

CRESCENT CITY'S DESTRUCTIVE HORROR OF 1964 (THE VIEW OF THE TIDAL WAVE FROM THE LIGHTHOUSE AS DESCRIBED BY PEGGY COONS, CURATOR OF BATTERY POINT LIGHT HOUSE IN 1964) - from the Del Norte Historical Society files.

Battery Point Lighthouse, built in 1856, is located just west of the Crescent City breakwater. Battery Point Island, elevation 32 feet, got its name from a "battery" of guns – three brass cannons salvaged from the 1855 wreck of the *America* - which were placed on a point of land near the island. The parking area across from the island was a Tollowa village. Before the Crescent City pier was built, the Point was on a peninsula, connected to the mainland by sand. Passengers and freight were ferried between ships and the shore in small boats. The lighthouse was built to guide navigation through the dangerous, rocky entrance to the harbor. After the outer breakwater was built, sand no longer replenished the connection and the Point became an island at all times except low tide. The lighthouse beacon, 75 feet above sea level, can be seen 14 miles offshore. It remained in service until 1965 when the Coast Guard ceased to use the station. In 1982, the lighthouse was reactivated as a Private Aid to Navigation and is now supported by the Del Norte Historical Society. In March, 1964, Peggy and Clarence Coons were the resident curators of the lighthouse. Peggy Coons wrote the following description of the tsunami.

Good Friday, March 27th, 1964, the morning was mild. The trade winds that prevail along the Pacific Coast had subsided. Little did I realize, as my husband Roxey and I went about our chores at the lighthouse, that before the next day had dawned high on Battery Island, we would watch four waves play havoc with the town and its people. Smashing the city's business center along with some of the beach front homes in Crescent City, CA, and we would have a spectacular view of the whole performance. And as curators here at the lighthouse we would be called on by friends and tourists alike to relive this one night of horror almost everyday since.



Perhaps I should stop to explain Battery Island, three hundred yards from the mainland, is solid rock at the base and about three quarters of an acre, fifty-eight feet at the highest point near the flagpole. The lighthouse, completed in 1856, is 74 feet above mean sea level. The only access to this Historical Monument is walking across the ocean floor at low tide.

We spent the early part of the day planting a garden. Friday was our shore leave, so we crossed to the mainland at three o'clock to shop for Easter. Late that evening we struggled back across the rocky ocean floor with our supplies and stopped to rest before climbing another two hundred yards to the lighthouse. Exhausted, we turned in shortly after nine o'clock unaware an

earthquake and tidal wave had devastated Alaska. We might have slept through the whole thing if I hadn't gotten up to go to the bathroom a little before midnight. I stood at the window, a full moon shining on the water below me. Somehow the first moment I saw the ocean I sensed something was wrong, for all the rocks around the island had disappeared. They were covered with water. I realized it was almost time for high tide, but the rocks are always visible even in the severest of storms. Suddenly I became alarmed and called Roxey. We quickly slipped on some clothes, rushed down the stairs, and grabbed our jackets as we ran outside.

The air was still, the sky had an unusual brightness about it. It was light as day. The water shimmering in the moonlight was high over the outer breakwater. We headed for the highest point overlooking the town. The first wave was just reaching the town. Giant logs, trees and other debris were pitching and churning high on the crest of the water as it raced into the city. "My God, no!" I cried, "It will flood the town." As the impact began, the loud blast of breaking glass and splintering wood reached us, buildings crumpled, cars overturned, some smashed through plate glass windows, while the water plowed down the streets. Within minutes the water came back just as fast as it had gone in, bringing all manner of things with it. It drained away with terrific speed. The whole beach front was strewn with logs, cars, buildings, trash of every description. Some of the fishing boats were tossed high on the land, others drifted to sea. A few cars and two small buildings that were swept off Citizen's Dock floated away with the water. The water was gone. We could see it piling up a half mile or more beyond the end of the outer breakwater, higher and higher as the minutes passed.

We stood there stunned with fright for we knew there was no way out of here if the water came this high. The light house, serene in the moonlight, had been battered with severe storms for over a century: could it protect us now? We have lived on the island since 1962 and watched the storms come and go, but this was unlike anything we had ever experienced. The light flashed in the tower. We knew we would have to notify the Coast Guard if there was any failure or discrepancy in it. I don't know how long we stood there for we were just too frightened to move, when the second wave churned swiftly by us, gobbling everything in its wake. It picked up all the ruins along the beachfront and shoved them right back into town. It didn't seem as large as the first one to us, but it caused considerable damage. Some of the lights faded out along Front Street. As the backflow began we raced frantically around the place, watching the water drain from the bay. We glanced at the tower: the light was still flashing.

We watched the Coast Guard Cutter, a big lumber tug, and some of the fishing boats that had received warning and left the harbor riding the tides a good three miles or more off shore. We were getting more frightened now, for the water had receded farther out than before. We knew it had to come back, but when? We screamed at one another in our fright, wondering if it would ever stop, for there was an ominous stillness about it, warning us of more to come.

