

Oral History Project
Les James
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Narrator- Cathy Magnusen

Interviewer-Les James

..... **We can talk about any topic that you would like to. I'm kind of interested in what it was like during the earthquake. Mary said you were in high school then?**

Yes, I was a junior in high school I had just had my 17th birthday and you know you don't have any cares or any thoughts about anything except yourself you know, and what you're going to do in fact I was on the phone when the earthquake hit. I was at home alone and we lived on the base and my folks had a cabin out at Chiniak and almost every weekend they went out to that cabin. They. . . my mother had left Thursday after school and had taken all of the kids except myself and my sister and I worked at the Exchange and so that was my excuse I didn't want to go. As a teenager I had had enough of that family stuff and my dad left that Friday right after work so he had been gone about an hour with my sister when the earthquake hit. . . And I was talking on the phone arranging where some, one of my friends was going to come to town because something was going on at the high school and I was going to ride with them. We talked through the first part of the earthquake and it you know, because they come and they go and you just don't pay that much attention and you know in California, you've been through them. **Oh, yea nothing that big though.** We finally decided. . . I said, " Jerry we need to get off the phone, we need to get some cover." **So you were on the phone when the ground was actually shaking. And the building was. . .**

There was enough time that we concluded that we needed to get off the phone because this was bad because things were starting to fall out of the cupboards. And I got off the phone and it was difficult to walk from the living room to the door and you know to stand in a doorway and then you see, the doorway to the kitchen was where I was standing and things were falling out of cupboards on both sides of me and you could see things heaving and you know you've been in earthquakes before and things kind of shudder but they don't roll, and they don't and you can't see that wave of movement and you know I began to get a little concerned so I got through the kitchen to the back door kind of dodging things and got outside and . . .I don't know why and the ground was just, it was really difficult to stand up because you had nothing to hang on to and you could see the cars bouncing up and down and uh I heard a powerline stretch and snap and I thought this is not the brightest thing I've ever done and I had time to walk back into the doorway again into the porch before it quit .

So you stayed in the door frame?

Yea.

To me, I guess the epicenter was close to Anchorage, right?

Yes, south of Anchorage.

It's amazing to me that Kodiak would feel it but I guess it rolls through the floor of the ocean and you know, takes everything and shakes it, I . . .

You know it's the luck of the draw I swear which way it effects because we've been close to earthquakes before that didn't cause that kind of movement or action and so ...

Who were you on the phone with again?

A friend of mine, a guy named Jerry, he was in the same class that I was he played basketball.

Was he in Kodiak also(when you were on the phone)?

Yea, his family lived on the base too he lived across, right by the runway. And you know all of that is just flat and he, his parents managed the marine club I think it was and they lived above the club and that was on a hill and that was the only high spot between the ocean and that hill, it was very near to where Peterson(elementary school) was temporarily last year.

O.K. It was near the Golden Anchor?

Yeah, o.k. where the Marine Club was just a little higher than the Golden Anchor.

Is that out of the tsunami range?

No, but nobody knew at that point, tsunami was not a word that anybody knew or certainly that I knew and ...

So you probably didn't have drills?

Well you know my dad um, we had lived on the base or had been associated with the base for years and years and my dad had been a block warden so we had always we had grown up with drills and his job had always been, it was always associated with war, that we had these drills and his job was always to go to a certain area to make sure that those people got out and then somebody was assigned to our area and made sure that we got out and we had things we were supposed to do and places we were supposed to go that we were pre-assigned to, so we all knew basically that you needed to move in some situations but nothing...you know this wasn't a situation we had prepared for...**Right...**Nobody had, even after it was over, I remember feeling relieved and then it(the ground/aftershock) would shudder again and then you would go.. I wonder how bad it was going to get....but um it was, it was real different.

