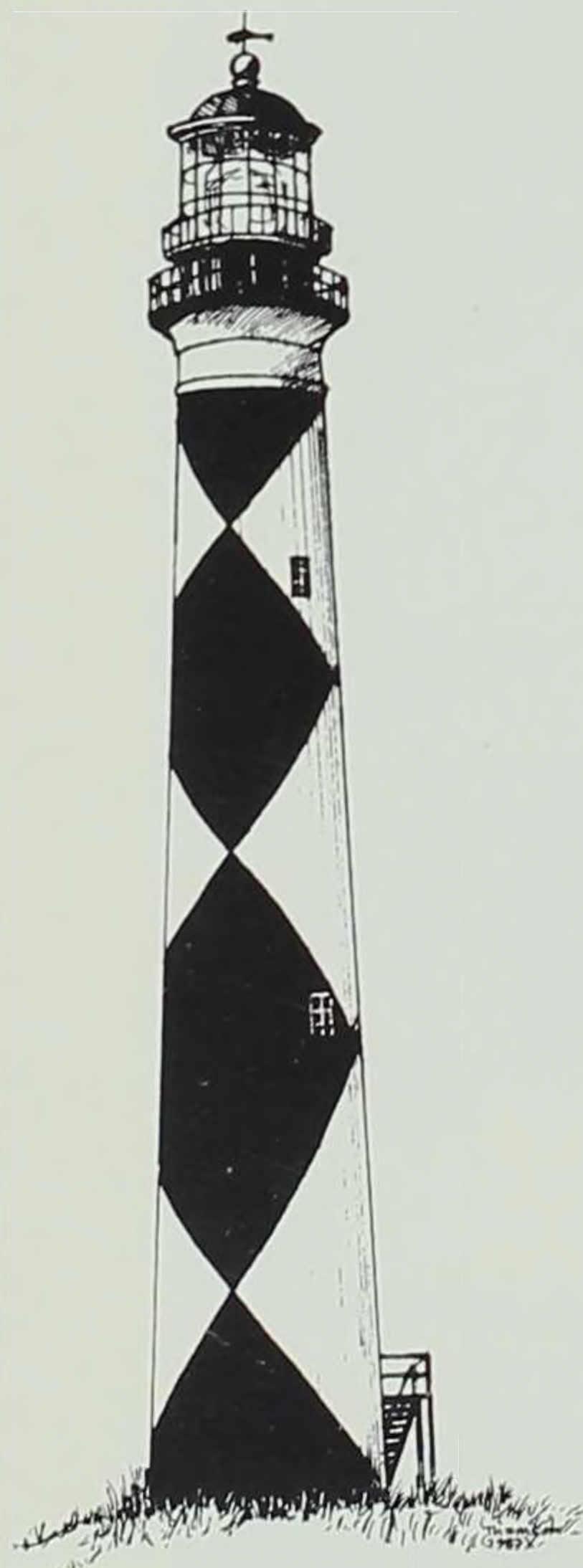


# A WHALE FOR IOWA

by WILL THOMSON



VISITORS to the University of Iowa Museum of Natural History in Iowa

City look with awe at the forty-five-foot skeleton of a whale suspended above them in Mammal Hall, yet few pause to consider how this enormous marine mammal became an exhibit in a midwestern museum. The story of its journey in the late 1890s from an ocean home half a continent away from Iowa provides insight into the resourceful energies and interests of our early naturalists. It encompasses the

scientific endeavors of those individuals and touches on the history of the lost American subculture of whaling. And it explains how this particular whale got to Iowa.

Now the rarest of Atlantic great whales, the North Atlantic right whale, *Eubalaena glacialis*, was once abundant along the east coast of the United States. Because it was easily captured and floated when killed, it was called the "right" whale. Rich in oil and baleen (commonly known as "whalebone"), right whales were a preferred catch for nineteenth-century whalers. Yet today, despite this once-active commerce in whaling, few whale skeletons are on display in American museums because of the immense size of the skeletons and the difficulty of preparing them for display.

In the waning decades of the nineteenth century, several naturalists and curators actively gathered and prepared specimens for

museum collections. One of these men was to make whales his specialty. Herbert H. Brimley, with his brother Clement, had developed a small business of collecting and preparing specimens for other museums to purchase, which led to Brimley's appointment as curator of the North Carolina State Museum in Raleigh.

At the University of Iowa, already established as a major center of museum activity, Herbert Brimley's counterpart was Charles Cleveland Nutting, professor of zoology. In 1886 Nutting, at the age of 28, had been named laboratory assistant and curator of the natural history museum when the museum was moved from Old Capitol to Science Hall and when collections were expanding rapidly. That year the naturalist William Temple Hornaday donated his collection of birds and mammals, including Australian marsupials. In 1887 D. H. Talbot of Sioux City gave his collection of several thousand bird skins. Promoted to full professor of systematic zoology by 1888, Nutting continued to actively solicit specimens for the museum. His speeches and narratives of his expeditions, often written in a semipopular style for nonscientific audiences, generated public and private support and financed several expeditions.

The collections in Science Hall continued to grow. Nutting's own expeditions in the early 1890s to the Bay of Fundy and the Bahamas added seabirds, seals, and marine invertebrates to the collection. Graduate student Frank Russell's three-year expedition to the Far North brought back caribou, musk-oxen, and mountain goats. By 1892 the exhibit space was filled. Boxes of specimens were piled high in the basement and attic. Then in March of



1898 Nutting heard from his colleague Brimley about a particular specimen, and despite the severe lack of exhibit or storage space, Nutting was keen to acquire this unusual addition.

**O**N THE WINDSWEPT coast of North Carolina, at the eastern tip of a slender twelve-mile-long barrier island called Shackleford Banks, was the town of Diamond City. In the late nineteenth century, Diamond City was a relatively thriving fishing community. The inhabitants were descendants of English stock who had settled on the Outer Banks two centuries earlier.

