

There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own.

- Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

The Essex disaster is not a tale of adventure. It is a tragedy that happens to be one of the greatest true stories ever told.

- Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea, The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex*

Oil. The day in early July 2010, at the TAH seminar when a classmate introduced me to the story of the whale ship Essex, oil was in the headlines. Not whale oil but petroleum, beneath the sea gushing from a broken wellhead one mile below the surface of the Gulf of Mexico. Two months prior, an explosion on the oil rig platform Deep Water Horizon killed twenty oil workers and destroyed the well head. As a result, oil began gushing into the Gulf of Mexico for almost three months damaging the environment and coastline of the gulf states, the economy of the gulf states and the Gulf itself. After reading Nathaniel Philbrick's book about the whale ship Essex, the seemingly unconnected events of the Deep Water Horizon and Essex appeared to me to be similar in terms of the human and natural cost required to satisfy man's desire for energy to fuel society's continued existence and future growth. Both rig and ship were located far from land and home, both catastrophes were caused by the object of their purpose, and bad decisions by those in positions of authority extended the duration of the suffering.

The Deep Water Horizon oil platform was situated in water one mile deep due to the environmental restrictions placed on the domestic oil extraction industry not to drill in shallow water close to shore. The technological difficulties would be lessened, but environmental concerns trumped cost savings. The industry was adapting to commercial realities. The whale ship Essex, was hunting for whales in the middle of the Pacific Ocean two thousand miles from the west coast of South America, an

area new to the whaling industry, because of the commercial realities affecting the domestic whaling industry. Philbrick begins his book with a detailed description of the home island of the Essex, Nantucket. The original colonial inhabitants were hunting whales by 1690 in twenty foot boats. The whale blubber was boiled down and used to make candles and as a lubricant. In 1712 the first sperm whale was harpooned off of Nantucket. The oil from the sperm whale was of a better quality and it gave off a more luminescent quality of light with less smoke and soot than the oil of other types of whales. An additional bonus or curse, depending on which end of the harpoon one was, was the sperm whale's head contained a reservoir of even superior oil, which did not require much refining and could be ladled directly from the whale's head into casks. The oil in the head resembled human seminal fluid and was referred to as spermaceti, and it was from this that the whale received its name.

Eventually Nantucket became one of the main commercial whaling ports along with other seaports in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, and Massachusetts. By 1774, three hundred fifty commercial whaling ships were sailing into the Atlantic Ocean to hunt sperm whales. By late 1776 the American whaling industry almost totally collapsed due to the British blockade on colonial shipping. In 1781 the industry began to rebound, but continued British pressure on American merchant shipping did not allow for a robust recovery. It was not until after the war of 1812 that American commercial shipping and whaling in particular began to expand very rapidly. By 1850, there were seven hundred thirty six whalers sailing from the above mentioned seaports. The whaling industry employed 70,000 people during this time. In 1819, the year of the Essex's fateful journey, Nantucket alone accounted for seventy whale ships. By 1843, sperm oil production peaked to 5.26 million gallons. All whale oil production peaked in 1845 to 11.59 million gallons. The discovery in 1859 in Pennsylvania of petroleum was the beginning of the end of the American whaling industry. Then the Civil War which accelerated the decline in 1861. Thirty seven New Bedford Massachusetts whale ships were sunk during the war. Also, the invention of spring steel replaced flexible whale bone for industrial and commercial uses. By

1871 American and foreign whalers were venturing as far as the Arctic Ocean to pursue the dwindling number of whales. As a result of the diminishing whale stocks, voyages for the whalers grew in duration for the fewer number of whales that were more difficult to find in the same size ocean as before.

