

ORAL INTERVIEW OF JACK OSBEKOFF
ON
KODIAK DURING THE EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI
OF
MARCH 24, 1964.

BY
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On 2 April, 1993 at Kodiak Senior Center.

The following interview was conducted at Kodiak Senior Center on 2 April, 1993, with Jack Osbekoff. Mr. Osbekoff is presently a resident of Kodiak, but was born and spent most of his life at Chignik on the Alaskan Peninsula. He was a mainly a fisherman but traveled about Alaska, and also worked at the Naval base on Kodiak during WWII. His main job on the Naval base was to drive a powered barge delivering cargo down the Aluetian Chain.

Mr. Osbekoff was present on Kodiak, March 24th 1964, when the earthquake and subsequent tsunami hit the island.

JF: Mr. Osbekoff, tell me a little bit about yourself and how long you have lived in Kodiak?

JO: Well, at the time of the Tidal wave I was living over Chignik, that's my home town. I was due to go back there a few days afterwards.

JF: And you were born, and lived there all your life?

JO: Yes, in Chignik. Of course I traveled around quite a bit. I did alot of sailing and fishing.

JF: And you were working in the cannery (King Crab Cannery) when it hit?

JO: Yes, I was working up at King crab. I was just wasting time waiting to get home, and it happened on Friday.

JF: And what was the date again when it happened?

JO: March 24th, 1964. On friday anyhow. See, my sister stayed right down here on 7th avenue and I was staying down there. So, I walked in town and got a taxi cab. It picked me up by the Church (Russian Orthodox Church) and it drove me down Mission (Street) and I

JO: got out just at the bottom of Mission and the bottom of Seventh and boy, the ground was just shaking. You could here the trees, "tick! tick! tick!".

JF: So it shook pretty bad around here?

JO: Yes. Then I looked up there (to his sister's house) it was my sister out on the porch. She was outside with the kids so I got up there. I told here too, I said "After a big earthquake like this we're gonna get motion to the water." Sure enough, we looked out. You could see quite a ways out there, and we saw that that wave coming. Just coming in you know. It came in. The first time it didn't do any harm. Then, when it went out you could have walked across the shallow here (Near Island Channel). I went out that far.

JF: So, it took all the water out of the little inlet there (Near Island Channel)

JO: From Women's Bay and out that way. This channel (Near Island Channel) went dry. And then it came back in again. It stayed for a little while, and that's when town got flooded up. So, when it went out the second time, out comes the buildings: Cannery buildings, airplanes. Every thing that was loose came floating out. So, that was about 6:00 when the last one went out.

JF: Was that in the morning or the evening?

JO: In the evening. And then the aftershocks of that quake kept up till the next day. We kept on getting aftershocks.

JF: Were there a whole bunch of them, or a couple of big ones?

JO: There were quite a few. They were not as big as the first big one but you could feel them. The next day, that night anyhow, it was calm. There was no wind at all. We tried to get in back to town but they had it all blocked off. Then the next day afterwards, then the wind picked up. We had a heck of a wind. Some of the boats landed up on Near Island; the small boats.

JF: So a storm hit right after the wave?

JO: I was sunshiny, but there was Northwest winds. That's about the main part that I can remember.

JF: How hard did it hit the town? Did it tear up downtown pretty bad?

JO: It did. Anyhow, the reason that they blocked town off was that one guy got into Tony's Place (a bar in town) and he almost got drowned. And then there was a powered scow out at Selief (A street in town). One of those 85 footers. She had about 5000 crab aboard. So they heard her over the radio. They asked her "How you makin out?"

JO: He said "Well, I'm doin fine, I'm just passin by Tony's Place headin for the hillside". He was too. He had about 5000 crab aboard, and that's where he stayed, right up under the school house. They finally got the crab off, but I don't know how they got the boat out. The small boat harbor, that was a mess. They had boats scattered all over. I don't know if McCorkell was Harbor Master or not...I think he was.

JF: Did they loose alot of people in that tidal wave, or was everybody prepared? Did they get albt of warning?

