

***BERTHA GOES WHALING, PERSONAL MEMOIRS OF A VOYAGE ABOARD
A WHALING BARK 'THE ISLANDER' 1871 by Bertha Hamblin Boyce
Self-published in Falmouth in 1963 (as told by Bertha in her 96th year).***

Bertha Goes Whaling-Written by Bertha May Hamblin Boyce-A Choral Reading
Written by Renee Voorhees using the author's words with occasional
imagined conversations in order to bring even more liveliness to the account.

PART I:

NARRATOR: This story, was written by the author "in her 96th year" about her voyage as a five-year-old, accompanying her father, Captain John C. Hamblin, on the bark, The Islander, out of New Bedford, in 1871 bound for the Indian Ocean. This is Bertha's story.

CAPTAIN JOHN C, HAMBLIN: "Maria, it is almost time for my ship to sail. Are you coming with me this time?"

BERTHA: That was my father, Captain John C. Hamblin, speaking to my mother. She had gone with my father on two previous voyages, and he hoped she was going with him this time.

ALICE: My name is Alice. I am 7 years old. I was born in Australia.

HENRY: My name is Henry. I am 5 years old. I was born on Norfolk Island in the South Seas.

MARIA: "Oh, John, I don't see how I can go this time. There are four children to leave at home." (*Whisper*-And another soon to come).

BERTHA: "Then the trunk came down from the attic. Aunt Abby and Uncle Josiah came up from Pocasset to take care of the children left behind (as they always did). And suddenly, me (age 5) and my brother (age 2 ½) were fitted for a whaling voyage.

BERTHA and BENJAMIN: ([Singing](#)-We're going whaling...We're going whaling.)

MARIA: "Hush you two. Say goodbye to your brothers and sisters."

BERTHA and BENJAMIN: "Bye Etta, bye Alice, Bye Henry, Bye John."

NARRATOR: The bark (another name for a whaling ship), the Islander, sailed out of New Bedford, which is where most whalers departed in the 1870s.

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN: "Hurry along children. The stagecoach is waiting to take us to New Bedford."

NARRATOR: The family arrived in New Bedford with bag and baggage and sailors rowed them to the Islander, waiting for them in the harbor.

BERTHA: "Oh I hope the sailors don't get my beautiful new hat wet."

NARRATOR: Once on board the ship, the family made their way to the Captain's cabin.

MARIA: "Oh John, the space is so small. What am I going to do with two lively children in such a small space?"

BERTHA: Mother was used to the big house in West Falmouth. (A replica of this house sits in the upstairs lobby of the West Falmouth Library during December).

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN: "Now Maria, look here. We will sleep on this swinging bed, and Bertha and Benjamin will sleep on this trundle bed we will pull out from under the swinging bed. You will make do, as you always do."

BERTHA: "On July 25, 1871, we set sail for the Indian Ocean."

BENJAMIN: "Berta, we see whales?"

BERTHA: “Yes, Benjamin. We will see whales. (To self-“I hope the whales stay out of sight, or Papa will catch them.)”

NARRATOR: Alas, the Captain sent home 895 barrels of sperm oil taken in the two years at sea on the Indian Ocean.

PART II:

BERTHA: “Everyone wonders what we did for amusement on ship. Instead of woods and green fields, we had the ship deck.”

MARIA: “Go play children. The weather is warm in July. You won’t always be able to play above on deck. Be careful and don’t bother your father.”

BERTHA: “First Benjamin and I went to the cook’s galley, where we hoped to get a handout.”

BENJAMIN: “Look Berta, a sea turtle”.

BERTHA: “Benjamin, be careful, he does not look too friendly.”

NARRATOR: When the children were not bothering the sailors, they spent hours riding on the turtle’s back, being careful to keep away from the turtle’s head so as not to get bitten. Remember the children were ages 5 and 2 ½ and trusted alone on the deck of the whaler. For the most part, they avoided trouble, but there were exceptions.

BERTHA: “Ben, get down from there.”

BENJAMIN: “Berta, watch, I swing.”

BERTHA: “Ben, you climb down right now, before father sees you.”

NARRATOR: Little Ben was holding onto a rope and billowing out over the sea as the ship rolled back and forth. Suddenly a call came from the crow’s nest.

SAILOR ONE: “Thar she blows.”

NARRATOR: Bertha and Ben ran to the side of the ship.