To the east of Diamond City lay the southern tip of Core Banks and Cape Lookout. The town had been named for the black-and-white diamond pattern painted on the Cape Lookout Lighthouse, which warned navigators away from the cape's treacherous shoals. It was in these waters that the people of Diamond City made their living, and in the winter, when fishing was at its ebb, good fortune sometimes

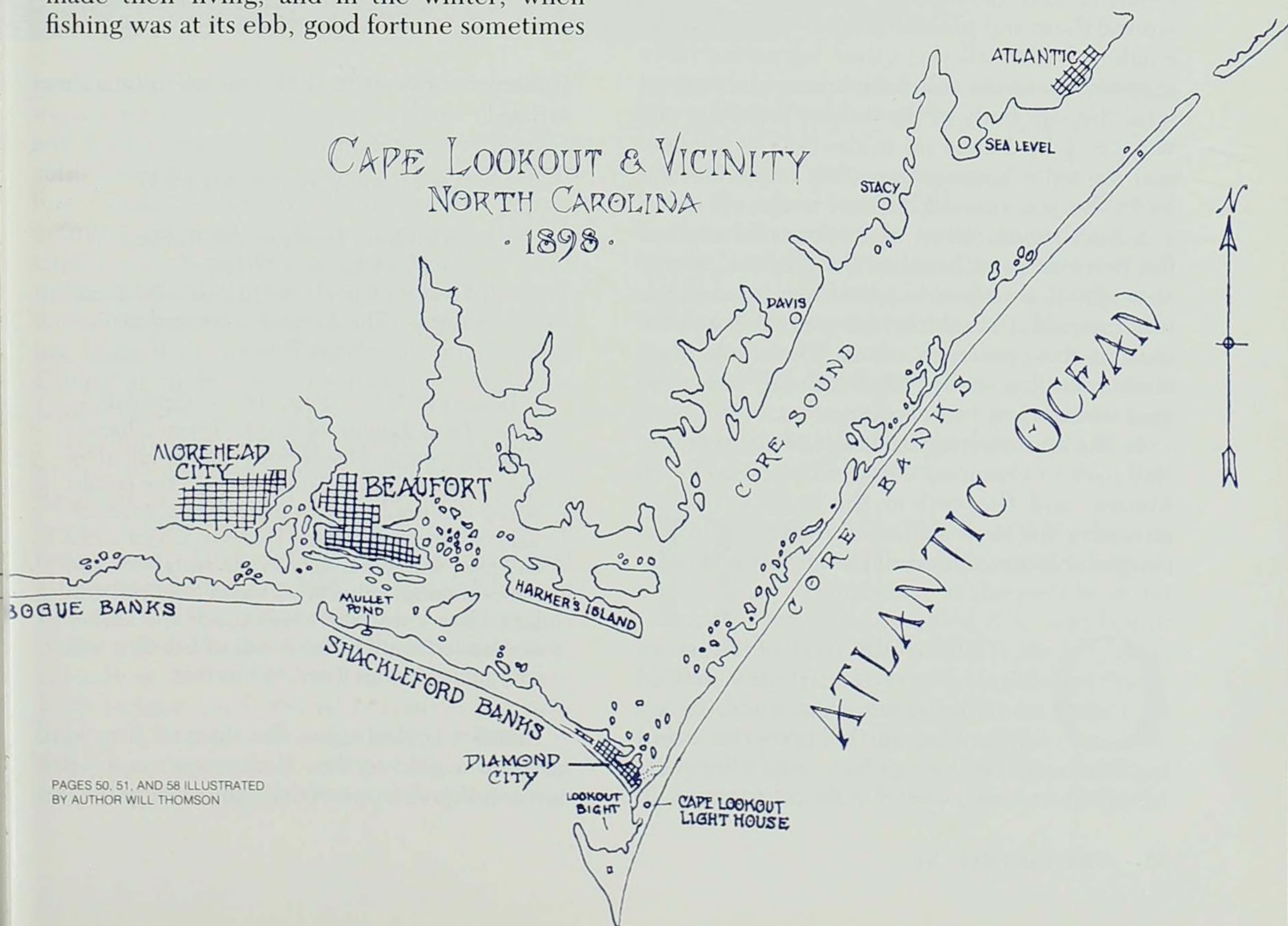
sent whales migrating southward past their shores.

On the morning of February 14, 1898, a low plume of mist was sighted on the horizon — the sure sign of a whale. Cries of "Whale!" stirred adults from their chores and sent children clambering over the dunes to catch a look. As the town came to life, the local men of Captain Tyree Moore's Red Oar Crew scrambled for their tackle.

Within a half-hour of the sighting the crew shoved their six twenty-four-foot open boats into the surf. With a man at each bow, four to six men-at-oars, and a steersman, each boat plowed into the breakers and made to the southeast in pursuit of the leviathan.

After over an hour of steady rowing, the Red Oar Crew pulled in close. The whale, a large female North Atlantic right, was making for open water south of the hook of land called Cape Lookout. The crew was tired, but the

# CAPE LOOKOUT & VICINITY NORTH CAROLINA · 1898 ·





prospect of adding such a catch to their meager winter incomes spurred them on. Harpooners stationed in each bow prepared for action.

