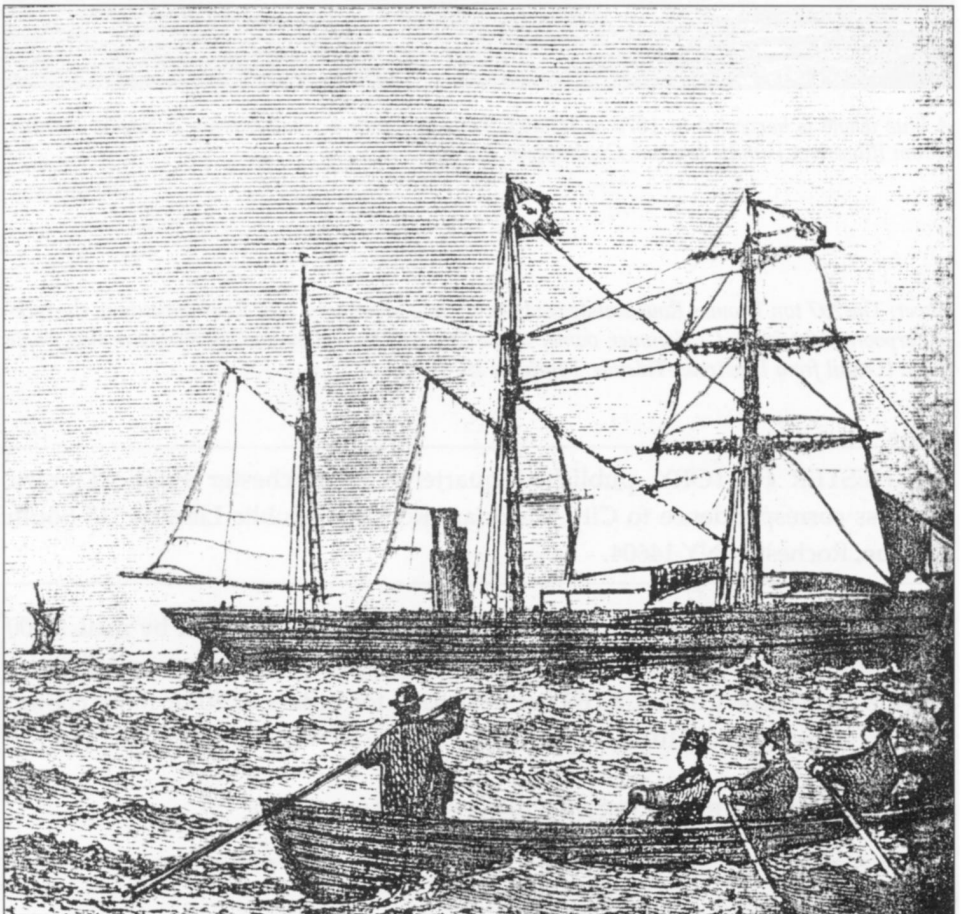
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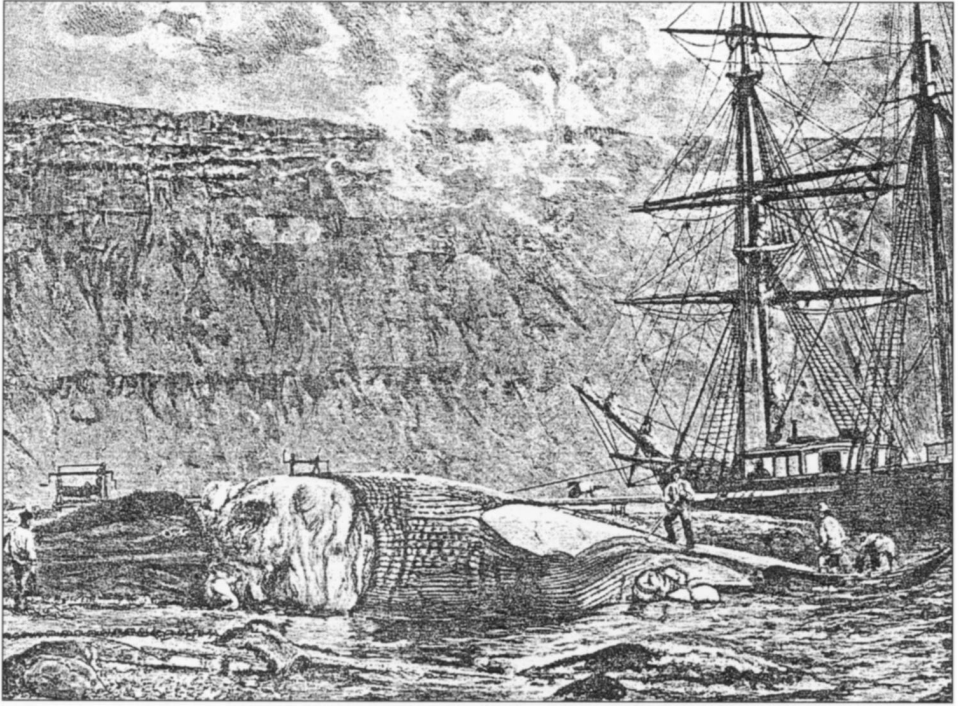
No.2

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## The Whale Hunters of Pultneyville

by Lillian Roemer





*A blue whale is harvested in 1870 at Iceland. Roys had such a whale station at Seydis Fjörður. (From Illustreret Familie Journal, Copenhagen, 1889).*

*Cover: The 297 ton Thomas Roys stands ready as her whaleboat crew uses Roys' invention, the rocket harpoon. Captain O. C. Hammer, owner of the ship was funded by Danish money in this whale hunt. (Detail from Illustreret Tidende, February 25, 1866.)*

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## WHALE HUNTERS OF PULTNEYVILLE

In spite of the cold, rain and sleet the villagers of the town of Pultneyville, turned out for the Seventeenth Annual Dance, called "Sailors' Return" on Christmas Eve 1867. And as the *Commercial Press* of January 1868 reported the event:

*About forty couples were present and the music was all right, because "Major and Charley" can't be beat.*<sup>1</sup>

It was a fun time in the village. Most of the sailors were home for the winter, but *Captain Samuel A. Roys, Captain S. Roys and Captain Henry Roys sailed from New York for San Francisco, California on the Steamer, Morning Star, December 21. They are to remain on the whaling coast this winter and in the spring they will proceed to the coast of "Alaska," our new possession just purchased from Russia.*<sup>2</sup>

Jacob Dunning, and 16 year old, Frank Dunning<sup>3</sup> sons of Arnold Dunning were home with their friend, Byron Brewer, son of Cornelius Brewer and Harry Craggs, son of Thomas Craggs as reported in the *Commercial Press*.<sup>4</sup> All had been on whaling expeditions but none had made his mark yet in the village and were still referred to as "the son of" their well-known and established fathers.

The dance was always held when the sailors came home for the winter. The village tavern, Gazley's Hotel, where Mr. Gazley had built a big dance floor was the scene. In the spring the "Sailors Farewell" was held in the same place, before the sailors left to join whaling crews or jobs on the Lake schooners. And sometimes some of the young men who had danced in the spring did not come home to dance in the fall. Sailing was a hazardous business.

The spring and fall dances were events that reflected the community feeling of this small village; along with the concerts, socials, spiritualist meetings, church gatherings and an event described as The Exhibition where "the music furnished by Mr. T. Scott Ledyard and Wife, assisted by Mrs. Capt. Samuel W. Roys, was grand."<sup>5</sup> All these functions made up the social life of this community.

