

Pender Harbour's pioneering role in the live capture of orcas, Part I

By Brian Lee

In the 1960s, most considered a whale as just another fish.

So when a group of Pender Harbour fishermen started capturing whales for sale to various aquariums, few saw a problem with it.

At the time, orcas were considered vermin by much of the coastal B.C. population.

It was commonly thought that killer whales were dangerous to man, their numbers were greater than they were and they ate too many salmon.

In a province that relied heavily on salmon for income, it shouldn't

surprise anyone that even a whale would be disposed of if it got in the way of making a buck.

Navy planes used orcas for target practice and the department of fisheries even set up a large-calibre Browning machine-gun on the shore of Quadra Island to control, what they thought at the time, were growing numbers of these "blackfish."

Luckily for the whales, the Browning was deemed too dangerous for residents on the other side of Seymour Narrows so they scrapped that plan without firing a shot.

But that didn't mean the whales were left alone.

Killer whales were characterized as man-eaters and it was properly accepted to shoot at a whale if given the opportunity – especially if you were a fisherman.

As Bruce Obee wrote in his 1992 book *Guardian of the Whales*, one-quarter of the whales caught for aquariums in the 1960s and '70s bore bullet wounds.

In the summer of 1964 no one at the Vancouver Aquarium believed that a whale could be caught live.

In fact, they weren't even trying to catch one live the first time it happened.

The aquarium merely hoped to get their hands on an intact carcass so

sculptor/fisherman Sam Burich could produce an accurate model for display.

That first whale, Moby Doll, was harpooned off Saturna Island and shocked many when it turned out to be highly intelligent and gentle.

It was also resilient enough to survive getting towed back to Burrard Inlet with a harpoon in its back.

Moby Doll lived only three months but that was long enough for Burich to complete his sculpture, which hung in the foyer of the Vancouver Aquarium for many years.

More importantly, Moby Doll captured people's imagination.

In June of 1965 salmon fisherman Bill Lechkobit, with the help of friend Lonnie McGarvey,



Anne Clemence photo

A group of school kids from Madeira Park travelled across to Garden Bay to view "Pender" in Eddy Reid's *Defender I*. The black boat to the left is Sonny Reid's *Instigator One*.

unwittingly captured an orca in his net at Namu on the central coast.

Ted Griffin, owner of the Seattle Aquarium, paid \$8,000 for “Namu” and towed it all the way from Namu to Seattle in a triangular pen.

By the time the whale reached Deception Pass in Washington, the entire world was watching and Namu had become an international celebrity.

Namu only lived for a year but Griffin was hooked and immediately went into business catching whales himself.

Two years later in 1967, Griffin provided the Vancouver Aquarium with a female, Skana, its first resident killer whale, for \$22,000.

Suddenly there was a healthy market for killer whales and aquariums from all over the world were offering huge sums for a live capture.

Meanwhile, back in Pender Harbour, fisherman Cecil (Sonny) Reid had been following this story with mild interest when his dad mentioned he should go out and try to catch one.

In February of 1968, a pod of orcas came into Pender Harbour, probably following the schools of spring salmon who were themselves following the schools of herring.

“I just happened to have my San Juan net still on the drum — which is a lot deeper and touched bottom — so



Garden Bay Pub Collection photo

Onlookers are treated to one of the whales showing off. It was soon observed that the whales were extremely intelligent and as curious of people as we were of them.

when they came into Garden Bay the first time I just set my net across and cornered them,” Sonny says from his home overlooking Pender Harbour.

“So we stopped them there and who shows up, rowin’ around in his rowboat, but Bert Gooldrup. He was followin’ them in this old skiff he had.”

With the help of a couple more Reids, namely Wilfred (Tiffany) and Michael, and four Camerons — Bill, Bob, Donald and Jim, Sonny and Bert netted three whales that day.

The wind picked up a bit later that night, breaching the net and allowing two of the whales to escape.

But the capture sparked a me-

dia frenzy — locally and from afar — as TV, radio and print converged on Pender Harbour.