As the third wave raced swiftly by us, it was much larger than the second, a horrifying thing, crushing everything in its path. When it reached the south end of town, sparks started flying in the air, igniting a fire. It spread rapidly, lighting up the water and sky around the bay. All of the lights faded out along the 101 highway.

The water withdrew suddenly, as though someone had pulled the plug out of the basin. The water was here, then gone. We ran around the lighthouse again wondering if we were safe. We kept anticipating something more violent would happen, for the water had receded far out, three fourths of a mile or more beyond the end of the outer breakwater. We were looking down as though from a high mountain into a black abyss of rock, reefs, and shoals, never exposed even at the lowest of tides. A vast labyrinth of caves, basins and pits undreamed of in the wildest of

fantasy. In the distance a dark wall of water was building up rapidly, so the Coast Guard cutter, the lumber tug, and small craft appeared to be riding high above it, with a constant flashing of white at the edge, as the water kept boiling and seething, caught in the rays of the moonlight.

The basin was dry. At Citizen's Dock the large lumber barge, loaded with millions of board feet of lumber, was sucked down in the bay. The fishing boats still in the small craft harbor, were pulled down on the floor of the ocean. We clung to one another, asking God to have mercy on us. We prayed for the town and its people. We realized the water would return with more destruction to follow. We kept straining ourselves trying to visualize what would happen next, while the water piled higher and higher in the distance.

Suddenly there it was, a mammoth wall of water barreling in toward us, a terrifying mass of destruction, stretching from the floor of the ocean upwards: it looked much higher than the island, black in the moonlight. Roxey shouted, "Let's head for the tower." It was too late. As we turned toward the tower, he yelled, "Look out!" We both ducked. It struck, split and swirled around both sides of the island with such speed we felt like we were sailing right along with it. It took several minutes for us to realize the island hadn't moved. It crashed the shore, picking up the driftwood logs and other debris lodged in our roadway and along the beachfront. It looked as though it would push them on the pavement at the end of A street leading past the Seaside Hospital. Instead it shoved them around the bank and over the end of the outer breakwater through Dutton's Lumber Yard it tossed big bundles of lumber, some splitting up with planks like matchsticks flying in the air, while others sailed gracefully away. The water overflowing Dutton's Dock was high above it. At Citizen's Dock, the large lumber barge, loaded with lumber came up and sat on top of the dock. The dock humped up, then relaxed right off its pilings. The fish storage houses, on the fish wing, were dancing around in the fury. The fishing boats still at their moorings were bobbing around like corks. Some sank right where they were while others flew onto the beach, while others came out, careened about and flew on the other side of the bay. One boat took off Elk Creek at the end of town as though someone was at the helm.

When the Tsunami assaulted the town it was like a violent explosion, a thunderous roar mingled with all the confusion. Everywhere we looked buildings, boats, lumber, everything was shifting around like crazy. The whole front of town moved, changing before our eyes. By this time the fire had raced across the water to the ruptured Texaco Bulk tanks: they started exploding one after the other. The whole sky lit up. It was fantastic.

As the tide turned it was sucking everything back with it: cars, buildings were moving seawards. The old covered bridge, from Sause Fish Dock, that had floated high on the land, came back to drop almost in place. Furniture, beds, mattresses, TVs, radios, clothing, bedding, and other objects were moving by us so fast we could barely discern what some of it was. A siren was blowing. There were lights now in the front of town or along Highway 101. The light in the tower continued to burn. The block on this end of town near the Seaside Hospital was unharmed. Across the bay the fire was till raging higher and higher as each tank exploded. Time passed quickly, for everywhere we looked was a shambles; houses, buildings, lumber, boats, all smashed or moved blocks from where they had been by the onrush of water.

The fifth wave rushed swiftly by us back into town. It just pushed things around. We could observe no noticeable damage this time, but off and on the rest of the night the water kept surging in and out and slopping around in the harbor. At daybreak we made coffee and fixed our breakfast, but we kept checking each change of the tide. We had never seen so many in our knowledge of the sea. The boats continue to ride the surf off shore, waiting for another big one.

A fishing craft careening around in the harbor finally sank. The boat up Elk Creek had settled among the ruins of the new Olympic Pool. The cars along with the two small buildings, that were swept off the dock had faded from sight. Logs, boats, furniture along with the buildings all tossed helter skelter. The lumber from three big yards was tossed high on the land or floating in the water. Some of the landing and small craft floats were sailing away in a dizzy pattern.

Isolated on the island we watched the search begin along Elk Creek for the bodies of the victims. The demolition crews started clearing the streets and burning the debris along the beachfront and the 101 highway. The silent killer had left after taking its toll of life and property, but the vacant lots, the broken fish docks, along with abandoned fishing boat hulls still reminds us of the gruesome night the Tsunami destroyed 56 blocks of Crescent City, CA.

It still seems hard to believe that with all the salvage that floated by us out to sea, the only bit to reach the island was one spool of lavender thread.