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"Blasted blubber"

"He brought up the idea at dinner one night and all of a sudden, here we are," Raia said, explaining how the Monday night reenactment came about.

Raia, whose family is friends with Spangler, was just looking for something fun to do. The dinner conversation turned to the upcoming anniversary of the whale.

"We thought, 'Why not just make this happen, what's the

harm in it?'" Spangler said. "It sounded fun, and the town needs silly stuff like this. With a median age here in the 60s, it can make things a little tough for those who aren't in their 60s."

Raia, a 15-year-old, thought it would be fun to recreate the incident through a sort of interpretive dance. She wrangled her friends and family to play the whale, and Spangler worked on getting the props. The script for the reenactment came from a now infamous news report that has become famous throughout

the world.

The legend began in 1970 when an 8-ton sperm whale, 45-feet in length, washed up on shore just south of Florence. It was a curiosity for residents and beachcombers at the time, but soon became a bit of a problem as the stench of rotting whale began to overtake the dunes.

Since Oregon beaches are a public right of way (the speed limit is 25 mph, with pedestrians having the right-of-way), the Oregon State Highway Division (now the Oregon Department of Transportation) was tasked with cleaning it up.

The idea of burying the whale was floated but turned down: The ocean tides would surely uncover the beached beast. It could have been cut up to pieces, but who would want to do that? So, according to the Oregon Encyclopedia, Assistant District Highway Engineer George Thornton consulted with a U.S. Navy munitions expert about the issue and decided to treat the carcass as a boulder, using half-a-ton of dynamite to blast it to smithereens. Scavengers such as seagulls, crabs and "whatnot" would gulp up the remainders.

KATU television news reporter Paul Linnman showed up to cover the event and interviewed Thornton just before the whale demolition.

"Well I'm confident that it will work," Thornton said. "The only thing is we're not sure just exactly how much explosives it'll take to disintegrate this."

"Is there any chance it might be more than a one-day job?" Linnman asked.

"If there's any large chunks left," Thornton replied. "We may have to do some other clean up, possibly set another charge."

The dynamite was placed on the leeward side of the whale, in hopes that the majority of the explosion would go out to sea. Then, when the tide washed back in, highway crews would haul away or bury what the seagulls didn't eat.



PHOTO BY JARED ANDERSON/SIUSLAW NEWS

On the 48th anniversary of Oregon's exploding whale, a group of Florentines came together to reenact the explosion through "interpretive dance" on the beach near Driftwood Shores.



At 3:30 p.m., police began moving the 75-odd spectators back to safety, a quarter of a mile away unless things went wrong which, of course, they did.

At 3:45 p.m., Thornton gave the signal to push the plunger, and a plume of sand and whale 100 feet high erupted into the air.

The initial explosion brought cheers from the onlookers. A moment later, one woman said, "Here comes pieces of... MY GOD!"

"The humor of the entire situation suddenly gave way to a run for survival as huge chunks of whale blubber fell everywhere," Linnman reported. "Pieces of meat passed high over our heads, while others were falling at our feet."

Multiple cars were hit with the ensuing debris.

"My insurance company will never believe it," spectator Walter F. Umenhofer told the Siuslaw News in 1970. His car was crushed by a three-foot-square hunk of blubber.

"The blast blasted blubber beyond all believable bounds," Linnman reported.

The resulting remains were too big for any seagull to handle, and it didn't matter anyway. They were all scared off, despite the abundance of bits of whale spread along the beach. Work began on burying the hundreds of chunks that were strewn across the area.

This is the incident that played out on Monday night, sans cars being flattened and the spraying of guts. One of Raia's friends played Linnman, who gave a word-for-word report over the loudspeaker. Spangler played Thornton and Raia and the rest of her friends played the whale.

Just after the "whale" exploded, the 1980s pop hit "Don't you Forget About Me" played over loudspeakers as the participants laughed and hugged with the 20 or so onlookers. A small dance party ensued in what Spangler and Raia deemed a successful evening. However, the event did not come without its own controversy, as Florence's exploding whale is something of a touchy subject for some in town.

