

Death of a Village—

MARCH 27, 1964

ALEUT DESCRIBES GRIPPING EARTHQUAKE, SEISMIC WAVE DISASTER AT CHENEGA

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MARCH 27, 1964—A day that is in the memory of many, many people and will be remembered for many years by those of us who survived this tragic day, those of us who lost our loved ones, our neighbors, our homes, our whole way of life. The memory still haunts me as the fifth anniversary of this natural disaster, that took the lives of many people, passes. The disaster that took the lives of twenty-three people at Chenega, a seismic wave that destroyed the homes of all the residents in our little village of seventy-six people.

CHENEGA WAS a little village on Chenega Island in the western end of Prince William Sound in Southcentral Alaska. Approximately forty miles from the epicenter of the earthquake, the all-native community was hit without warning by the seismic wave.

THE DAY STARTED as usual, peaceful and quiet, but there seemed to be a feeling of tension in the air as my wife, Mary and I recalled later. We had the feeling that there was something about to happen. Maybe it was a premonition of what was to happen.

I HAD JUST finished painting my 18-foot skiff the day before and I was contemplating on whether I should launch it and go seal hunting, but I decided to wait until the paint was completely dry. Mickey and Nick Eleshansky were out seal hunting, and as I learned later from Mickey, they were at Prince of

Wales Passage, about twelve miles from Chenega. Mark Selanoff and George Borodkin were also seal hunting at Icy Bay about four or five miles from the village; these two were incidents, I'll relate later as the latter hunting party saved the life of one person.

WHEN THE SHAKING started at about 5:30, my first thought was that we were experiencing a mild quake as we occasionally experienced, but as the tremor became worse I thought that our stove at home would topple over and start a fire, so I started running home to shut the stove off. We had an oil burning kitchen range and the stove pipes were very unstable. At the time I was at the opposite end of the village from our house, as I was running home I met my wife and she asked me where our children were and I didn't have the faintest idea.

I LOOKED OVER on the beach again on the opposite side of the village from where I was standing momentarily and I saw some children. Thinking that they were ours I started running back again to get them. By this time the tremor had increased considerably and I had a difficult time staying on the road.

I REACHED the dock when I noticed that the water was receding rapidly, I found my three daughters and quickly took the two younger ones and started running toward higher ground with the oldest girl ahead of me. Someone yelled "tidal wave" and I glanced at the water quickly and started running faster, but I was too slow. Before I realized it the water was upon us and in trying to reach for the oldest girl, I lost hold of one of the girls I was holding in my arms.

THE TWO GIRLS were swept away from me immediately by the force of the water. The last word my oldest daughter uttered was "Dad," that was all and they were lost to me forever. I was powerless to do anything. The force of the water carried me past the church which was on higher ground and across a stream behind the church where I landed feet first into a snow bank, fortunately I still had my youngest daughter in my arms.

THE WATER receded again and I tried to free myself from the snow bank to no avail when I heard someone holler, "There's another one coming." I looked back to see the water rushing back and my brother-in-law, Charlie's house topple over with it. I grabbed my daughter and tried to shield her with my body and that's all I can recall when the water reached us again.

I REMEMBER that there was a loud crackling noise, when I

opened my eyes again I realized I was holding on to something with my right arm and my back hurt something awful. I was stretched out horizontally with the force of the receding water and in my left hand was my daughter's parka hood; still dazed I pulled and I was so relieved to see that she was still with me that I cried a little.

I IMMEDIATELY pushed her ahead of me and continued up the hill. There were others ahead and I called to them for help as my back was hurting when I tried to carry my daughter. Mike and his wife, Dorene, Charlie and his wife, Katie and some of their children, and Henry were there ahead of us on the hill.

AS I STRUGGLED UP once again I heard someone say that another wave was coming. I thought for sure we would get washed away this time. As I looked back in dismay, I noticed what was left of our little village—a big pile of lumber—fortunately the last wave stopped about two or three feet below me and my little girl.

WE CONTINUED up the hill another fifty feet or so where I joined the rest of the people and I gave my daughter to Henry to carry for me. All this time I didn't know where my wife and our three boys were. I thought for sure they had been carried away as my two older daughters had been.

WE WERE EXPECTING another wave to come so we kept climbing and we noticed that the school building was still standing. We were headed for the school when I heard someone calling for help below us. Thinking it was my wife, I started rolling and sliding down the hill to where the voice was calling for help.

