

From the Sag Harbor Express

Success and Tragedy of Sag Harbor's

Most Famous Whaling Captain

Thomas Welcome Roys was Sag Harbor's, and arguably America's, most remarkable whaleship captain. He was the first to sail north through the Bering Strait into the Arctic Ocean. He conceived a rocket-powered harpoon to hunt the biggest prey. He developed land-based try-works in remote parts of the world that extracted more oil from whale carcasses. He wrote a book that studied 18 types of cetaceans. And he was one of the first to realize that over-fishing could endanger the whales' survival. Tragically, he died penniless in a tiny Mexican town, depending on the kindness of strangers for a decent burial.

According to Schmitt, De Jong and Winter, co-authors of an eponymous book about Roys (sometimes spelled Royce), he was born on a farm in Pultneyville, NY in 1816. At age 17 he shipped out on the Sag Harbor whaler Hudson under Captain Henry Green. His first chase off the Cape Verde Islands fascinated him and he signed on for voyages on Gem, Josephine, Superior and William F. Safford. In 1841, now 25 years old, he became skipper of the Sag whaler Crescent. Captain Green must have approved of him because in August 1843 Roys married the captain's daughter Ann Eliza.

Later, while recovering from an altercation with a whale in the northern Pacific, he learned about Arctic Ocean whales from a Russian seaman. On a long voyage aboard the Superior, after failing to find whales in the southern Pacific Ocean, Roys headed north for the Bering Strait and the Arctic. Those seas were so unexplored and so daunting at the time that his

first mate Jim Eldridge burst into tears when he learned of their destination. Fortunately bowhead whales in the Arctic proved easy prey and Superior returned to Sag Harbor in May 1849, after 21 months at sea, loaded with oil and baleen worth \$100,000. Even the British Lords of the Admiralty recognized his daring feat. Most crewmen considered Roys “stable, fair and just,” yet he obviously ran a tight ship. In Valparaiso during another voyage, on Christmas Eve he hauled on deck the ring leader of six malcontents and ordered him flogged. In San Francisco he turned over the mutineers to a U.S. Navy ship.

Roys and several friends bought the Sag whaler William F. Safford and outfitted her with special harpoon guns he had designed. Untested and untried, one of the guns misfired during an exploratory voyage in 1856 and blew away Roys’ left hand. A couple of months later, he was chasing whales again and borrowing money to work on endless improvements of his invention. Even after killing whales, another major problem was their tendency to sink, so Roys went about devising gear to raise sunken whales, though their huge weights proved too much for the mechanism to succeed.

Roys started chasing whales in the North Atlantic and while visiting Lorient, France, met and married Marie Salliord, Ann Eliza having died in childbirth. Years later, Marie reportedly ran off with one of Roys shipmates. After much trial and error, and borrowing from investors, Roys rocket-propelled harpoon gun evolved into a seven-foot long, shoulder-fired weapon something like WW II bazookas. (The Sag Harbor Whaling Museum owns a model of the launcher, and holds many of his logs and papers.) He partnered with Gustavus Adolphus Lilliendahl, a pyrotechnic manufacturer, and their innovations were considered the link between old and new style whaling. A Norwegian, Sved Foyn, and O.C. Hammer, a Dane, won great

success with their own cannon designs and Roys' new venture petered out. Making matters worse, with the discovery of petroleum, the price of whale oil was dropping.

But Roys never gave up. The Sag Harbor Corrector, March 10, 1866, reported the success of the Sag ship Reindeer in catching giant blue whales. Roys and two of his brothers manufactured and tried to sell their new equipment, despite what the Corrector called the "crochetical" attitude of old-time seamen.

Roys was unheard of for many years, then turned up in 1876 in San Diego, worn out by a lifetime of long voyages, financial reversals, and failure of his inventions. He joined a ship but had contracted yellow fever and was put ashore at Mazatlan, Mexico. He was found "in the street, sick, destitute and wandering in mind" by American doctor D.M. Brown who took him into his own home. Roys died a week later, on January 29, 1877 of stroke, leaving only a roll of papers in his pocket. American Consul E.G. Kelton collected \$60 from friends to bury the indefatigable but unfortunate Thomas Welcome Roys.

#

Word count 763