

IN TWO PARTS: PART ONE

# westways

1909 • GOLDEN JUBILEE • 1959

DECEMBER 1959

20 CENTS



*Miriam Deyera*

**T**HE BREAKWATER at Santa Barbara shelters a typical southern California yacht and sportfishing anchorage. Weekend sailors are painting their boats. Kids are hand-lining for perch. Commercial fishermen are repairing nets. The sunny air is pleasantly filled with seagull noises and the tangy smell of salt.

But one boat tied up alongside Navy Pier is not typical—simply because it does a job performed by no other in the world. It's the *Seal*, a stubby little thirty-seven-footer as sound as the day she was built at San Pedro in 1916.

The *Seal* looks like any dirty-white fishing boat. Her special distinction, however, is that she is used to catch California sea lions (popularly known as "seals"). More than 5,000 of these intelligent, acrobatic creatures have been

netted off the Channel Islands and shipped to all parts of the world.

The difference between a sea lion and a seal, according to marine biologists, is this: sea lions, unlike the true seal, have external ears, a long, supple neck and

*By Andrew Hamilton*

rear flippers that turn forward for walking when the animal is ashore. Seals cannot turn their rear flippers forward because they are joined behind the body by a membrane.

Chances are ten to one next time you see a sea lion in a circus act—balancing balls on his nose, honking out a tune on a set of horns, or clowning with his flip-

pers—his first contact with civilization was aboard the *Seal*.

Come along and we'll see how they are captured. You'll have to get up early. Richard Headley, the present "Seal King of Santa Cruz," shoves off at three o'clock in the morning. It's cold and gloomy as the boat wallows through the blackness.

About six o'clock as grey dawn is breaking, the *Seal* chugs slowly along the rocky shores of Santa Cruz Island where the sea lions have spent the night. Headley, a blond-haired, muscular man, stands in the crow's nest—looking like a Viking chieftain in his long boat.

As the *Seal* rounds the rocky point of Potato Harbor, Headley yells to his crew: "Seal ahoy!"

Clustered on rocky ledges around an old, battle-scarred bull are some forty

## How to Catch a Sea Lion

• Rough water and tricky currents can make anchoring the trammel net a difficult operation





• Once a herd is spotted, the Seal is anchored and Headley and his helper get into a skiff with the big trammel net and a slatted crate



• Whether scared by the men's yelling, or just curious, many of the sea lions dive off the rocks. Some dive over the net in play

or fifty females and pups of the harem. As the fishermen approach, some of the animals leap nervously into the water. Others sit and stare. There is considerable grunting and barking.

Headley anchors the *Seal*. Then he and his helper load a trammel net and a slatted redwood crate into a skiff. They row to one side of the cove and secure the net to a rock. Then they row the skiff perpendicularly to the shore and pay out the net to full length.

The trammel net (150 feet long, 24 feet deep) is the key tool used in capturing sea lions. It has three layers. The two outer layers consist of twenty-four-inch mesh, the inner layer of ten-inch mesh. The animals slither through the outer layers and become entangled in the inner layer—which bunches up into a loose "sock" to hold them. Such nets are worth about \$400.

When the net has been set, the fishermen begin to whoop and holler—hoping to scare the sea lions off the rocks and into the net. Some scare, some don't. All of them are curious about the strange antics of the two-legged creatures in the skiff. Once in the water, a few of the bolder ones will swim up and examine the net—or even jump clear over it. When Headley and his assistant see the plastic floats at the top of the net begin to bob, they know an entangled sea lion will soon thrash to the surface.

That's the signal for the fishermen to go to work: (1) to extricate the frightened animal from the net and (2) to shove him inside the wooden crate. Sounds simple, but it calls for great courage and superb seamanship.

"A hysterical sea lion is one of the world's most dangerous critters," Headley says. "He'll bite anything in reach—the skiff, the net, the floats. Men have lost fingers, boats have been overturned, and one man is said to have lost his life."

The best way to pacify a newly-caught sea lion is to lasso him—exactly as you



• After the net is secured to a rock, it is payed out perpendicularly to the shore. When the floats begin to bob, a sea lion is caught

would a bucking steer. You toss a lariat over his neck or grab his hind flippers and tie them. The trick is to get the knot under his chin; otherwise it slips off his head. Once he is lassoed, he is pulled into the wooden crate and the net cut away.

"There's no graceful way of doing it," says Headley. "Just a lot of pulling and hauling, brute strength and sweat. Sometimes a little old-fashioned cussing seems to help."

One day last February during rough weather at San Miguel Island, high swells and swirling currents tossed Headley's skiff and net up on the rocks. A few minutes later another big wave washed the boat free. But the net disappeared, an oar broke and a plank in the skiff split open.

"We felt lucky to get back to the *Seal*," Headley says.

Sea lion fishermen work all day long—from dawn until too dark to see. A good day's catch is fifteen to twenty. On the homeward journey no attempt is made to feed the captives for it may take them several weeks to adjust to their new life. But they must be kept wet with hoses.

Since sea lions are captured only on order from a trainer or a zoo, they're shipped out the next day. Some go by railway express, some by air. Last year about 200 animals were shipped from Santa Barbara.