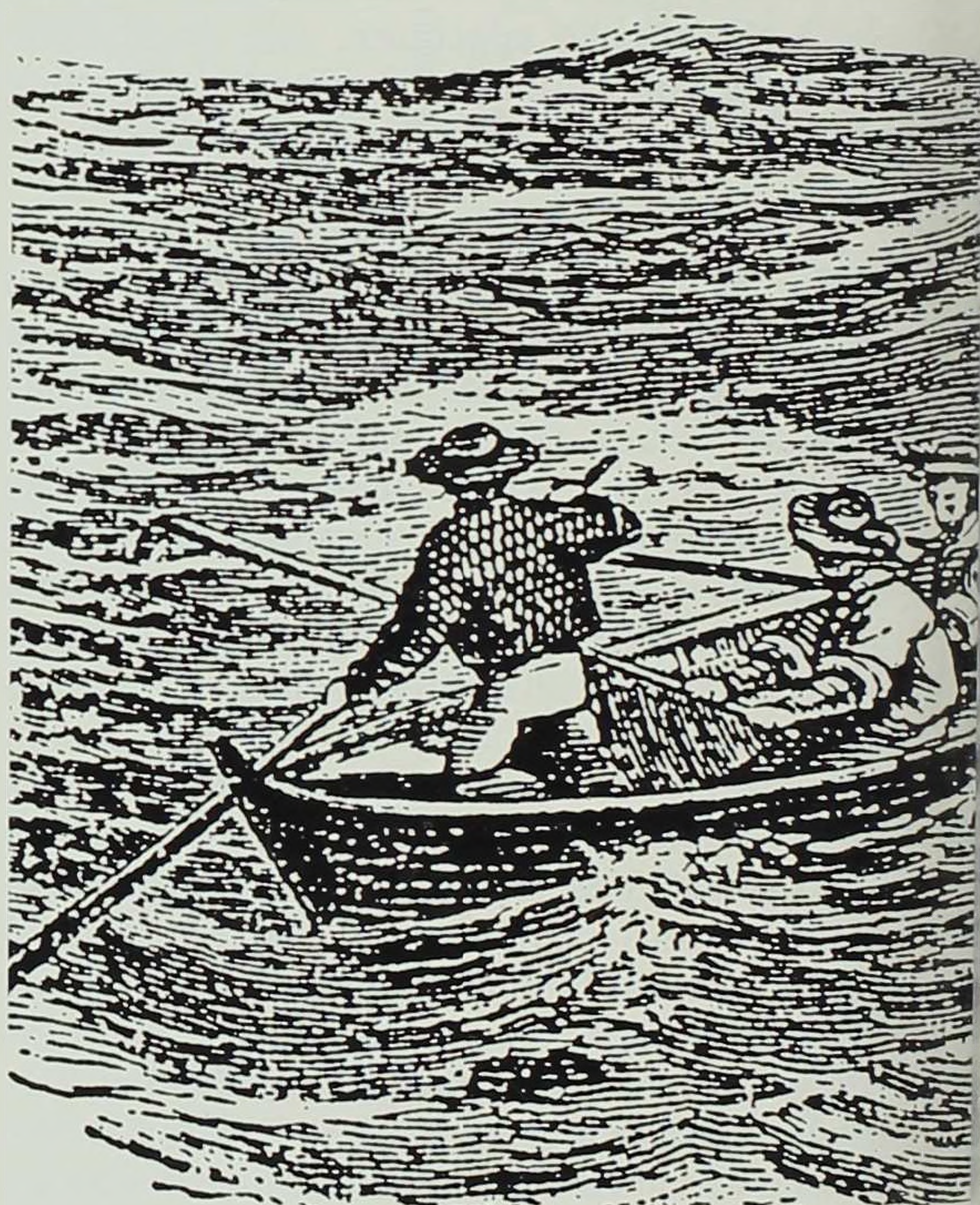
In one boat, John Lewis readied his harpoon and, at the whale's next breach, plunged it into the whale's back. Rowing furiously, the crews kept pace with the animal until it began to tire. Surfacing more and more frequently, it turned from its course as it tried to shake off its pursuers. As the boat pitched beneath him, Lewis hefted the heavy whale gun to his cheek and waited to fire. More like a small cannon with a shoulder stock, the gun was a heavy iron affair capable of driving an exploding harpoon deep into the whale, close to its vital organs. When the huge brow of the whale lifted out of the water directly in front of him, he quickly tugged the gun tight against his shoulder and fired.

The deafening report thundered above the roar of the sea. Lewis was tossed backwards by the recoil of the gun and landed amidships with a thud. The great beast rolled away from them, twisting and thrashing. The water boiled around them and plumes of spray drenched the whalers. After all the other harpoons were thrown, the crew fell back apace and waited until the still body of the animal drifted at the surface. John Lewis sat in the bow of his boat and nursed a large gash on his nose. He was lucky the gun's recoil had not broken it.

Several hours later, the exhausted men of the Red Oar Crew beached the fifty-ton carcass on a spit of sand beside a brackish pond at the western end of Shackleford Banks. As it was the custom to name each whale they took, they christened this whale "Mullet Pond," from the spot where they came ashore.

In the approaching darkness, word was carried back to Diamond City. John Lewis, Tyree Moore, and the rest of the crew sat down around a fire and joined in weary smiles of congratulations; a hard day's work was done.

ON THE MORNING of February 15, Herbert H. Brimley settled into his breakfast chair and, taking a sip of tea, rattled open the morning edition of the *Raleigh News and Observer*. All of the recent news of political tensions in



Cuba were forgotten as his eye fell upon a short article:

