Kodiak's Whaling History Focus of New Exhibit

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This image of whaling in Kodiak was captured by W.J. Erskine. Photo courtesy of the Kodiak Historical Society, P 368-5-39

Jennifer Canfield/KMXT

The Baranov Museum is unveiling a new exhibit this weekend that explores Kodiak's whaling history. Anjuli Grantham is the curator of collections for the museum. She's spent the past six months combing through their archives to bring the exhibit to life.

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"Whales were a really critical resource in the country. Whale oil illuminated the world, it was where we got our light, it provided heat. The baleen was used where today we use plastic and so in a way if you think of any sort of product that we use today and they had a similar product in the 1800's it was likely that instead of petroleum, it came from whales."

Grantham says the history of whaling in Kodiak is fascinating because you can compare it to other forms of resource extraction that are common today. She points to the right whale, which was hunted to near extinction, as an example that people of the time didn't fully understand the consequences of their depletion.

"Even thought today we also know that drilling for oil has these environmental consequences, and these consequences for our health and for the planet as well as for human rights, that doesn't mean that we stop driving our cars. In the past even if people had some idea of what they were doing they were probably dealing with a finite resource and there were moral implications to whaling, they still needed to light their whale oil lamps in order to read at night. So in a way it's a question of our history of consumption, I think."

The exhibit is a collection of photographs and artifacts. Grantham says the next step is to make the exhibit available online.