

A whale of a tale hits the screen in Sisters

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

One of the most extraordinary tales of survival in the storied annals of seafaring will hit the screen in *Sisters* on Friday, December 11. Ron Howard's "In The Heart Of The Sea" recounts the destruction of the whale ship *Essex* by a sperm whale off the western coast of South America in 1820. The surviving crew were cast adrift in the Pacific Ocean in whaleboats, struggling against the sea, against thirst and hunger, to make landfall and seek rescue.

The incident inspired Herman Melville's "Moby Dick."

At the time the *Essex* met its terrible fate, whaling was one of the key industries in the young United States. Whale oil lit homes and businesses around the world. The sperm whale produced dense, waxy spermaceti, which burned spectacularly bright with little soot or residue — making for premium candles in a world

still lit by candlelight. Whale oil also lubricated the machinery of the burgeoning Industrial Revolution. The whales' filtration system called baleen — flexible and strong — was manufactured into consumer products like buggy whips, fishing poles, corset stays and hoops for skirts.

For many critical decades, the world ran on the product of the whale. In the U.S., the trade was centered in New England, with towns like Nantucket booming off the proceeds.

Whaling — like the fur trade that brought the mountain men to the fore, or the trade in ivory that sent bold men with rifles into the African bush to seek their fortune — was an epic, heroic endeavor. Iron men in wooden boats contended with the elements and in hand-to-hand combat with a quarry that could, and sometimes did, kill them. The industry spawned breathtaking tales of survival against all odds. Whalers

traveled vast distances, linking the world together in a skein of commerce, and they fed the engines that drove the early Industrial Revolution.

Whaling was the kind of work that spawns song and legend.

It was also — again like the fur and ivory trades — grotesquely exploitative and profligate. Little thought and less care was given to the long-term viability of the resource, much less any consideration of the ecological morality of slaughter on an industrial scale.

Whaling represented adventure and opportunity to the young men of New England, whose opportunities on shore were limited. Whaling crews were paid in shares, which meant a rich haul could fill a fellow's pockets. Of course, there was a risk of coming home from an arduous cruise with nothing to

show. But the share system, known as the "lay" stimulated the entrepreneurial spirit, and a skilled and lucky whaler could rise from serving on a ship to owning one.

The whaling trade hit its peak in 1858, with 199 U.S. whaling ships plying the waters of the world. Within 20 years, the American trade had crashed. There were many reasons for the crash — over-hunting, a shift toward the use of petroleum products for lubrication and lighting (the era of the gaslamp was at hand). Another significant factor was the very industrial revolution that whaling helped to push into high gear. American wages were climbing, and it was harder to entice young men to risk their lives in months- or years-long cruises at sea for the chance of



WALFANG ZWISCHEN 1856/1907

fortune when they could work in a factory or a steel mill and come home to wife and family. Other countries with lower wages — like Norway and Japan, who are whalers to this day — took market share from the American whalers, and investors shifted into higher-margin ventures.

Like the fur trade, whaling in the U.S. passed into history and legend, leaving behind a trail of carnage — and a legacy of heroic endeavor that helped to build the world we live in today.

"In The Heart Of The Sea" plays at Sisters Movie House starting December 11. For more information visit www.sistersmoviehouse.com.

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