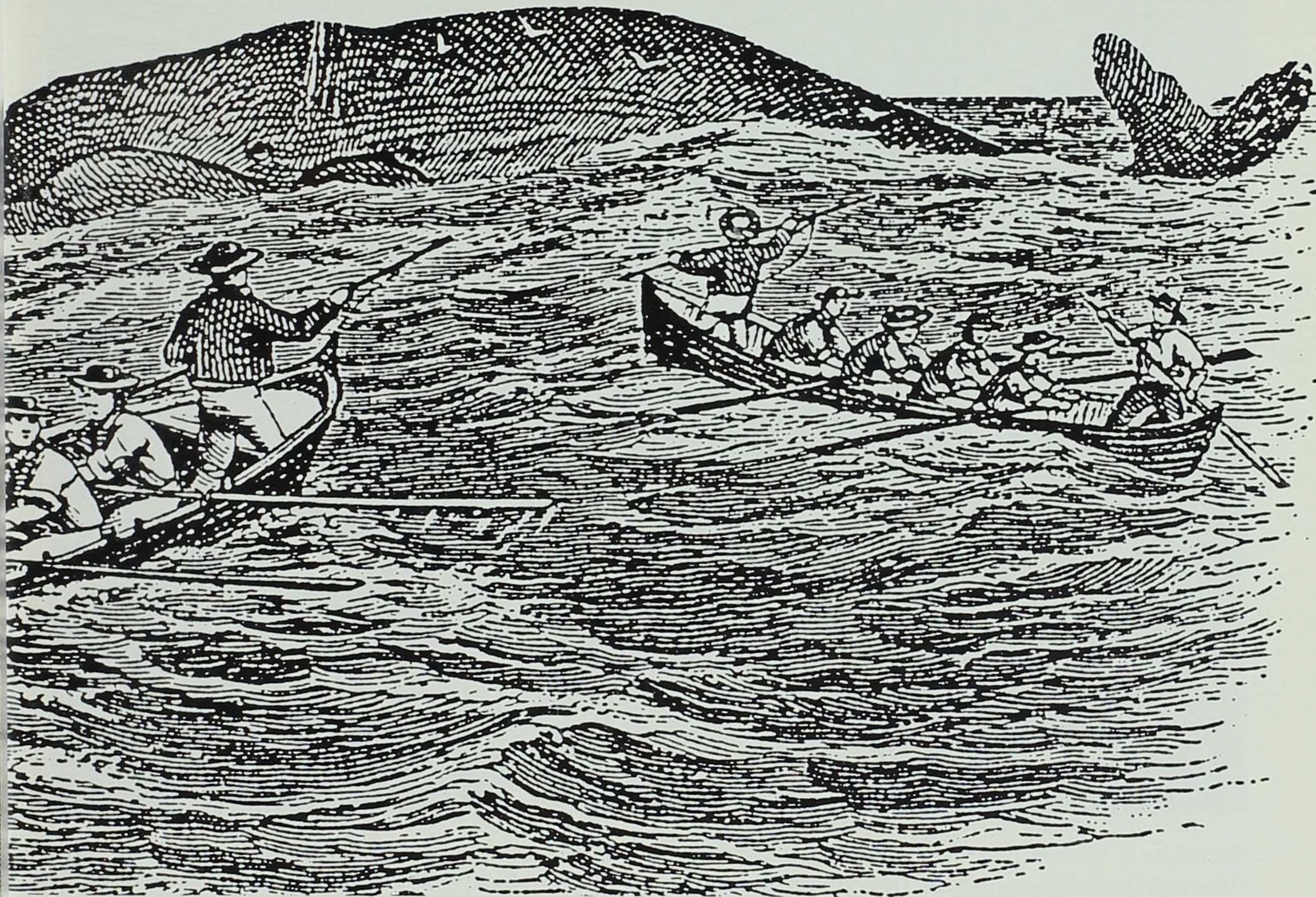
#### AN \$1,800 WHALE KILLED

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Fleet Lands a Monster.  
Will Yield 65 Barrels of Oil and is 60 Feet  
Long — The Largest Captured in  
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Beaufort, N.C., Feb. 14 — (Special) — Capt. John Lewis, of Capt. Tyree Moore's whaling crew on Shackleford's Banks killed today at twelve o'clock, near the bar, the largest whale captured here in many years, measuring sixty feet long, bone [baleen] seven and a half feet, will make sixty five barrels of oil and [an estimated] value of eighteen hundred dollars. They towed the whale inside the harbor and landed it at Mullet Pond, where they will commence trying it out to-morrow.

Brimley seized upon the item as if it were news of a gold strike. If the newspaper was correct, this was one of the biggest right whales





ever, and there was no time to waste in securing its skeleton. Pulling out a sheet of paper and a fountain pen, he hurriedly scribbled a cable to his friend in the seacoast town of Beaufort: "Potter: Offer \$25 Banks or \$35 depot. Letter tomorrow. H.H.B." Brimley had no time to spell out the details; Potter would understand. With that, he grabbed hat, coat, and message and headed for the door, reminding himself to stop off and notify his brother Clement on his way to Raleigh's Western Union office.

Herbert and Clement Brimley had immigrated to North Carolina from their native England in 1880, and as young men in their twenties they had taken to their new country quite well. After a false start farming and attempting to teach school on the outskirts of Raleigh, in 1882 Herbert Brimley read a pamphlet titled *Taxidermy Without a Teacher*, rekindling an old interest in natural history. Both lacking much formal education but brilliant and largely self-taught, the brothers by 1884 were operating a respectable trade as "Brimley Bros., Collectors and Preparers." In

A harpooner stands ready in a whale hunt depicted in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.

1895 Herbert was appointed curator of the North Carolina State Museum. As collectors their travels took them to the Outer Banks of North Carolina, where they discovered a world of wonders, including the great whales. Before the end of his career, Brimley would collect six great whales and several smaller marine mammals. The "Mullet Pond" whale would be their third undertaking, and its final destination would surprise the salt-bitten men of the Red Oar Crew.

**B**Y THE MORNING of February 16 the rendering of the great whale — or "trying-out," as the people of the Outer Banks called it — had begun in earnest. Large iron kettles called try-pots had been set up on the sand near Mullet Pond, and fires burned below them. Even in the cold February weather, the odor of the operation was penetrating. Crews carved large chunks of blubber from the whale's body and carried



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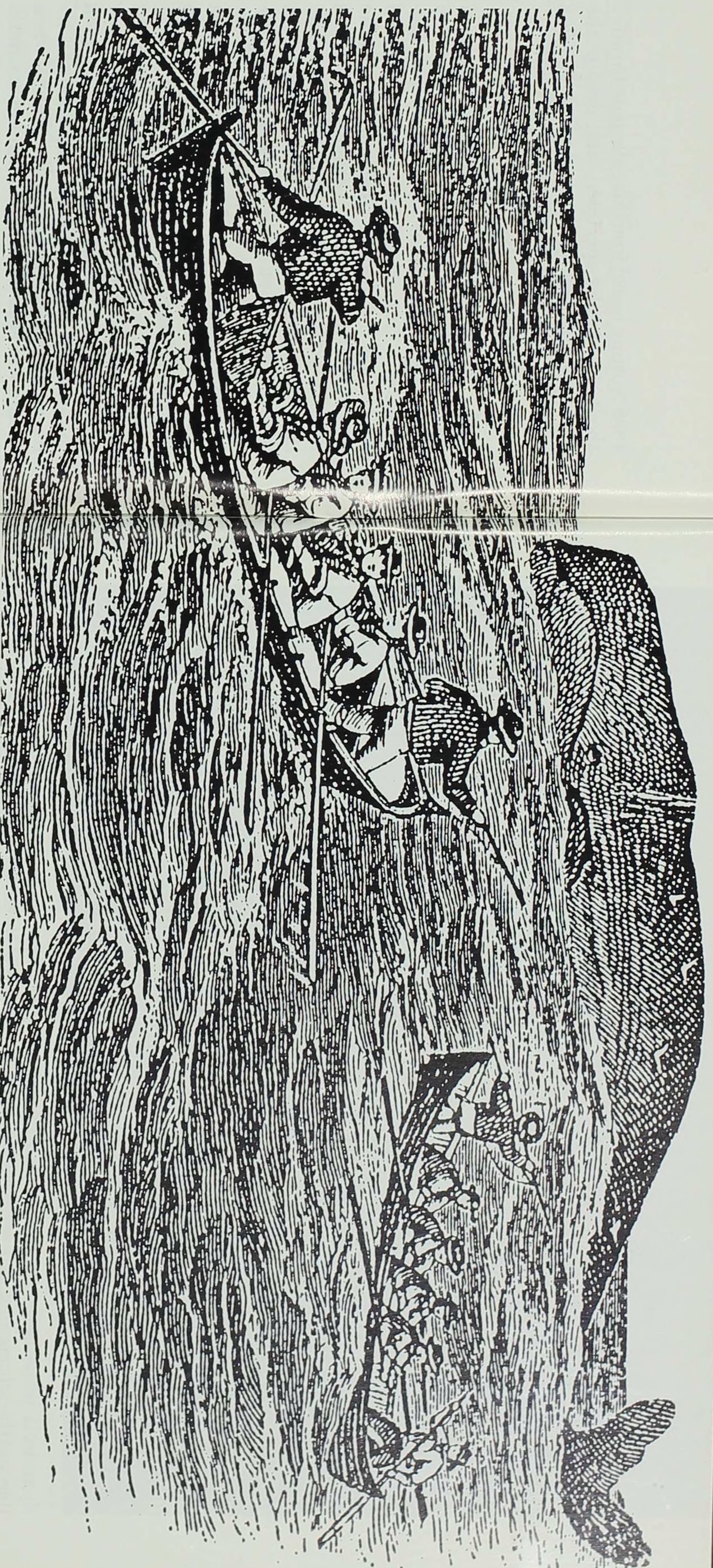
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COURTESY NORTH CAROLINA STATE MUSEUM OF NATURAL SCIENCES

