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The Boston Globe

The lure of whaling, the reality and lore

By Sam Allis

Globe Staff / May 10, 2010

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Thanks to Herman Melville's masterpiece "Moby Dick," the whaler is as much an American archetype as the cowboy. Picture him standing, poised to launch his harpoon into a huge, dangerous creature close by in choppy seas.

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INTO THE DEEP: America, Whaling & the World
American Experience
On: WGBH, Channel 2
Time: Tonight, 9-10:30

Filmmaker Ric Burns presents an absorbing look at such men and the rise and fall of American whaling in "Into the Deep: America, Whaling & the World," which airs tonight on WGBH. He wrote, directed, and coproduced the program, which rises on tremendous research, much of it about America's whaling capitals, the Quaker communities of Nantucket and New Bedford.

Burns mixes rich reporting on the industry with a sense of its darkness, myths, and danger. American whalers were the best in the world. They perfected the art of finding and killing whales and rendering whale oil in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the golden age, which ran roughly from 1820 to the early 1850s, our whale ships were ubiquitous, harvesting huge amounts of whale oil in the offshore grounds of the south Pacific, thousands of miles west of South America. With little to guide them, they became explorers and mappers as well.

Whalers were willing to face great hardship and years away from home because of the phenomenal return on the spermaceti wax in the head of a sperm whale that, when reduced to oil, served as America's major illuminant until petroleum was discovered in 1859. The industry was no different from any other in this country. At its heart was the defining American craving for money.

Life aboard whale ships was horrific, but that reality was trumped by the timeless romance of the wild sea and the primordial urge to hunt and kill whales. Quaker whalers displayed a brutal side of their pacifist nature in their savage pursuit of the animal, oblivious to its risk of extinction.

American whaling, which goes back to the late 1600s, is marbled with maritime legends. Amid them is a true story on which "Moby Dick" was based. Nathaniel Philbrick wrote in his award-winning book, "In the Heart of the Sea, the Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex," about a Nantucket whaleship far off the coast of Peru that in 1820 was rammed twice by a huge whale, sinking the vessel and killing most of the crew. Eight survived, including five in long boats who made it thousands of miles east to safety, having resorted to cannibalism to stay alive.

Burns stages a decent reenactment of the Essex ordeal, and he does his best to illustrate the whaling story with limited resources. He relies heavily on marvelous period paintings of the hunt, along with grainy film footage from the



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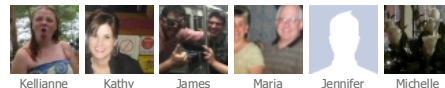
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final days of the industry. The experts on the program, dominated by Philbrick, are authoritative, and actor Willem Dafoe narrates crisply.

Melville arrived in New Bedford as a young man in 1840 and promptly signed on to Acushnet, a whale ship bound for the South Pacific. It was aboard this and other vessels that he soaked up the truth of whaling. By a fluke, he was given a copy of the memoir of an Essex survivor, and in 1851 he published his great novel, to stinging reviews.

“Into the Deep” is elevated by the poetry of Melville’s words from “Moby Dick,” read by the actor Robert Sean Leonard. They speak as no others can of the terror and beauty of the ocean, and man’s dark pursuit of treasure in it.

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