

# Times Standard

## Not My Fault: Earthquake – Tsunami Booth returns to the Humboldt County Fair

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*The 2024 Earthquake – Tsunami Booth at the Humboldt County Fair.*

Last Wednesday, the Humboldt County Fair opened its gates in Ferndale for the 127<sup>th</sup> time. For 25 of those years, the Ferndale Fair Grounds has also been home to an Earthquake Tsunami display.

The Humboldt County lays claim to hosting the oldest county Fair in the State, starting in 1861 and moving to the present Ferndale Fair Grounds in 1896. It's not surprising that the State's county fair tradition was born here. The two oldest 4-H clubs in the State also took root on the North Coast. Formed a day apart in the 1913, the Arcata Bottom club just nudged out the Ferndale club to lay claim to the oldest title.

My family started attending the Fair in the early 1980s and it quickly became a yearly tradition. In the mid 80s we picked up a free redwood seedling. It lived in a pot for a few years and then we planted it in the woods on our McKinleyville property and paid it no attention for a few decades. Twenty years ago, we noticed a 20-foot tree working its way through the undergrowth. Today at 70 feet, it is the third tallest tree on our property, well on its way to overtaking the two Doug firs that survived the last round of clear cutting.

Our redwood tree is a visible reminder of my Humboldt County Fair history. A far more visceral connection was made in 1991. I was watching my husband Tom and 21-month-old

daughter on the merry-go-round when the ground began to lurch and tremble. The fairgrounds around me suddenly went out of focus as if a movie projector had gone on the blitz. The grandstand was groaning as it vibrated back and forth. It was the most exciting ride of the day by far.

We were fortunate on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1991, that the magnitude 6.0 Honeydew earthquake wasn't a bit larger or closer to Ferndale. The shaking was strong but other than a few toppled items in the exhibit halls, there was almost no damage. It did leave me with a bit of vertigo for the rest of the day.

Eight months later, the Fairgrounds had another earthquake experience. On April 25<sup>th</sup> a little past 11 AM, a magnitude 7.2 earthquake struck near Petrolia, centered only 15 miles from Ferndale. M6.5 and 6.6 aftershocks that night caused additional damage. When the dust had settled, over 400 injuries and \$60 million in property damages were reported. The level of damage triggered a Presidential Disaster Declaration, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was brought in to assist with the recovery.

The Ferndale Fairgrounds were the perfect place for FEMA to set up shop. It was offseason and no-one was at the fair at the time. There was some damage on the grounds but most of the buildings were intact. Belotti Hall with its full kitchen became a makeshift shelter and food distribution center.

The 1992 earthquake profoundly changed my relationship with the Fair. In August of 1992, the Fair opened a normal schedule of events but Ferndale, Rio Dell, Scotia and surrounding communities were still in the early stages of earthquake recovery. FEMA partnered with me and the Humboldt Earthquake Education Center to establish a display at the Fair to both assist people in applying for recovery assistance and to explain the earthquake story of the region.

The Fair provided us with a small room in Hindley Hall just off the main entrance. We put up posters about our regional tectonics and historic earthquakes. FEMA folks had a table with recovery assistance forms. It was also the early days of developing our intensity survey questionnaire and we queried everyone who stepped through the door about their experiences of the earthquakes. I spent much of the 11-day fair run in that room, and it was my first exposure to hearing the multitude of concerns and questions people had about North Coast earthquakes.

The 1992 fair earthquake room was a one-time affair. FEMA had organized the space and by 1993 had moved on to disasters elsewhere. But the experience of that room in 1992 stuck in my mind. Fairs are a wonderful place to connect with people who might not go out of their way to go to earthquake talks or preparedness fairs.

The Cape Mendocino earthquake sequence of 1992 was a watershed moment for awareness of the earthquake and tsunami threat on the North Coast. We didn't talk much about tsunamis in the 1992 Fair display because soon we didn't know much about them. The M7.2 had produced a modest tsunami that was recorded on tide gauges along the U.S. West Coast and in Hawaii and concerns about the impacts of a larger earthquake/tsunami triggered new studies.

In 1995, the first of those studies was released. The California Geological Survey published a scenario for the shaking impacts and tsunami inundation that a magnitude 8.5 earthquake could produce. That publication led to formation of the Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group (RCTWG) to develop materials and an outreach plan to inform organizations and the public about preparing for much larger quakes than 1992.

That Fair room memory resurfaced in 1998. The Fair organization embraced the idea of us returning to Hindley Hall with an Earthquake – Tsunami display. They offered us a bigger and better room that, after cleaning, painting, and adding new lights, became the perfect venue for posters, our tsunami wave tank, and sometimes a portable seismograph.

For 22 years we occupied one of the two front rooms in Hindley Hall. Each year we focused on a different theme and pulled together a new set of information posters. In 2008, the State’s Big Shaker quake trailer visited the Fair, and in 2014 a tsunami boat that spent three years in the Pacific after being swept away from Japan before beaching at Dry Lagoon was featured.

The 2024 exhibit is more modest but just as informative. The Earthquake – Tsunami Booth occupies the west wall of Hindley Hall and is packed with information about earthquake and tsunami basics, and current events. You will find a section on CERT (Community Emergency Response Teams), CalOES, and the National Weather Service, in addition to RCTWG materials. You can also pick up free copies of the new 36-page Living on Shaky Ground magazine, tsunami brochures, and how-to information sheets on making your home and workplace safer.

RCTWG volunteers will be staffing the Booth for most of its open hours. They are a knowledgeable group and can help you determine if you live or work in a tsunami zone or how to enroll in CERT classes. Come with your questions – if they can’t answer them, they will connect you with someone who can.

The Fair has a different schedule this year. It is open through Sunday August 25, closed Monday and Tuesday, and reopens the 28<sup>th</sup> through Labor Day. Hindley Hall is open from noon to 9 PM on all open Fair days. The exhibits will not be open on the final weekend of horse racing September 7-8.

Note: Our Virtual Fair is posted at <https://rctwg.humboldt.edu/virtual-fair>. Scroll to the bottom of the page for links to past fair exhibits.

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