Pultneyville, as described in the *Lake Ontario Coast Pilot* of 1877, was a village of 500 people located on the shore of Lake Ontario in Wayne County. Its

*harbor comprises Salmon Creek and a cove at its outlet into Lake Ontario...  
sheltered by a point of land on the west but is exposed to the north and east.*

The village and the farms in the township of Williamson formed a close community; everyone knew everyone else—and what they were doing. The *Commercial Press* saw to that! This paper was published monthly in Pultneyville during the 1860's by John M. Reynolds. And as it was stated on page 3 of each paper, "cost 10 cents per year, paid in advance."

In the 1860's roads were few and bad. Shipping by water was the easiest way. The small schooners of that day did the work of the trucks that we have today. Seafaring—"lake-faring" was an important way of making a living from the beginning of the town in 1811 until after the 1890's. Some sailors and captains combined it with farming, leaving the farms to wives and children when they had a sailing assignment. The shipping business

## PATENT ROCKET HARPOONS AND GUNS.



**FASTEN TO AND KILL INSTANTLY WHALES OF EVERY SPECIES,  
WITH PROPER LINES AND BOATS,  
SUCH AS WERE USED BY THE OFFICERS OF BARK REINDEER IN 1864,  
ALL WHALES ARE SAVED.**

N. B.—Two Months' notice required to fill an Order for the Season of 1865.

— FOR SALE BY —

**G. A. LILLIENDAHL, - - - - - NEW YORK**

*Thomas W. Roys and G. A. Lilliendahl placed this advertisement for their rocket harpoon in the Whalemens' Shipping List and Merchant's Transcript in New Bedford, Massachusetts throughout the 1860's. (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.)*

was affected by depressions and war; so it was wise to have another livelihood.

There weren't many Pultneyville families in the 1860's and 70's who were not involved in some way with shipping, as captains or crew, warehousing or boat building. And several families, in particular the Roys family, were whale hunters.

In the 1850's and 60's Pultneyville was at its best as a port. The harbor had been deep-

ened, the channel straightened and 171 feet of pier had been built by subscriptions. But in 1892 the government closed the custom office. By then port traffic had almost ceased. Finally the pier that the townspeople had built and re-built several times, succumbed to the Lake storms. Today there is little to remind one of the once busy port— only a break wall and a marked channel maintained by the Pultneyville Yacht Club.

There were at least three shipyards that closed after 1874 when the railroad came to Williamson, 4 miles away. It was then cheaper and faster to ship by rail than by schooner. If the flurry of plans made by the village fathers during March and April of 1868 had been successful, the port might have continued to flourish. Their efforts were bent towards bringing the railroad north from Williamson to Pultneyville in anticipation of the benefits to the village and to the other small communities along the way. Perhaps shipping coal to Canada would have delayed the closing of the port for some years. The *Commercial Press* of June 1869 had this statement:

*People all along the proposed line should be willing to do anything within reason to promote this [rail road as the] return freight could be produce and fruit from the farms [and] coal directly from the mines would be cheaper and better fuel than if it stood in the weather for six months. Another reason for the extension of this rail road is the inexhaustible bed of iron ore north of the Ridge which has been tried and mixed with iron ore from Pennsylvania and all the iron manufacturers are anxious to obtain this ore which could be [shipped in] the return cars with a good freight both ways.<sup>6</sup>*

But Sodus Bay became the shipping point.

Boat-building had been important to the business life of the community from the beginning. The schooner *Enterprise* was the first boat built at Pultneyville, in 1811, by Russell Whipple, and owned by Horatio Nelson Throop, whose business career is a story in itself. This was the first of many, as shipbuilding became an important industry as the town grew. All the materials that were needed to build vessels were available in the vicinity, iron ore from the town of Ontario, five miles away, and limestone just south of the present Ridge Rd., to make the metal items for rigging, anchors, etc. There were plenty of trees, although no oak was available. None of the lumber was seasoned but the builders knew which wood would warp and which would not. By placing the lumber that would warp against a wood that would not, they were able to use pine and hemlock or whatever was handy.<sup>7</sup>

Philander B. Roys' sons formed the nucleus of the townsmen who were whalers, along with their cousins, nephews and later grandsons. Many of whom were hard to trace as the names Thomas, Samuel, Philander and Henry were very common in all branches of the family. They made up the officers, and crews on the whale ships. Most had learned sailing and boat handling as children on the Lake. When they were grown, that is 14 or 16 years of age, they went to sea. Most voyages were for about two years but some lasted as long as five or six years. One of the Roys' brothers took his bride on their honeymoon on a whaling voyage to Iceland!

Philander Roys was the first of the family to come, just after the War of 1812, to Pultneyville, as it was then spelled, in Ontario County.<sup>8</sup> There had been Royses sailing out of Connecticut ports since Colonial times. This Yankee family traced its lineage back seven generations and there is a legend that one Robert Roys was chased out of Boston in 1634 for his religious beliefs.

The War of 1812 had closed down shipping and afterwards it was increasingly hard to make a living on the ocean, then the Panic (Depression) of 1818 after the War made matters worse. The western New York area was opening up and many east coast people were coming to establish farms and businesses. Philander settled in a place where there was good farm land and a harbor on a large body of water where he could engage in a business he already knew. Although there is no record of them doing so, it isn't hard to imagine that they built a boat or acquired one as soon as they had provided for their shelter. Their first homestead was south of the present village on Salmon Creek<sup>9</sup>. It wasn't until 1865 that Philander bought the house and lot located in the rear of the Union Church, (which is still being used), from William. F. Miller who was leaving for the rush to the new oil field in Titusville, Penn.<sup>10</sup> As with others who came at this period, after the first few years in the new location, through their industry and success they were able to build homes such as they had left on the coast. These New England-type homes still give the town a Down East flavor.

Philander was a town selectman, very well thought of, who had re-organized the 1811 Pultneyville Lodge No. 159 F. & A. M. in 1850, after it became inactive following the Morgan affair of the 1830's.

Not all branches of the Roys family living in the County were active in whale hunting. Thomas Craggs, a cousin, born in England in 1835 and coming directly to Pultneyville, was a farmer and fruit grower, whose grist mill was on Salmon Creek near where the Pultneyville Yacht Club is today.<sup>11</sup> James S. Roys grew mint near Lyons, the mint capital of the world in this period; Issac S. Roys, another cousin, owned saw and grist mills and served in the 138th artillery during the Civil War along with G. M. Roys and Daniel Roys. In the 1870's Charles Roys was the County District Attorney and Charles K. Roys was a medical missionary doing rescue work in the flooded area in China.

There were other whaling families too. Gilbert Youmans of Walworth, N. Y. carved a ruler of whale bone for Hannah Hopkins of Ontario, N. Y. while on a voyage during the 1830's. A napkin ring, tips for knitting needles and a scissor-like object that there is a question about but may have been used to stretch leather gloves, was made by Richard Russell. All are on display in the Wayne County Historical Society.<sup>12</sup>

The Cuyler name is well-known in Pultneyville for the schooners the family owned, Glen Cuyler was a young crew man on a whaler, as was Henry Gloyd, William Fleming, William Pratt and Albert Pallister. All these men were from the town. Richard "Toby" Greene was born in Rochester and was a shipmate of Herman Melville aboard the *Acusnet*. And Ira Lakey, a native of Marion, N. Y. became the master of the whaler *Siren Queen* in 1853 and later commanded the Arctic.<sup>13</sup>

Getting a crew for a whaling vessel was not always easy. There were many tales of the hard, dangerous work, mean captains and mates, poor food, and uncomfortable quarters. A. B. C. Whipple in *Yankee Whalers in the South Seas* says that recruitment of crews moved inland to the larger ports on the Great Lakes when the supply of labor on the Coast dwindled. In Buffalo, for instance, shipping agents circulated “handbills depicting the excitement of the chase and the fat profits of a voyage.”