Yea, the earthquakes that I've been in in California were just like I say, just kind of shakers, and you just kind of.."O.k. , we're having an earthquake, no big deal. Oh it's over." And you know something hanging might be swaying back and forth or something but it wasn't that magnitude, anything of that magnitude. I wasn't close to the one in '89 that shook San Francisco and Santa Cruz. I remember the one in '71 the Los Angeles earthquake, we lived in Tehachapi about 2-3 hours away and I remember my brother's bed shaking and moving across the floor to the other side of the room. And then we went and woke our parents up and of course he had missed it and so he was mad...

But, when I think of Kodiak, of course after what I've heard about the tidal wave, then, it's once the initial surviving the earthquake and then you know that there's the potential for a wave coming ..

Yea, and I don't think that uh...it took awhile for me well, I was by myself and I

remember trying to clean-up . . .

You just started cleaning things up?

Yea, I remember trying to pick stuff up and clean things up, I mean when my parents came home I traditionally had the house all clean and that was just my job, that was my role.

Payback for getting the weekend to myself. And that was o.k. with me so I started picking things up and ...I don't remember whether we had phones, I don't think we had electricity or water or anything but I don't remember for sure. And this lady that I was very close to lived two doors down from me and I must have gone over to her house after I picked some things up and she was frantic her husband was the fire chief and she was like my other mother. She was real special to me and she had a son who was a year younger than me and we were very close, we were like brother and sister and she was panicked because he wasn't at home and he had gone over to The Exchange, or the movie or something and she was just hysterical. I had never seen her like that, she was always the calming person in my life, so it was a little disconcerting to see her like that and I'm wondering what do you do? Because I can't call anyone I can't do anything. I remember feeling helpless that I couldn't do anything for her and she couldn't calm down. I don't remember how she found out that he was o.k. There are lots of things that I just don't remember.

Yea, probably some things you tend to want to block out or haven't thought about. Now, did the wave come close to where you lived?

When the tidal wave hit, were you far enough away where...

I didn't stay there. We did get word, I don't remember how it happened somehow my brother showed up. I had an older brother who had graduated from high school the year before and he worked on the base and uh, he came to the house as soon as he could to check on me and uh, somehow we knew that we had to move by that time, we needed to go higher and so we all went up to the what was then Aviation Hill, now I don't know what it is I'm, it's this side of the school, it's that last hill you go down before you get to the school, and we all spent the night up there and really didn't know what was going on. We heard that there were waves, and you heard rumors and you heard a lot of hysteria but you know it was more like a party at that point for people my age, we knew all of us were together and we were just goofing off...

So you don't know when the wave actually hit?

No, not anything that I saw.

When did you find out about the wave? Do you remember?

When it got light.

So it was at night when it hit? The earthquake hit...

People say that they could see it come and go here in town. What time was it 5:30 when it happened? It was only March so it wouldn't have stayed light for that long, um, I don't know what time it hit. I, of my own knowledge, I don't know ...I know that from my mother's notes I could tell because my brother was killed in the tidal wave and he had been with my mother and she had put it all down in a journal just as a way of dealing with it herself you know but we really had no clue of what was going on you know, where we were. And I think that as the word came out I went to a friend's house and my brother went to do what ever brothers do and her father was the captain in charge of the air station and I stayed at their house they had a fireplace and so we could be

warm. And it was a whole bunch of us and again it was still like a big party but you began to sense that something bad had happened and people really didn't want to talk about it and then they just tried to keep us busy the next day. So, we uh, they sent us to get firewood from a place where, the prisoners used to have to chop firewood for the officers and it was all kept in a building and uh the guys in the brig, I don't know, that's all we knew, and everyone else was there getting firewood and that was the first time that I heard that the tidal wave had wiped out Kalsin Bay and everyone in it. And that was where my family was supposed to have been and no one was telling me that, I guess I was just hearing it. So I began to get really concerned at that point. I still didn't know anything really.

Your family went there to visit at Kalsin Bay or what?(I thought they had gone to Chiniak)

They had a um, they had a cabin you know there were all the, there was so much military here during WW II and there was a big military installation all the way out at the end of the road at Chiniak, I don't know if you've driven out there ...