BERTHA: “Look, Ben. Down go the whaleboats and the harpooners. They will chase the whale until he surfaces again. They must find just the right spot to put in the harpoon. Whales are dangerous, and their big jaws can swallow a whale boat and all the sailors. (*To self*-I remember a whale jaw that hung in a tree near our driveway in West Falmouth for a long time).

NARRATOR: Once the whale was killed, it was towed to the ship. The cutting stage was lowered and the sailors peeled off the blubber in large pieces. The blubber was hauled aboard and cut in smaller pieces called “Bible Leaves” and cooked in try pots over fires on deck.

BERTHA: “I often wondered how safe a fire was on the deck of a wooden ship, but when the fires burned all night, Ben and I would chase each other around the ship, jumping in and out of shadows.”

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN: “It was my job to keep track of the names and locations of islands where we went ashore. I also had to write a daily log for each day we were at sea. I often drew pictures of the whales we had spotted in the margins of the journal.”

NARRATOR: In November, the Captain wrote....

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN: “Next week is Thanksgiving. I hope the next Thanksgiving will be spent at home. ***If it weren't for hopes, what would we do.***”

BERTHA: “One day the sailors went on shore to an island, and brought back a pail of turtle eggs.”

BENJAMIN: “And one day they brung back cow milk.”

MARIA: “Now children, take care and do not drink too much of the milk. I need to scald the milk so that it will last longer.”

BERTHA: “Mother put the milk on the table, and when she wasn’t looking, I sneaked a drink. “I am dead; I am dead” I cried, burning my mouth”.

MARIA: “Come, Bertha. I have some Arabian balsam. It will help you sleep, and then you will feel better.”

NARRATOR: Sometimes another whale ship was sighted. That was a great day. The Captains would visit each other; have a gam (conversation between whalers) and dinner; and talk of world affairs and share experiences. Gam also referred to a gathering of whales.

BENJAMIN: “Berta, me bored.”

BERTA: “Let’s go see what the sailors are doing.”

SAILOR ONE: “Hi children. I am carving whale bone. When I polish and decorate it with India Ink, it is called scrimshaw.”

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN: “I was quite proud that I was a 33rd degree Mason, so I designed the Mason emblem on whale’s teeth and ostrich eggs”.

MARIA: “It is so nice to have the children on deck visiting father and the sailors. I need to get this yarn wound on this swift and use my gadging wheel (a fork made from whale bone) to crimp this pie.”

BERTA: My mother was known for her pies and hard gingerbread. With eight children and all the neighborhood children around, she didn’t have time to make cookies. But, when I got older, I **did have time** and everyone knew me as the “cookie lady” of West Falmouth.

MARIA: “We sailed the Indian Ocean all of 1872. August 31, 1872 is Bertha’s birthday. I guess we will be spending it on ship anchored between Africa and Madagascar.”

BERTHA: “Do you know what I got for a birthday present? My little brother, Ernest Seaborn Hamblin. He was born on the ship the day before my birthday! When Ernest grew up, the kids use to tease him by calling him an African and saying he could never be president of the United States.”

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN: “Bertha, come quick, look what I am getting you for your birthday!”

BERTHA: “It was a whale. They caught a whale on my birthday. Later, father promised me a watch for a real birthday present.”

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN: “Come Bertha. Mother and I are going to meet the Chief of Madagascar, and you are invited.”

BERTHA: “Benjamin, you won’t believe it. The Chief had seven wives! They were dark skinned, of course, being Africans, and they were dressed in white. Their lips were blood red from chewing betel nuts. I will tell all the girls when I get home that lipstick comes from betel nuts.”

JOHN C. HAMBLIN: “It is early in 1873. I think we have caught enough whales...”

MARIA: “And I am tired of tending three children on a whaler...”

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN and MARIA: “It is time to head home.”

BERTHA: “But first we stopped in Australia, well Tasmania to be exact. Ben, look this road was made by convicts.”

BENJAMIN: “Berta, what’s a convict?”

BERTHA: “Someone who builds roads.”

BENJAMIN: "I like the wild roses on the convict road. I am tired of looking at water."

NARRATOR: The sailors took the family across the water to Australia where they stayed with Mrs. Tassell, a missionary.

BENJAMIN: "Berta, what's a missionary?"

BERTHA: "Someone who has a mission. She has Sunday School for the natives. You ask too many questions."

MARIA: "Here, Bertha. Mrs. Tassell wants you to have a Bible."