In Pultneyville with so many men either captains or crew members recruitment took place right in town among family, friends and neighbors. Whaling provided an opportunity for the young men to see the world and to make some money—to buy a farm—before settling down. But many of the crew members made only one journey. Perhaps they found jobs on the schooners on the Lakes as Byron Brewer did after his whaling voyage. His family owned the schooner *Petrel* which his father, according to a notice in the *Shipping News* in the *Commercial Press*, had lengthened by “putting a piece of about 15 feet in her center”<sup>14</sup> This schooner was active on Lake Ontario for many years. She is mentioned many times in the Pultneyville paper as well as in the *Marine News* in the Rochester papers.

The following statement in the April 1869 *Commercial Press*, the first copy of that paper that I saw a few years ago, seemed so strange and started my search for other material about this man who made such a contribution to a large industry of his time:

*Captain Thomas Roys arrived in town a few days since on a visit, bringing with him his patented harpoon for killing whales. It was a decidedly saucy looking thing.*<sup>15</sup>

As he wrote many years later,

*I commenced whaling at 17 years of age and it has been the whole study of my life ever since.*<sup>16</sup>

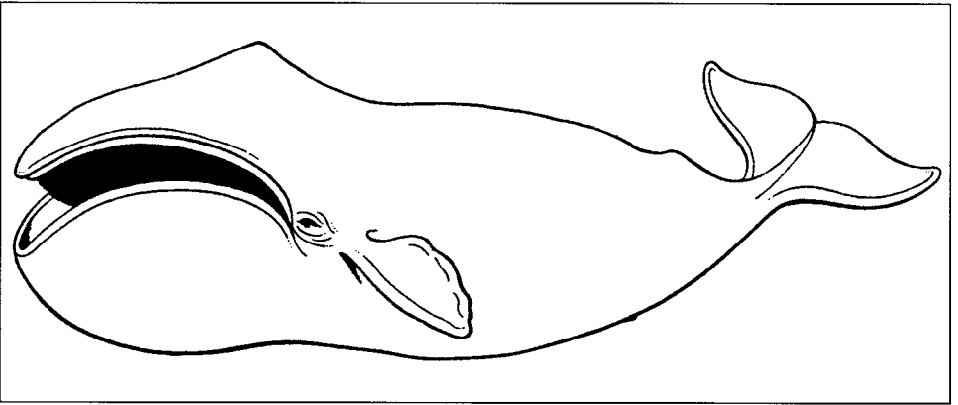
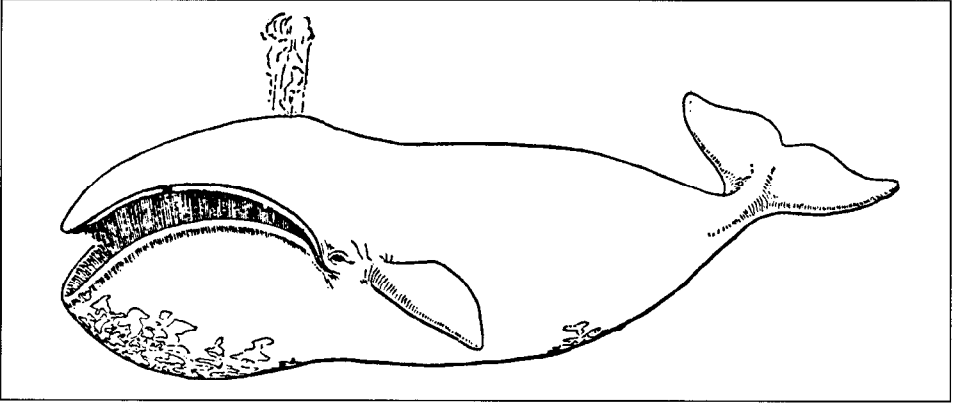
His schooling had ended with grade school and while he desired more education, there was no one, nor time for a new hand to learn anything but his job on the whale ship where every effort went into obtaining oil. It wasn't until he became a mate and later a captain that he had the time to study and read.

He was born on his father's farm in Pultneyville in 1816, part of a large family—nine brothers that we know of, girls weren't counted but it is believed that there were 3 or 4. His mother, Tamimer, had at least a half dozen children before she died in 1816 at the age of 41. His father then married a Massachusetts girl, Orpha Warner, who was 16 years younger than he. Orpha also had at least a half dozen children. All of his brothers and half brothers, except one, were either whaling captains or crew members on whalers or sailed on commercial vessels on the Lakes.

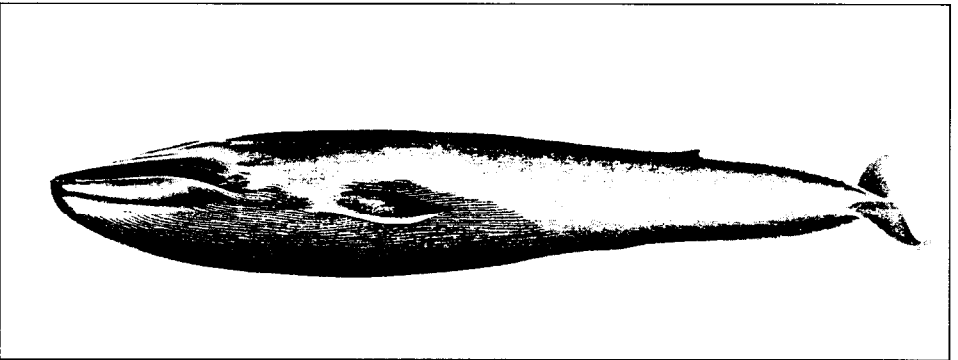
In July 1833, Thomas left home, went to Sag Harbor, Long Island and signed on to his first ship.

*He matured quickly, learning and absorbing the rudiments of his life's trade and earning the appellation “whaleman” instead of being considered a hayseed “lubber.”*<sup>17</sup>

Years later, when writing his memoirs, he remembered those first miserable days as a



*The Bowhead whale was slow moving and attractive to whale hunters. Roys found many of them in the Bering Strait in 1848. Before long they were on the verge of extinction and had to be protected. The "Bunchback" whale below was thought to be a subspecies of the Bowhead, though that is now uncertain. (Bowhead from History of American Whale Fishery by Alexander Starbuck, Washington, D.C., 1876.; "Bunchback" from Marine Mammals of the Northwestern Coast of North America, Charles Scammon, San Francisco and New York, 1874.)*



*The Rorqual blue whale was avoided by early whalers because it could weigh 100 tons and reach an unmanageable length of 100 feet. Roys' invention allowed hunters to go after these profitable whales. (From G. O. Sars, Om "blaaivalen," Christiania, Norway, 1874.)*



greenhand under Captain Henry Green and a tough mate, whom he didn't name.

*We touched at Fayal one of the Western Islands (Azores) to procure vegetables. I had been seasick from the first, lying on the deck, utterly regardless of the men running over me, and when I went below, lying down with coat, hat, and boots all on, and perfectly indifferent to all around me and entirely regardless of my fate. Many of the Portuguese came on board, with baskets of fruit for sale and quantities were bought by the sailors, and when tacking ship the sailors would try to run over and upset the boats and appropriate some of the fruit to themselves; after eating some...I began to feel better and took my turn at the helm for the first time.<sup>18</sup>*

Tom Roys told of the harshness of the mate who on one of the first days he was on the ship told him to "stop" a coil of rope that was on deck. He didn't know what "stop" meant and did not move to do the task, expecting to be told what was expected. Instead, he was exposed to the full wrath of the mate who called him belittling names. In this way he learned what was expected on board the ship.

He tells of his first experience hunting whales.

