

ROSE COBIS, INTERVIEWER  
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INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES MADSEN  
AT KODIAK, ALASKA

RC: This is an interview with Charles Madsen about the tidal wave on Good Friday. That was in 1964 wasn't it Charles?

CM: Right. In 1964 I was ten years old. The day of the tsunami I had come home from delivering papers and it was a pretty nice day and as I walked on the porch I was watching the neighbor across the street playing kick ball in an open field across from my parents house. The neighbor was Gary Lester, as he went to kick the ball all of a sudden he was sitting on his rear and the ground was moving up and down. Stuff started falling out of the cupboards and dishes were breaking. My mother was in a panic and we grabbed my younger brother and sister and ran outside. Shortly after it stopped. I would say the most striking thing about the earthquake was the noise. The sound level was something I don't think could ever be reproduced or simulated. It was unbelievable, it was so loud. The sound of the earth moving like that was pretty memorable, the kind of thing you never forget. A short period later the tsunami came, I imagine it was about a half an hour later or so. People were still kind of shook up because of the earthquake itself, but I don't think most people were aware of the possibility of a tsunami after an earthquake, or associated the two together. I know I had never heard of it. The first wave was more like a tide coming in real rapidly and came up to the level of where City Market is today, almost to the police station downtown. It didn't do much damage on the way in but when it went out is when the damage came. It started taking the buildings and everything with it. Everything was wood framed, built on pilings pretty much. There were a few concrete or cinder block buildings but not many at that time. After the first wave it started getting dark, it was still pretty early in the year and got dark at 5:30 or 6:00 at that time. So after darkness fell it was just the noise. You could hear everything clunking and rumbling around downtown as the buildings came in and out with each successive wave. That was pretty loud as well. There were aftershocks of course going on at the same time as the tsunami. When you have a major earthquake it doesn't just happen all at once and then is over, you keep getting rumbles and of course everybody is really edgy by then and you have to run outside because you don't know if it's an after shock or what. There weren't any major shocks after the big one but quite a few after shocks, and that was pretty much it.

RC: Did you have dramatic results from the earthquake like Anchorage with the streets heaving up and large holes opening?

CM: No that didn't happen here. I think it was probably because of the rock here. With the geology of the island we didn't get

that reaction in this area. That happened in Anchorage and the mainland. Here it was more of a jarring or shaking action than a movement of the ground in waves, which is much more destructive. I don't think there was that much damage done by the earthquake here, even tho it was an 8.5 quake. I don't believe any buildings collapsed or things like that. In some areas the ground slipped a little bit.

RC: Your damage here then was done by all the water?

CM: Yes it was all from the tsunami. The earthquake didn't break any windows in the house just lots of dishes.

RC: Did the tsunami sweep whole buildings out to sea?

CM: Oh yes. It pretty much wiped out the whole downtown area. The APA cannery and The Donnelly-Atchison buildings which were down by the channel were swept out in one piece. People said they saw it going out with the boilers still going and steam coming from the chimneys. The wave floated all the downtown wood framed buildings right out the channel. Krafts grocery store was concrete, it stayed. The Fish and Wildlife building was cinder block and it stayed. There was an arcade called Sportland with a pool hall that stayed as well. We used to go down there after the tsunami and look for the steel balls from the pinball machines. We'd dig around in the mud for them and that was a big find!!! We went down the channel that night because I had an uncle that lived in a building owned by Kodiak Electric Co. and it was right down on the water. That was about 11:30 at night and the channel was all white water. It was whirling and going back and forth. You would see a boat go by with it's lights on and five minutes later they would be coming right back up the channel the other way. It was very turbulent. Surprisingly his building was still there, I don't know why. It had slid partway into the channel but the building was intact.

RC: Where did the people go who had lost their homes?

CM: The school was a shelter and emergency housing during the tsunami and shortly afterward. But most people ended up in other peoples homes. The national guard was called out and they had the armory set up for shelter. They also set up guards downtown to keep people from looting and to keep people out of the downtown area because there was alot of stuff spread around. It was a Friday, a payday for alot of people, so there was money in the buildings and in the banks.

RC: It was March so the light hours were low and there was no electricity for how long?

CM: Seems to me it was about a week till some of the power was back in service. We had a fireplace for heat. It was a little longer for water. You had to treat your water with chlorine and there was a place to go and get water. Even after the water was

going you had to treat it because the waters in the reservoir was so stirred up. When they finally got the phone service back in they had one phone per block. They were real scarce and people had to run and carry messages back and forth to let you know you had a phone call at the house with the telephone.

