

Good Friday Earthquake (1964)

Excerpts from Alaska Earthquake 1964 (Eyewitness Accounts)
and Earthquake by Eloise Engle



Statistics of the 1964 Alaska Earthquake

1. It registered between 8.4 and 8.6 on the Richter scale in use at the time. Its equivalent moment magnitude is revised upwards to 9.2 making it the strongest earthquake to be recorded in North America.
2. This was the 2nd largest earthquake ever recorded in the world.
3. 131 persons were killed, Alaska was not heavily populated at the time, 119 were caused by the tsunami.
4. It caused the greatest amount of vertical uplift ever measured.
5. Movement of the ocean floor caused the most disastrous tsunami that ever hit the West Coast of the United States and Canada. The largest wave height was 220 feet in the Valdez Inlet Shoup Bay. Traveling at speeds of over 400 mi/hr.
6. The Tsunami hit Crescent City, Ca. And killed 10 people. It also, reached the Hawaiian Islands
7. 300 to 400 million dollars in property damage were reported (1964 dollars).
8. An area of over 50,000 square miles sustained major damage.
9. The schools in Anchorage were almost all wiped out.
10. The epicenter was 55 miles west of the town of Valdez and 75 miles east of Anchorage.

March 27, 1964 at 5:36 pm, Good Friday, Alaskan's thoughts turned to the Almighty during five minutes of impending eternity. The earth began to shake.

Private First Class Clarence Myers, stationed at Fort Richardson, was standing outside when the quake started. Soon he could barely stand up. He wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go. The pavement all around him was waving. Cars took off and smashed into one another. Power lines snapped. Splintering glass was everywhere.

In downtown Anchorage people were forming a chain in the middle of the street by clasping hands as a protection against the huge cracks that were opening in the ground.

Five horrifying minutes later the quaking stopped and all over Anchorage there was a vast stillness save for the cries of the injured. Dr. George Wichman patched up patients by the light of a flashlight.

Seventy-five percent of the city's property lay in ruins. One hundred commercial buildings had been destroyed. Ninety-five percent of the high rise apartments were condemned.

Residents of Kodiak Island were warned to evacuate to the mountains because the earthquake had generated a huge tsunami. It rushed down the Gulf of Alaska.

Bill Cuthbert was having supper in the galley of his crab boat when suddenly he felt a jar. Most of Kodiak's 160 crab and salmon boats were bucking at their moorings. The first wave hit at 6:47 pm. -- gently, a gradual swell followed by a gradual ebb.

The second wave hit and in an instant every piling, every anchor, every line, every pier snapped and broke and the harbor became a whirlpool.

The next onslaught came 55 minutes later, with less force but more height. Cuthbert's scow was whirled around and around and came to rest upright on a crushed store.

The fourth wave refloated the scow and Cuthbert tied a line to a telephone pole. Through the night, every 55 minutes, the waves came in, weaker each time, until the nightmare ended at 3 am.

The following paragraph is a partial recording from the radio announcer R. Pate, at the radio station KHAR – 1964

"Hey, boy!—Oh-wee, that's a good one! ... Man, that's an earthquake! Hey, that's an earthquake for sure!—Whee-eee! Boy oh boy—... Man—everything's moving— ... Oh boy, I wish this house would quit shaking! ... the whole place is shaking—... Boy! Let me tell you that sure scared the hell out of me and it's still shaking, I'm telling you! I wonder if I should get outside?... I'm telling you, the whole place just moved like somebody had taken it by the nape of the neck and was shaking it.... Oh! I'm shaking like a leaf—...Boy! The place is still moving! You couldn't even stand up when that thing was going like that—I was falling all over the place here. I turned this thing on, and started talking just after the thing started, and man! I'm telling you, this house was shaking like a leaf! The picture frames—all the doors were opened—the dishes were falling out of the cabinets—and it's still swaying back and forth—... Man I hope I don't live through one of those things again...."

The damage to life and property was devastating, but the Alaskan spirit is strong. "I had my life and my health and God was watching over me. I knew I could start over and that is what I set about to do." Norman Nault