them to a makeshift wooden trough. There they cut the salmon-pink fat into strips with old scythe blades and tossed the strips into the try-pots. As the whale oil melted off, the remaining crisp, oily residue was fed to the fires.

While one crew worked on the rendering, other men removed the huge sheets of baleen from the whale's mouth and stacked it to be cleaned and weighed. Tough, flexible, and fibrous, the hornlike substance of baleen would be sold and manufactured into buggy whips, umbrella ribs, corset stays, and dress hoops. "Mullet Pond" would yield over 750 pounds of baleen (some in sheets over six feet long and worth nearly two dollars a pound) and over thirty barrels of whale oil (at twenty-five cents a gallon). The profits from the work would be divided according to a system of shares long followed on the Outer Banks: two shares to each gunner, one to each boat owner, one to each participating crew member, two-thirds of a share to each owner of a full set of tackle, the other third to each harpooner and steersman, and a fee of five gallons of oil to the owner of each try-pot.

Meanwhile, across the sound in Beaufort, the fellow named Potter received Brimley's cable from Raleigh. This time the hard, smelly

Specimens on perches and in jars surround Herbert H. Brimley in his North Carolina taxidermy laboratory.

work of the Diamond City whaling crew would pay off with an unexpected bonus.

**T**WO DAYS LATER, Potter received a follow-up letter from Brimley concerning the bones of the Mullet Pond whale. Prepared to offer twenty-five dollars — or thirty-five if Potter got them to the nearby Morehead train depot — Brimley outlined what conditions the bones must be in for exhibit purposes. "If quite perfect, that is including all small bones, I will add \$5.00 to each of above prices," Brimley bargained. "Bones to be sufficiently clean of flesh not to be offensive. . . . I beg to offer sincere congratulations on its capture as it is a good one if newspaper articles are to be believed. In writing please give me any dimensions you can & any information about its capture you can, while the matter is still fresh."

The matter was indeed still fresh, Brimley discovered, when he traveled the 150 miles to Beaufort to view his potential investment and conclude the arrangements. Though an experienced naturalist and veteran of other whale-collecting adventures, Brimley never grew



accustomed to the atmosphere of a rendering. "The combination of odors from a smelly whale carcass on the beach," Brimley wrote, "with the sickening effluvia of boiling oil, together with the aroma of burning grease from the fires, is hard to beat from an olfactory standpoint!" Later he described the odor as "approaching that of a fertilizer factory that had been turned into a home for unexpurgated skunks."

Brimley managed to find a silver lining in this cloud of offensive fumes — cheaper freight rates. The cost of shipping 4,400 pounds of whale bones might have been exorbitant. But Brimley secured a much lower rate by shipping the bones as fertilizer material, and the scent emanating from the crates, as they traveled on March 16 by rail to Raleigh, certainly proved ample testament to that commodity.

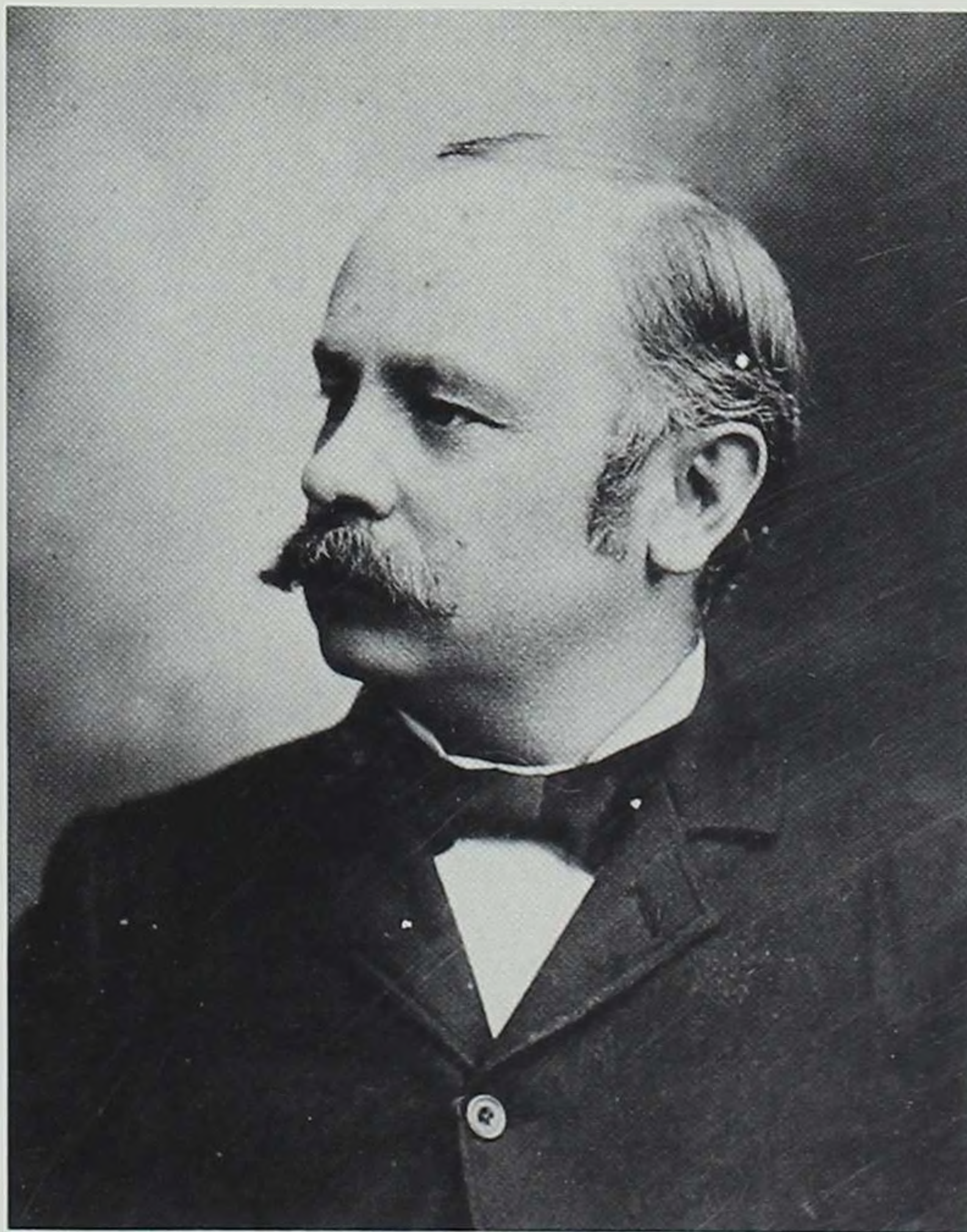
Once a storage site in Raleigh was found, Herbert and his brother Clement began the search for a buyer for their disarticulated and somewhat odiferous prize. Although the Brimleys had been in the specimen trade for years and had an established clientele, over two tons of unassembled whale was another matter altogether. Then Herbert Brimley happened to think of his acquaintance Charles Nutting, curator of the Museum of Natural History at the University of Iowa. Perhaps the people of Iowa would like to have a whale of their own.