The whale could have broken through the nets at any point and it surprised many to discover that it didn’t try.

It seemed to exhibit a patient acceptance and wariness of the nets.

“Maybe it likes it here.” Reid told a Vancouver Sun reporter at the time.

The fishermen became instant celebrities and sold the whale, a 15-foot male nicknamed “Pender” by local residents, to the Vancouver aquarium for \$5,000.

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Killer Whales(cont.)

The group split the money evenly although the selling price was much less than what Griffin had paid earlier for a whale.

Bert Gooldrup told a reporter from a local paper at the time that the fishermen didn't want to make a profit as long as their time was covered and Vancouver had a local whale.

"Pender" became "Hyak" and was being groomed as a companion for Skana in the hope that they might produce offspring but aquarium officials decided to keep the whale in Pender Harbour until they could renovate the whale pool and make it suitable for two.

Vancouver Public Aquarium director, Murray Newman told a Vancouver daily:

"We're considering keeping the whale up there for some time and perhaps developing a research and collecting station in Pender Harbour."

Arrangements were made with the Columbia Coast Mission to set up pens in Hospital Bay and trainers Terry McLoud and Graeme Ellis were sent to Pender Harbour to train and study Hyak more closely in its "natural" environment.

After this first brush with success, Reid and Gooldrup rigged up

nets specifically for catching whales and purchased permits from the DoF, which was starting to realize it needed to regulate the killer whale fishery before it got out of control.

The timing was perfect because soon after it became next to impossible to acquire a whale fishing permit — which left Reid and Gooldrup the only two permits in Pender Harbour.

Two months later, Sonny recalls that he and Bert were off on an unsuccessful wild whale chase up the coast and eventually gave up to be home in time for a bowling banquet held at Lord Jim's Lodge in Secret Cove.

"Everyone knew we were coming

home for this bowling banquet so they had it rigged up that they were gonna pull a prank on us and they were gonna phone and say the whales were in Garden Bay," Sonny says.

"Little did they know that Sam Lamont had phoned my mother and my mother phoned and told me the whales were there. So I tell Bert and Marie and Isabel and the four of us all left the party early."

While the rest of the party reveled in their successful prank, the four of them raced to back to Pender Harbour, still in their dress clothes.

"I guess it was a

Harbour Spiel



Garden Bay Pub Collection photo

Though they could have escaped at any point, the whales were wary of the flimsy gillnet and accepted their captivity. Bert Gooldrup's brand new *Bonavista*, pictured here, was sold many years later but landed back in the news in 1993 after it collided with a tug and barge near Active Pass, killing all six aboard.

hell of a big laughter because it ruined the party for us. We left there but the whales were really in Garden Bay — it was no prank!” Reid says.

“So we took Bert’s boat and we ran over and we set the net and we caught ’em.”

Bill and Muriel Cameron arrived to help the four haul nets as they worked through the night, still in their suits and evening gowns.

The seven whales caught that evening were most likely members of Hyak’s pod and, ironically, it was the captive whale that attracted the other family members in to allow their capture.

The media were there by morning and the whales created an international bidding war.

Aquariums like Marineland of the Pacific in Los Angeles, Sea World in San Diego, the Seattle Marine Aquarium and the Marine World Aquarium in Redwood City in California all sent representatives to take part in what the Vancouver Sun called “the biggest whale sale in the world.”

After four of the whales were sold to US aquariums, fetching up to \$25,000 a piece, the Vancouver Aquarium stepped in to purchase the remaining three, keeping Skookum Cecil, a male, and Natsidalia, a female, in Pender Harbour.

The third, a male calf named Peanuts, was shipped to Vancouver to become a companion for Skana.

Peanuts would later become Hyak II, one of the longest living Killer Whales in captivity, educating and performing for Vancouver Aquarium audiences until his death in 1991.

With three whales now stationed in Pender Harbour, the aquarium had a

major attraction on its hands.

The trainers not only were able to teach the whales to eat but in short time were able to get them to perform tricks on cue.

