**The Big Island Tsunami** -On April 1, 1946 more than 1,300 homes were swept away and 159 people were killed.

The April Fools’ Tsunami was caused by an 8.6 magnitude earthquake in Alaska. It was the most destructive Pacific wide tsunami of the 20th century. The north shore of Kauai was hit first 4.5 hours after the earthquake. Kauai was hit by two powerful 49 foot waves. All the bridges at Wainiha were washed out, and the tiny village of Wainiha itself was flattened. On Kauai fourteen people died, including many children.

4.9 hours after the earthquake the tsunami hit Hilo. The town of Hilo was pounded by seven 39 foot waves. The waves killed 159 people and caused $26 million in damages.

Tuck Wah Lee was a 27-year old dockworker working in an oceanfront warehouse. He heard someone yell from the dock outside that the water was disappearing in the bay. While other workers ran to pick up fish flopping on the damp sand, Lee scurried up a Coast Guard tower to get a better look at the bay. Years later, he told a Big Island news reporter, “I saw a brown wall of water coming in. The wall got higher and higher, and the whistling sound that came with it got louder and louder”.

He climbed a scaffolding ladder, his legs just two feet above the water as it smashed through the warehouse. Two-ton boulders were rolling about the bay, and he saw a railroad car rise three feet off the tracks from the force of the giant wave.

When the water lulled, Lee jumped into the bay and swam for a nearby ship. Along the HIlo bay front, 90 residents perished.

At Lapauho‘eho‘e, a few miles north, 20 schoolchildren and four teachers drowned in the huge waves. Laupaho‘eho‘e resident Leonie Kawaihona Laeha Poy was a teenager getting ready for school when she noticed that all her friends had lined up beside the seashore. She and her brother hurried down to join them, but when they saw there was no water, they knew something was terribly wrong. They rushed home and their father quickly herded them into the car to head for higher ground. From the rear window of the car she saw the waves washing over the coconut trees. From the safety of a rock wall she watched the teachers’ cottages, the shop building, and the bathroom facilities all get washed away. Worst of all, schoolchildren she knew climbed onto the bandstand, but when the wave hit, it broke into kindling, and she could see her classmates bobbing helplessly about in the water.

That tsunami was the worst recorded in recent history for the Hawaiian Islands, while a 1960 tsunami from Southern Chile was nearly as bad. On the Big Island, 61 people were killed and 282 injured in the waves that hit on May 22, 1960.

After the 1946 tsunami, scientists developed a warning system in 1947-48 that has detected every Pacific-wide tsunami since. Generally tsunamis are generated by the rippling of the ocean floor when an earthquake occurs, so seismographs, oceanographers, tide gauges and observers all work to detect changes indicated on instruments at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center at Ewa Beach, O‘ahu and other places throughout the Islands. Waves generated by an earthquake of a 7.5 magnitude on the Richter scale occur 10 to 20 minutes apart and travel at about 500 miles an hour, so Hawai‘i usually has several hours when sirens along the beach can warn residents to evacuate.

Unfortunately, the more time that elapses between tsunamis, the more complacent people become about evacuating. Most recently, smaller waves hit the Hawaiian Islands on March 27, 1964, November 29, 1975, and May 7, 1986—the 11 year lapses are just long enough to let people forget the dire consequences. Sometimes, surfers head for the ocean, hoping to catch that big wave, when warnings sound.

Besides the 1946 and 1960 waves, five other tsunamis are known to have taken lives in Hawai‘i. Sixteen people were killed in November 1837 (14 in Hilo, two on Maui), 47 in Ka‘u on April 1868, five in Hilo on May 1877, one Hilo fisherman in February 1923, and in November 1975, two campers on the Kona Coast were washed out to sea. Because the Hawaiians kept only oral histories, the first tsunami wasn’t documented until 1819.