**A** THOUSAND MILES from coastal Carolina, in land-locked Iowa City, Charles Nutting had his hands full. The university's Museum of Natural History was bursting the seams of Science Hall. Nutting was campaigning hard for a new, more modern facility which would unite the museum and the departments of natural sciences — geology, zoology, and botany. In particular he envisioned a strong zoology department built around a "study" museum, where students would observe diverse collections of specimens arranged in systematic order. When Nutting heard Brimley's offer, he quickly realized that obtaining a whale skeleton was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity — but that opportunity came at a time when there was no storage or exhibit space available. Confident that his dream of a new building would

come to pass, Nutting made a decision for the future. Within six weeks Nutting got approval for purchase of the skeleton, and on May 7, 1898, an authorized purchase order for \$250 was on its way to Brimley.

It took the better part of a month for Herbert Brimley to secure the freight rate to Iowa that he desired. Negotiations had to be reopened with Southern Railways, which had first shipped the bones to Raleigh, and on June 20 Brimley received a bid at \$1.62 ½ per hundredweight. This was a much better rate than the University of Iowa had secured from the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific line, who bid at \$2.94 per hundredweight. During these negotiations, university president Charles A. Schaeffer became involved, and on June 21, following word from the Brimleys about Southern's rate, Schaeffer cabled them to accept the lower rate and to await shipping instructions from Nutting. Nutting's cable followed immediately: "H. H. & C. S. Brimley: If you have not shipped whale accept \$1.62 ½ if you can do no better and ship. Answer. C. C. Nutting." Brimley received the telegram and replied,

COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF IOWA ARCHIVES



Charles Nutting acquired the whale skeleton and eventually a new natural history museum in which to exhibit it and other extensive collections of specimens.





The proposed Hall of Natural Science (now known as Macbride Hall) appeared in the March 23, 1904, *Daily Iowan*.

"Have received shipping order from President. Whale leaves this week."

And so, on June 23, 1898, the bones of the "Mullet Pond" whale began the journey, packed in seven crates and bound by rail for Iowa.

IT IS ALMOST a certainty that there were some serious doubts about the wisdom of the purchase when 4,400 pounds of smelly whale bones arrived in Iowa City, addressed to the university's natural history museum. Due to their condition and inadequate storage space, the bones were kept outside for several months, until they had been properly cleaned and at least partially cured of their odor.

Five years later the November 23, 1903, *Daily Iowan* mentions the bones in the museum's attic, in a story designed primarily to encourage support for a new museum building: "How many students aside from those who are admitted to study it, are aware that we have the skeleton of a large whale stored in the darkness of an attic along with thousands of other specimens?" asked the writer in the university newspaper. "Small wonder that the extent of our collections is not appreciated when they are packed away in odd corners exposed to constant danger from fire and mould. In time

when this part of the University is properly housed, the people may know what our museum is."

The news story may have had some effect: in January 1904 the Board of Regents approved plans for a new building, and Charles Nutting saw his dream at least partially begin to take shape. In the summer of 1905, the three-story brick Science Hall was gently jacked up onto rollers, and workers moved the building to another campus site 150 feet away. The effort — which moved the building no more than seventeen feet a day — was so smooth that equipment and exhibits were kept in the building and summer classes were held in the classrooms and labs during the move.

This feat of strength and maneuvering, which rivalled the beaching of a fifty-ton whale, left space for the new Hall of Natural Science (later renamed Macbride Hall in 1934). Part of the building was allotted to an auditorium and the university's library (the library building had burned down in 1897). These changes in plans meant that there was not enough space for the geology and botany departments; they would stay in Old Science Hall (today known as Calvin Hall). But Nutting's zoology department and the museum moved into the new Hall of Natural Science in late 1907. At last Nutting had space for many new exhibits — including the "Mullet Pond" whale skeleton, long stored in the attic of Old Science Hall.

Creating new exhibits largely fell into the



capable hands of Homer R. Dill. As a youth Dill had sought out William T. Hornaday himself for inspiration and direction in his chosen career. Dill came to the University of Iowa from Maine's State Museum in 1907 and was appointed taxidermist and exhibit preparator for the newly quartered museum. Dill would be responsible for filling two large galleries on the third floor with exhibits. He would design and install exhibits, mount specimens, and create new habitat groups, which were scenes composed to represent the reality of an animal's environment, including a painted background scene. Whereas Nutting's devotion to the museum was constantly interrupted by his duties to his research and to the zoology department, Dill could devote his entire energies to the new building.

