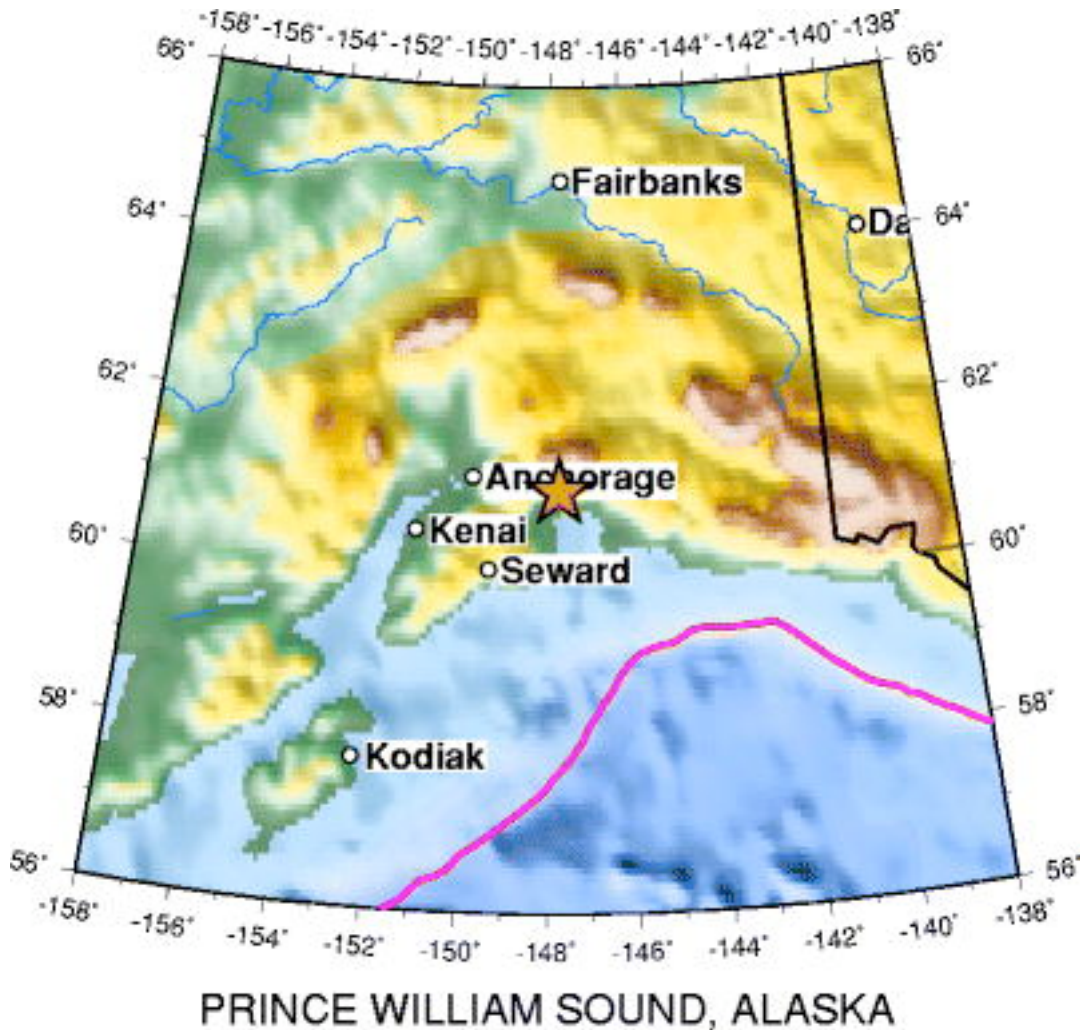


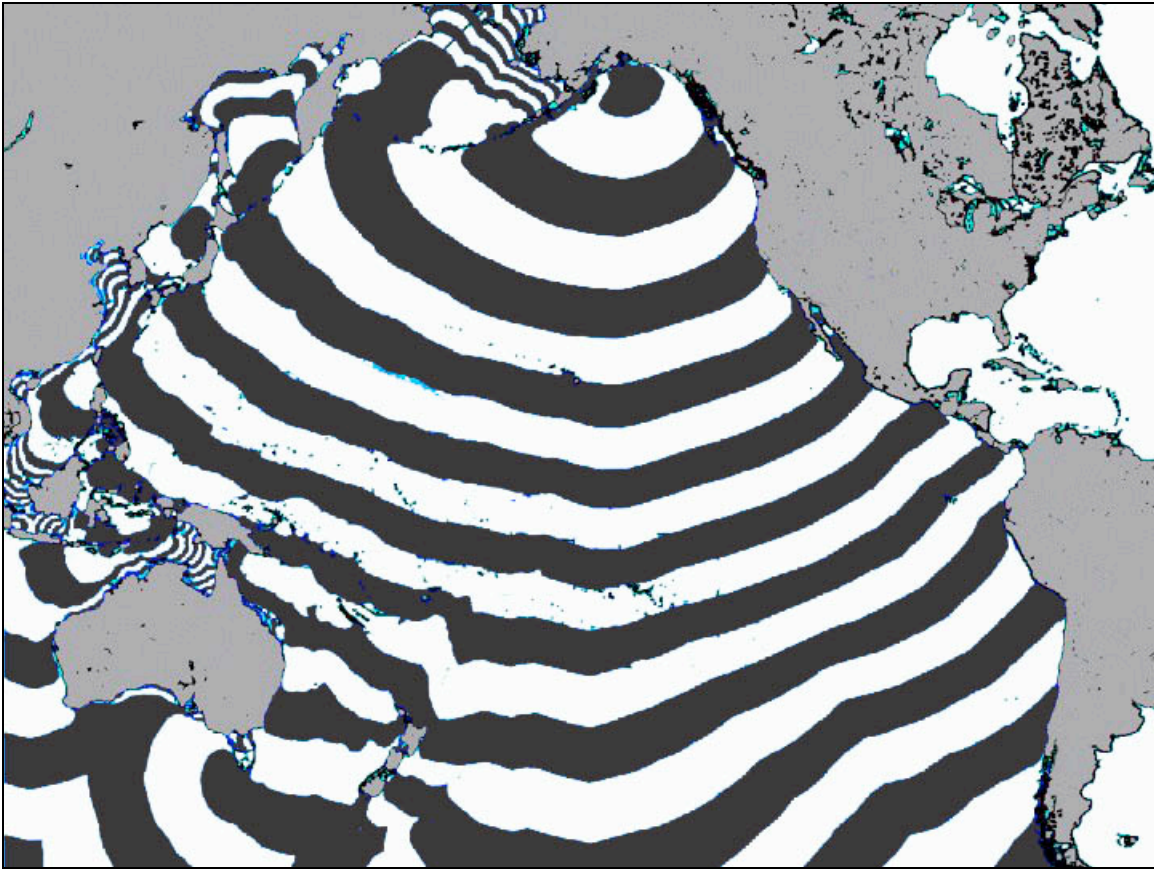
A Tsunami Hits Hot Springs Cove

The 1964 Great Alaska Earthquake, also called the Good Friday Earthquake, occurred on March 27, 1964, measuring 8.4 on the Richter scale. The epicentre of the megathrust quake was roughly 78 miles east of Anchorage and 40 miles west of Valdez in an area of active subduction.



Map showing the location of the 1964 Good Friday Earthquake that sent shock waves across the Pacific Ocean.

The shifts in the ocean floor produced tsunamis that caused destruction in Prince William Sound and other coastal Alaskan communities, and along the coast from British Columbia to California. Hawaii and Japan also experienced damage from tsunamis.



Map showing tsunami travel time spreading out from 1964 Good Friday Earthquake in Alaska across the Pacific Ocean. Each band boundary represents one hour travel time. Adapted from NOAA map.

Sue Charleson is a member of the Hesquiaht First Nation and resident of Hot Springs Cove. Sue is the manager of the Hesquiaht First Nation Fisheries program. She is a mother, grandmother and great grandmother. She recently shared her story about the tsunami that devastated the village at Hot Springs on March 27, 1964.