*After sighting the Cape Verde Islands we saw the island of Tristan d'Acunha where we began to see whales, and I shall never forget my first chase after them. I did not know how to row (a whale boat) and made bad work of it, and the mate found fault with every stroke I pulled and made me believe I scared the whales away, to the great disadvantage of everyone.<sup>19</sup>*

Life at sea agreed with him, inflexible mates, wearisome toil, long monotonous days and all. When a whale was sighted it was adventure, exciting though dangerous and hard work. There were also times, some romantic, some bizarre and certainly unforgettable for a young greenhand. As when his ship went into St. Augustin Bay in Madagascar, he tells of a group of "finely formed" natives who came out to greet them. Their king had just traded for a gun from the ship's captain in exchange for wood and water that the ship needed. He began amusing himself and in "high glee" fired among his subjects, wounding several.

Tom became very good at his job and his first promotion was as boatsteerer in the Hudson. There followed jobs on several other ships and finally he was made the chief officer and then a year or so later, the captain of the whaler Crescent.

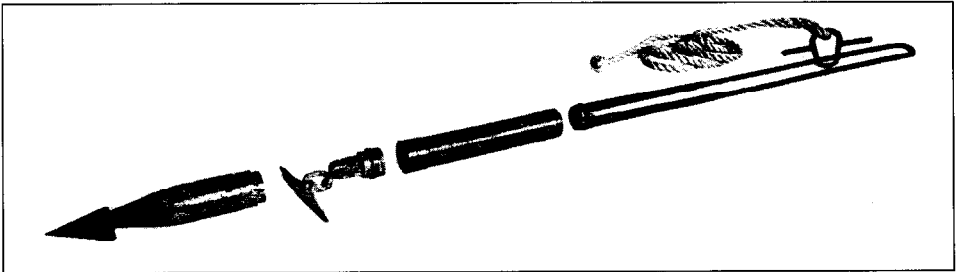
He married Ann Eliza Green, the daughter of Captain Green of his first ship. She died a year or two later after having their one child, Philander, who was raised by Capt. Green's wife and Thomas's aunt in Pultneyville. He grew up to follow his father on a whaler.

Roys was very interested in the sea and bird life around him. He did a lot of reading, and made careful observations and recorded all that he saw. His prime interest was in whales and he became convinced that there were more whales and larger ones in Arctic waters. At this time he was the Captain of the ship Superior and although the crew and his mates objected, fearing that they would never see home again, the Captain took his ship above the 60th parallel. The cold, the thick fog and freezing rain made tough sailing con-

ditions with the constant hazard of “growlers”—huge floating chunks of ice, some as big as the ship. His chief officer became hysterical and all the crew were infected with fear, a mutiny was fomenting and Roys decided to bring his ship back south of the 57th parallel. But all this was forgotten when pods of odd-looking, very large whales appeared and swam around the ship. From his earlier observation Roys had suspected that such whales would be that far north, and identified them as polar whales, bow-heads, one specie of which is named in his honor. They were able to fill the ship to capacity in only 35 days, this usually took 2 cruises. Some of the whales were so large that they couldn’t handle them with the small boats and light gear that they had and they had to let them go.

Then for several years Roys sailed north only to find growler ice and unfriendly natives and no whales. On one such occasion he “gammed” with the captain of a ship sent to look for Sir John Franklin, the English explorer, who had disappeared some time before this. As whale hunting was not successful, and there was a world-wide search for Franklin, he joined the fleet of ships. Lady Franklin sent Roys a packet of official reports to help him in his search. But finding of the Franklin expedition was not successful either. It was not found until 1991.

During the 1851 season 15 boats had been lost because of the ice. Roys decided not to risk his ship but to head south to the Solomon Islands where, as they attempted to fill their water casks, they had a close call with hundreds of angry natives who shot arrows into their sails when they tried to sail out to sea. Besides the usual hazards of the sea, storms, broken rigging, bad food, etc., add ice in the north and unfriendly natives in the south.

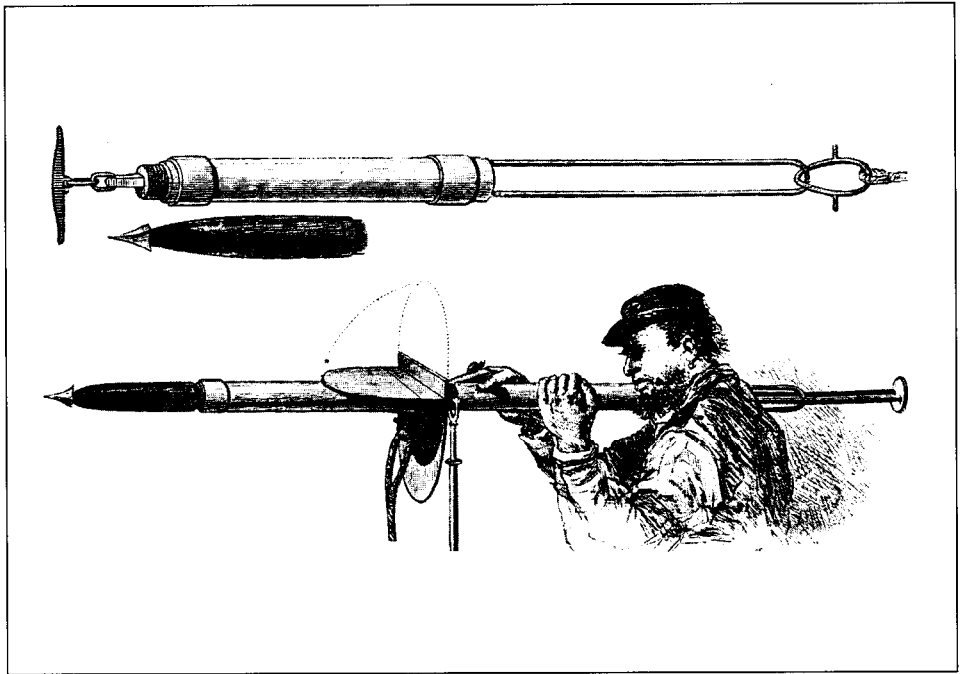


*Only one of Roys’ rockets is known to exist today. It is on display at the Smithsonian Institute. It is shown here disassembled. (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)*

On this trip when Roys took his ship in at Ocean Island in the Gilberts, he unexpectedly found the Inga and his brother, Sam, who was the mate on that New Bedford whaling brig. Sam was apprehensive because his captain was trading too freely with the natives, not observing the precaution of allowing only a few at a time to come aboard. Tom feared for his brother’s safety. Both remembered other ships that had been overcome in similar circumstances. Tom convinced his brother to leave his ship and to join him. Within a month the Inga was attacked by natives and all her people killed except two crewmen who jumped overboard and only returned to the ship after she had been set on fire. They put out the fire but could not sail the 160 ton vessel to the nearest port which was Sydney, Australia and were finally picked up after drifting for 6 weeks.

Tom Roys was a good skipper, admired and respected by his crew and by other captains. But not particularly easy going, he ran a tight ship, even flogging a crew member who disobeyed his orders. However, unlike most captains of whale ships, he kept the Sabbath on board his ships—only the watches were kept and the work necessary to run the ship, done—no cleaning or repairing. The crew had the day pretty much for their own use—except when a whale was sighted.

All during the years when Roys was hunting whales he made careful observation and kept copious notes of all the sea life he encountered, of whales in particular. In 1855, he sent a copy of his notes to Lt. Matthew F. Maury later called the “Father of Oceanography,” who charted the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Sea. This was the beginning of a friendship and a regular correspondence between the two that influenced Roys’ goal for himself. He could have continued as a whaling captain and been in charge of any ship he wanted because of



*The California Whaling Rocket Harpoon invented about 1827 protected the face of the whaler when he fired his harpoon. (From California Historical Society, San Francisco, California).*

the successful hunts that he had had. But his goal was to study whales—and to develop radical new ways of killing them.