Dill set to the task of mounting the whale skeleton in late 1909 in the third-floor Mammal Hall gallery. A spacious freight elevator in the building brought the whale bones, freshly cleaned and dried, up to the exhibit gallery floor.

By January 9, 1910, Dill was well along with the assembly, noted a short article in the *Daily Iowan*. Assembling a whale was indeed a learn-

ing experience. At that time there were probably fewer than a dozen articulated skeletons of that size anywhere. Undoubtedly Dill enlisted his students to help him. Dill had already initiated coursework in museum training. By 1910 or 1911 the coursework was formalized — making it today the oldest continuously offered museum program in the nation. Although no record of Dill's exact procedure has been located, it is reasonable to assume that Dill followed a plan recommended by Brimley. A procedure later published by Brimley closely matches the specifics of the Iowa whale exhibit. The steps reveal what a herculean, yet intricate, process the assembling of two tons of whale bones could be.

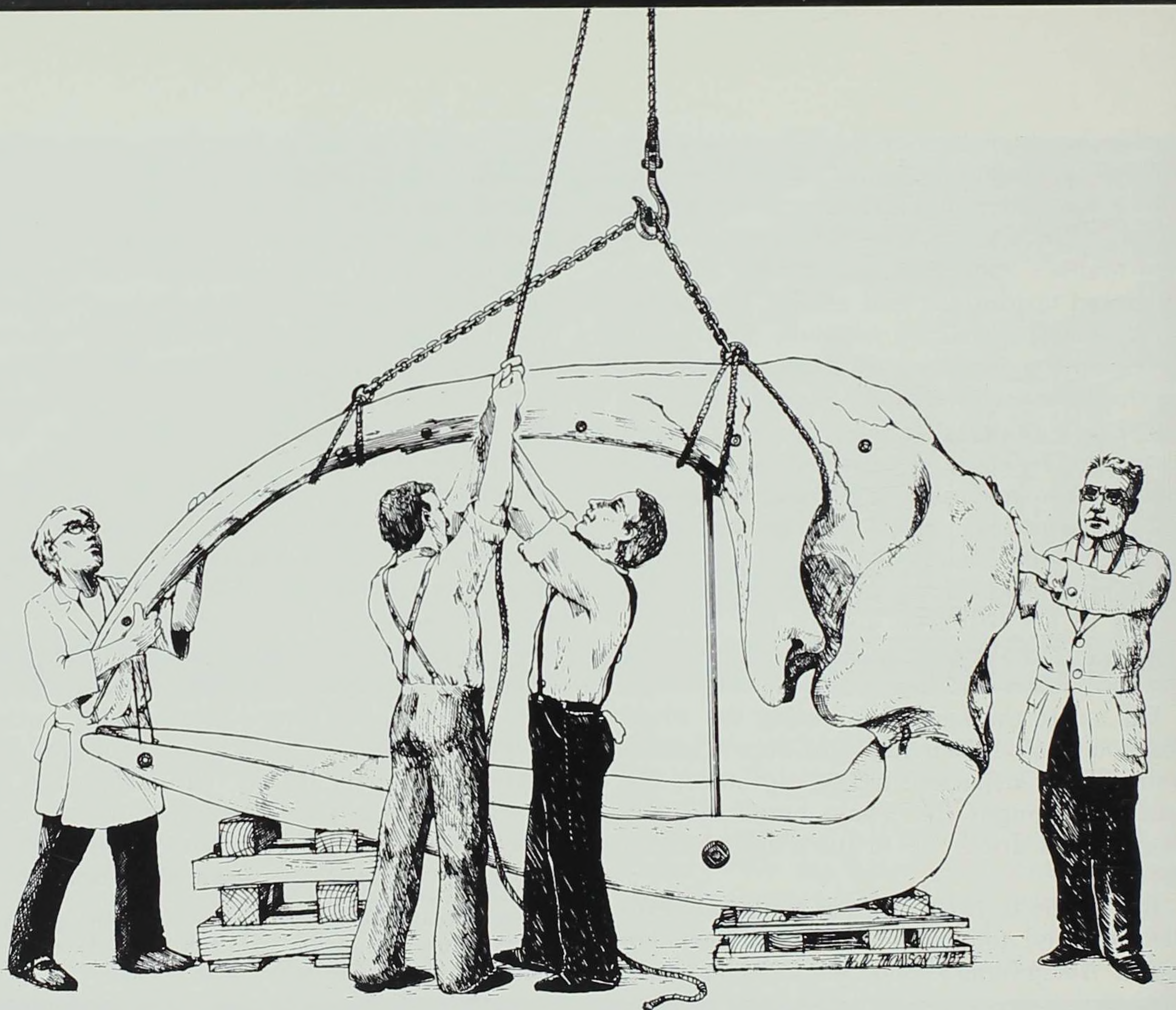
Dill's first step was to lay the 140-odd parts out on the gallery floor. Tackling the huge skull first — which was over a fourth of the entire skeleton's length — Dill positioned and adjusted each part for fit, then clamped or blocked them in place until most of the skull was aligned. Because the skeleton had been in storage for eleven years, some of the bones had

Homer Dill (standing, with glasses) supervises students in taxidermy and plastic arts. Dill no doubt enlisted student help in mounting the whale exhibit.



COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF IOWA ARCHIVES





undoubtedly warped or become distorted, thus requiring corrections. Using long auger bits and a strong arm, the assembler drilled holes through the very hard outer bone and then bolted the skull together with long carriage bolts. Difficult sections were bridged together with iron pieces hammered out on an anvil. The fit of each part was gradually adjusted until all the parts came more or less in line. Once assembled, the massive skull was as tall as Dill.

The fifty or so vertebrae (each weighing about thirteen pounds) were strung together on a long iron beam the length of the spine. The beam passed through the spinal canal, and thick wooden disks were fashioned and added between each vertebra to form the intervertebral disks. The disks were covered with a plaster veneer and painted.

Next, four threaded steel rods were passed down through the ceiling from steel beams in

Dill (right) and assistants hoist the whale skull, as interpreted here by author/illustrator Will Thomson.

the attic. With several sets of block and tackle — and several measures of steady faith — the assembled skull and then the spine were hoisted up, attached to the rods, and then connected to each other.

