

# One year later, police chief remembers tragedy

One year ago, on Friday morning, Aug. 1, Cannon Beach police received a call seeking assistance for a “disoriented female” at the Surfsand Resort.

Police Chief Jason Schermerhorn, who had been on the Cannon Beach force for only 18 months after a 26-year career in Seaside, was not prepared for what he was to find. When he and Cannon Beach Fire Captain Matt Gardner broke their way into the hotel room, they found a dead toddler, 2-year-old Isabella Smith, and beside her, in shock, her older sister Alana Smith, 13. Alana was lying in her own blood, severe cuts on her body, blood spread throughout the room.

Their mother, Jessica Smith, 40, from Goldendale, Wash., was implicated in the attack and apprehended after a two-and-a-half-day search. She was arrested and taken into custody by the Cannon Beach Police Department and the Clatsop County Major Crime Team. She is currently in Clatsop County Jail awaiting trial in summer 2016.

It was an incident no cop ever wants to experience, but few are spared.

Schermerhorn took time out Tuesday to share his thoughts at the approach of the one-year anniversary.

The early morning of Aug. 1, 2014, Schermerhorn was filling in at the overnight desk for an officer on vacation. He’d been covering since 3 a.m. when at 9:40 the emergency call came in from a housekeeper at the Surfsand Resort, who was unable to gain entry to the room.

Schermerhorn arrived at the scene with Matt Gardner.

“We didn’t know what we were going into,” Schermerhorn said. “We ended up cutting the dead bolt to get in.”

Schermerhorn entered the room first.

The “disoriented female” who had been reported, Schermerhorn realized, was 13-year-old Alana Smith. Medix responded and she received treatment at Seaside hospital. Meanwhile, Jessica Smith was at large.

Cannon Beach City Council chambers on Gower Avenue were turned into a war room, with local, state and federal agencies coordinating the search.

## CANNON SHOTS

By  
R.J.  
MARX



**‘Everybody knows as small as we are, everything can still happen here.’**

Police Chief Jason Schermerhorn

“The FBI came down and introduced themselves and said, ‘We’re here to help you. If you want us here, we’ll accept that, and if you want us to leave, we’ll respect that.’ There was no issue, they were great.

“Each day I would come in at 6 a.m. and work until midnight, popping back and forth to see where they were and see what they needed,” Schermerhorn said.

“The first day they didn’t find anything. The second, they didn’t.”

The third day, Jessica Smith’s car was found on the logging road off Highway 26.

“Interesting thing — Alana had said she thought her mom would go to a park or logging road,” Schermerhorn recalled.

Jessica Smith was apprehended without incident, taken for medical evaluation and transported to the county jail.

After her arrest, Schermerhorn remained at police headquarters in Cannon Beach.

Meanwhile, the press from Portland and beyond descended on Cannon Beach.

Schermerhorn found himself before the microphones.

“You really can’t say ‘no comment,’” he said. “Having a prepared statement is important, but having knowledge of what’s going on is important as well.”

Schermerhorn said despite efforts to keep his two children away from the news, the steady stream of

headlines made that impossible.

“My son saw his dad on the front cover of the newspaper and asked what was going on,” Schermerhorn recalled. “He was 10 at the time. That’s just a hard thing to explain. Why would a little girl’s mom hurt her? It’s very hard to explain to anyone, much less your own child.”

Community support made a big difference during the healing process.

“The fact that our community was so supportive shows we can live through things like this,” Schermerhorn said. “They’re scary at the time, but those things make our community stronger, and our relationships with the community and the police department stronger. When they understand and are working with us asking what they can do, that develops a good camaraderie and partnership.

“Cannon Beach is a great town,” he said. “There was a lot of support afterward, people who brought thank-you cards. People who said they were thinking of us. That’s important. Law enforcement is such a thankless job most of the time. When you do get thank-yous and kudos for doing your job, it’s appreciated.”

For Schermerhorn, the process is far from over. A year later the attacks are something he “constantly thinks about.”

In trying to understand the motives for the killing, Schermerhorn said he believes this was Jessica Smith’s “last hurrah” before she was supposed to give her children over to her divorced husband.

“We adults become controlling during a divorce,” he said. “There’s got to be a better way of handling it. There needs to be better counseling, and family check-ups.”

Schermerhorn praised the work of District Attorney Josh Marquis, Assistant District Attorney Dawn Buzzard, and Victims Assistant Unit Coordinator Marilyn Reilly.

“The great thing about it — if there was any good about it — was the community partnerships we developed,” Schermerhorn said. “Every one of the agencies we worked with stepped up.”

