

# Tsunami Survivor Stories: Hilo, Hawaii - April 1, 1946



Image courtesy of Jeanne Branch Johnston



Photo courtesy of the Pacific Tsunami Museum, Hilo, Hawaii

Early in the morning on April 1, 1946, an earthquake with magnitude 7.8 occurred in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska. Almost five hours later, one of the most destructive tsunamis of the twentieth century in the Pacific Ocean struck the Hawaiian Islands. Maximum runups were reported to be 54 feet in Moloka'i, and Hilo on the Big Island was hit particularly hard. Tsunami runups here were 27 feet. A total of 159 fatalities resulted from this destructive event. Many were curious school children who ventured into the exposed reef area, not knowing the receding water to be a sign of an approaching tsunami. Three years later the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center was established to provide warning of tsunamis to the Hawaiian Islands.

Hawaii State Civil Defense Earthquake and Tsunami Program Planner Jeanne Branch Johnston, her brother Dr. David Wright Branch, and their family lived in Hilo, where they survived the tsunami. For the fiftieth anniversary of the tsunami, they share their survivor stories.

## Jeanne Branch Johnston

As a six-year-old child, the morning of April 1, 1946, April Fools Day, dawned like any other day. My four-year-old brother, David, and I were staying with our grandparents, Charles and Elizabeth Mason, in the Keaukaha area of Hilo, Hawaii.

My grandparents' three-story house was built in such a way that the ground floor included my grandfather's workshop, the maid's quarters, a bathroom and the garage. On the second floor were the living room, dining room, my grandparents' bedrooms, a bathroom and the kitchen. On the third floor were more bedrooms and a bathroom.

I was on the second floor overlooking natural lava brackish fishponds, which surrounded the house, when I heard the sound of horns honking. While the family was getting ready for breakfast, I went out on the front lanai to see what was happening. I saw water on the road, which was across the street from the ocean. The lava brackish fishponds had filled with water and overflowed into the yard. I was quite intrigued, so I ran into the house to get my brother, David.

David and I walked outside, crossed the small concrete bridge over the ponds, and proceeded down the short driveway to the street. We reached the mailbox and as we

## Tsunami ... continued



Photos this page courtesy of Jeanne Branch Johnston

Left photo: our grandparents' house after the yard was cleared; above photo: our grandparents' house after repairs.



Photo of Jeanne's grandparents' house prior to the April 1946 tsunami.



Jeanne at age six with her brother David, age four; and their dog, Danny. Photo taken March 1946.

stood beside it, red ants that had been disturbed by the first tsunami wave began biting my brother's bare feet. David said he wanted to go back to the house. Years later, we determined that those red ants probably saved our lives.

We ran to the house and told my grandmother what we had seen. Her reply was, "It is probably just high seas, don't worry." I looked out the back window and discovered that right after David and I entered the house, another wave rolled in and the water was up to the top of the clothesline, which was about five feet deep. Alarmed, I told my grandmother that she should look out the

window. At that moment, she screamed, called to my grandfather, and went to wake Uncle Rod who was still sleeping.

Uncle Rod, along with my mother and Aunt Jean and Uncle Bill, had been at a party at the Hilo Yacht Club the night before until the wee hours of the morning. My uncle came home while my mother went with a group to my aunt's house in Wainaku (on the high side of Hilo) where they had a late breakfast and she spent the night.

After waking Uncle Rod, my grandmother told my brother and me to go get dressed. I ran upstairs, filled a paper bag

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## Tsunami ... continued



*This is what the road looked like when we came back.*



*Here is where we crossed the Lakoaka Pond in rafts.*

*Photos pages 12, 13 courtesy of the Pacific Tsunami Museum, Hilo, Hawaii*

with my mother's jewelry, put on my dress and ran downstairs. David and I decided to close the windows to keep the water out of the house. We raced around the house, shutting all the windows.