Today with the emphasis on protecting the environment, this slaughter of whales is hard to consider, especially as so many were lost, killed but not processed, and needlessly wasted.

In 1856 Roys was lucky on his experimental cruise and had killed a blue whale in Hudson Bay. These whales, one of the rorquals, were the largest whales of all and previously had not been hunted because of their size. Roys had observed these rorquals, the

blues and the humpbacks, discussed them with Maury and written about them in his "Description of Whales." He knew that they could not be taken on the light equipment then in use. He was captain of the Hannibal and the owners refused to let him use heavier equipment or his rocket-gun. They classified him as crazy and dismissed him. He bought and was captain of the William F. Safford, sailing out of Sag Harbor. He equipped her with heavier gear and only two whaleboats, heavier than the five boats she usually carried. He added a variety of his bomb-lances to the usual ones used and hunted off the shores of Alaska, the South Pacific and Iceland.

Roys had taken out a patent in Great Britain in 1857 for an explosive shell and Congreve-type rocket similar to those developed in the War of 1812 and the Napoleonic Wars.

In 1861 he described his latest design in this way:

*... a bomb lance consisting of a heavy gun which fired an explosive missile that would penetrate inside the animal and explode, killing the whale safely and efficiently.<sup>20</sup>*

This rocket-harpoon could be fired from about 100 feet away from the whale, thus enabling the whalers to keep away from the huge animal's thrashing flukes.

Roys wrote in his log about the accident he had in the following way:

*...while standing on the main hatch, I fired the fuse, ignited the powder in the shell and it exploded, blowing up the gun and sending me backwards about eight feet. I did not fall. Looking around me, I enquired who was hurt. There was no reply. Then I saw lying on the deck a finger with a ring upon it which I knew, and looking I saw my left hand was gone to the wrist, but for the moment it had given no pain, only the sensation of numbness. Walking into the cabin I sat down and had it amputated by Roger Bishop, (the first mate and a trusted friend) as well as we could with razors, and we steered for Oporto (Portugal).<sup>21</sup>*

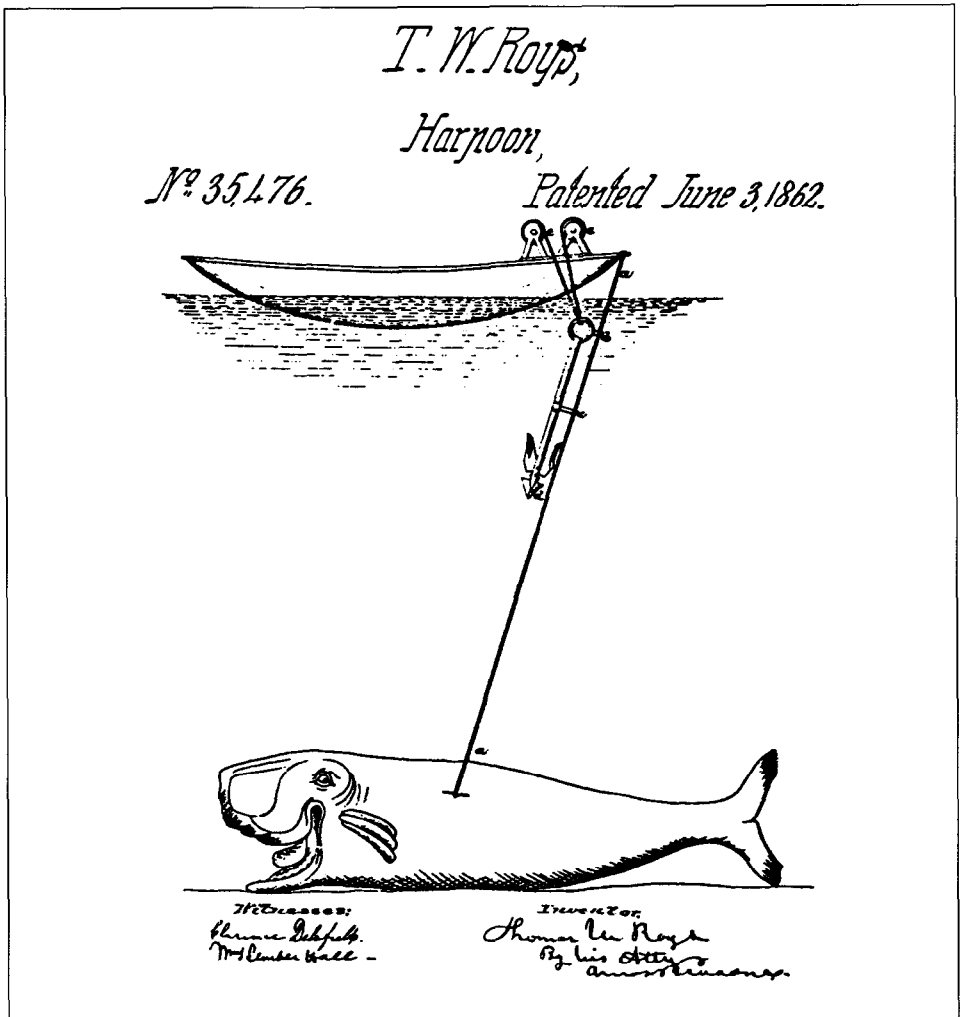
The doctors in Oporto amputated his lower arm and told him he could not live because of gangrene and loss of blood but he paid no attention to them and in two months he was able to go to England. There he experimented with a safer fuse which he patented in England later that year.

His voyage to Iceland during the summer of 1858 was a failure. He fired into numerous rorquals but the missiles ricocheted off the water or from the whale's blubber. The same shell that would pierce iron on shore would not enter the blubber. Roys was so dissatisfied with the whole project that he re-designed his gun to fire a harpoon powered by rockets from a shoulder launcher similar to the present day bazooka. Again he was disappointed to find that the powder charge in the harpoons was not strong enough to penetrate.

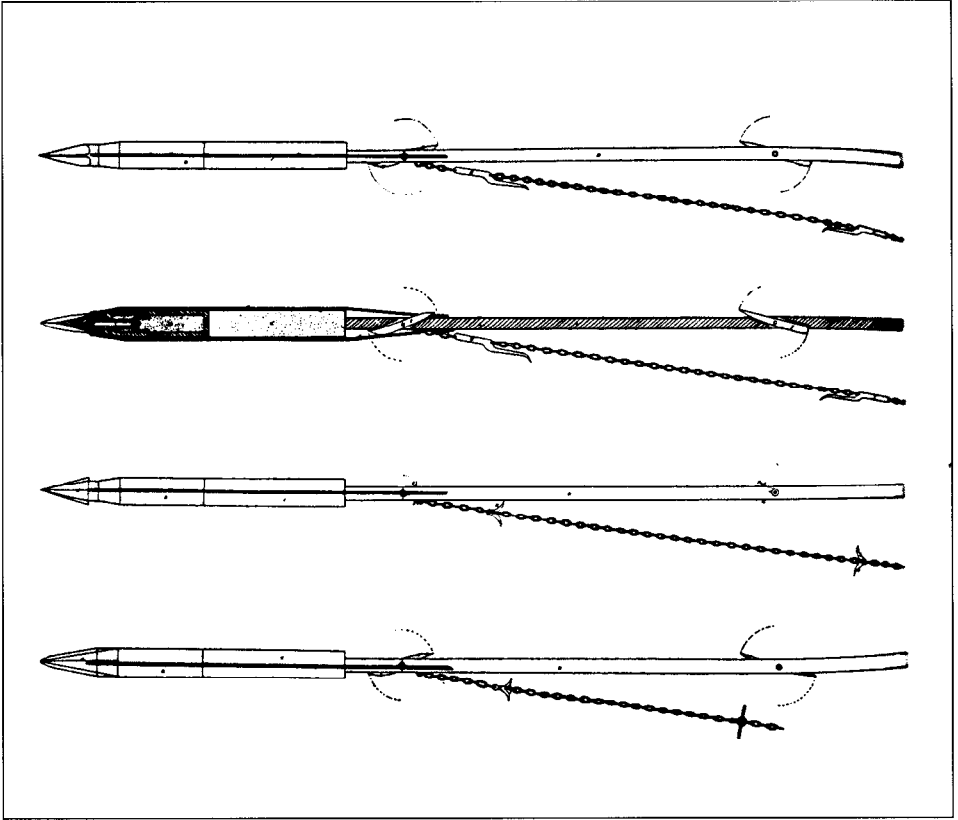
*as weapons they were full of difficulties and errors. A heavy charge of powder would cause the gun to recoil too much and send the harpoon over the whale; or the projectile would go right through the animal. And some charges wouldn't fire at all—if the powder had become damp.<sup>22</sup>*