Can future tragedies like this be prevented in Cannon Beach?

“You can do your best to do prevention and be visible, but there are things you can’t stop from hap-



CANNON BEACH GAZETTE

Headlines in the Cannon Beach Gazette one year ago. The case has left a lingering impact on both law enforcement and the community.

pening because you can’t see them coming,” he said. “That’s something you see with a tourist population, transient population, people coming back and forth on weekends. You do deal with a certain criminal element. It may be somebody who’s never committed a crime before in their life. For some reason they make a poor decision, or a poor choice.”

One year later, young Isabella remains a haunting figure in his mind. “I know Isabella’s birthday was a couple of weeks ago,” he said. “That’s just sad. Her family will never get over it. Alana can get counseling, and all the love you can give her, but it will still be in the back of her mind, having lived through that.

“The hard part is we’ll be going through the whole thing a year from now when it goes to trial,” he said. “It’s difficult for me to understand how they can make Alana go through it then. Why not get it done as soon as possible? That is the most horrific thing for me to see, because she just needs to get past it.”

Schermerhorn admits he, too, may never fully get “past it.”

“It’s something that never leaves our minds,” he said. “I still have a picture of Alana in the hospital, when she was released, in my office. That picture reminds me of why I’m doing law enforcement. The reason



SUBMITTED PHOTO

“Missing” alert issued by Cannon Beach police after a tragic killing one year ago.

we go into this thing is to help people. The medics and crew who were on scene that day saved her life. That’s something that explains why we do the things we do.

“We didn’t have anybody say, ‘How could this happen in our town?’ You wonder that, but everybody knows as small as we are, everything can still happen here.

“It’s something you’ll never get used to,” he said. “When you do get used to it, it’s time to get out of law enforcement, because you’ve just kind of lost your heart.”

## Reflections ELAINE TRUCKE

# The megathrust quake that changed Cannon Beach

With the recent article in the New Yorker making the rounds, I thought this would be a good time to look back on what happened in 1964. Some of you are probably saying, “OK, I get it, tsunamis. The coast is a dangerous place.” Insert eye roll here, but the thing is a tsunami is a real possibility. And for some of us a constant threat in the back of our mind. Could what happen in 1964 be worse? Could Cannon Beach handle it?

On March 27, 1964 a megathrust quake (sometimes referred to as the Good Friday earthquake) shook Anchorage, Alaska, to its core. The term megathrust refers to a quake that occurs when one tectonic plate is forced under another, otherwise known as subduction. This type of quake can exceed 9.0 in magnitude; the Good Friday quake was a 9.2. Tremors lasted for four minutes and set into motion a tsunami that swept along the North American shoreline.

Many coastal communities were unaware of the strength of such a quake, or of the tsunami heading their way.

In the early morning hours of March 27 a group of six poker players had gathered at Frank Hammond’s house. A “big bet” of \$15 was on the table when the phone rang. Bill Steidel, one of the poker players, recalls, “The phone rang and one of the men got up and answered the phone. ‘They said there’s a tidal wave coming,’ he said. We all ignored it, because we heard that every winter, that there were some big waves coming. It wasn’t unusual to hear that.”

Then the second call came. The wave had hit. As Steidel recalls in his 1995 Cannon Beach History Center oral history interview, “We said to Hammond, ‘Where are you going?’ Hammond says, ‘The last wave broke over, you know that tree in my drive-

way — the last wave broke over the top of that tree.”

Steidel describes the scene as a “Laurel and Hardy picture.” Every man ran for the door at the same time. Then they scrambled into their cars and made for their families as quickly as they could.

The news of the quake in Alaska and tales of an approaching tsunami was rebuffed by some, at least at first. The community of Cannon Beach was prepared for any number of Northern squalls, floods, and fires, but this was something different, something unexpected.

Bridget Snow and her husband had a unique view from one of the bluffs in Cannon Beach. As they scanned the sea they noticed the wave approaching, curling to shore and rising in height about a foot a second, about 10 feet in all.”

By the time the first wave made it to shore it was a 30-foot wall of water.

Elsewhere in Cannon Beach — Margaret Sroufe glanced out her window and was shocked to see dancing blue and green orbs right before the power went out.

Intrigued she made for her porch. Sroufe and her husband had an unprecedented view of the damage caused by the tsunami from their home on west side of Elm Street. “There was a little duplex down the street, and the duplex started to move,” Sroufe remembers. “It hit the telephone pole, and went around the telephone pole, and ended way back up in the pasture. And the bridge lifted up and moved on back into the pasture. It came right up to the edge of our driveway. We just stood there with our arms around each other watching the water come up.”

