



Our Lives

Tidal Wave at Lord's Cove

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Mary McKenna

It happened in 1929. The newspapers summed it up: *At Lord's Cove, All fishing property and provisions were lost. Four lives were lost: Mrs. Patrick Rennie, 37, and her three children: Rita Rennie, 9; Patrick Rennie, 7; and Bernard Rennie, 2.*

I went over to St. Pierre when I was thirteen and I worked at a hotel. A woman had three children. I was taking care of them. I used to go back to Lord's Cove in May because my father needed my help and I worked with him during the summer. His name was Jim Walsh. I stayed late that year, so I was there for the tidal wave.

It was in November when the ground shook. The ground may have had a little frost in it but I doubt it. My whole body was shaking, especially my knees, even when I was standing still. I didn't know if I should move or not. A lot of people found it the same.

I know I had a package in my hand and my father's wallet. I was just shaking because there was nothing to hold onto.

When I got home my father said to me, "What in the heck is going on? Everything is shaking here."

Off every kitchen in Newfoundland, in the old houses, there's a little cupboard there with dishes in it. I went to look in the pantry and there were a couple of cups down on the floor.

Later that evening I just had my coat put on and I was in the front door. I called to father. I said, "Pop, there's no water in the cove. It's all rocks."

He said, "What?"

"There's no water in the cove," I said. "Come and see." That's when he got up and came and looked out. He stayed staring at it and then we saw the wave coming.

So then he ran out and hollered to everybody. That was the way we got in touch with our neighbours, one to the other. So they all came out and saw it. Then when they saw the water coming everybody started to run. Because it wasn't like it was coming in through the cove. It was like it was coming from the sky. That's how high the waves were. But it got smaller as it came in.

In Newfoundland years ago, especially the Roman Catholics, they always died with a candle in their hands, did you know that? My mother was sick for a long time, and when she died somebody had to hold the candle. That was the church's rule.

So anyway, it wasn't all burned away. There was quite a bit of it left at the time she died, and my father kept it.



James Walsh's house as it is today.

I was in the door when he saw the wave coming. He was in the hall when he saw it. He left me and went upstairs and grabbed the candle. He jumped into his boots and went out to the bank where the capstan was and he stuck it down in a piece of chain.

It was one of those old-fashioned long white candles. He lit the candle and it was going after the third wave. He took it out of there when we thought there were no more waves coming.

So we never lost anything. Everybody else lost their stages, dories, skiffs and everything. Ours was still there. So of course that was quite a thing, people coming and looking at that. I don't know why but father believed it was because of the candle.

The water didn't come anywhere near there.

Now, when it started, my sister Katie wouldn't come away from the house. Father and I wanted to take her three children.

I tried to get her to leave her house. I said, "Come on Katie, I'll help you with the children."

And she said, "No, I'm going to bless the bank."

Katie went out with a bottle of holy water and sprayed the bank. There was an incline there and that's what she did.

We thought the wave was going to come up where we were, so my father jumped over the barbed wire fence. I went under, but I had this little girl I picked up on the way. Celeste Bentaue was her name.

A dear little thing, I'll never forget her. She had a kind of reddish hair and she was sitting down in what they called the chip pile, where you cut up wood. When we were running I said to my father, "My God! Celeste!"

Celeste was sitting, playing in the chip pile and I just picked her up. She didn't know what was happening. Father looked back, and he was going to get her, but I picked her up and we ran.

My father helped me put her over the fence and then I crawled under it. He jumped over and tore his rubber boot. But the water didn't even come up there.

Every night Pat Rennie used to come over to Merle Harnett's. That was soon after supper, to play cards. Merle was our neighbour. People usually finished eating a little after six, so when the dishes were cleared away there was the kitchen table with an oil cloth on it. Everybody sat there. Well, this was one of the nights Pat Rennie came over. His son Martin came with him.

When the tidal wave happened Pat Rennie was standing on the road in front of our house.

The men were around talking and he said, "There, look, there's my house and my children and my wife are in it."

And the next wave that came, we saw it coming so we all moved back. Well, it took Pat Rennie's house out.