I've seen some of the pill boxes ...

And quonset huts and all of that and from time to time, the Navy in its infinite wisdom would say, o.k. if you guys want to fix that up for a week-end retreat you can do it and pretty soon they'd get mad and say no, you can't go out there and everybody would have to stop going out there, but anyway, we had mostly, all the time I was growing up we had spent summers out there and weekends out there and people fixed up those pill boxes and fixed up the quonsets and ...but at the time, my parents had, I think they were staying in a cabin right in Kalsin Bay, I can't remember for sure, but that, uh, you know the place was gone and uh...

There's not much there now you have the bar, the restaurant, and a couple of trailers...

And there really wasn't much there then um, that bar that's there now was built afterward. There was a house there and it was kind of a, there was a ranch there, and there was an old house there and there were two concrete uh, you can still see the concrete frames across the road ...

Gary talked about that.Wasn't there a barn there?

There was a big barn there, but across the road where the two concrete foundations are by that little lake that somebody has made right underneath the cliff um, that's where the two cabins were that these people, one of the two couples that lived there were quite elderly and were like grandparents to us and the other couple that lived there were just people we had known since we were real small. My family spent a lot of time with them and they were with my mother at the time that the tidal wave you know came so... And then there was a house across the street and a barn...I can't remember what all was there. But it certainly changed the landscape. It really changed.

I was looking at those pictures of Anchorage and it was really incredible houses on their sides, a big gully...

They lost so much, I don't think we had the destruction of homes that they did, you know, at all. We didn't have that kind of major stuff.

Probably some landslides I would imagine from the cliffs...

There were some places on the road to Chiniak, I remember the first time I went out

there afterwards, there was a , you could see fault lines and across the road out there before you got to Kalsin Bay you know where the road is so high? There was one place you couldn't get through because the road had shifted and there was quite a distance, a variation of the level in the road and there were no bridges...the bridges were all gone so you couldn't...

Because of the water, and well I guess because of the shaking too...

Yea, I don't know what really took it, there were, some of the bridges were moved , you could see them up farther, the bridge was concrete, and I think it was concrete, you could see the entire bridge just moved up the river you know and in other cases there was just, there was nothing. And not all of them were gone, enough so that you couldn't get up the road anymore.

You were attending high school in town at the time?

Yea. That's always been the only high school.

I had heard that they turned the high school into a shelter?

Did people go there for bunks and ...

They did. We uh, that was one of the busy jobs that we uh, Cindy's dad gave to us was, why don't you guys go to town and see if you can help out in town and one day we did that and they were feeding people at the high school and uh,

I guess they would have showers in the gym and they would have uh...

I think that everything was working, I think so, but not having to use it you know, we just kind of camped out. Some people I think had facilities that we could use on the base and some didn't but by that time there were uh, the Red Cross had set up at the Armory by that school and there were boxes and boxes of, it's amazing the things, you wonder where they got some of it. Some if it was pretty nasty you know it looked like it had been around for years and years.

Probably army surplus and...

There were food items I believe but the thing they had us sorting was clothes.

Oh, probably donated huh?

Yea, uh-huh, yea, and it looked like uh, it would have been more costume material it had been you know, some of it was real old. Maybe it was just what we happened to get.

So did they cancel school for awhile? Were you out of school?

Yea

For a month or?..

No, gosh I don't know how long school was out. Since that was Good Friday, I know we had Easter, I don't think we missed that much school, maybe a week.

So you were able to back into your old classrooms?

Yea.

So they were o.k.

Yea, I don't , here in town, other than the boats in the boat harbor being a mess you didn't see much damage and really the houses on base weren't you know, we all went back and lived in our houses once they got the power plant unflooded. But it was quite a chore to get everything cleaned up I'm sure.

I've heard that the Lion's Club helped move or relocate the village that was on Afognak and that's what, Port Lyons now?