Although discouraged, he continued to experiment with the amount of powder. He killed two blue whales, "98 footers" on his next voyage. Unlike smaller whales, when they were killed, the rorquals sank. This was another problem that he went to work to correct. He wrote Matthew Maury during this period, "many long weary years have I pursued this object, sacrificing my property, my limb, my friendships, and my loves."<sup>23</sup>

Roys met and married Marie Saliord in 1860. She was French and lived in Lorient, France where he had called on one of his voyages. She was only 20, half his age, and seemed to fall in love with Roys who was a brash, red-headed, red-bearded, an attractive man with some fame. They came to Long Island and settled in Peconic, called "Blubber Row" for the many whalers who lived there. Roys had many friends and former shipmates



In 1862 Roys invented a "whale raiser" which brought a dead whale to the surface of the sea by a line attached to the ship. A barbed harpoon line was driven into the animal with a 200 pound weight before it was pulled to the surface. (U.S. Patent Office, Washington, D.C.)



*In 1857 Roys patented these harpoons which were fired by the rocket. Movable barbs held fast to the whale and the chain held the harpoon and the whale to the ship. (Patent Office, Orpington, Kent, England)*

in the town. Marie was an accomplished pianist and gave music lessons while her husband was away on hunts. Between voyages Roys worked to find additional financial backing to support more experimenting. Their children were born during this period: Thomas Welcome Roys, Jr. in 1864, Willis in 1866, and Mathilda in 1868. Then sometime in 1870, his wife was rumored to have "run off" with a former shipmate. His three children went with her.

During this period, Roys made a trip to the West Coast and was trying to promote his harpoon among the whaling captains there. Unfortunately the captains found the \$25.00 that he was asking for each unit to be too high and not many were sold. Roys received his first U. S. patent on January 22, 1861, and Patent No. 35,474, called an "Improvement in Harpoon-Guns." on June 3, 1862.

His goal, as described in his patent application was to shoot heavy enough bomb-harpoons to kill larger whales.

*Bigger guns are more difficult to aim but are necessary to hurl larger missiles. The firing of large rockets or missiles at sea has hitherto been attended with a great deal of uncertainty in point of effect.*

# MASTERS OF VESSELS!

And all others interested, are hereby publicly cautioned against shipping the following officers of the "LANCASTER," of New Bedford, as it was through their ignorance, inefficiency and utter incompetency that the "Lancaster" was "SKUNKED!"

## WILLIAM HENRY ROYCE, SECOND OFFICER,

Was 3d mate and boatsteerer of the Bark "Black Eagle" for the season of '55, during which time he distinguished himself as an excellent DO-NOTHING, whilst as 2d officer of the "Lancaster" he won for himself the reputation of an extensive KNOW-NOTHING! Too ignorant to catch a bow-head, and afraid as death of a right whale. Would make a good deck walloper.

## CHAS. BUSHNELL, THIRD OFFICER,

Is equally incompetent and worthless. Was boatsteerer in the "Washington" when lost--no oil! Then 4th mate of the "Wm. Badger--no oil! Again 4th mate of the "Huntsville," brought no oil to the ship! And finally 3d dickey of the "Lancaster"--SKUNKED! Was fast six hours to a ripsack which drove him out of the head of the boat and from which he finally cut. Would make a good blubber room hand.

Of the mate we will say nothing, preferring to consign him to the tender mercies of Captain Carver.

Before shipping any of the above worthies, Masters of Vessels are requested to ascertain their true characters.

(Signed by the entire Crew.)

*William Henry, called Henry, had a varied reputation on the whaling ships as this uncomplimentary broadside, circulated in New Bedford attests. He didn't have his brother's skill and was personally disliked enough to have all the members of the crew on his ship chip in to publish this broadside. Only Thomas Welcome Roys of all the brothers was well-regarded throughout the whaling community.*

He continued his patent application, pointing out:

*To unite in a single gun the means of complete control and the capacity for throwing large rockets weighing as much as eighteen or twenty pounds with accuracy, notwithstanding the motion of the vessel and without injury to the gunner or to any one standing near him, is the chief object of my invention.<sup>24</sup>*

His gun was made without a stock or carriage with the barrel shaped and proportioned to balance on the shoulder of the gunner with the firing mechanism within reach while in position on his shoulder. The barrel of the gun or launcher was a cylinder of sheet copper or other metal; fastened around the barrel. In front of and in back of the gunner were two split circular flanges. These were hinged and connected to several valves leading to the firing chamber. These flanges were folded down while the gunner took aim; after firing they popped up by pressure that came through the valves from the discharge. These flanges protected the man's face from backfire and gases. The bomb-harpoon had two moveable barbs that prevented it from going through the whale and from pulling out.

While he was experimenting Roys sought backing from the whaling community of New Bedford. He felt they would welcome his invention as he saw it as a means to

*destroy all chances of the whaling industry becoming unprofitable, which will soon occur unless some one brings forth the means to make other whales available to mankind.*

He claimed he had accomplished three things:

*ability to fasten to them at 100 feet, killing them with the explosion, and fastening hawsers to them so they can be heaved up when they sink.<sup>25</sup>*

Roys almost found the finances needed when arrangements were made to back a voyage by the firm of Charles W. Morgan, the dean of the whaling magnates. Unfortunately Charles Morgan died before the papers had been completed.

After a year of so, in 1862, Roys formed a partnership with Gustavius Adolphus Lilliendahl, a wealthy New York City pyrotechnic manufacturer. Lilliendahl was attracted to the aggressive tone of Roys' advertisements in the papers and to the boastful form letter that he sent to whaling concerns. One such letter read:

*I Estimate that One Million, Two Hundred Thousand dollars is annually lost in the whaling fleet, through the sinking of Whales that are captured by harpoon and line; and to prevent sinking saves all that, besides leaving nothing in the way to prevent the taking of every kind of Whales that inhabit the sea. I have the means to prevent the loss of any Whales sinking on shoal water of 100 fathoms or less. Since the weapon and gun is perfected Whales of every description are killed as easily and as quickly as the smallest bird could be by the hunter, without the slightest inconvenience and the impossibility of the re-coiling of the gun. I wish all persons who may receive this, to keep it and compare my prediction with the proofs of the coming years, and the very day you have the proof that Whales can be prevented from sinking, will also prove the Whaling business is in its infancy, although existing for 250 years.<sup>26</sup>*



Roys and Lilliendahl worked well together and in 1862, they patented an "Improved Apparatus for Raising Sunken Whales to the Surface of the Water," patented at the same time as his harpoon. A barbed "whale-raiser", 10 feet long was sent down the harpoon line. Its 200 pound weight drove it into the dead animal and the hawser secured to it was drawn in by the ship's windlass, bringing the whale to the surface along side the vessel. To further test this equipment in actual use, the partners bought the 150 ton bark, Reindeer and fitted her out for whaling.