Newly-caught sea lions are worth from \$50 to \$100 and are sold all over the world. Germany, England and Japan account for the bulk of the overseas trade. Most trainers prefer young females—eighteen to twenty-four months old and weighing ninety to a hundred pounds.

The season runs from January to June, when mating starts. During winter and spring the old bulls are not especially upset by having their harems reduced. But in the mating season (July and August), they become possessive and belligerent.

"I've seen old bulls that rush up to the net when a female is caught and try to pull her out," says Headley. "One of them attacked a skiff and almost upset it."

Occasionally a trainer will order a smaller, spotted species known as the harbor seal or leopard seal. They frequent rocky coves and open, sandy beaches. The technique for capturing these little fellows, therefore, is somewhat different.

"The only good way to catch a harbor seal is with a scoop net—resembling a big butterfly net," Headley declares. "When you find one asleep on the sand, you creep up and dive at him. You aren't always successful. They're quick as lightning and will scuttle into the water like a flash. Then they swim out beyond the breakers and gaze at you—for all the world as if giving you a horselaugh."

The business of catching sea lions for zoos and circuses has flourished in Santa Barbara for the past fifty-six years. It was started in 1903 by Captain George M. McGuire, who died only a few years ago at the age of one hundred and two.

In 1903 McGuire wasn't a sea-going man at all. He was a landlubberly adver-

tising executive in Detroit. One day he noticed a newspaper want ad, placed by a Captain Mullet of Santa Barbara. Mullet was seeking a partner to go into the sealing business. McGuire came to California, provided Mullet with financial backing, finally took over the business.

Up to that time, the accepted method of capturing sea lions was to club them into insensibility. McGuire thought this too cruel. He discussed the matter with fishermen at Santa Barbara and developed the present method of netting the animals.

McGuire had a business head on his shoulders and began to solicit orders for seals from circuses and zoos. He would catch seventy or eighty, pack them in crates and accompany them to Europe, where he'd sell to the highest bidder.

One of his favorite stories, which he



• A sea lion can be distinguished from a seal by its external ears, long supple neck and rear flippers, which turn forward for "walking." Season runs from January to June, when mating starts



• The sea lions are lassoed and pushed into the wooden crate. At this point they can be dangerous, for they will bite anything in sight



• Looking like the captain of a Viking ship, Headley takes the helm of his boat as it cruises along the rocky shore of Santa Cruz

used to tell on himself, was the time his supply of frozen fish food was exhausted in mid-Atlantic. By coincidence, the ship was also carrying a large shipment of goldfish. McGuire went to the ship's captain with a proposition:

"I'd like to send a wireless message to the goldfish shipper—offering to buy the entire lot."

"Isn't that pretty expensive?" asked the captain.

"Sure is," agreed McGuire, "but it's the only way I can keep my sea lions alive."

In 1938, Walt Miller, who today is a tall, grey-haired man with hands scarred from bites and rope burns, began to catch sea lions for McGuire. Later he bought him out. Last year Miller sold the business to Headley, a former Los Angeles fisherman.

Headley chooses as assistants men who can be instantly available for a one, two or three-day trip. They include Bob Kirby, a boat shop owner, "Woody" Treen, a pilot and commercial diver, Dick Morelli, a commercial fisherman, Bud Allen, a commercial fisherman, and Pete Maglio, a retired fisherman.

The California sea lion is found in

West Coast waters from Point Arguello southward to Baja California. Heaviest populations—and most of the catches for zoos and circuses—are made on Santa Cruz, Anacapa and San Miguel Islands. This species has big black eyes, darkish-brown fur that turns black when wet, an array of stiff white whiskers, a pair of big flippers and a marvelous sense of balance.

It is this sense of balance that has made sea lions so readily adaptable as acrobatic performers. Distantly related to the dog, they train easily—especially when pups. "If fed regularly and not mistreated," says Headley, "they become devoted to their trainers."

He recalled that Homer Snow, a well-known San Francisco animal trainer, regularly takes his troupe of sea lions to the ocean for a swim. They frolic gaily in the water, making no attempt to break for freedom. When Snow whistles, they lope back and jump into his car.

Sea lions are caught under permission from the California Fish and Game Commission. One permit allows the capture of twenty—but permits are re-issued as often as requested. The state, however,

requires full and careful reports of the numbers and kinds of animals captured.

At the present time, the population of California sea lions in the Channel Islands is estimated to be about 12,450. And despite the fact that 200 to 250 are captured and sold each year, the herds seem to be growing larger.

Their real enemies are not men (although some sports fishermen think they eat too many game fish and therefore should be exterminated). The sea lions' most dangerous foe is the killer whale—a black demon with a wicked dorsal fin. They travel in packs and wreak havoc in a herd of sea lions.

"I've seen killer whales tear sea lions to pieces just for the perverted joy of killing," says Headley.

Should you stroll along Navy Pier at Santa Barbara and see the *Seal* at anchor, don't get any ideas about buying a boat and getting into the business yourself. It requires the professional technique most people don't possess—as well as exceptionally hard work.

And the present volume of orders supports only one man who can cry, "Seal ahoy!"