Right, if you have the occasion to go out in a boat, you can see where the old village

was. And we stopped by there the summer before last and some of the houses are still quite nice but you know, they just didn't feel like it was a place to live there anymore I don't think so it was real low and some of them have been really damaged.

O.k. when did you first come to Kodiak?

I believe I was almost six and I came on a boat and my dad had taken a job after the war after he had got out of the Air Force. He had taken a job in civil service and they would transport - you could sign a contract for two years or a year or whatever - and they would send you and your entire family to Alaska and that's what they did. But, I had been sick so I had stayed behind and so they came down and got me and..

Where were you living before you came?

In Washington state. Yea. It wasn't that far to put us on a ship in Seattle so that's what we did. But we quickly discovered that sea travel was not...I was sick I remember being sick the whole time. I saw pictures later that someone had taken out of one of the port-holes, and that's the way I saw it. The only time I remember going upstairs was at the very beginning when they made you put on your 'May West'. And go up there for safety drills.

That was a survival suit?

That was the life jacket. And they didn't have kid size, I remember they were just huge. You had all these straps dangling all over the place and it was just ...not much fun.

So you remember that trip at six at six years old...

All I remember is being with my brother and being sick and I remember being outside on that ship yea, but not much more than that.

Was it a military ship?

It had been part of the military transport. It had been a troop ship and there were lots of us that they were moving around and I think that's probably how they sent people to Guam and the civilian people that were sent to the bases.

So when you arrived here, your father was working on the Navy base?

And what did he do on the base?

He ran the road grader when we first got here and we lived out at Bell's Flats in one of those quonset huts and his job was to keep the runways clean first and then clean the roads. We thought that was pretty neat because every winter we had the best snow forts of anybody because the grader somehow managed to build us some pretty nice walls. That was one of the perks.

Did they have the dairy out there at that time at Bell's Flats?

There was a dairy then and I'm trying to remember if the Navy bought milk from them or not. There was a radio station out there at the time.

Was it on a hill?

I don't think it was up on a hill. Well, you know the military, what did they call the radio that they had? Armed forces radio? And it was just in its beginning if I remember right and our radio station was out on the base, I have no idea why it would have been out there. Except that that was a place full of barracks from WWII and maybe that's where it had originally been and it just stayed there, I don't know but there were barracks all over the place. Just everywhere.

So you graduated from Kodiak and ...

And then got married a year later, I worked on base for a year and then got married. I never went away to school.

Were you here during the 70's when they had the height of the crab fishing? I've read a little of Spike Walker's book *Danger on the High Seas* and I read about the crabbing industry as being one of the most dangerous jobs you could have, in the book he writes about his experiences trying to find a job on a crab boat and going to the different bars and meeting people who had boats and he kind of had that color of the community and I haven't finished the book, but what's your perception of Kodiak during those crab fishing days? Was it a lot different than it is now?

I think it was a lot different in some ways it was, it was pretty wild. There were a lot of people without any ties. There were a lot of young people making a lot of money in the '70's who had come from Minnesota and you know Oregon, all over the place and they were making more money than they knew what to do with. I was working as a bookkeeper for 7 years I worked for one of the local bookkeepers and we did fishery settlements and these guys would come to town and the skippers would bring us a check or box full of receipts and we would figure out who got how much based on the percentages that they told us and during those days it was nothing at all for me to be writing checks for, I know there were days when I wrote over a million dollars worth of checks.

Wow!

You know they would bring you their settlement from the cannery and you'd send some to Uncle Sam, you know and disperse it to the crews and give the rest back to them and it was just , it was amazing. It was a lot of money, a lot of money.

I'm kind of amazed as I drive around town looking at some of the homes that are here. There seem to be at least by the waterfront, a lot of small little homes that I'm guessing were cannery workers or someone that was tied to the industry and then as you drive around, you see some of these huge homes almost hotel size, tri-level homes and of course my wife and I have been looking for a home here in Kodiak and there aren't many homes within our price range and I'm just wondering if most of those homes, was there a big building boom during the crab fishing time?

