September 1741. Captain-commander Vitus Bering’s ship, *St. Peter*, was stumbling somewhere among the long desolate string of Aleutian Islands in the far North Pacific. All on board recognized that it was unlikely they’d ever make it home. Scurvy had flattened several of the crew, two men had already died, and Captain Bering himself was terribly ill. The fresh water stored in barrels was mostly foul, and the storm-force winds and seas were constantly in their faces.

Sailing aboard *St. Peter* and sharing the cabin with Captain Bering was a German physician and naturalist named Georg Wilhelm Steller. On his first voyage, Steller was certain they were near to land because he saw floating seaweed and various birds that he knew to be strictly coastal. But no one listened to him, in part because he hadn’t been shy in showing that he thought them all idiots, and also because his idea of exactly where they happened to be was wrong.

Bering’s expedition continued, blindly groping westward toward Siberia’s Kamchatka Peninsula. The storms raged on, more men died, then eventually, somehow, they made it to a small protected harbor in the middle of the night. They hoped it was the mainland.

Steller and his servant rowed several of the sickest men ashore the next morning. He thought the place was an island because of the shape of the clouds and how the sea otters carelessly swam over to the boat, unafraid of man. Once ashore, Steller noticed a huge animal swimming along the coast, a creature that he had never seen before and was unknown in cold, northern waters.

He wrote in his journal: “Nor could I even know what kind of an animal it was since half of it was constantly under water.”

As the shipwrecked party settled in to winter on the island, some of the sailors died, including Vitus Bering himself. The survivors named the frigid island after their commander. With Steller’s guidance, they struggled through the long winter by eating birds, foxes, sea otters, seals, spoiled ship’s flour, and wild plants. Once they had eaten through all the animals and greenery they could reach, they were still starving. So after the winter ice melted, they turned to the giant manatees off the coast. They repaired one of their small boats and fashioned a sort of harpoon. After many failed attempts, one day the men were able to kill a female sea cow and drag her to shore.
"At long last," Steller wrote, "we found ourselves suddenly spared all trouble about food." The naturalist explained that the sea cows were completely unafraid of people. He continued: "They have indeed an extraordinary love for one another, which extends so far that when one of them was cut into, all the others were intent on rescuing it and keeping it from being pulled ashore by closing a circle around it. Others tried to overturn the yawl. Some placed themselves on the rope or tried to draw the harpoon out of its body, in which indeed they were successful several times."

For the next few days, a male manatee kept swimming by to watch his dead mate on the beach. The men fed on the meat ravenously and found practical uses for the oil and the skin. The men were then able to survive long enough to finish building a new seaworthy boat to sail the short distance to the mainland. Before long, the reports of the plentiful sea otters, fur seals, and sea lions on Bering Island attracted fur traders and hunters. These men quickly decimated the already small population of sea cows. The only surviving account of this huge animal alive came from Georg Steller's detailed descriptions; hence, it is known as Steller's Sea Cow. Within fewer than thirty years of Bering's shipwreck, men had hunted this animal to extinction. Nothing is left today but a few preserved skeletons and Steller's observations and careful measurements from his dissections.

Steller's notes reveal that the sea cow had a stomach larger than a man's. Groups and families grazed in shallow waters, eating kelp, algae, and sea grasses. The sea cow was an enormous cousin of the same warm-water manatee that swims today, mostly in the Caribbean and Florida, and of the dugong, which lives primarily off northern Australia. Most scientists now believe the sea cows, manatees, and dugongs are more closely related to elephants than they are to whales or seals.

In the next issue: the second extinct animal that Steller and his men on Bering Island discovered (and ate). For past “Animals in Sea History” go to www.seahistory.org.