Meanwhile, the car was under about five feet of water and the pressure caused the horn to honk. Uncle Rod, suffering ill effects of the night before, decided to stop the noise. With hammer in hand, he dove underwater to silence the horn. As I watched, I remember seeing a rat swimming around in search of dry land.

Slowly, the water receded and Uncle Rod took David and me out to the road where we met a group of people, including the Van Gieson family, who lived across the street. The group of us ran up the road and saw water coming down the street. When we looked back, we saw water coming from the other direction also. We realized that we were trapped and some began to panic. People were screaming and babies were crying. We ran as fast as we could and went through the Saiki's back yard in an effort to get as far from the ocean as possible.

Behind the houses in Keaukaha were lauhala trees, maile pilau and dense undergrowth interspersed with a'a lava and small lava rock ponds. The men in the party hacked their way through the jungle with machetes. All of us were cut by the sharp edges of the lauhala leaves and from falling on the lava rocks. When the adults felt that we had reached a safe distance, we finally stopped to rest

somewhere near the radio tower. Some of the adults left the group to search for food. They found some houses that were still intact and brought back food for everyone. While we waited, I climbed up a tree and saw a huge wave wash over a telephone pole.

In the afternoon, we made our way back to the road. The sight was that of unbelievable destruction; demolished houses, uprooted trees, twisted furniture, large boulders and body parts were everywhere. David and I made our way back to our grandparents' house and found that everyone was alive. My grandfather was sitting on the neighbor's wall with a breadbox full of pilot crackers and sandwiches.

Grandma and Uncle Rod had sought safety at Mrs. Kennedy's house next door. The Kennedy house was made of concrete and sat on a knoll while our house was made of wood and located in a low-lying area. Grandpa had refused to leave his house, which was swept several feet off its foundation and into the back yard by a large wave. My grandmother and uncle were safe on the top floor of the Kennedy house, standing on a balcony, when the third and largest wave of the day swept in from the ocean. They watched in horror as my grandfather leapt from the front steps into the house just as the wave picked up the entire house and washed it away. My uncle turned to Grandma and said, "Well, Admiral Mason has finally gone to sea!" At the time, my grandmother did not see the

## Tsunami... continued



*Heavy equipment and trucks crossing where the road had been.*



*More evacuees being taken to the Naval Air Station.*

humor in this statement. The story has been told many times over the years and always with a laugh.

When the water receded, our family car was in one of the lava fishponds. A long board was sticking out where the back window had once been. The Goldsmith's house, which had been directly across the street, on the ocean, was completely destroyed and much of the contents of the house were in our fishponds.

While we observed the damage, military aircraft flew overhead and dropped rafts since the road was washed out with the first wave and there were no other means of evacuation. We crossed the expanse of water in a raft with our grandmother. Soon we were loaded into a military truck and taken to the Naval Air Station barracks near the airport. We had to stand in long lines, but the military fed us and took our names to notify our next of kin. They gave us a room with a mattress on the floor and we were instructed to remain there while they located and notified our family to come and pick us up. Uncle Rod came for us about 7:00 PM, twelve hours after the first wave hit. We drove to Wainaku where we were reunited with our mother and the rest of our family.

My mother said that David and I had nightmares for months afterwards. But we were the lucky ones. We did not lose any members of our family.

### **Dr. David Wright Branch**

I don't remember why I joined my sister Jeanne on the trip to the mailbox. It could have been because exciting things happened around Jeanne; exciting, but usually bad things ... things you got spanked for.

Jeanne and I walked to the mailbox with the letters to be posted and when we reached it, Jeanne insisted that I stand on the red ant colony nearby. Since she was older and a good deal stronger, I opted for the ant's wrath over Jeanne's and stepped up. Fortunately for me, Jeanne noticed that the street was wet. There were leaves and sticks strewn all over it as well as in our suddenly, very full, fishpond, like after a storm, even though the sky was clear. The sight drew Jeanne's attention and she scampered into the house to report it to Grandma Mason. Grandma was nonplussed, mumbling something about a broken water main. Jeanne asked her a few minutes later if we shouldn't close the downstairs windows since the water was rising. Just then, the horn on our old Desoto came to life and signaled the beginning of an adventure a four-year-old boy would remember the rest of his days.