As early as 1819, the Nantucket whalers were required to sail into the Pacific Ocean in search of sperm whales. After rounding Cape Horn on the southern tip of South America, they pushed further and further northwestward repeating the process of depleting the whale stocks as they went. A process begun in the Atlantic and now being repeated in the Pacific. Two to three year voyages were not uncommon. The Essex left Nantucket on August 12, 1819, and it was fifteen months later on November 20, 1820, that the Essex was sunk by a sperm whale. The ship was on the other side of the world from Nantucket, already more than a year at sea, due to commercial realities, when it was rammed twice by a sperm whale and sunk. The entire crew of twenty managed to get into three small whale boats and after scavenging some supplies had to decide into which direction to sail. East or west? South America was due east 2,000 miles away, but they would have to sail south 1,000 miles to pick up the westerly trade winds they would require to get to South America. To the west only 1,000 miles away were the Marquesas Islands, a relatively large group of islands some of which were rumored to be inhabited by cannibals. The first mate Owen Chase pressured Captain Pollard to sail toward South America. The captain protested but agreed to Chase's demand which was heartily supported by the crew. It was this lack of leadership and bad decision by the captain which put into motion the tragic events for the crew. The desire to fear a rumor resulted in the crew resorting to that which they sought to avoid. They decided to put their faith in the sea and their ability to navigate and sail it.

It took three months and almost three thousand miles of difficult sailing, thirst, hunger, and cannibalism, that five sailors were rescued from two boats within sight of South America. Three sailors

choose to stay on Henderson Island, a month into the journey after 1,000 miles. They were eventually rescued. The five sailors in the two boats were found sitting among the bleached bones of their comrades, sucking the marrow from inside their bones to stay alive. The survivors were rescued in February of 1821 and made it home to Nantucket in June of that year. News of their rescue reached Nantucket before they themselves physically returned. The sailors' ordeal was passed ship to ship and eventually became a global news story. Owen Chase published an account of the ordeal in November 1821. It became a best seller and eventually was used as a reader in many grammar schools. The story was repeated across the entire country and made it to Europe.

Herman Melville met Owen Chase's son in the Pacific Ocean during his own period of whaling work and eventually made it to Nantucket and met Owen Chase himself. In 1841 Melville read Chase's account of the sinking and survival. It was ten years later that Melville published *Moby Dick* which ends with a white whale attacking and sinking the whale ship. Unfortunately for Melville, his book was not well received and he quit his very successful literary career to live out his days as a customs inspector. It was not until the 1920s that Melville's *Moby Dick* was recognized as a great work of literature and identified as a quintessential American novel. It was in 1928, October 28th, that the last American whale ship made port in San Francisco.

According to Philbrick, "before the discovery of petroleum, the oil business did not involve drilling holes in the earth, but killing sperm whales, ripping off their blubber and boiling it down to oil. It was Nantucket sperm oil that was lighting the streets of London, that was lubricating the machines of the emerging industrial age..... In the early 19th century, Americans were aware of Nantucket's role in the global business....So it is no accident that Melville hit upon the Nantucket whalers." Melville in *Moby Dick*, describes the whale "Retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect." The

representation of the whale as nature, as a blind brute force, unforgiving and all encompassing and continuing, brings me back to the Deep Water Horizon disaster.

The tragedy of the Essex and her crew, in the pursuit of whales for oil, occurred 190 years ago. Here is human kind still in search of that energy source to help power the machines and to provide light to ward off darkness. It is still a dangerous business. When 'In the Heart of the Sea' was brought to my attention I did not think that story would get me to research America's whaling industry beyond what the book included. Beyond that I did not imagine a connection and similarities between the whale ship Essex, whale oil, and petroleum's Deep water Horizon. My extended research brought me to book by Neil Hanson titled 'The Custom of the Sea'. It is the story of three British sailors surviving a ship wreck off the coast of Africa in 1884 for four weeks in a dinghy, by killing and devouring a seventeen year old cabin boy. After their rescue off the coast of Brazil, the three survivors were prosecuted for murder. Two were found guilty and served six months, then released. Eating human flesh is not illegal, but murder is. That case brought attention to the question of sea worthiness of insured ocean going vessels. In 1884, 560 British ships were lost at sea, their owners collecting large insurance payments and not paying the lost sailors wages. It was the insurance companies that began to petition Parliament to require stricter safety requirements for ocean going ships. The short term greed of the ship owners was overcome by the long term sustainability of the insurance industry. I will think of that when my next automobile insurance premium comes due.