



LIŖWILDAŖW RESEARCH CENTRE

Call 250-287-9460 (ext.3) or email: LRC@wewaikaitreaty.com

We are continuing regular newsletter updates to share exciting history from the archives with the communities. Some of you know these stories but others do not, so it is a pleasure to introduce Vol. 2, Edition 1 of: **Tales from The Vault.**

Remembering the 1946 Vancouver Island Earthquake:

The Ninini (earthquake) dance is performed during the Tłasila (Peace Dances) portion of the Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch – a time when chiefly families open their Box of Treasures to validate their connections to specific lands and resources, and demonstrate their ancestral knowledge of supernatural and natural events, such as earthquakes. (Chief Waxawidi, William Wasden, Jr.) These stories teach us to have foresight that earthquakes and tsunamis will happen again on the west coast. It reminds us that we are part of the land and ocean, and not above it. (A-nii-sa-put, Tim Paul)

On the quiet Sunday morning of June 23, 1946, at precisely 10:13 a.m., the heart of Vancouver Island trembled in a way it never had before. A magnitude 7.3 earthquake—the strongest onshore earthquake ever recorded in Canada—struck near the Forbidden Plateau. Its effects felt as far south as Portland, Oregon, and as far north as Prince Rupert, British Columbia.



Figure 1 Foundation failure in Comox, 1946 earthquake

In Cumberland, Union Bay, and Courtenay, 75% of chimneys collapsed, and buildings suffered heavy damage. In Port Alberni, Comox, and Powell River, homes and businesses were shaken. In Victoria and Vancouver, buildings swayed, a small fire broke out at the Hotel Vancouver, and frightened residents poured into the streets. Along the coast, lighthouse keepers reported shattered windows and smashed dishes. The quake's power even knocked the needle off a seismograph at the University of Washington.

Thankfully, the timing—a quiet Sunday morning—spared many lives. Schools were empty, and streets were less crowded than usual. In Courtenay, a chimney crashed through two floors of the elementary school, destroying classrooms that would have held 60 children had it been a weekday. Tragically, the earthquake claimed two lives: one man succumbed to a heart attack, and another drowned when his boat was swamped by waves near Deep Bay.



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Some Elders recall a nearly three-foot-wide chasm opening in the village of Cape Mudge. Curious children were warned to stay far away until the ground finally settled and the gap closed several days later. The late Olly Chickite spoke of a terrifying encounter while fishing following the quake. While hauling in his set, he saw a massive, nearly 60-foot sea creature rising from what he believed was a chasm in the sea floor. Stunned by the sight, the crew made the difficult decision to cut their net and flee to safety.



Figure 2 Chasm in Kelsey Bay highway, just north of Campbell River

Vancouver Island sits atop the Cascadian Subduction Zone, a tectonic boundary known for its seismic activity. While minor tremors are common, the 1946 earthquake was a stark reminder of the immense forces shaping the region. It also sparked a new era of seismology in Canada, leading to the installation of sensitive seismometers and systematic earthquake studies.

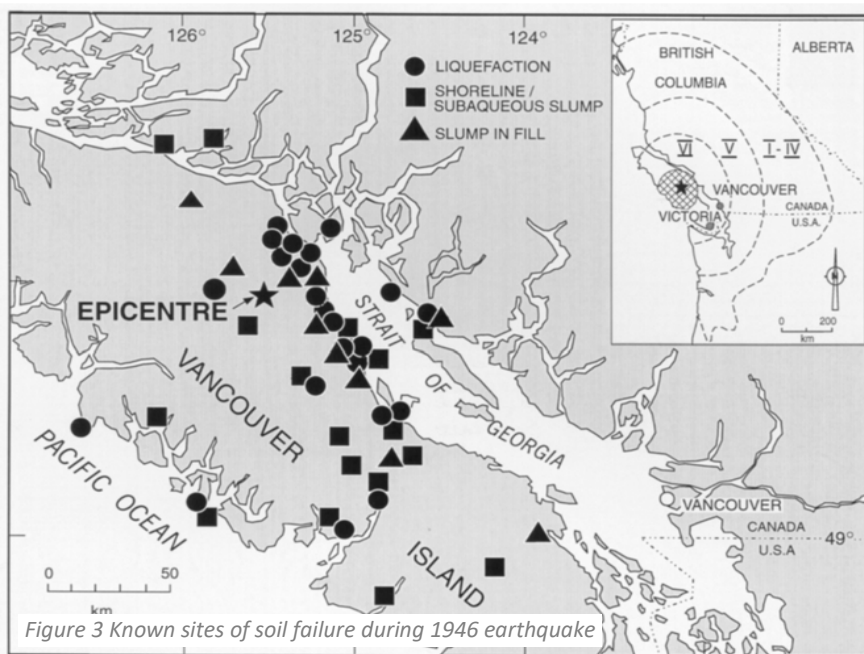


Figure 3 Known sites of soil failure during 1946 earthquake

This earthquake remains a powerful story of nature's unpredictability and the resilience of those who endured it. Talk to your aunties and Elders about their memories of that day. What was it like for them? Did they feel the earth shake? What stories do they have about our communities? These recollections bring history to life, connecting us to the lived experiences of those who witnessed these extraordinary events and mysterious creatures.