Those who were heading for high ground via the Ecola Creek Bridge were shocked to find that it was gone. Steidel was the first to arrive. “The bridge was gone,”



ELAINE TRUCKE

he said, “The water was all around me, and then a house went by. The house went over into the meadow and settled down.”

The tsunami only picked up speed as it moved further down the coastline. In Crescent City, California it moved with such strength and velocity that when hitting the shore. Seagulls were caught in mid-air by the rushing 30-foot — or more — waves. Witnesses have referred to these waves as “walls of water.”

The north end of Cannon Beach was the hardest hit by the ’64 tsunami. Homes were torn from their foundations or flooded. In addition, the Ecola Creek Bridge was completely destroyed leaving behind only skeletal pieces of wood hanging from the road on either side. Tsunami debris was distributed throughout the town. Though Cannon Beach did not experience the fatalities or devastation of other coastal communities, it was a shocking occurrence that changed how those who live at the coast react to a tsunami.

The 1964 tsunami wasn’t the first, nor will it be the last time that the coast is hit by a tsunami. The threat of a tsunami has always been a threat. There is extensive archaeological evidence and geological records that indicate past severe seismic events that have caused devastation along the entire west coast. Native American oral traditions of the region further confirm that such events have impacted ancient populations



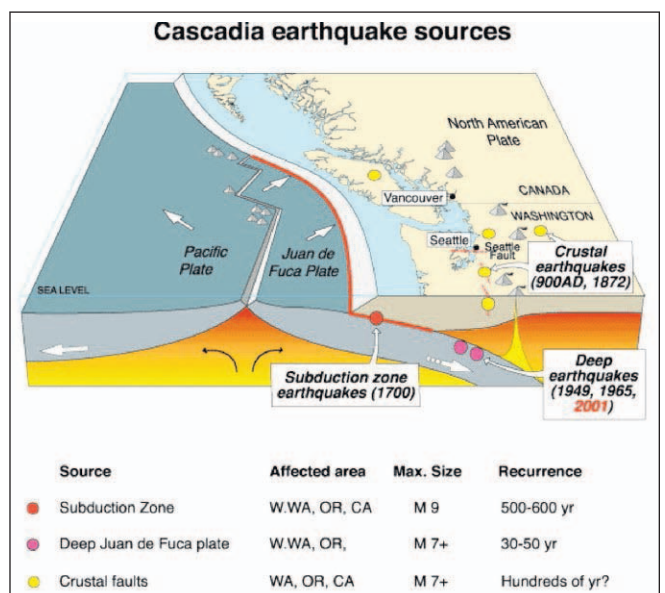
CANNON BEACH HISTORY CENTER/SUBMITTED PHOTO

A bridge is out during the 1964 tsunami.

in the past. Archaeological work done in areas around Port Townsend, various parts of Oregon and northern California have shown that the Cascadia subduction zone has been and will be responsible for earthquakes and tsunamis. One such event occurred on Jan. 26, 1700. How can we be so accurate on this date? The tsunami of 1700 was so devastating that it reached the shore of Japan and the time and date were recorded there. In addition to the records in Japan, dendrochronology and Native American oral traditions further substantiate a devastating tsunami in 1700.

Nearly every year new information becomes available to the public thanks to the hard work of geologists, archaeologists, and other scientists. This information does not fall on deaf ears, which is why tsunami safety and preparedness has become synonymous with the Oregon coast, specifically Cannon Beach.

Cannon Beach has had a strong emergency preparedness program for years. In fact, on April 14, 2010, The New York Times commended Cannon Beach for the city’s tsunami preparedness plans and proclaimed the town to be at the forefront



CANNON BEACH HISTORY CENTER/SUBMITTED PHOTO

Potential earthquake sources in the Pacific Northwest.

with their policies. Despite some of the claims in the infamous New Yorker article, many hotels in the area have evacuation plans outlined for guests, signs throughout town direct inhabitants to the safety of high ground, and local businesses have begun to construct tsunami and earthquake safe buildings. The best part is, the City of Cannon Beach and the fire and police departments are willing to change and adopt new policies as new information becomes available or as new concerns arise. Suffice to say, the town of Cannon

Beach does not use the “let’s just put that off” policy when it comes to being prepared for a natural disaster.

Education is still the number one combatant against casualties related to tsunamis and earthquakes. Safety drills, workshops, and community forums have led to a well-educated community. If you would like to know more about the tsunami that occurred in 1964, or even about the one that occurred on Jan. 26, 1700, then stop by the museum. We’re open 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day except Tuesday.