

BACKYARD SANTA BARBARA

Locals' creation is 'Whale' of a game

WHO AMONG US long-time Santa Barbarans still cherishes their "Save the Whales" game? Recently my son and I arrived for our regular volunteer night at Noah's Anchorage, a residence for local youth from troubled families. The evening activity, after dinner clean-up and homework, was playing this cooperative board game, which happened to be one of our kids' favorites in the 1980s.



KAREN TELLEEN-LAWTON

We worked together to protect eight great whales: Bowhead, Fin, Blue, Gray, Humpback, Right, Sperm and Orca - while oil spills, radioactive waste and catcher ships loomed to move them toward extinction. "Save The Whales" was a Parent's Choice Award winner for Best Game in 1979.

The game is quirky and unpredictable, like life on the high seas. It doesn't feature the speed and violence of today's internet games, but it proved to be a rewarding interactive activity that entertained while teaching. I love the heavy, beautifully-crafted whale game pieces, which are like bronze sculptures to Monopoly game pieces.

As we left Noah's, I got to thinking. We purchased it from a local company headquartered on Mission Street; a place called, hmmm, what was it? I wondered if they were still in business, still saving whales. With the wonders of the Internet it didn't take much sleuthing to find Animal Town.

Ken and Jannice Kolsbun started the Animal Town mail-order business in 1976; Save the Whales was one of their first inventions, and definitely their most successful. As with all ventures it bore unexpected fruit over the years. One highlight for Ken was playing the game with the crew of Green Peace in the late 1970s, on their boat in San Francisco Bay. "All the whales were saved that day," says Jann. "At the climax of the game all the big burly men jumped up and yelled in excitement at saving the whales, just as if they were out at sea."

After "Save the Whales" took off, the Kolsbuns designed many other cooperative games. Their goal was "always to bring out the best in every player, encouraging them to attain a mutually desirable goal". Their most successful included "Back to the Farm" (about organic farming), "Dam Builders" (about beaver ponds and the disruption when

the waterways are disturbed), and "Rainbowland" (about weather); all of these eventually sold out.

The Kolsbuns raised three daughters in Santa Barbara. I couldn't help wondering whether any of them grew up to become marine biologists or Green Peace activists. The couple did inspire some scientists: two women emailed them to say that that their favorite "Save the Whales" game influenced them to become marine biologists. A third said she was marrying a marine biologist and surprising him with "Save the Whales," which she

played throughout her childhood. "We have had mothers write to tell us their children bathe with the whales," wrote Jann. "They know each whale by name and whether they are baleen or toothed whales."

None of their daughters studied marine science, but one of them, named Tuesday, helped to design a game space called the "Bee Bed" on one of their boards when she was a young child. The space showed the bees sleeping comfortably under a patchwork quilt.

Tuesday went on to design all the artwork for "A Chicken in Every Plot" (yes, PLOT!) when she was eleven years old. That game encouraged players to accept natural sounds like roosters crowing as easily as we accept manmade sounds like jets, trains, and motorcycles. Tuesday became an artist and a teacher.

The Kolsbuns left Santa Barbara in 1990 and "still miss it terribly." They enjoy a simple life in the Sonoma County town of Forestville, in "a small home with a big yard in the country," where Ken gardens and is writing a book. They have nine grandchildren who like sports, games, and even designing little games of their own.

"They are all pretty balanced when it comes to competition. We have a grandson playing varsity baseball," writes Jann. "I think they would all say they like playing our cooperative games, or they are just being very kind to grandma and grampa."

You can find "Save the Whales" and other cooperative games at the Kolsbuns' two websites: www.cooperativegames.com and childandnature.com.

Karen Tellen-Lawton's column appears every Tuesday in the Daily Sound. E-mail her at backyard@santabarbarafree.com.

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