JO: Well, they don't now exactly how many was lost, but they did loose some out of the boat harbor. Later on they had it in the paper, I forgot how many was lost, but there was some lost.

JF: Did the local Police give everybody a warning before it hit, or did everybody just know it was coming?

JO: Nobody knew. It just hit like that! Well that night, the old beachcomber was still standing. On Friday night they generally had a spaghetti feed down there. We were supposed to have that spaghetti feed about six-o'clock that night. If that tidal wave had of hit about six or seven-o-clock, everybody would have been killed. They wouldn't have had a chance. It just wipped that Beachcombers right out. So, I don't

JO: know exactly how many people were lost, but there was some people lost.

JF: How long do you think it took for Kodiak to get back to normal after that hit?

JO: They did a good job on it. In about a year or so they had it pretty well back to normal.

JF: Did they get alot of outside help, or did it mostly come from people here on Kodiak?

JO: They got alot of outside help too. So when I left here it was about two days after the quake. I flew back to Chignik. I was fishing up there.

JF: Did Chignik get hit pretty bad with it?

JO: Everything was hit. It was still smoking up there, burning trash and everything. It was quite a mess.

JF: What about around the other side of the island, around Port Lions, and Karluk?

JO: That I don't know, but it hit quite a bit around there too. There was a fella that had a little boat. I can't remember the name of it. It was the name of that point out there (not sure) anyhow. Anyhow, they took off from here. They were tied up at the dock down there (Public Dock). There was about four guys aboard her. And they took off, and they got just to where that last bouy is out there (bouy 4 maybe) and they saw that wave coming.

JO: He said "I don't think I'm gonna make it". And they didn't. The wave got them. The boat landed up on the shore out there. But the first boat that went by, it went over them. They made it. That was quite a shakin up that time.

JF: Did they loose all the power and water for quite a while?

JO: Yes, that was down for quite a while, but I left here about three days afterward and flew back to Chignik. I came back that fall. I got on the Tustemenia. That's when she first came up here. By then they had the town back in pretty good shape again.

JF: What was going on with your family and sister? Did she make it alright?

JO: Well, there was alot of people that headed up for Pillar mountain. In fact they almost had a bad accident up there too. So many cars got in there, and the middle car almost caught fire, then the other ones couldn't have gotten outta there. My sister didn't go up there. Her and the kids stayed home. The next day they got a warning again (tsunami warning) so they had to take off for Pillar Mountain again.

JF: Did they have another one hit after the main one?

JO: The next day we got the aftershocks. It lasted for

JO: for about a day or so. But, that main one was a terrible one. I got out of that car (taxi) and I was thinking "what the heck is happening here". I almost fell down. And then I could hear the trees go " ticka ticka, ticka". You could see the ground move like that (making wave motion with hands). Lucky thing it didn't crack anywhere.

JF: It didn't crack the ground anywhere?

JO: No, it didn't crack. I wonder what would of happened if that bridge had been there (Near Island Bridge). It wouldn't have took it I don't think.

JF: When they blocked off downtown, was it underwater for quite a while?

JO: Just when the tide came in and out. It came in twice. The second time it came in it did quite a bit of damage. that's the reason why they blocked it off so you wouldn't have anybody looting around down there.

JF: About how high did it get down there?

JO: You see where Kraft's store is up there, it reached up there. It hit the jail. It looked so funny, all those buildings gone out... airplanes and what not.

JF: How long did it take it to come in and go out?

JO: From the time we saw it, it took about 15 to 20 minutes. It came in and went back out again.

JF: When I think of tidal waves, I always think of this big tsunami crashing in. So it didn't crash in? It just steady came up?

JO: There was just a swell come in. You could see it white right across. You could see it out by Marmot Island. I think there was alot of people lost out at Bell's Flats. They were half way across, but they couldn't make it.

JF: Were there alot of houses out there at Bell's Flats at that time?

JO: I don't think there were as many houses. About half as many. At that time there was mostly trailer houses.

JF: What about out at Chiniak?