41 beached sperm whales

"I've gotten some feedback from people, asking, 'Why would you do that, it's an embarrassment to the town?'" Spangler said. "But it happened. And it's really funny! The original news footage is hilarious and amazing. Sure, it's not the proudest moment of well-thought-out-ness. But

it's a common occurrence, and disposal methods vary. This was not one of the better ones."

Raia agreed, saying, "In my opinion, it was a really stupid idea. Yeah, the whale is going to disintegrate. How would that work?"

In fact, the embarrassment of the incident occurred soon after the whale first exploded. One songwriter was reported looking for a group to record his latest ballad, "Blow Whale Blow," according to the Siuslaw News in 1970. Residents visiting the South Jetty were seen carrying gas masks, and sea gulls continued to avoid the area.

But Gunderson, whose shirt art depicts the beached whale in mid-explosion, thought of the incident a little differently.

"We were really embarrassed for a long time, but I disagree with that," he said. "It was a scientific experiment. We didn't know what was going to happen, and now we know. We don't do it anymore."

Actually, dynamite has been used to explode whales since 1970. In 2001, the carcass of a Southern Right whale floating off the coast of Southern Australia led to a school of sharks feeding on it, and curious boaters coming to see the frenzy. In fact, the boaters made the habit of actually climbing onto the dead whale for laughs, including a small child.

The incident was becoming untenable, so authorities decided to use explosives to blow up the belly of the whale.

And sometimes beached whales explode without the help of TNT. Putrefaction of beached whales builds up gases such as ammonia, hydrogen, methane and sulfide, which can swell the body. In 2004, biologists were transporting a dead sperm whale from a beach through the city of Tainan in Taiwan when the whale accidentally exploded, creating a river of blood and guts down city streets.

An unexpected explosion of a whale became an internet meme in 2013 when biologists on the Faroe Islands attempted to cut up a beached sperm whale to harvest the bones for a museum exhibit. A video shows a biologist, dressed in an orange hazmat suit, carefully cutting into the whale when suddenly a geyser of guts came exploding out. The biologist was unharmed as they ran like crazy from the gushing gore.

But Gunderson is right: Most whale disposals are not done through explosives.

"And the people who blow it

up usually don't do it twice," he said.

The Oregon Highway Division learned their lesson from 1970. In 1979, 41 sperm whales beached themselves near the same location in Florence, and the idea of dynamiting was quickly passed over. Instead, the whales were buried in the sand.

And Florence had hoped the tale of the exploding whale would be buried in the sand as well, until 1990 — when Pulitzer Prize winning writing Dave Barry wrote in his syndicated column about the event, having just viewed the Linnman video.

"I am absolutely not making this incident up; in fact, I have it all on videotape," Barry wrote before going into a play-by-play of the explosion.

"There was no sign of the sea gulls, who had no doubt permanently relocated in Brazil," Barry wrote. "This is a very sobering videotape."

In 1994, an abridged version of the article was re-posted on the internet, but without Barry's name attached to it. Readers believed that the exploding whale incident had just occurred and freaked out, flooding ODOT with outraged calls. It's at this point Florence's exploding whale became one of the first viral internet stories.

By the time YouTube came around and the KATU video was uploaded, the story was a worldwide sensation. As of this writing, various postings of the video have garnered over 10 million views.

"I'm originally from Texas, and I knew about this before I moved here," Spangler said. "It is a big thing, and that's really awesome."

In fact, Florence's exploding whale is a worldwide phenomenon.

"I'm blinded with whale guts!"

The go-to resource for exploding whale information is the website theexplodingwhale.com, created by Steve and Jen Hackstadt. The site began in the early 1990s on a webserver in the Department of Computer and Information Science at the University of Oregon to help spread the KATU video. Soon, other information about the incident was added, and now the site is home to dozens of articles and videos discussing exploding whales throughout the world.

Here are just some of the pop culture gems the website lists when it comes to topic of exploding whales.

See WHALE page 10A

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