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Whale Watching on the LIE



By Douglas Feiden

The Long Island Expressway is infamous for its carbon monoxide, bumper-to-bumper traffic and the unofficial and unflattering title it has held since the 1960s as the “world’s longest parking lot.”

Now, the LIE has a new and more positive claim to fame. It is the repository of a big whalebone that briefly passed through the Sag Harbor Whaling and Historical Museum en route to the Interstate.

Why, one might ask, would a rib bone of a whale – roughly five-feet long with a curvature of about two to three feet – wind up, behind glass and on public display, between exits 51 and 52 in Dix Hills?

Ah, that’s a question for Richard Doctorow, the curator of the Whaling Museum who was recently promoted after three years as collections manager: “If there is such a thing as whale kismet, this is it,” he said.

As Mr. Doctorow tells the story, he was contacted in late August, out of the blue, by New York State Environmental Conservation Police Officer Kevin Holze who was in possession of the hefty rib bone and a smaller companion bone that his agency wanted to contribute to the museum.

“We’re of course always grateful for donations, so we accepted,” Mr. Doctorow said.

Yes, but where did the bones originate? As Officer Holze picks up the saga, it was during a routine boarding of a surf-clam dredge commercial fishing vessel about two years ago at a Nassau County fishing port that the bones were discovered on the deck near the stern. No attempt had been made to conceal them, and he believes they had simply been scooped up by the dredge from the bottom of the seabed.

“We came on board, and we saw them, and we said, ‘Hey, what’s up with these things? What the heck are they?’” Mr. Holze recalls.



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"I finally said, 'Wow, these are whalebones!' Legally, they cannot possess them, so we took them."

For months, the bones sat in the Department of Environmental Conservation holding pen in Stony Brook. Officials mulled using them for outreach and educational purposes, but as the officer points out, "It simply did not prove to be practicable to carry them around."

In fact, Mr. Holzle adds, "These things were just too dang heavy! So I went to the museum on my off day, after I cleared it with my lieutenant, Sean Reilly, and asked if anybody wanted them. When the museum was offered the bones, they were ecstatic."

And so the rib bones came to Sag Harbor toward the end of the summer season. But their sojourn was very brief. Why? Again, Mr. Doctorow picks up the thread, telling of an email he got barely two weeks later, in early September, from Aida Jackson of the Long Island Convention and Visitors Bureau.

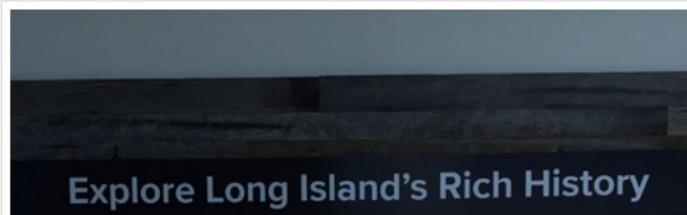
The tourism promotion agency, which has just been rebranded as Discover Long Island, was seeking interesting regional artifacts from museums and attractions in Nassau and Suffolk counties that could be displayed in a new Long Island Welcome Center, a \$20 million visitor's center and rest stop the state was building off the eastbound lanes of the LIE.

Did Mr. Doctorow have any whale bones the museum could offer for the exhibit? As a matter of fact, yes, he had just come into possession of a fine sample, and in short order, a long-term loan was arranged.

The ribs would take their place in a glassed-in display case inside the 15,200-square-foot center — alongside a century-old butter churner, 1930 cream separator, 1920 potato grader and 1948 potato advertisement. It's all part of an effort to promote Long Island's foods, beverages and tourist attractions.



Environmental Conservation Police Lieutenant Sean Reilly poses with whalebones that his agency donated to the Sag Harbor Whaling Museum, which loaned them to the Long Island Welcome Center near Exit 51 off the LIE. Photo courtesy NYS Department of Environmental Conservation



"We have a collection of whale bones on our walls, so rather than just put this in storage, it will be displayed in a place where people can see it — on Exit 51," Mr. Doctorow said. "As long as they're displaying it, it can stay up, and if they want to fill their walls with other items, it would come back to us."



Whalebones at the new Long Island Welcome Center off the Long Island Expressway near Exit 51.

Photo by Lizete Monteiro, Empire State Development

The lead agency on the project was Empire State Development, and early on, it made clear to Discover Long Island that it wanted to secure such bones. In addition to the museum's contribution, the Long Island Aquarium donated a whale vertebra, which is also on exhibit.

"While the whale bone and vertebrae initially weren't part of the exhibit, we really pressed on to find them since there's a strong historical significance to whaling on Long Island," said Lizete Monteiro, ESD's head of experiential marketing.

Including the whalebones was important, she said, because the whale fishery was a main driver of the island economy, and more than 500 ships departed from Sag Harbor alone during the golden age of whaling.

As Ms. Monteiro hunted the island for her whalebones with a single-minded focus that might impress Captain Ahab, the pressure to deliver fell on Kristen Jarnagin, president and CEO of Discover Long Island.

"I never thought it would become part of my duties to find a whalebone," she said. "But we were always being told it was 'mandatory' that

we get a whalebone."

Eventually, Ms. Jackson, a staffer, connected with Mr. Doctorow, who had taken possession of the bones only a few days earlier. Now, they would be going right back out again on loan.

"There were a few visitors in the hallway at the museum as I carried the bones out to the van," he said. "They smiled and chuckled at the sight. I guess it is a rather odd thing to see.

"Having worked here for three years now, doing something like wrapping up a whale's rib bone in bubble wrap and carrying it down a hallway seems a pretty normal thing, but I guess it's not your typical 9 to 5," he added.

The artifacts exhibit opened in early October, and for the first time in the history both of whaling and the LIE, the village's oldest, most storied industry is now being commemorated on a highway rest stop.

"It is designed not only to offer visitors a taste of Long Island's rich history, but also, hopefully, inspire them to visit the attractions from where the artifacts came," Ms. Monteiro said. "In the case of the whale rib bone and vertebrae, our hope is that visitors will then explore the Sag Harbor Whaling Museum and the Long Island Aquarium."

In the meantime, Ms. Jarnagin often pulls off the LIE to watch as visitors delight in the exhibit. And she cites a little girl who pointed and exclaimed, "Look, daddy, it's a real whalebone!"

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