

Hudson Resident from the Azores

Hunted Whales ~~from~~ ^m Small Boats

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Manuel Avila, now of Hudson, Massachusetts, hunted whales for most of his life from the island of Pico in the Azores. He hunted them in the traditional manner of the Portuguese islanders--in small boats. Recently he talked with the staff of the "Focus on the Family" Project of the Hudson School Department about this traditional form of family self-sufficiency that he knew for some thirty-five years before coming to Hudson in 1969. The interview was conducted in Portuguese by Helem Santos of the Bilingual Department at Hudson High School.

Question:

Weren't you afraid hunting ~~the~~ whales in these canuas (or small boats)?

Manuel Avila: Danger was always present. But we didn't live in fear. The whalers then weren't as nervous as people are today. The elders knew what they were doing. That was their life. Weather was always a problem. And so were the whales. But my father, grandfather and uncles taught us about the weather, and navigation. They taught how to avoid the "bad" whales - the "mean" ones. There were "mean" ones - just like some people. We were taught about "warned" whales - ones that had been harpooned before but managed to break the lines somehow. And when we came back on land we all felt like brothers. We didn't have many accidents, arguments or fights. It was a marvel. People then talked with each other lovingly.

Question:

In pursuing the whales, how far from the waters of Pico (an island in the Azores) would you go?

Manuel Avila: We almost never left Pico. Sometimes we might follow a whale to Sao Jorge, Fai~~al~~ or Graciosa (other nearby islands in the Azores) to kill it. Sometimes we would be out in the ocean for two days and two nights. But most of the time we came in every night.

Question:

Would you go out after the whales in bad weather?

Manuel Avila: No. If it was a south or southwest wind the sea would get dangerous. But north or east land winds on the ocean made bad waves. There's no better machine in the world that can tell the weather than our mountains and the clouds. We always watched where and how the clouds crossed the mountain.

We always tried, if we were out in boats, to stay close enough to see the mountains. Fog was dangerous.

Question:

How did you learn about whaling?

Manuel Avila: You began to learn this as a little boy. Yes, all of us. We began to learn all of it as boys. We would listen to the words of our elders. We would listen to what they said. They worked hard and they too were raised around whaling. And they were not afraid. My father was a whaler as was his father before him. And I went out with both of them as a boy. My uncles were there too. We were together. My elders were knowledgeable without being schooled. They knew how to navigate, particularly in bad weather. They taught me how to anticipate storms and escape from angry whales. The danger signals of nature were known by the elders.

Question:

What was whaling like in the Azores?

Manuel Avila: Whales would appear about forty times a year in the waters of Pico and Terceira. They also appeared around Faial. There was no particular season. Whales came throughout the year. We would see one almost every day, but it wasn't always close enough or the right kind. If they were close enough we could see their trunks. Then we would get into the canuas (small boats - like a long row boat) and go after them if they were the right kind (*i.e. Sperm whales*).

Question:

How many whales would you kill in a year?

Manuel Avila: We usually killed about 35 a year in a boat.

Rarely did we reach 40.

Question:

How did you kill the whales?

Manuel Avila: We would row out to the whale. The whale is frightened by the sound of motors. We would try to get within six feet of the whale. It is necessary to be very strong. We had handsome, strong men who worked with us. In the old days they were all small. When the whale is right in front of you, you throw the harpoon. These are few men who can get the harpoon in when the whale is farther than six feet away. The harpoon is used to grab the whale and ~~stay~~ ^{stays} in him until he comes up again. The lance is used to kill the whale. They are sharp and large, about 20 pounds each. They have no lines on them. The harpoon does.

Some whales take about three or four harpoons with them. That helps to bleed the whale. The whale can sometimes die with just one lance. Sometimes they may take up to twelve. It depends. It dies faster when you cut the vein or hit the lungs. The whale has a lot of blood. Sometimes it bleeds for a whole day and night.

Question:

(How did you kill the whales? (cont.))

(Manuel Avila:) When the whale is actually hit by the harpoon and the lance it dives down into the ocean. We put up a flag so that our companions know that we have it. Then we take our harpoon line and tie it to the end of the line of another canua. Sometimes it takes two or three canuas. We all spread out in the ocean chasing after the harpooned whale. Then we send for a motor boat to take it into shore.

Question:

How would you locate these whales?

Manuel Avila: The person on watch on the mountain can see about 20 miles or so. No one can see more than that. When he sees the whale lift its tail up into the air he calls everyone. The kind of whale we looked for does that. It's the only one. It lifts the tail into the air and then goes down into the ocean. We recognize it because of its tail. It's the only sea animal that does that. Then we know which direction it's going ~~to~~ because of the way it twists its tail. It tells us if it's going left or right, down deep or not. And so we know it.

Question:

What happens after the whale dies?

Manuel Avila: A motor boat comes out to get it and pulls it into shore to the factory (the processing plant). The factory has personnel to cut and clean it. We often did this ourselves in the old days. The factory personnel make everything possible out of it. Fertilizer and oil are made from the melted-down meat. Animal food is made from the meat that isn't or can't be melted-down. What is left is taken to another factory for more processing.

Question:

What was the quality of the waters around the Azores in which these whales were found?

Manuel Avila: Our water there is very different. It's very pure. Here it smells. There in the Azores it's virgin water and the fish taste better.

Question:

What was different about learning to be a young man in a traditional whaling community?

Manuel Avila: We only went to school from ages 7 to 10. Our parents needed us after that. Life was harder there. But we weren't afraid or nervous. We were taught life by the elders.

There was quite a "science" to it. We spent hours and hours with our elders. Our elders aren't like the modern ones of today. And we were proud of them. I had an uncle (Jose Batota) who used to kill more than 50 whales a year. They made a film about him. Not many men could kill more whales than he did.

Also the elders taught us how to save people from ~~drowning~~ ^{drowning}.

I saved someone that way once. We didn't wear life jackets.

Maybe today the modern boys spend too much time in school?

Maybe they know about school. But they don't know how to recognize storms. They haven't been taught to recognize the signals of nature. Years went by without an accident. Today life is dangerous for the young people. Our children go out.

Question:

What was different about learning to be a young man in a traditional whaling community? (cont.)

Manuel Avila: You wonder if something can happen to your

child. An accident? We get very sad.

Question:

What has happened to this traditional form of whaling in the Azores?

Manuel Avila: At one time our small fleet was 14 canuas. Now?

Now there are only two left. And on some days only one goes out. There used to be seven companies hunting whales. Now the companies have gotten together. A man from Lisbon is a representative of an oil company. He owns about 53% of the whaling today.