The house was behind a pond and a beach separated the pond from the ocean. They used to spread their fish on the beach in the summer.

It started with the first wave. When the tidal wave came in it went over that beach. There was a pond, a freshwater pond, that's where the Rennies' house was, back of that. The first wave took it and put it right by the shore, but nobody could get to it because they were all up on higher ground. But another wave came in and took it a little farther. The third one took it out right farther in the pond and the water was deep there.

They thought they heard someone crying in the Rennie house. It was a little girl upstairs in bed.

Father went out in the dory; he could never have done it without help, so he wasn't the only one. When they heard the noise, Father and Maurice and Clem Harnett, two brothers, decided they'd launch a dory.

Clem Harnett stayed on the land, at the capstan. He was the one with the rope on the dory. There was a big ring there on the end, just in case they had to have help.

Merle rowed and my father stood in the front. Father broke the window and reached in. Like they were saying, it was a good thing, the crib was right there. He had to reach in to get it.

They always carried a scoop in the dory. I think he used that to break the window. I said to him, "You could have cut yourself when you reached in through the window."

"When I hit the window, I hit it!"

Well, he broke the window and sure enough the child was there and they just had time to get in before any more waves came. This was the most dangerous part.

They couldn't get that house in until the next day or the day after that. I know they rigged up a tackle with chain or ropes. I saw them with it, on the beach. They pulled the house in and when they got it in on the land the water poured out.

They found Mrs. Rennie and the children. They were waked in the school house.

I saw the funeral go by, because, standing out by our house I could see the church. To see all those caskets coming out was a terrible thing.

I didn't go. I didn't go to the school neither where they were waked. Somebody told me that Mrs. Rennie was in the centre and a child on each side of her and one at her feet.

I heard people saying it looked so sad.

It stays with you, you know. I never stayed in our house at night after that. I used to stay with my father in the daytime but I used to go to Katie's and sleep. I couldn't stay there. I've been back several times and I didn't stay there.

Even when I didn't sleep at home in the house I didn't sleep well. And I think it upset people for years. I don't sleep good now. On Young Street, here in Halifax, I would wander around half the night and sometimes set a pillow on the radiator, sitting like that.

It's an awful feeling to go through an earthquake. It was only two hours afterwards that the wave came and I don't think anyone knew there was a tidal wave after an earthquake.

Afterwards the cove was never the same, I think. A lot of people noticed it. What I mean by that is it seemed that when there was a heavy sea there were no waves. It was like there was no bottom in the ocean.



This family cemetery plot holds the four members of the Rennie family lost in the tidal wave at Lord's Cove.

I said to my sister Katie that at night I hear the noise. She said, "Yes, but down farther you could hear it more."

I said, "What does it sound like to you, Katie?"

"It is like there's no bottom."

So I don't know. It is strange, isn't it?

Margaret Rennie's Story

Margaret Rennie was the young girl rescued by Mr. James Walsh and his friends in the Tidal Wave of 1929. Today she lives in Fox Cove, Newfoundland. Here is her story.

I was awake when the earthquake happened. The only thing I do remember is the lamp went out with the shaking, the lamp on the stairhead.

Albert, my brother, and Dad were across the beach playing cards. My brother Martin was with them too. When they heard the noise they came to see what it was. When they looked the house was gone out in the pond.

When they got me I was unconscious from the mud and water and everything else. They took me and put me down in a big tub of warm water. I think this was at John Joe Fitzpatrick's house. His wife's name was Bertha.

They found Mom and the children downstairs. Mom was found in under the table. She was sewing at the table, with the sewing machine.



Margaret Rennie today,
survivor of the 1929 tidal wave.

Now, Patrick was upstairs in bed earlier. I suppose when he heard the noise he came downstairs. Poor Patrick, he was found in under the couch. Rita was around there somewhere, I suppose. The baby, Bernard, was tied in the high chair.

I haven't got pictures of any of them. Poor Mom. I don't even know what she looked like.

After this I went to Roundabout with relatives and my two brothers stayed in Lord's Cove. Soon after, we all got back together as a family. There was no work in Lord's Cove so Father moved to Little St. Lawrence to work in the mine.