

The Ballard Locks, The Whaling Industry, and the Rise of Bellevue

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Large scale infrastructure projects can have many interesting results. In the case of the Ballard Locks, the construction allowed one of the last commercial whaling fleets to winter in Lake Washington and contributed to the birth of the City of Bellevue, Washington.

The Hiram M. Chittenden Locks aka the Ballard Locks is a system of locks connecting the Puget Sound to Lake Washington. It carries more boat traffic than any other lock system in the U.S. and it profoundly shaped the areas around it (4). Discussion of building a navigable route between the Sound and the Lake began as early as 1854. The United States Navy endorsed the plan in 1867. In 1891 the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers began planning work, and the project was completed in 1917 (4).



Property of Museum of History & Industry, Seattle

Two years after the project was completed, the American Pacific Whaling Company moved from Gray's Harbor to Meydenbauer Bay in present day Bellevue. American Pacific processed up to 450 sperm, humpback, and finback whales a year. Their fleet included 4 ships: the *Aberdeen*, *Moran*, *Paterson*, and *Westport*. (3). They were one of the last commercial whaling fleets in the country (1).

The fleet moved because freshwater is better for boats than salt water. According to Bill Lagen the grandson of William Shupp who brought the whaling fleet to Meydenbauer Bay the fleet moved because "[Meydenbauer Bay] was out in the country, and it was freshwater, and his boats would be moored in freshwater instead of salt. There's a tremendous difference between freshwater and saltwater on a steel hull." Freshwater is less corrosive and helped kill the barnacles on the ships (2). Whales were never brought to Bellevue. The company hunted in Alaska and the carcasses were processed at whaling stations near the hunting grounds. However, there was still a lot of work to be done in Bellevue.

By the 1930s, American Pacific was the second largest employer on the east side of the Lake Washington. The ships wintered in the Bay and received maintenance every Spring before they headed out again. The harpoons also required maintenance (2).

The market for whale oil began to dry out in the 1930s. World War II finally ended business. The government canceled the 1942 season as the Alaskan whaling grounds were considered too close to combat. The military eventually took over the fleet during the war and used Meydenbauer dock as a base. One of the boats was used



Whaling Vessel docked on Meydenbauer Bay 1925
. Eastside Heritage Center

as an icebreaker and the rest were used for patrol. After the war the whaling dock was converted into the Meydenbauer Bay Marina, and in 1997 the family sold the land and the marina to the City of Bellevue (2).

After the war, the loss of the whaling fleet hurt the economy of Bellevue. However, it made a comeback due to another piece of public works infrastructure, the I-90 floating bridge. The bridge opened on July 2, 1940.

Bellevue incorporated in 1953 and marketed itself as a bedroom community and a place to get away from the hustle and bustle of Seattle (1). Since then, Bellevue has become a bustling city with its own downtown. The Bay that once housed the whaling fleet is now a marina for pleasure boats with a small beach (1) New public works infrastructure continues to be built shaping the growth of the City.

Works Cited:

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- 3) "American Pacific Whaling Company" *Wikipedia*. 1 June 2023
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- 4) "Ballard Locks" *Wikipedia*. 1 June 2023 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ballard_Locks>