Yea, a lot of people came here and settled here. When I was growing up, people came here to fish salmon during the summer and the people here fished salmon during the summer and that's all they did you know, and so it was a sleepy quiet town- it was real busy during the summer time but real quiet during the rest of the year. And then this crabbing started about the time well it was about the mid-sixties and it brought in a lot of people who had no ties and then they began to eventually marry and settle down and build houses here. Most of the small houses that you see are very old and if you were to look at the lots up in the Borough office, they're not sitting where they belong they're uh, lot sizes are not right you know most of them don't meet the guidelines for building they were just built before all of the rules.

I look at some of the homes and they look like they would have been around before the earthquake and tidal wave and I'm wondering, a lot of them are fairly close to the water and I try to picture how high the water was when the wave hit because some of those homes look like they've been there even before the tidal wave. . .

You're right . There are homes that are down on the um, the ones that intrigue me the most are the ones that are down on the channel. They weren't taken, you know, they're just there.

It's interesting.

The KEA plant was covered with water and it was flooded to a certain level, I'm not sure what level um, and there was water in town here up to the Orpheum, but that wasn't the kind that did damage you know it looked like it raised it calmly, so I don't know, it's just amazing

It seems like there's a big gap in the building industry, in my mind, with those huge homes and those older smaller homes. Now there are some homes being built that are kind of mid you know in-between .

We've had a problem in Kodiak with availability of land for building too. There hasn't been that much and then it got very expensive because there was so little so and then building was difficult. You're right, there is a big gap but I never thought about it because I wasn't looking for a house. But there was a lot of houses built in the '70's **I was wondering if most of those people made money in the crabbing industry and then decided to stay here and they took that money and built homes, the bigger homes, or were they built by people coming to retire here in Kodiak or...**

My perception of that is they were people who were making a lot of money who were building those houses, nobody came here with a lot of money to retire.

So that crabbing industry lasted through the 70's and kind of died out?

Here yea, um, I was trying to remember when the first Crab Festival was,. I t has always been a spring festival, but I'm thinking it was maybe on the 4th of July when I was little. The Crab Festival is kind of a joke because there isn't any crab. I don't know how long that's been since they closed the crab season, it's been at least 10 years. But yea it died and people just moved west ward to fish. But there's been other things in between, it seems at the same time they were fishing crab there were huge halibut landings and a lot of that fishery was outside fisherman. You know they didn't live here, they came here only to fish. A lot of them were Canadians and they had to pay a tax and so they settled up and paid their tax when they came in and then they left. And there was a lot of money in shrimp but that was a very short-lived fishery.

And then there were the scallops. They were able to make a good living for a number of years. There were never many boats involved in it but at one time I bet that there were between 5 and 10 of the east coast scallopers who had given up and had come over here and they were able to make good money.

How do you think the IFQ's are going to affect fishing? From what little I've read about IFQ's is that it was an attempt to save lives because the season is so short and so they have to go out in rough weather. But what I've heard about the IFQ's is that it's a quota and you can go out in nice weather at anytime and stop fishing once you have met that quota. I've heard a lot of negative towards it too.

I think it's a wonderful idea and as I travel, people hear you're from Alaska and they want to talk about different things and they talk about seafood and they're always trying to feed you farm fed farm grown, artificially whatever, fish, or they're trying to get you to eat that crab that isn't crab, you know and I'm pretty picky and you get into

discussions and one of the things that I've always heard is that people don't buy Alaska seafood as much as they would because it's only available at a certain time of year and so I do understand the logic to that reasoning but at the same time the way that it was determined to do it was really bad. It really smacks of the guys who are in power are the guys with money. And they're making decisions for themselves and that's how it comes down to us. I don't think it's going to be good. You have a lot of owners in Kodiak who don't work their own boats. You have a lot of guys who have made them rich by working their boats for them. And those guys who worked those boats during those years don't get anything and that's the sad part.

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