I CAME UPON my sister-in-law, Dorothy; stuck in the snow up to her waist in the cemetery near the school. Ken Vlasoff and John Brizgaloff arrived at her side about the same time and together we got her in the shelter of the school power house. By some quirk of fate she had managed to live through the nightmare of all three waves!

THEN WE HEARD another voice calling for help out on the water amidst the pile of lumber and debris. There was no way we could help the person and just about that time, the boat, Marpet came around the point and fortunately Markey and George heard the cry for help and rescued Margaret Brodtkin, who, injured below her waist, was clinging to a pile of debris.

ABOUT THIS TIME there were some more people coming down from the hill behind the

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school and I immediately asked Phil Totemoff if he had seen my wife and our three boys. I was very happy to hear that they were all up on the hill along with many others who I thought were lost.

THE SCHOOL building was not washed away, so it was decided that everyone should stay there as it was warm. Someone went to get the rest of the people from the hill. When they arrived at the school I was very happy to see my wife, our three boys, Mark, Nick, Jr., and Arthur, and all the rest of the people who managed to make it to higher ground before the wave reached them.

MISS KRIS MADSEN, the school teacher at the time, saw to it that everyone received dry clothes, coffee, soup and milk for the children. The older people decided that we should spend the night on the hill after another tremor frightened some of the women and children. Everyone agreed since there was a possibility that there might be another wave.

WE ALL HEADED up the hill and spent the long cold night huddled around the fire, that the men built. Miss Madsen had a portable radio and we listened to news of the disaster in all the other places that were hard hit also.

THE NEXT MORNING those of us who survived were taken to Cordova. The Cordova Airlines widgeon, piloted by Jim Osborne, made three trips taking the injured, the women and children first. The rest of the men went to Cordova on two boats, the Marpet and the Shamrock. The Shamrock, owned by Paul Selanoff, who was seal hunting with George Chernoff at the time, was in the vicinity of Nellie Juan where three more people were lost, my Godfather, Alex Chimovisky, his wife, Anna, and Manuel, their son. They were winter watchmen in the one-time salmon cannery of Port Nellie Juan.

IN CORDOVA the people were very friendly and hospitable. The Red Cross set up temporary quarters for us in the Cordova Community Center. Food and clothing were provided by the Red Cross. My family and I stayed with the Rev. Bert Hall and his family at the Baptist parsonage. Bert and his wife, Helen, made us very comfortable and I am eternally grateful for their hospitality.

THE CHENEGA Village Coun-

cil, of which I was a member, met on numerous occasions with Bureau of Indian Affairs Representatives and Red Cross officials to determine where we would relocate near Tatitlek.

A GROUP OF us men from Chenega went to Tatitlek in the latter part of May to assist the Bureau of Indian Affairs carpenters construct tents for temporary living quarters. We lived in those tents until November when the homes that were being built for us were partially completed. We moved into our new homes in the latter part of November, 1964. All the labor was provided by those of us who were getting new homes.

ON SEPTEMBER 15th, 1964, I was ordained as reader of the St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church in Tatitlek by His Grace Bishop Amvrossy of Sitka, and served the parish of Tatitlek as Reader until September, 1967, when my family and I moved here to Anchorage, where I am presently employed at the Anchorage Post Office Annex as a clerk in the Alaska Dispatch Section.

MY PRIMARY reason for moving here was to further my education. I enrolled in the Basic Education section of the Anchorage Community College under the State Manpower Development Program. I attended classes for two and a half months, passed all my G.E.D. tests and subsequently received my high school diploma on May 10, 1968. I am very grateful that I was given this opportunity to earn my high school diploma.

ON SEPTEMBER 15, 1968, I was ordained to the Diaconate here in Anchorage by His Grace Bishop Theodosius of Sitka. At present I am the Parish Deacon of St. Innocents' Orthodox Church of Anchorage. I assist our Pastor Father Nicholas Harris in our church services temporarily being conducted in the Greek Orthodox Church on 44th and Arctic Boulevard.

WE HAVE a program on Station KYAK here in Anchorage and I am a participant in this program sponsored by the St. Innocent Mission Society to further the Orthodox faith in Alaska. I am very grateful to be a part of this task.

WHEN I WAS on that hill in Chenega on the fateful day of the earthquake I didn't dream that I would one day be on radio speaking of the Orthodox faith to my fellow native Alaskans.