

Scrimshaw

ART OF THE WHALEMAN

On January 22, 1829, the Nantucket whaleship *Susan* lay becalmed off the coast of Japan. On the deck slick from whale oil, seaman Frederick Myrick sat laboring over a glistening whale's tooth, jackknife in hand, perspiration running from his forehead into his homespun. Painstakingly, he chiseled the finishing touches into the intricate carving, then carefully rubbed the design with India ink. This was the last of a series of seven whale's teeth whaler Myrick had carved on his voyages, and he scratched into it this motto:

*Death to the living
Long Life to the killers
Success to sailors' wives
Greasy luck to the whaler.*

Today all seven carved whales' teeth, depicting various whaling scenes, are on display at Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, specimens of the earliest and best in American scrimshaw. Frederick Myrick is acknowledged to be a past master of the art.

What is scrimshaw? It is the sailors' handiwork, the distinctive folk art of the American whaler, who worked in bone, wood or rope to create intricate carvings, useful or decorative objects for the folks back home. Scrimshaw includes the carving of whale tooth and walrus tusk, and the ingenious use of whalebone, tortoise, and seashell as inlay for wood. In practicing his art, the whaler used only his jackknife, sometimes implemented by a small saw, sharpened harpoon fragment or sail needle. The word applies both to the practice of the craft and the product itself.

Since whaling voyages often lasted for two or three years, there was plenty of leisure available between long cruises on the whaling grounds. The excitement and adventure of the chase were followed by endless days of routine, when boredom and homesickness plagued the whaler. Then it was that he turned to carving scrimshaw. Perhaps the meticulous work involved lightened his spirits and brought him closer to loved ones at home.

When the whaler's job was done and the captured whale "cut in", (blubber cut off and stored) the bones and teeth suitable for scrimshaw were cleaned. Often they were trailed behind the ship until washed clean by the salt water. Then the first or second mate in charge doled out the whale ivory to those who wanted to carve.

The tooth of the sperm whale provided a remarkably good base for a test of scrimshaw skill. The tooth was prepared with great care after having been cleaned and dried out. It was then smoothed, polished with pumice or ashes from the tryworks, where the blubber was melted into oil, and rubbed with the palm of the hand.

Walrus tusks, much larger than the whale's teeth, were eagerly sought for scrimshaw. The tusks were considered to be equally good for working, and they provided some variety as well. Etchings on these included naval battles, patriotic motifs, all types of ladies ranging from Greek goddesses to South Sea Island belles, and of course many whaling scenes.

The designs on the teeth were not



Sketch by Gordon Grant,
from book "Greasy Luck."



Heavily-detailed whales' teeth showing battles of Lake Champlain and Lake Erie.

Patriotic and battle motifs were popular subjects of seamen. From Mystic Seaport collection.