On April 3, 1866 Roys took out another patent called an improved "Tackle for Raising Sunken Whales and Other Bodies."<sup>27</sup> This consisted of a block and tackle to which was fitted a counter-weight and a dual set of pulleys connected with huge rubber bands. The goal was to prevent the harpoon from pulling out of the whale when the ship rolled in a sea by taking up the slack in the line attached to the whale. This worked in the same way that a rubber snubber does when used aboard yachts to keep mooring lines taut. This equipment was partially successful.

The most note-worthy step that the partners took at this time advanced the whaling industry into a modern day operation. They established a shore based whaling station under the high cliffs of the east coast of Iceland. For this they made special arrangements with the Danish government to enable them to hunt in these waters and process whales at the land station. Here, while the natives watched in amazement—and occasionally profited when a wounded whale came ashore, the partners set up an oil production unit consisting of high pressure steam vats holding 50 barrels, large presses to break down the blubber before putting it into the vats and special bone grinder machinery to extract the oil in the bones. The grinder and presses were also designed by Roys. This was dangerous work because of the amount of hot oil being handled and there was always the possibility of a boiler explosion. But it was much safer and more efficient than the hazardous age-old method of "cutting in and boiling out" on board ship. And one that has been followed in the industry up to the present time.

Remembering all the difficulties he had had with his crew members on his first trip to the Far North, Roys to set up the crews on each ship with people on whom he could depend—his brothers, other relatives and friends from Pultneyville and Sag Harbor were the officers on the ships. The mates and some of the members of each crew were experienced American whalers but the rest of the crew members were from whaling ships from all over the world. According to Danish law, the vessels fishing here had to be of Danish registry, and the captains had to be Danish citizens. For this reason Andrew, Sam and William Henry Roys became Danish citizens. This arrangement worked well in theory but there were difficulties with the language, orders were not understood, and the fishing techniques and ship board customs of the different nationalities sometimes clashed.

The *Commercial Press* for March 1866 reported:

*"Capt. John G. Roys returned home January 29th having been absent about ten months on a whaling voyage to the coast of Iceland. He will please accept our thanks for the files of Scotland papers."*<sup>28</sup>

Thomas Roys' younger brother figured in one of the flare-ups between crews at the whaling station that occurred at this time. His employment had not been successful. He was considered lazy by his shipmates and he was often seasick—considered a bad omen by whalers. He was on a Danish ship, under an exacting ex-Danish naval captain, O. C. Hammer. His job there was to teach the crew members the use of the new rocket-harpoon and the other American equipment and techniques. But he wasn't a good teacher. Usually he had sailed on a ship commanded by one of his older brothers and he depended this to make up for his lack of skill. So it is strange to find so many references to him in the *Commercial Press* in the years after he returned to Pultneyville, always in relation to the schooner *Union*<sup>29</sup> in which he made his living. He sold the *Union* in 1872, moved to Wisconsin and wasn't heard of again.

In 1866 Roys and Lilliendahl got another U. S. Patent for an improved rocket-harpoon similar to his 1862 model; it consisted of the following parts: the launcher, the rocket itself, a pointed harpoon-bomb screwed into the rocket, the stock of the harpoon of which the barbs and the shank were part. The shank end was formed like a bow or a loop, to which was secured a large iron ring which slipped back and forth freely and to which the harpoon line was attached. When the gun was loaded into the launcher the barbs closed on the shank with the link hanging loose in a special cutout slot in the launcher. The propellant was contained in the stock portion of the harpoon. As the rocket-harpoon left the launcher the barbs sprung open and the securing link slipped to the end of the harpoon shank. The bomb portion of the harpoon exploded after impact, and killed the whale, the barbs held the whale fast until it could be reeled in by the whaleboat. This harpoon was about 7 feet long and weighed 30 pounds. The bomb weighed about 10 pounds and measured about 3 inches in diameter. It could fasten to a whale at 130 feet.

Roys had difficulties with the rocket part of the harpoons; sometimes it was the powder being damp, or with fuses that wouldn't fire, or pistol igniters that refused to work. On one cruise, he decided to take the time consuming dangerous choice of having all the powder burned out of each shell and refilling it. This produced an improvement. The three ships<sup>30</sup> owned by the organization had better yields for that season.

<i>Staperaider</i>	<i>Capt. Samuel Roys</i>	<i>1050 barrels</i>
<i>Vigilant</i>	<i>Capt. William Henry Roys</i>	<i>920 barrels</i>
<i>Sileno</i>	<i>Capt. Andrew Roys</i>	<i>680 barrels</i>

But the 1866 and the 1867 seasons were not satisfying to the partners. When the 1867 season closed on the Iceland operation 90 whales had been killed but only 43 processed, resulting in about 3000 barrels of oil worth about 100,000 Danish dollars. The rest of the whales were lost while heaving them up from the sea bottom. Roys "compensator" did not function as he had hoped. And he found himself in financial difficulties again. Lilliendahl was a wealthy man and as he had the money to put into the station, he stayed on and worked with the Danes for another year.

Roys and Lilliendahl had a friendly dissolution of their partnership and Roys returned to the States. It was at this time that he visited his boyhood home in Pultneyville and

brought with him his "patented harpoon" that was mentioned in the *Commercial Press*.<sup>28</sup> According to the notes in his memoirs he tried to raise money to continue his experiments. And he tried his hand at manufacturing the igniters used in the rocket-harpoons but ran into difficulties. None of the people that he engaged to do this work were able to produce a fool-proof part. Out of funds, Captain Roys signed on for another whaling voyage out of San Francisco at this time.

When the Iceland station finally closed the other Roys captains returned home or took other assignments.

In December 1867 after his return from Iceland Captain Samuel W. Roys had left Pultneyville for San Francisco<sup>32</sup> In April 1869 this appeared in the *Commercial Press*:

*Captain Samuel W. Roys arrived home from San Francisco, California a few days since. He had been in command of a vessel employed in the merchant service. He was at San Francisco at the time the recent earthquake took place. He says the published accounts did not give one quarter of the amount of damage done to the buildings and personal property.*<sup>33</sup>

In July 1869 there was a brief notice in the paper that Capt. Samuel W. Roys had purchased a farm in Nebraska.