JO: I don't know about that. I wasn't out there. But, I guess it did damage out there too. Old Harbor, and Alitak down there too got it I think. At Chignik too. The water just raised. Now I don't know how true it is but they said that the peninsula (Alaskan Peninsula) came up a little. I don't know how much, but it came up a little bit (refering to raising above sea level).

JF: Did that surge effect the fishing around here?

JO: It didn't effect the Salmon runs too bad.

JF: So it didn't effect the Crab?

JO: They had alot of crab that summer.

JF: So it helped it?

JO: Yes. They had lots of crab. King crab too.

JF: Tell me again, why you were in Kodiak. You were fishing?

JO: This was in spring of the year. I was here in the winter and I went back to Chignik. In fact, here's how it was. I got on a little mail boat, the Iceland. I was on her, then I came back off here to wait for a ride back to Chignik when it happened. I was traveling around quite a bit when that happened.

JF: So you were standing out there, you felt the shocks, and then you saw it coming?

JO: Just outside of my sisters place up there. She's got a porch way up on top, so we were standing up there watching that tidal wave. Dead calm that night too. There was no wind at all. Its a good thing it didn't happen when I was working in the icebox at King Crab (Cannery)

JF: Did that get wiped out too?

JO: Well, they had our paychecks all ready and that washed them all away. We finally got em though. I'll tell you one thing, that old dock out there, the King Crab dock stood it. It didn't do any damage to it. It came up over it but nothing happened to it.

JF: Do you think that after the wave it drove alot of people off the Island? Did it scare alot of people to leave?

JO: That I don't really know because I was over in Chignik. But I think some of them did get scared.

JF: Did it hit the Airport pretty hard?

JO: I think it did. Yes. I know the Navy had their seaplane ramps out there.

JF: Did they have alot of damage out there?

JO: I guess they did, but I wasn't there to see it. I worked out there in 1941 when Pearl Harbor was bombed. The SS Yale was laying in there. We used her as a bunk house. That night when Pearl Harbor was bombed, me and my brother were up on the hillside, but nothing happened.

JF: Was there anybody still living out on Near or Woody (Island) when that hit?

JO: Yes. There was people living out on Near Island.

JF: Do you have any stories about what was going on over in Chignik after it happened?

JO: In Chignik it didn't do much damage. The most damage it ever did was that place they call Chiniga in Prince William Sound. Alaska steamship, their boat was in there. It wiped out everybody that was on the dock. I guess you heard about the time that Scotch Gap light

JO: got hit. Wave came along and hit her from the Bristol Bay side. What happened that time was that the ocean bed up in the Bering Sea cracked open. That tidal wave came down and hit Scotch Gap and took Scotch Gap Light off. There were two guys in Scotch Gap... they didn't have a chance. Killed them.

JF: When was that?

JO: It must have been, 1945 or 46. Somewhere around there.

JF: Did Kodiak feel that any?

JO: I tell you where they felt it... Hawaiian Islands.

JF: Was that when they started to have tsunami warnings?

JO: I don't think they had it before. That's when we started to get tsunami warnings.

JF: This area right in here where we are, in the Senior center, this was pretty much underwater too when the wave hit? (REFERING BACK TO THE KODIAK QUAKE)

JO: Well, at that time there was nothing here. There was a house standing here of a fellow named Otto Mahley.

JF: Was anyone in the house when the wave hit?

JO: Yes, I guess they were here. There must have been, but the tide didn't come up this far. In fact, you know where that Irskin House museum is? Where those steps are, down around in there someplace, you can see on the

JO: (contd) well there how far up the water came. You can see it up at Krafts Store too. It really change the place around down there. You know where the Elks Lodge is now? That used to be a big hillside there. When they rebuilt the place they leveled it. And then, down here where Donally Atkinsons is, across from Irskins house is; that road was gone down by a big bank, then it went to the left and then to the right. Now its all straight.

JF: Did it tear up Kraft's too?

JO: That was completely wiped out. Kraft's store was sitting on pilings. It just wiped it out.

JF: Besides King Crab, all the other canneries along the shoreline were wiped out too?

JO: The only one at that time was King Crab. The rest of them weren't there yet.

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