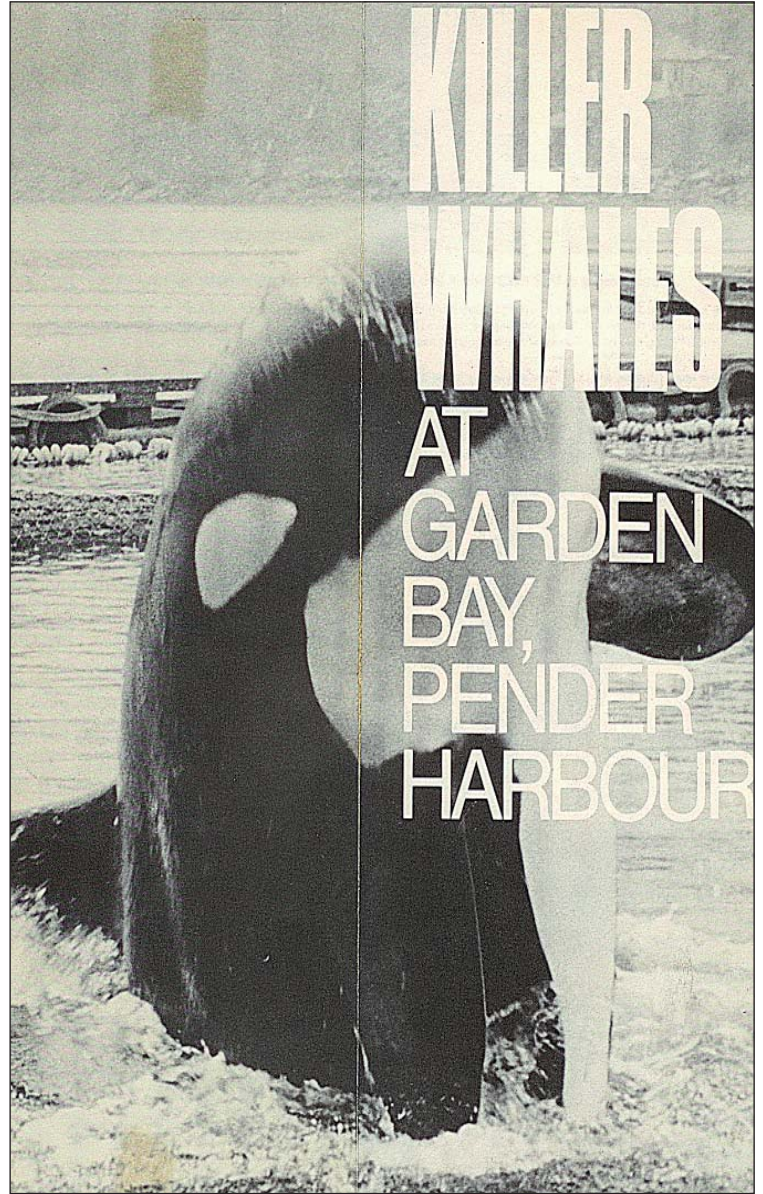
Soon they’d built three net pens, a viewing area for visitors and were actively promoting Pender Harbour’s whale facility through print brochures and advertising.

On August 1, 1968 the Pender Harbour Whale Station officially opened and reportedly attracted some 10,000 visitors that summer.

There was talk of expanding what promised to become a major tourist attraction.

Reid was honoured with the Captain Vancouver Award in recognition of the amount of publicity he helped to bring to Vancouver’s growing aquarium and the Financial Post even wrote an article on the promise of this new whale hunting industry.

But this period was to be the high point for the Pender Harbour fishermen and signalled the end of



The Vancouver Aquarium’s ‘Pender Harbour Whale Station’ brochure promised “At Pender Harbour you will see one large whale perform at intervals upon the command of its trainer. In adjoining pens, you will see scientists studying the behaviour, intelligence and sensory systems of other specimens.” For 40 days after its opening on August 1, 1968, the display reportedly attracted 10,000 visitors.

innocence for Pender Harbour’s whale hunting industry.

Soon afterward things took an ugly turn.

**To be continued in the January 2008 Harbour Spiel.*