It was at night during the Easter weekend. I was busy with laundry and ironing. Our generator (the village's source of electrical power) normally went off at 11:00 pm, so just before 11:00 I started putting things away. We had just gotten into bed when something made a really loud noise. The addition to our house for the washing machine had fallen off when the first wave came in. We all ran to the door and saw a fish boat drifting by. Mike Tom, my father-in-law, said something was wrong with *Naas* (in this context, Sue explains the Hesquiaht term *Naas* refers to something like 'Mother Earth' or 'Nature'). The first thing I did was get my oldest daughter Jessie who was just seven months old. I wrapped her up in lots of blankets. This turned out to be a good thing because when we got out of the door – there were five or six stairs - we couldn't walk. We had to swim right away.

I started trying to swim with one arm. Jessie floated away from me. She was going up towards the stream, floating right on top of the water. I had to go swim after her.

We knew there was a big stump behind the house and that's where my mother-in-law and I went. It was a good thing it was a full moon so we could see. Her husband was on a bigger, higher stump and he was watching. He told us that the water was still going up. When the water was getting flush with the stump, he told us that it was starting to recede. He told us to get ready to run to the other end (of the village). We figured that it would be the end where my Mom and Dad lived because we would not have been able to cross the stream that separated us from the other end.

It was really noisy, really loud. I don't know what happened but my mother-in-law and I got separated. I guess it was when we were getting off the stump. The next thing I knew she wasn't there and Mike Tom was beside me. He said he'd take the baby and we'd run across, but it was so loud. The stumps, everything was coming down with the water. I didn't find out until the next day that Mike must have been looking after his mom. I guess they drifted or got pulled down a ways. They ended up on a different boat than I did.

We ended up at the end of the village. The canoe was just coming back ashore and they were yelling to see if it was me. I answered them and they told me to come straight down to the boat. The water was still going down, but it wasn't going as fast as it was when it first started rushing back out. By the time we got to the boat, the second wave was coming up. I think there must have been 13 to 15 houses counting the little ones in the village at the time. It was this second wave that pulled about four or five houses out into the bay. They were drifting on top of the water with people inside them. A couple of the houses were in flames. By that time, Tony Charleson who was living over on the side of the bay and a couple of others were running around in boats getting people out of the homes before they sank. I think Tony could not take off in his boat right away because of whirlpools in the water. The houses floated maybe half ways out to the store (about a quarter of the way towards the mouth of the Cove) before they sank.

The other houses, I guess they all would have drifted out when they came off their foundations except they got stuck on different stumps. The only houses still standing properly were the ones on each end of the village – one belonging to Louis Sabbas and one belonging to my father Stephen Charleson.

There were three waves that came in. I guess they each got bigger, but none of the other houses came out on the third wave. Maybe they just moved some more. In the meantime, the fuel lines must have broken at the old store (at the current government dock on the east side of the Cove where a marine fuel station and store used to be located) after the second wave. It was lucky that those burning houses did sink before they reached the spilled fuel.

Most of the fishboats were alright. They had good anchorages in front of the village. There was also another very big boat - to this day I don't know what kind of a boat it was - it was anchored in the bay. It was using its searchlight. It never moved all night because I guess it was scared to move. At least one boat though, the one we saw drifting past our house, ended up on the beach. We stayed on the boat all night. Other

people stayed on other boats. It was scary after we were all in the boat because people did not know where everybody was - especially the teenagers who had been out in the evening. People were yelling and crying for them. There were also people up on both ends of the village and people who stayed up on the hill all night. But nothing else happened.

Because my mom and dad's house was fine – it moved but it was still on its foundation - that's where they were feeding the people the next day. All the people were okay; I think only one cat was lost. At least two or three boats from Ahousaht came that afternoon. They took us all to Ahousaht. We stayed there for a couple of days. When we came back from Ahousaht we stayed with mom and dad for a while. People were just doubling up and seeing what was left. People managed, the ones that did stay, to use what was left of their houses to fix up places to live.

There was no warning at all. We heard later that the phone operator was trying to get through to Hot Springs, but they used to shut the phone lines down around 9:00 PM for long distance.

The people in Ahousaht had noticed the waves because I think some of their graveyard was flooded. But it seems like it was places like this – the heads of bays and inlets where the tsunami didn't have any where else to go once it hit – that got hit the hardest. Where Tony Charleson was living on the side of the bay, they could see the water running in and going out, but his house was not flooded. Neither was the store on the opposite side of the bay.

