



Quake Tales Presents Pete Geddes
“A Place Where Nothing Ever Happens”
The Port Alberni Tsunami 1964
April 12th, 2024

In the BC Earthquake Alliance’s first Quake Tales story, we invited Pete Geddes, former fire chief and long-time resident of Port Alberni, to share his story. Mr. Geddes has lived in Port Alberni for over 80 years and spent 30 working for the fire department, putting him in a position not only to provide insights as a professional whose career focused on preparedness and emergency response, but also into how his community, in particular, rises up to the challenge of dealing with the constant threat of natural disaster. He graciously shared his experience during the March 27, 1964 tsunami in Port Alberni and its aftermath. The (Mw 9.2) that caused the tsunami, was the US's largest recorded earthquake and it affected the Western Coastal area of North America in states such as Washington, Oregon, and California as well as British Columbia. Having been involved in community safety and preparedness for most of his life, Mr. Geddes shared his memories of the event, how it affected him, and advice for younger people on preparedness.



Pete Geddes in Port Alberni, April 12, 2024

Photo at Hutchison Gallery

“...the wave was more of a high tide instead of the stereotypical image of a great huge wave”
- Former Port Alberni fire chief Pete Geddes

Firstly, he sets the scene where and when the tsunami hit Port Alberni. The 1964 earthquake in Alaska resulted in tsunamis in the same area, as well as in Port Alberni and Prince Rupert, BC, and other countries like Peru, Japan, and New Zealand. Mr. Geddes explained that his story begins in Nanaimo, where he is picking up a friend before heading back to Port Alberni, where his friend joked, “nothing ever happens here.”

After picking up two other friends to drive around and see what had changed since they left for university, they noticed logs going up the river and water coming across the road; the first signs they had that something was wrong before the police told them to get out as soon as they could because “another wave was coming.” They watched as that first wave retreated, sucking everything it could from the land as it did and breaking two of Lady Rose’s mooring lines on the way. Originally, the ship was as high as the wharf and now ‘we could look right over the wheelhouse’ (because she had dropped with the water level). At this point in the story, Mr. Geddes makes it a point to explain that the wave was more of a high tide instead of the stereotypical image of a great, huge wave. After witnessing this, Mr. Geddes and his friends looked around the city more to see how it was being affected and woke his friend’s parents up, to show them that logs were coming up the river.

*“...those tides continued into the next day, back and forth
in the inlet, not stopping where they should have.”*
- Former Port Alberni fire chief Pete Geddes

Mr. Geddes then recalls that many pictures were taken the next day while the residents, including him, cleaned up after the tsunami. The tsunami damaged the water line from Sproat Lake to the paper mill, causing the mill to shut down. Mr. Geddes and another nine to eleven young men at the time had to be flown in from Courtenay to Powell River to help start up three of the paper machines while the pipeline was fixed, which took around a week or two. After that, they went back home to work on repairing the dam.

Throughout the interview, one of the lasting impressions the tsunami seems to have made on Mr. Geddes was that the waves were not as described in many other tsunamis; they looked like high tides. This is an aspect of the Port Alberni tsunami that Mr. Geddes brings up more than once in his recollection of events and answers to questions. As he described, those tides continued into the next day, back and forth in the inlet, not stopping where they should have. Three tides were higher than the others and caused significant damage. 55 homes were washed away in Port Alberni; 375 others were damaged.

“[Port Alberni’s tsunami warning] system can also be used to protect the population from other dangerous situations, such as a forest fire, since the sirens used in the system can be used as speakers to prevent people from going down to the beach out of curiosity by warning them of what the situation is.”

- Former Port Alberni fire chief Pete Geddes

Reflecting on the changes in Port Alberni due to the tsunami, Mr. Geddes mentions that now they have one of the largest dyke systems in the Valley, the Kitsuksis Dyke Alleyway. Another addition is the sophisticated tsunami warning system, where for three minutes, sirens ring and tell residents to hike to higher ground as a tsunami is due soon. It was the second warning system to be implemented on the North American West Coast, following the system in Cannon Beach, Oregon. Mr. Geddes explains that this system contains sirens and speakers that can also be used to protect the population from other dangerous situations, such as a forest fire. The speakers can help prevent people from going down to the beach out of curiosity by warning them of what the situation is. There are also more signs for evacuation routes now and tests of the system.

On a personal note, Mr. Geddes shared that for him, ‘preparedness is a way of life’. The tsunami reinforced his Boy Scout discipline. Aside from his emergency kit, he has a travel trailer for emergency shelter. He also recounts that many times in his career, he has said that should something of this magnitude ever happen again, he would like to be in Port Alberni. His reason for it is that the population in Port Alberni is very well prepared, and because there are so many loggers in Port Alberni, finding someone who knows first aid or has a truck or a power saw to lend is not difficult. Another trick he picked up was storing water in old juice containers in his freezer, so if his house were to lose power for a few days, he would still have access to that clean, cold water.

He has chosen to share his experience in our Quake Tales series because many of the people who witnessed and could accurately recount the tsunami in Port Alberni, unfortunately, have passed. This year (2024) marks the tsunami’s 60th anniversary, and he thought it important to remember this event. Later he did express the frustration shared by many who work with educating the population around emergency preparedness when putting so much effort into events to educate the public fails to attract the target audience’s attention. While Port Alberni luckily did not have any casualties, that is never a guarantee, and the 1964 earthquake followed by tsunami led to 128 casualties in total.

“I guess it’s disheartening that you put a lot of work into it. And many people don’t come out, and then if something happens, they’ll say, ‘Well, why didn’t you tell us this?’ Well, we spent a whole week trying to tell you, and you didn’t come to look. And that’s something that would be nice if people would be a little more involved with.”

- Former Port Alberni fire chief Pete Geddes

His advice to younger people is the same as to anyone else. It is that it is a good idea to know your neighbours in case of an emergency where you have to work together, get trained in first aid, and keep a few tools in your emergency kit that can help you clear a passage if your escape route gets blocked. Even storing clean, empty buckets for water might come in handy in an emergency. Big or small, make adjustments to your lifestyle and supplies to help prepare yourself in case of an emergency.

Lastly, Mr. Geddes praised Port Alberni one more time for putting preparedness first. He highlighted the changes made, like the dyke and tsunami warning systems as well as bylaws, such as the ones regarding building houses where there cannot be sleeping accommodations below the high tide mark in case another tsunami hit the inlet. He noted that Port Alberni has apparently solved its issue with spring floods entirely and hopes that more places follow Port Alberni’s lead for the sake of their communities.

What is Quake Tales?



The Quake Tales Project is curated by the BC Earthquake Alliance and features stories of British Columbians’ earthquake or tsunami survival stories. Stories with local connections resonate deeper with audiences, so we collect them to help spread awareness and further increase the culture of preparedness across our province.

Want to share your story? Contact us at: office@bcearthquakealliance.ca