There was also this announcement:

*Captain Henry W. Roys, son of Philander B. Roys of our village has arrived home from California having been gone about two years on a whaling voyage on the coast of Alaska.*<sup>34</sup>

During this period the paper also noted that their father was "ill of cancer in the face;" When he died this appeared in the Sept. 1869 paper:

*Philander B. Roys died at his residence in this town, August 15, aged 82 years. Mr. R. selected the chapter for his funeral sermon, and the Rev. Erastus P. Smith, Episcopal clergyman of Sodus to preach from it. Mr. Roys moved from Connecticut to this town about fifty-five years ago, and was one of our earliest settlers, a man of sterling integrity, and a prominent man in town.*<sup>35</sup>

Then in the Nov. 1869 *Commercial Press*:

*Captain Andrew Roys arrived home from Liverpool a few days ago, since having been absent on a two year cruise on the Atlantic and Pacific. He now thinks of making California his future home as he is of the opinion that for climate and farming purposes it can not be beat.*<sup>36</sup>

Andrew Roys was one of the last Roys brothers to come home from the Iceland station. He had stayed on to captain one of the ships of Capt. O. C. Hammer of the Danish Fishery Company when Hammer took over the station from Roys and Lilliendahl. He was with Hammer until the Danish Fishery Company disbanded. He didn't go to California to farm as he wanted to, according to the paper, but headed for Nebraska and may have joined his brother, Samuel. He became one of the first settlers in David City, later the town undertaker, and a prominent citizen who was instrumental in getting a post office in the new town. He had the reputation of telling rousing sea stories. He was the last of the Roys

brothers and passed away on June 18, 1932 at the age of ninety-one.<sup>37</sup>

In November 1869 Captain Thomas Welcome Roys was listed as the master of the whaling steamer Emma out of British Columbia. The main purpose of this voyage and of the others he took during this period, was to promote his rocket-harpoon. He needed new investors so that he could continue experimenting. There were still difficulties, due to the need to hold to the rigid specifications.<sup>38</sup>

Then in 1871, the brig Bysantium, that had carried lumber to Honolulu, was fitted out for a whaling expedition. Her captain, Rufus Calhoun, had agreed to invest \$8,000.00 on the voyage and they equipped the vessel with a tryworks, oil tanks and a good supply of Roys' rocket-harpoons. The weather was very unsettled that year and produced one severe storm after another. One of these bad gales drove the ship on to the rocks in Johnstone Strait off Vancouver Island. The 12 officers and crew got off in boats but took very few possessions. The ship was stove in and could not be hauled off. In the morning they found that the wind and waves were too high to return to her and they abandoned the effort. When the ship floated off the rocks at high tide the natives towed it behind an island and plundered it before allowing her to drift out to sea.

Roys and the others were stranded. The loss of the vessel amounted to \$15,000.00, most of this borne by Captain Calhoun. But the strain of this last failure—though not his fault—was hard for Roys to bear. It was his last attempt to mount a whaling expedition.

What Roys did and where he went during the years between 1872 and 1876 are hazy. There is a listing in the New York City Directory and Roys may have lived there for part of this time. Then he turned up in San Diego in 1876 and joined the crew of a whaler. As was the custom in those days, when he contracted yellow fever they put him off the ship in the Mexican fishing port of Mazatlan. He was found "in the street, sick, destitute, and wandering in mind"<sup>39</sup> by an American doctor, D. M. Brown. Dr. Brown took him into his own home and nursed him but Roys lingered only about a week and died on January 19, 1877. He had no money, only a roll of papers—his memoirs, and patents and letters from his half-brother, Andrew, and from his son by his first wife, Philander. He was identified by these. He was buried in a paupers grave in Mazatlan.<sup>40</sup>

The rocket-harpoon did not die with Roys. Two men, John Nelson Fletcher and Robert L. Suits started to produce harpoons fashioned after the Roys rocket-harpoon with minor changes. They called this the California Whaling Rocket. Roys' old partner Gustavus Lilliendahl gave them certain patents and manufacturing rights and they became the sole manufacturer of whaling rockets. There was no competition. Fletcher and Suits sold several to Pacific Coast whalers and had some very complimentary letters from these captains. They continued to experiment; a heavier charge of powder produced better results, as did making the rocket heavier and charging it with a special high powered black powder.

But in spite of the acceptance of this California Whaling Rocket, it was doomed to fail. By 1880 the petroleum wells of Pennsylvania were producing and natural gas and kerosene were being substituted for whale oil. Whale oil in the 1860's had sold for \$2.55 per gallon; in 1878 the price was 25 cents per gallon.<sup>41</sup>

One of the last rocket-harpoons sold was a used, repainted model that was bought from Fletcher for \$ 16.00 by the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>42</sup>

*Lillian Roemer is a member of the Marine History Committee of the Charlotte Genesee Lighthouse Historical Society and a founding member of the Marine History Society.*

## End Notes

1. *The Commercial Press*, January 1868, p.2, col.2.
2. *IBID*, p.2, col.1.
3. The experiences of Frank Dunning are reported in this undated newspaper clipping owned by Carl Dunning of Williamson, NY and loaned to the author by Pultneyville historian Chester Peters. The account reads: Dunning recalls his father, Frank Dunning, telling how he left Pultneyville at 16 or so to go on a whaling expedition to Iceland. He saw no summer for three years. He left home in winter, all of his time away was spent in perpetual winter and he returned home in winter. For a long period his father was unable to bear the warmth of a stove-heated room. Some tales of the old whaling days are related today by Dunning as his father told them to him. His father's first winter with the expedition saw their outfit harpoon forty-five whales, but only nineteen were taken aboard. It was a most hazardous undertaking. One man sat always in the bow of the whale-boat with a hatchet, alert to cut the rope should the harpooned whale sound and drag the boat and men under with it. Dunning's father later sailed in Lake Ontario schooners. He served for twenty-three years under Captain Pallister (the last surviving Lake captain). Often on putting into Sodus Bay at sundown, his father walked the sixteen miles to Pultneyville to spend a few hours with his wife and family and then walked back to board his ship at sun-up.
4. *The Commercial Press*, January, 1868, p.3, col.1.
5. *The Commercial Press*, April, 1868, p.1, col. 2.
6. *The Commercial Press*, June, 1869, p.2, col. 2.
7. Kane, Robert, "Sailors and Whalers, Lakemen of Pultnerville," *American Neptune Magazine*, October 1974, p. 245.
8. Roys File, Wayne County Historian's Office.
9. Interview with Chester Peters and William Miller, April 19, 1994.
10. *The Commercial Press*, June 1865, p.2, col.2.
11. 1857 map, Wayne County Historian's Office.
12. Roys' File letter dated February 18, 1972 from Mrs. Daniel Ennis, Curator of Wayne County Historical Society to Jeffrey Messing, College of Education, University of Toledo.
13. Morison, Samuel Eliot, "Marine History of Massachusetts," p. 322.
14. *The Commercial Press*, November, 1864, p.3, col.2.

15. The *Commercial Press*, November 1869, p.2, col.2.
16. Schmitt, Frederick P., Cornelius De Jong, Frank H. Winter, "Thomas Welcome Roys," p.1.
17. IBID, p.2.
18. IBID, P.2.
19. IBID, p.3-20.
20. IBID, p.74.
21. IBID, p. 71.
22. IBID, p. 77.
23. Letter to Matthew Maury, November 2, 1858.
24. "Improvement in Harpoon-Guns," Application for U.S. Patent, January 22, 1861.
25. Schmitt, Frederick P. and others, "Thomas Welcome Roys," p.84.
26. IBID, p. 93.
27. U.S. patent number 53684, April 1866.
28. The *Commercial Press*, February, 1866, p. 3.
29. Enrollment form dated May 30, 1867, issued at the port of Genesee, lists the vessel as the Union of Wilson built at Wilson in 1865, 25 tons, 50 feet, 8 inches in length, 13 feet, 5 inches beam and 5 feet draft. John J. Roys and William Swales are listed as owners. sold in 1872 to John Burtiss.
30. Roys' "Notes," Sag Harbor, New York.
31. The *Commercial Press*, November 1869, p.2.
32. IBID, April 1869, p.2.
33. IBID, July, 1869, p.2.
34. IBID. August, 1869, p.3.
35. IBID, September 1869, p.2.
36. IBID, November, 1869, p.3.
37. Thomas Welcome Roys, p. 193.
38. Roys' notes, Sag Harbor Whalong Museum and "Sailors and Whalers, Lakemen of Pultneyville", Robert Kane, American Neptune Magazine, October, 1974.
39. IBID, pp. 203-206.
40. IBID.
41. IBID.
42. IBID.



*Captain Thomas Welcome Roys (1816-1877)*