RC: What about food?

CM: As far as I know they airlifted in emergency food supplies although I'm not sure. Wasn't what a ten year old thought about too much. Everybody had a fair amount of can goods anyway because the supply boats only came to town once or twice a week at most. When a ship came in it was Alaska Steamship Lines there was no Sealand yet. People kept fairly large pantries anyway. City Market was intact. They hadn't lost there stock so they were open right after.

RC: Did anything dramatic happen with the big oil tanks? Were they there then?

CM: The large oil tanks were there and nothing happened to them. There was however a large residential area interspersed between the business buildings and all those homes had above ground oil tanks. The tsunami washed all the oil tanks out and in the process coated everything with diesel fuel. Absolutely everything downtown was coated with stove oil and diesel fuel. The ground and the buildings that were left were saturated with it. Everything reeked of oil. The harbor itself was wiped out, the docks were all washed out. The pilings were gone I don't recall seeing anything left in there but the breakwater, that was about all that was still there. The next day there was a real big windstorm blowing northwest and it blew 90 to 100 miles an hour.

It blew alot of the boats that had survived the tsunami and washed them up on the breakwater. It was that big of a storm. It probably did as much if not more damage to the boats as the tsunami did. With no harbor there was no place for the boats to go. They finally established a temporary harbor in Gibsons Cove. It was real bad timing.

RC: Who did the reconstruction work?

CM: It was done by urban renewal, a federal government agency. They were in charge. Once in their hands you were pretty much stuck with it. They were the ones responsible for the current beautiful downtown area!"Lots of laughter"

RC: So they were physically involved as well as providing the money for renewal?

CM: Yeah. There were disaster relief funds that paid for the reconstruction. The downtown area was divided up between the different businesses that had been there before that had suffered losses. They were given certain areas depending of what they'd

had before and how prime the location was. I'm sure there was a lot of "horsetrading" going on, as to who got what and where. For example, where Sutliff's is pretty close to where Kraft's Hardware had been. Kraft's wasn't rebuilt there. Sutliff's was where the old Kodiak Mirror building is on Rezanof, which of course is still there. Sutliff's wasn't damaged in the tsunami but Sutliff's ended up rebuilding down below it.....! There was even some land there that wasn't there before. Like around the harbor area that was filled in. That was all tidal area before. There was alot going on with that kind of stuff but of course I was too young to really know what was going on.

RC: Did you actually see the boat harbor bottom?

CM: I don't recall if it went totally dry but it was really shallow tho. The next day standing about where K.E.A. is and looking out between the Woody Island and the Spruce Cape Channel and all the way out as far as you could see was solid debris. All wood. I don't think you could have brought a boat thru it, there was so much packed in there. The tides finally carried it away. They tried to salvage what boats were out there drifting around, and watching for anyone that might be in trouble out there.

RC: Did you lose many people?

CM: No we didn't. I don't recall the final total for Kodiak. There was one man, a teacher named Shultz, who was the music teacher at the school. He and his family had gone on a picnic or something out the road here and they never did find them. They figured they were washed away and don't think they ever even found the car.

RC: What went on during reconstruction?

CM: They erected a lot of temporary buildings. They did a temporary store to replace Krafts. It was down where the mall parking lot is now. Most of the business's got back into action with something. There were many plywood building thrown up quickly so they could get back and get things going again. One big project was to get all of the boats out of the downtown area. There were boats strewn all over, big boats. Once they got them out of the way and the debris cleaned up and the sewer systems working again then they could start setting things up. They had to get fire protection back in again, hydrants and such. The big plywood building that was Krafts had sawdust on the floor. Because there was mud everywhere. Couldn't keep it clean anyway. They utilized any buildings that had been left standing and set up temporary business.

RC: Would you say it had the effect of stimulating the economy of Kodiak, even tho the damage to the fleet and canneries was great?

CM: It definitely promoted a lot of growth that probably would not have happened otherwise. It brought people in, it boosted some of the business's. It made alot of people because of the contracts that they got for reconstruction. Brechens would be one. They were just one or two trucks before the tidal wave. A small business.

RC: Your strongest memory?

CM: The noise the earth made during the earthquake. It was pretty remarkable. Something you wouldn't forget.

This file is part of the Kodiak History Project.

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