

## Back In Time: North Coast hit by tsunami in 1964 remembered

April 2, 2023



Friday, March 27, 1964 was a warm, sunny day on the North Oregon Coast.

Anyone listening to the radio or watching TV around 7 p.m. that night had the normal programming interrupted by breaking news of a very large and destructive earthquake along the south coast of Alaska.

Initial reports were vague, as normal communication channels with Alaska had been disrupted. “Civil Defense Authorities” warned of a possible “tidal wave” that could impact areas along the west coast.

Shortly after 11 p.m. on that moonlit night in Seaside and Cannon Beach, the ocean pulled away from shore in a “negative phase.” The Necanicum River estuary in Seaside was virtually empty of water, before ocean water surged up the river channels of the Necanicum, Neawanna and Neacoxie, washing over low-lying areas along the river channels, carrying logs, sand, and ocean debris.

Ocean water and sand covered sections of Highway 101, and bridges over the Necanicum River in Seaside were damaged. A huge wave surged up Elk (Ecola) Creek in Cannon Beach, destroying the bridge over the creek, throwing debris against the exterior walls of the grade school and flooding the interior.

Multiple structures in Seaside and Cannon Beach were damaged or destroyed, along with several vehicles. The tsunami wave broke over the “Prom” in Seaside, damaging nearby homes. Ocean water and debris covered Hemlock Street in downtown Cannon Beach.

Cannon Beach resident Sam Steidel tells the story of his father Bill Steidel during the tsunami: “They were at Frank Hamond’s house across from the church on Washington. A call came for one of them saying the water

broke over the tree on the water front.

The card players scrambled to go home. Dad was the only one from across the creek. He raced through inch-deep water downtown, and when he came up to the bridge, a house floated by going upstream. He stopped just in time. He made it home by going back to Sunset Avenue, then up the highway.” Sam added that “I personally slept through it.

Afterwards we collected at the bridge abutments and waved at friends across the creek. You could see the bridge bits up-creek by where the house settled. Story was that the teapot and cups were still on the kitchen table.”

The massive magnitude 9.2 subduction zone earthquake that struck the south coast of Alaska near Prince William Sound, creating the tsunami that hit the Pacific coast, remains the largest earthquake ever recorded in North America. The earthquake struck Alaska at 5:36 p.m. local time (6:36 p.m. Pacific Time) with the shaking lasting for over 4-1/2 minutes.

The earthquake itself killed 10 people, with the ensuing tsunamis killing 122 in Alaska. One tsunami wave in Shoup Bay, near Valdez, was over 200 feet high. Some areas of coastal Alaska dropped 8 feet, while others rose almost 40 feet.

The tsunami wave spread out into the Pacific Ocean from Alaska, reaching the coast of British Columbia, where it did major damage to the town of Port Alberni, located at the end of a long, narrow fjord on the west coast of Vancouver Island. About 4-1/2 hours after the earthquake struck Alaska, the tsunami wave reached the North Oregon Coast.

Despite many close calls and damage to several coastal towns, there were no fatalities in British Columbia, Washington or Oregon, until the tsunami wave reached Beverly Beach State Park on the Central Oregon Coast.

There, four children sleeping on the beach were killed when they were swept into the ocean. When the tsunami hit Crescent City in northern California, damage to the area around the harbor was extensive, resulting in the death of eleven people. Thirty blocks of the town were inundated during four separate tsunami surges, each one larger and more destructive than the one before.

Residents of the NW Pacific coast were “lucky” in that the loss of life and property damage could have been far worse if the tsunami had hit at high tide, or if there had been large storm waves hitting coastal areas at the time.

Residents of the Pacific Northwest are understandably concerned about the threat of “The Big One” a huge Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake followed by a massive tsunami that will kill thousands and devastate infrastructure in Southwestern British Columbia, Western Washington and Oregon, and Northern California. The last Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake and tsunami hit on the night of January 26th, 1700, and could happen again tomorrow or hundreds of years from now.

Coastal residents should be prepared for the possibility of being cut-off from outside help for weeks; and without electricity, natural gas, or phone service for months or years.

A smaller, but still damaging tsunami resulting from a massive, distant earthquake is a more likely scenario in the years ahead, as the Pacific Ocean is surrounded by the 25,000 mile-long geologically active “Ring of Fire”; subject to volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis. 90% of the planet’s earthquakes, and more than 80% of the largest earthquakes, occur on this “Ring of Fire.”

**The Following is from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's ready.gov website.**

An earthquake is a sudden, rapid shaking of the ground caused by the shifting of rocks deep underneath the earth’s surface. Earthquakes can cause fires, tsunamis, landslides or avalanches. While they can happen anywhere without warning, areas at higher risk for earthquakes include Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Puerto Rico, Washington and the entire Mississippi River Valley.

Practice Drop, Cover, and Hold On with family and coworkers.

**Make an Emergency Plan:** Create a family emergency communications plan that has an out-of-state contact. Plan where to meet if you get separated. Make a supply kit that includes enough food and water for several days, a flashlight, a fire extinguisher and a whistle.

Being prepared allows you to avoid unnecessary excursions and to address minor medical issues at home, alleviating the burden on urgent care centers and hospitals.

Remember that not everyone can afford to respond by stocking up on necessities. For those who can afford it, make essential purchases and slowly build up supplies.

**Protect Your Home:** Secure heavy items in your home like bookcases, refrigerators, water heaters, televisions and objects that hang on walls. Store heavy and breakable objects on low shelves.

Consider making improvements to your building to fix structural issues that could cause your building to collapse during an earthquake.

Consider obtaining an earthquake insurance policy. A standard homeowner’s insurance policy does not cover earthquake damage.

*For additional ways to be prepared for earthquakes and tsunamis, visit <https://www.ready.gov/earthquakes>*

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