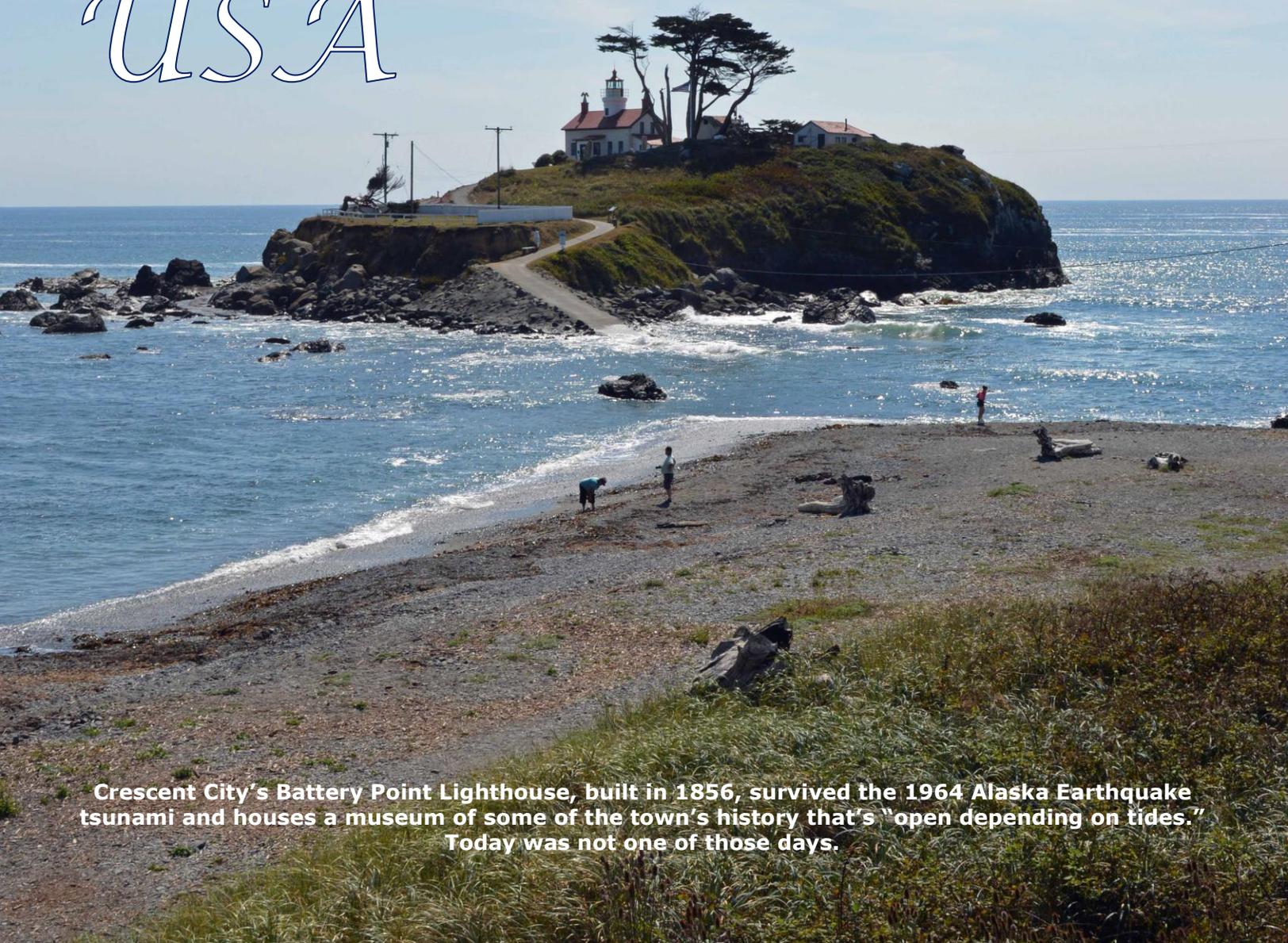


OCEAN OBSERVER

Crescent City, California

15 August 2014

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Crescent City's Battery Point Lighthouse, built in 1856, survived the 1964 Alaska Earthquake tsunami and houses a museum of some of the town's history that's "open depending on tides." Today was not one of those days.

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Victorian-era homes and buildings were the common theme of every town we stopped on our way up the North Coast – Willits, Ukiah, Ferndale, Eureka, Arcata.

Crescent City, our last stop before California became Oregon, was notable for the utter ordinariness of its architecture.

Plainness in 1960s style, unadorned wood-sided homes and fast food outlets behind illuminated plastic façades. Just the way you'd build a fishing village of 7,500 if you knew that every few years the ocean would rise up and sweep a good chunk of it away.

Crescent City, California is to tsunamis – tidal waves – what magnets are to iron filings and Hollywood is to actors. It has to do with the way this part of the U.S. coastline bulges westward into the Pacific and local peculiarities in the sea floor that magnify and focus wave action.

From Ferndale north, street and highway signs warned we were in a tsunami zone.

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A town says a lot about itself by what it chooses to put on a sign.

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A jetty protects the entrance to Crescent City's harbor.

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Since 1933 Crescent City has been hit by tsunamis more than 30 times – most with little consequence – but the biggest was 50 years ago this year.

On Good Friday 1964 (in March that year), a submarine fault near Anchorage, Alaska caused a 9.2 magnitude earthquake – 14 times the power of the 1906 San Francisco quake – the second-largest earthquake in recorded history.

In less than five minutes, part of the sea floor off Alaska's coast the size of Oregon rose as much as 40 feet while another region the size of Nevada dropped. The "ripples" swept down the North American coastline at 400 miles an hour damaging towns in British Columbia, Oregon and California on its way to Antarctica.

The earthquake killed 15 people in Alaska but the tsunami killed 106 elsewhere in the state. Outside Alaska, the tsunami killed five people in Oregon and 13 in California. Twelve of those fatalities were in Crescent City, where the fourth and largest wave came in at midnight, 20 feet tall.

Sixty city blocks were covered with water; half of those destroyed. Nearly 300 buildings were lost, a thousand cars and 25 fishing vessels in the harbor. On a per block basis, damage was greater in Crescent City than Anchorage.

The most recent tsunami fatality on the West Coast was in 2011, just south of town near the mouth of the Klamath River, where a 25-year-old man had gone to film the waves' arrival following the Fukushima, Japan earthquake. His body washed ashore a month later near the mouth of the Columbia River between Oregon and Washington, 380 miles north.

Meanwhile, the water sloshing within Crescent City's harbor destroyed much of the fishing fleet again. You can see a YouTube video of the harbor during the tsunami here:

<http://youtu.be/8ltLkvZYnxQ>.

More than most of the planet's people, the folks in Crescent City are acutely aware of how our fates are all connected, even if we're separated by 5,000 miles of an ocean named for its placidness.

Here's the YouTube video of the Del Norte High School project to return a 20-foot fishing boat sucked away from a Fukushima high school by the tsunami there and drifted ashore in Crescent City two years later:

<http://youtu.be/DARSLDzGEW8>.

Coverage of the end of the project by the Crescent City newspaper is here:

<http://www.triplicate.com/News/Local-News/DNs-Boat-Kids-a-big-hit-in-Japan>.

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It was near this spot just south of Crescent City at False Klamath Cove that the Fukushima tsunami claimed its only victim in North America.