A trussed frame of strap iron and rods was constructed to hold the tall, arching ribs in place, and the ribs were wired to the appropriate vertebrae and bolted to the frame. A sternum was fashioned and wired into place, and the two massive shoulder blades were bolted to the flanks of the rib cage. The five-foot-long flippers, which in a skeleton closely resemble gigantic hands, were assembled and bolted into place. With this final step, the completed whale skeleton hung suspended in Mammal Hall. This four-thousand-pound, forty-two-foot collection of bones had become a graceful, delicate thing on a massive scale.



**D**URING THE FOLLOWING years Dill and Nutting continued to procure outstanding specimens for the natural history museum — largely through expeditions. In 1911 Nutting planned and Dill directed the expedition to Laysan Island in the Pacific to gather data and collect specimens. In 1914, based upon the expedition, Dill completed the Laysan Island habitat group, one of the first cycloramic habitat groups to be developed in the museum world. In the 1920s Dill directed expeditions to Hawaii, Mexico, and Wyoming for birds and mammals. He developed new exhibit techniques and methods of mounting and preserving specimens. Nutting led expeditions to Barbados and Antigua, New Zealand and the Fiji Islands, and served as director of the museum and head of zoology until he resigned in 1926. Nutting died the following year, and Dill served as museum director from 1927 until 1949. Herbert H. Brimley continued in museum work until his death in 1947, along the way writing many reminiscences of his collecting days and coauthoring with Clement (who had become state entomologist in 1919) and Gilbert Pearson the 1942 edition of *Birds of North Carolina*.

Today in coastal North Carolina the unusual Elizabethan speech of the English who settled on the Outer Banks still echoes in the voices of the local people of Carteret County. But the fishing village of Diamond City on Shackleford Banks was abandoned after a storm in 1903. Only a cemetery remains in a grove of live oak behind the windswept dunes. The epitaph of the great whales was also very nearly written,

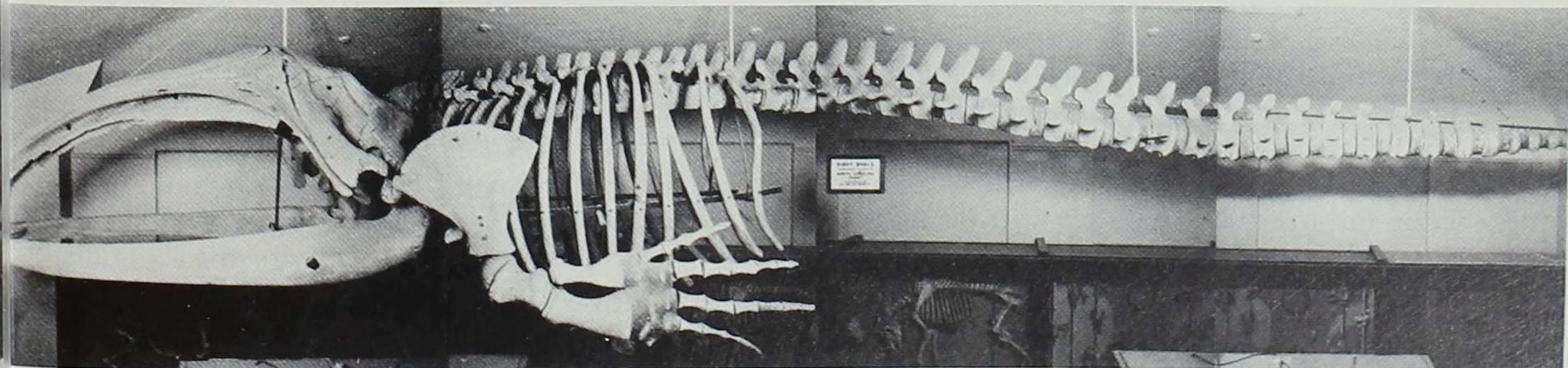
Forty-five feet long, the skeleton stretches nearly the entire length of the gallery alcove and dwarfs nearby exhibits. Restoration and relighting of the exhibit are now under way.

but the decline of the whaling industry and eventual measures to protect whale species have given the whales a new lease on long-term survival.

And what of "Mullet Pond," the fifty-ton North Atlantic right whale that swam off Cape Lookout ninety years ago? The skeleton still hangs below the vaulted ceiling of Mammal Hall. Because of the Red Oar Crew's whaling skills, Herbert Brimley's quick action, Charles Nutting's persistence and vision, and Homer Dill's painstaking assembly, the people of Iowa still have a whale of their own. □

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Herbert H. Brimley's personal papers at the North Carolina Department of Archives and History yielded much information: a description of a whale hunt (from a Brimley manuscript quoting a letter from an old-time whaler in the 1930s); an unpublished radio script by Brimley, "Old-Time Whaling in North Carolina"; Brimley's letters; and a manuscript describing mounting procedures (later published by Brimley as "Do What You Can Now With What You Have," in the *American Association of Museum's Museum News* (Nov. 15, 1930). Other sources were Eloise F. Potter, "H. H. and C. S. Brimley: Brother Naturalists," in the Carolina Bird Club's *The Chat* (Winter 1986); telegrams in the archives of the North Carolina State Museum of Natural History; Frederick W. True, *The Whalebone Whales of The Eastern North Atlantic* (Smithsonian Institution, #1404 North Atlantic, 1904); U.S. Department of Interior — National Park Service, *A Survey History of Cape Lookout National Seashore* (1-30-1968); and articles in *The Raleigh (North Carolina) News and Observer*. Much of the Iowa story was found in the following sources: the personal papers of H. R. Dill (University of Iowa Archives, Iowa City); Homer Dill, "The University Museum of Natural History," *Palimpsest*, 33 (Feb. 1952); the *Daily Iowan*; and J. W. Rich, "The Moving of Science Hall," *Iowa Alumnus*, 3 (Nov. 1905). Three M.A. theses (all written at the University of Iowa) yielded more background: Wilson Lewis Taylor, "Charles Cleveland Nutting and His Work" (1937); Francis J. Kohler, "History of the State University of Iowa: Scientific Expeditions, Collections and the Museum of Natural History" (1944); and Katherine V. Bates, "History of the State University of Iowa: Aspects of the Physical Structure" (1949). Special thanks to Charles McNeill and the staff at the North Carolina Maritime Museum in Beaufort, North Carolina.



COURTESY WILL THOMSON