I was ordered to wake up Uncle Rod and he was directed to escort Jeanne and me outside. We went down the front steps and onto the bridge across our fishpond, which was now covered with moving water. I cried out, "Uncle Rod, why are you carrying Jeanne? I am smaller than she is."

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He replied, "Because you're a man, David." That was more than enough for me and I trudged ahead feeling older than my years across the bridge and up the driveway to the street where we met the Van Giesons running towards us from their home.

### What Helped Us Survive

- Adults recognized the unusual behavior of the ocean.
- After the second wave they made a decision to leave the house and move inland and/or to higher ground.
- We moved inland as far as we could – even though it was only slightly elevated.
- We stayed at that location until it was determined safe to return.

Things got better for me here, as Uncle Eddie, the Van Gieson's 6-foot 2-inch tall uncle, swung me up on his burly shoulders and we galloped up the street in the direction of Puumale Home. We hadn't gone far when a new Ford, moving at a high rate of speed, headed towards us (towards Hilo). We heard the vroom of the car's exhaust grow louder as it approached us and then lower after it passed. I looked behind us and watched as the speeding car met its doom. A wall of water, foaming water, blotted it out. It would be months before I would see the car again at the back of the large pond, on the Hilo side of the Seaside Inn.

At the Saiki's house we turned *mauka* (toward the mountains) and headed into the jungle. Now this was a *real* jungle to a four-year-old. This was where bad things lived; centipedes, scorpions, and possibly killer mongoose. I climbed over a'a lava, maile pilau (*Paederia foetida*, a twining malodorous vine) and pandanus (lauhala trees) knowing that now I was safe because there were "grownups" here. It was obvious from their appearance that something bad, really bad, was happening, but I was too young to know why these people looked so concerned.

## Earthquake Hazards and Estimated Losses in the County of Hawaii

"Earthquake Hazards and Estimated Losses in the County of Hawaii", a publication by Hawaii State Civil Defense in collaboration with others, provides new estimates of potential earthquake losses to the island of Hawaii using HAZUS™. The study used customized parameters of Hawaiian seismicity, ground motions from past earthquakes, soil types, building construction types and their number and distribution, and local construction cost data.

Four earthquake sources were considered: A South Flank earthquake (south coast, M=8), Honomu earthquake (east coast, M=7), Kaoiki earthquake (south central, M=7), and a Kona earthquake (west coast, M=7). Scenario results are provided for each earthquake.

The results of the economic analysis indicate that earthquakes are estimated to cause an average annualized loss of \$32 million per year, exceeding the cost from hurricanes by \$12 million.

When the estimated annualized losses are compared to the building inventories, the County of Hawaii has the third highest annual earthquake loss ratio (AELR) of any county in the U.S.

The publication is available online at [http://www.hawaii.gov/dbedt/czm/czm\\_publications/pdf/earthquake\\_hazards-hawaii\\_county.pdf](http://www.hawaii.gov/dbedt/czm/czm_publications/pdf/earthquake_hazards-hawaii_county.pdf)

We hacked our way through the jungle for what seemed to be a very long time and eventually emerged into a grassy area where we waited. After a sandwich and some passage of time, we headed back towards home. The trip back wasn't memorable until we approached the road. Jeanne and I were instructed by the adults not to look around and for the most part I did as I was told. Jeanne didn't obey and suffered nightmares as a result of it later on. My memories were of a road littered with debris that was difficult to traverse and of being reunited with Grandma Mason for a trip in a raft across the missing part of Kalaniana'ole Avenue. In the raft, there was a man lying in the bottom that Grandma told me was sleeping. Years later I found out it was an eternal type of sleep. EQ