

50 years after the storm

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David Alan Shinkle vividly remembers the day he lost his grandfather. It was 50 years ago – on Aug. 16, 1972 – a day that would change the course of his life. It was the day a tragic storm took the lives of 13 fishermen in Pelican Bay.

Shinkle, like many young men and women, had the pleasure of spending summers with his grandparents. He remembers beachcombing, shooting guns and just doing the things that young boys do.

When he was a teenager, he started fishing with his grandfather – Clayton Dooley. Dooley was captain of the “Dixie Lee,” a 35-foot diesel-powered trawler based out of Brookings. Shinkle took to commercial fishing quickly – so much so that at only 16 years old, he was planning to make a career of it.

“I was going to go to a vocational school and go to a navigation course to get my captains license,” Shinkle said.

But it wasn’t to be.

When he and his grandfather left the Brookings boat basin early the morning of the storm, the skies were overcast and it was lightly raining. They headed south toward the Saint George Reef Lighthouse and were salmon fishing for several hours when things took a sudden and swift turn for the worst.

A tuna boat captain notified boats in the area on the citizens’ hand-radio that strong winds were coming in.

“We thought it was better to head on in before that thing hit,” Shinkle said. “We got all the way in and were tacking toward the waves to get in to port and our starboard windows got taken out by a huge wave.”

Shortly after that, a chain broke on their fishing equipment and the waves flipped their boat and rolled it over.

“Grandpa said, ‘We’ve got to get away from the boat, it’s going down,’” Shinkle said.

The teen-aged boy and his grandfather were forced to hold on to each other in the ocean with only their lifejackets as the storm rolled on.

“A Coast Guard boat came by and didn’t see us because it was so misty and stormy, another boat came and about ran over us – and I believe that was another boat that flipped in the surf,” Shinkle said.

“The survivability from hypothermia in the water is about two to three hours at the most – that is what grandpa lasted. But I had on my rain gear and my rubber boots because it was raining. Plus I was a pudgy little guy, and I think that’s part of what saved my life, and swimming and pulling him along.”

Shinkle could see an island and thought he could make it to shore. But his grandfather was struggling.

In a memoir, Shinkle wrote that his grandfather’s eyes had turned glassy and water came out of his mouth. The young man hesitated to let him go, but realized he needed to save his own life.

Finally the teen-aged boy saw another boat - and just as he thought the boat would pass him by, “I saw a guy – and he pointed at me. They came around and threw me a big rope and on the third try they pulled me up. I couldn’t stand up because my legs were all knotted and they took me in and gave me soup and blankets and I went to sleep.”

50-years-later, Shinkle can still hardly tell the story. His eyes water up as he talks about his grandfather – whose body was recovered by the Coast Guard.

David Shinkle and his wife, Karol, have made a family tradition to come to Brookings each year on Aug. 16 – the storm’s anniversary – as a tribute to his grandfather.

The event was so traumatic, Shinkle didn’t even talk about it to his wife for the first 15 years they were married, she said. But coming back to Brookings each year has helped him to process it.

“I think it has been good for him coming here,” Karol said during her and her husband’s trip to Brookings last week. “He lost his best friend that day and it changed the course of his life.”

Shinkle said he was terrified of water for months after the storm.

“And when the wind blew and a storm came up, I would kind of freak out,” he said.

But the next year, he came down to live with his granny and fished with one of his grandpa’s friends.

However, his previous plans to become a fisherman no longer felt right.

“In 1974. I got out of high school and got hired on the railroad, and I just retired not too long ago,” he said.

David Shinkle, who now lives in Lake Havasu, Arizona, said he hopes people the Brookings community will continue to honor their fishermen and other loved ones who have lost their lives in tragedies such as the Pelican Bay storm.

“It’s not a big deal to a lot of people but it’s a big deal to me,” he said. “And at the time it impacted a lot of people in the community.”

Thirteen fisherman lost their lives in the Pelican Bay storm and eight vessels were sank or destroyed.

The storm made headlines in The Brookings Pilot to the Spokesman-Review in Spokane, WA. It has been featured in books, Disasters of the Northwest, and Oregon Disasters – True Stories of Tragedy and Survival.

An excerpt from the book Disasters of the Northwest states: “It was a freak storm if ever there was one, and some 69 commercial and sport-fishing boats lay directly in the storm’s path, most without a clue of what was coming. And most had little chance to outrun it even if they tried.”

A monument stands in honor of those who lost their lives in Pelican Bay Storm just outside the Coast Guard headquarters at the Port of Brookings Harbor.