We went for a walk up the stream when we got back from Ahousaht. There was debris all over. Even those big galvanized tubs that they used to use for washing and rinsing clothes, they were way up there on branches. It was amazing the big stuff that you saw back there. The whole creek was changed.

People saved what things they could. Someone came in, a while after we were back, to tell us we could estimate the cost of what we lost. We all got a small cheque later. Boxes and boxes of clothes and shoes were donated but a lot of that we couldn't really use. It was after the tsunami that people gradually started moving to town from Hot Springs. Not right away, but slowly over the next years. Some families, after living in town for a number of years, have come back to this new village we have here now on the west side of the bay in Hot Springs.

I've told my kids about the tidal wave. I guess I scared my youngest son so much with my stories that when we had a tsunami warning when we were living in Port Alberni he was so scared. The funny thing is you are not scared while its actually happening because it seems you're just trying to stay safe. You're not terrified like you are when you get scared by a bear or something. Its after the event is over that it hits you. It was horrible. Even now today when I hear a tidal wave warning I dash. Even though we are quite a bit higher here (in the present village site in Hot Springs), I am scared.

Sue also shared a story about another tsunami that was felt in Hot Springs Cove on May 23, 1960. This tsunami was the result of the Great Chilean Earthquake of May 22, 1960. This massive subduction zone earthquake caused a rise in ocean levels around the Pacific

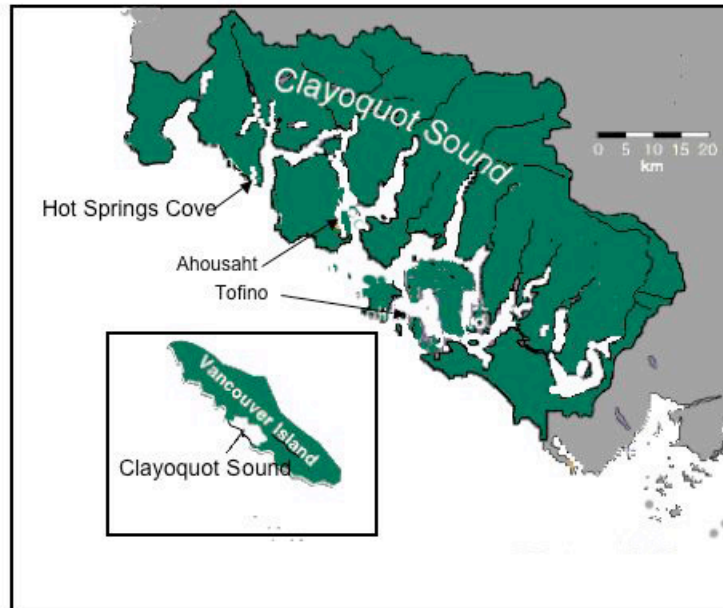
Ocean. The resulting tsunamis caused devastation and many deaths in locations such as Hawaii, Japan, and the Phillipines.

My mom and I were busy doing our normal washing and cleaning. My mom looked out and said “The tide is way out. I’m going to go get a bucket of clams.” But then when she got ready with her boots and bucket she said “The tide’s coming up.” It was way up by then but it was just a thin film. My mom then told me to go outside down to my brother’s house. We started lifting stuff up on tables there because we didn’t know how high the water was going to go. I had to run half ways to the other end of the village to find the kids. It was in the morning on May 23. Everyone was getting ready to go to Ahousaht for sports-day. But that was all that happened, just one thin film of water went behind the house and it didn’t rush out. It was more of a surge than a wave, but it did go out like they say a tsunami will – first the tide will go way out and then it comes surging back in. And that’s all I remember about it. It was nothing compared to the one in ’64.

My late father-in-law Mike Tom used to tell stories that he remembered from his ancestors about times that the water came up like that – always it would go down first and then come way up.

Sue Charleson

Map showing Hot Springs Cove, Ahousaht and Tofino



Aerial photograph of old village site at the head of the inlet. Taken by Charles Ford just after the tsunami. Used with permission from John Clague.



Aerial photo of new village site located high above the water on the western shore of the inlet.



Science on the Leading Edge (Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre) would like to acknowledge Sue Charleson for contributing her stories and personal experiences and sharing them with students and teachers.

Klecko, klecko (Thank you in Hesquiaht language)