

The Origin of the Whale Park

By Andrea Scharf and Jim Adler (October 2020)

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One of summer's pleasures in Yachats is to watch kids encounter the whale spout. They stand on the grass in the Whale Park, their eyes on the mound that represents the whale's back. Every minute, a six-foot spout of water bursts out of the ground. The children shriek and scream, run closer or jump back. The spout disappears and they cautiously inch closer and then—WHOOSH!!—there it is again, more screams, more shrieks, while laughing parents take pictures.

The whale arrived in the little park in 1991. Before it was a whale park, the lot on the corner of Yachats River Road and Highway 101 was the site of the Crab Shack, operated by Dave and Michiko Ryan. (Michiko Ryan was the Yachats City Recorder from 1977-1988.) In the late Eighties, the property was donated to the City of Yachats. Although the donor was a member of the Yachats Lions, and the Lions contemplated a veterans' memorial with flags, plaques, and a small cannon, donors are not allowed to specify the use of land donated to the city.

The low rock wall at the back of the park reminded Jim Adler of a rocky coastline. He imagined a whale swimming by. Jim is a local artist/blacksmith who built a house and studio in the Yachats River Valley in 1975. He started making conceptual drawings with the serious intent of honoring the giant animals that swim past the town. Then someone came up with the idea of a spouting whale and Jim jumped to the challenge, figuring out a way to create the spout with a pressure washer.

Jim built a model and brought it to the City Parks & Commons Commission, which approved it. When he brought it to City Council, councilman Burd Bicksler leaned over for a better look, the spout somehow went off and Councilman Bicksler got a face full of water.

The City Council approved the concept but felt they could not invest public money in art, so the Yachats Sculpture Committee was formed. But the Lions still wanted the veterans' memorial, so Jim made a presentation to the Lions. Most of them really liked the proposal and they withdrew their objections and lent their support to the project.

The Sculpture Committee went to work. Members included Tom Smith as chair, Karen Schuster as treasurer, plus Philip Schuster, Mary Welch, and Joni Bicksler. From the beginning, it was agreed that the fundraising campaign had to be fun.

And it was! Judy Grist d'Ville, Jim Adler, and Philip Schuster designed a couple of really nice posters and had them printed, using seed money donated by a philanthropic couple who lived in Yachats. They sent one of the posters to every household in Yachats, inviting people to

choose the alternative poster if they wanted to—and please support the whale! And people did. Donations were speedy and generous. The Sculpture Committee received a grant from the Oregon Arts Commission. There were t-shirts, a huge auction (supported generously by many businesses throughout Lincoln County, plus an original painting by artist Michael Gibbons), and concerts at the New Morning Café. And there was the whale salute—donors greeted each other with the whale salute, which consisted of holding your hands at shoulder height and flipping them, like a whale’s tail. If Yachats was ever going to have a reputation for whimsy, this was it.

The Whale generated a lot of enthusiasm and excitement. After Jim scaled out working drawings from the maquette and took them to Farwest Steel in Glenwood, their Operations Manager Ron Berntzen, was so excited by the project that he donated their cutting services and transported the pieces to Portland for free. He got two posters and immediately put them up in his office.

The steel arrived at Marks Brothers Fabrication in Portland. They rolled the pieces and Jim and one of their welders assembled them. The Marks Brothers welder was really good—he re-did Jim’s welds too.

Rod Smith, another Yachats resident, took his old beater truck to Portland to pick up the whale tail and bring it home. It was so heavy that the poor old truck stalled out and died on highway 99. The truck was fixed, and the whale tail continued its journey.

Leigh Green, the ex-postmaster in Yachats, ran a gyppo sawmill after he retired. He brought an ancient log loader to town, took the sculpture off Rod’s truck, and put it in place in the park. The equipment was so old, Jim remembers, it looked like the operation was taking place a century ago.

Jim did the work to build up the shape of the whale and set the tail in place on a base buried two feet into the ground. He constructed the spouting apparatus and hooked it up to city water. Then he drove to the Valley and brought back a load of turf. When he got back to town, he was beat—but that turf had to be unloaded and laid.

Vince Bitle, a poet who lived in Yachats, showed up and offered to help. The two of them unloaded the truck and Vince laid the whole load of turf. Dyke Dame and Dave Miller had a yard maintenance business and they volunteered to maintain the park for two years, mowing interesting patterns in the grass above the whale.

The public inauguration of the Whale’s Tail happened at the end of 1991. Larry Nixon showed up dressed as Captain Ahab, complete with a harpoon that Jim Adler had made for him. The first Halloween, someone put pumpkins carved as eyeballs on top of the whale.

The name of the whale is Bazalgette—look it up if you want to know what it means—and Jim maintained it until 2014, when the City took over its operation. With other duties, the Public

Works Department had trouble keeping the pump running, so they asked Jim to rebuild the pump operation, which he did in 2020, with the intent that the whale will continue to spout for many years to come, to the delight of future generations.