BERTA: "Mrs. Tassell had lots of Bibles to give away. I still have this Bible with my name and Mrs. Tassell's name and the date, but the words are so old and so small that I cannot read them anymore."

MARIA: Here, Bertha. Mrs. Tassell wants you to have this songbook so that you can sing to your brothers.

BERTHA: "Well I lost the songbook on the way home, but I still remember the song:

"I want to be an angel
And with the angels stand,
A crown upon my forehead
And a harp in my hand."

PART III:

NARRATOR: The ship was sold in March 1873. Captain Hamblin had decided to give up whaling and go home. The first mate, Mr. Hiram E. Swift of Whitman, Massachusetts took over as captain.

BERTHA: “I was happy to see that Captain Swift brought his little girl and his wife onto the ship, but no little boy. But perhaps, his wife would have a baby boy on ship who could never be president of the United States, too.”

CAPTAIN SWIFT: “Bertha, I have a story for you. One day you went into my cabin and found my pocket book to play with. Do you remember what you told me?”

BERTHA: “No, sir,”

CAPTAIN SWIFT: “You told me that you didn’t take the white money; only the yellow money.”

BERTHA: “I remember. I just wanted the gold! (*Aside*-Even at the young age of six, I knew the difference).”

NARRATOR: Captain Hamblin and family were now ready to return home, by way of London.

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN: “We stopped at Lisbon, Portugal...”

MARIA: “And Le Havre, France...”

BERTHA: “I knew we visited those places, because I have on my living room table, a pretty little shell snuff box from France, and a large shell that held a thimble, little scissors, and a case for needles that Papa bought me in Lisbon.”

BENJAMIN: “Our next stop is London. I am so excited. I run everywhere looking at everything. Then (sobbing) I am lost in the too many people. Help, help I cry.”

MARIA: “Benjamin, there you are. Must you always be running? You must stay close, or I will lose you in the crowd. I did not lose you at sea, I am not about to lose you in London!”

BERTHA: “In London, we got to go to the zoo....”

BENJAMIN: “And ride an elephant...”

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN: “Our next stop was the Azores.”

BERTHA: “A man was selling cakes from a little tin trunk, and mother bought a beautiful lace shawl made from the fibers of a tree-not silk or cotton, which I still have. It must be a museum piece now. And we also have some flowers...”

BENJAMIN: “Made out of feathers!”

NARRATOR: The family left home on a steamer.

BENJAMIN: “Berta, what’s a steamer?”

BERTHA: “Something that uses steam. Quit asking questions!”

MARIA: “We left West Falmouth in a stage coach, sailed on a whaling ship, rode steamers, and returned to find a railroad was built to West Falmouth, so we rode the train home from New Bedford.”

BERTHA: “Of course, when we got to the station, there was no one there to meet us; there were no telephones in those days, and no one knew when we would arrive.”

CAPTAIN JOHN C. HAMBLIN: “So, we walked home”.

BERTHA: I will never forget that walk home. The Boyce house wasn’t built then. The only house I remembered was painted white with blue blinds. It looked very pretty. Our first stop, of course, was our home-the Hamblin house. We were so excited to see Aunt Abby and Uncle Josiah and our brothers and sisters, and they were excited to see us.”

AUNT ABBY: “Maria, you let me at that baby...”

UNCLE JOSIAH: And John, Bertha, and Ben come meet the horse, the hens and chickens, and the two pigs.”

BERTHA: “Life was going to be quite different from our life on the ship in the Indian Ocean. There were hay fields in front of the house and woods to explore at the back of the house as we got acquainted with West Falmouth all over again.

ALL: But that is another story!

NARRATOR: Captain John C. Hamblin was born in 1829 to parents Benjamin Hamblin and Betsey Baxter. He was the second oldest of 10 children. He married Maria F. Toby, who was born in Sandwich in 1837, on October 9, 1856. Maria died in 1913 at the age of 76. John died in 1874 at the age of 44. Together they had eight children in all; the last was Leonella born in 1874 (the year John died). Captain Hamblin spent 24 years at sea, sixteen as a Master or Captain. In the last two years of his life, he purchased and managed a store in Falmouth.

Simeon L. Deyo, A History of Barnstable County: (About John C. Hamblin)
“He was an upright man and a Mason, and his humane and social qualities so softened the sterner and courageous elements of his nature that his decease was greatly mourned by a large circle of friends. He was charitable without ostentation, mild, yet decisive, and a true friend and counselor”.