

**DATE:**  
May 18, 1980

**PLACE:**  
Mount St. Helens, Washington

"Vancouver! Vancouver! This is it!" David Johnston's voice crackled over the radio to people listening in the city. Seconds later, his fellow scientists were unable to contact him. Johnston was a geologist who had come to Mount St. Helens after the mountain began to tremble. Although he was killed from the eruption that followed, his observations saved many lives.

### WARNING SIGNS

On March 20, 1980, Mount St. Helens experienced a tiny earthquake. It was so small that the only people who felt it were up on the peak itself. But then came another... and another. What was going on? Scientists started to wonder, especially when the earthquakes didn't stop. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, they decided to close the mountain to the public.

Just four days later – BOOM! An explosion occurred, but no one could see anything. It was too cloudy to tell what was going on at the top of the mountain. A news helicopter discovered that there was a huge hole – 200 feet across and 100 feet deep. People who lived in the town of Spirit Lake began to leave their homes.

On March 28th, Johnston told reporters at the base of the peak that: "It is extremely dangerous where we are standing. If it exploded, we would die."

"It's like standing next to a dynamite keg with the fuse lit," he said, referring to Mount St. Helens, "Only we don't know how long that fuse is."

Everyone expected *something* to happen – and soon. But no one knew exactly what that would be.

### A HAIR-RAISING ESCAPE?

Things stayed the same through April. While the mountain was still rumbling and ash and steam were escaping, people were starting to doubt if there was any danger.

Even some volcanologists believed that there was nothing to worry about.



Harry Truman, owner of a lodge at Spirit Lake, said that he wasn't moving – no matter what. "If the mountain goes," he said, "I'm going with it." But his cat didn't feel the same way. When



David Johnston, May 17, 1980.  
Taken by Harry Glicken, USGS.

his friend, George Bowers, came to visit, the cat hid inside Bowers' truck.

"When I hit the brake in Castle Rock, the cat let out a yowl that nearly scared me to death," Bowers said. "I couldn't believe it. I guess the cat wanted to get away from the mountain, too."

### EXPLOSION!

On the morning of May 18, 1980, a huge explosion of trapped gas blew the top off the mountain. It was bigger than anyone could have imagined. Newsmen, campers, residents... several people were near Mount St. Helens when it belched hot ash into the sky.

A news reporter, David Crockett, looked up to see mud and debris flying right towards him.

Crockett grabbed his recorder to try and tell people what was happening at Mount St. Helens. "I am walking towards the only light I can see. I can hear the mountain rumble. At this very moment I have to say, 'Honest to God, I believe I am dead.' It's very, very hard to breathe and very dark. If I could only breathe air. God, give me breath! I will try the radio. Mayday! Mayday! Ash is coming down on me heavily. It's either dark or I am dead. God, I want to live!"

The ash was falling so hard that even in places as far away as Yakima, it



by Gwen Perkins  
Washington State Historical Society, ©2008

CASE 1: THE MYSTERY  
OF MOUNT ST. HELENS

## What was the cost?

- 57 human lives
- 12 million salmon
- 4 billion board feet of timber
- 27 bridges damaged
- 200 homes
- over 2 billion dollars



was said that day had turned into night. Mudflows began to race down the Toutle River, snapping bridges and sweeping away homes and cars. Some people claimed that the fish were jumping out of the river to escape the heat of the boiling waters. Millions of trees had been blasted down, lying like toothpicks on the hillsides.

Helicopters began circling the mountain, searching for those who had been caught in the blast. Crockett was one of those rescued ten hours later, along with several others who had been on the mountain. Rescue teams and pilots worked for days to find and bring people back from Mount St. Helens.

Sadly, David Johnston and Harry Truman were among those who died on the mountain.

### AFTERMATH

After the blast, President Jimmy Carter came to Washington to see Mount St. Helens with a group of government officials. They were talking about how much it would cost the state to repair all of the damage when governor Dixy Lee Ray interrupted, "This is all very interesting but the top priority is people."

The federal government agreed. They made Mount St. Helens a federal disaster area. This meant that people could ask for loans to rebuild the homes and businesses they lost in the disaster.

Ash fell for days. Washington citizens worked together to find ways to cope with the falling ash. Some farmers put snorkels on their cars and trucks to try and pull clean air into their engines; still others put pantyhose over the air filters of their cars. This kept ash from clogging up engines. Many people opened up their homes to share rooms with travelers who were stuck because so many roads were closed.

After almost a year, the ash was cleared and cities that had been damaged by the eruption started to rebuild.

Animals slowly returned to the mountain but they

were different from those that had lived there before. The first birds to live on Mount St. Helens post blast were actually desert birds like meadowlarks and rock wrens, used to living in a barren landscape. They were followed by other animals. Even deer and elk returned as the mountain's vegetation began to recover.

Mount St. Helens is still being studied by scientists today. After the explosion, part of the mountain was made into a national monument. This lets people study what happened and learn lessons that they can use to study other mountain ranges. A lot can be learned by watching how Mount St. Helens changes to prevent other disasters.



Two kids wearing masks as protection against the ash. Taken by Jim Shelton, *Spokesman Review* 1980.

A group of scientists at the Coldwater II Observation Ridge on May 9, 1980 waiting to see what will happen. USGS photo.

### WORD CLUES

#### Geology

Geology is the study of the Earth's past, focusing on rocks. Scientists who study geology are known as *geologists*.

#### Volcanology (also called vulcanology)

Volcanology is the study of volcanoes, magma, lava, and related events or objects. Those who study this are called *volcanologists*.

#### Volcanic Ash

Powdered rock from a volcanic eruption.

#### Blast Zone

An area that has been damaged by an explosion.

### EVIDENCE SOURCES

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[www.fs.fed.us/gpnm/volcanocams/msh](http://www.fs.fed.us/gpnm/volcanocams/msh)

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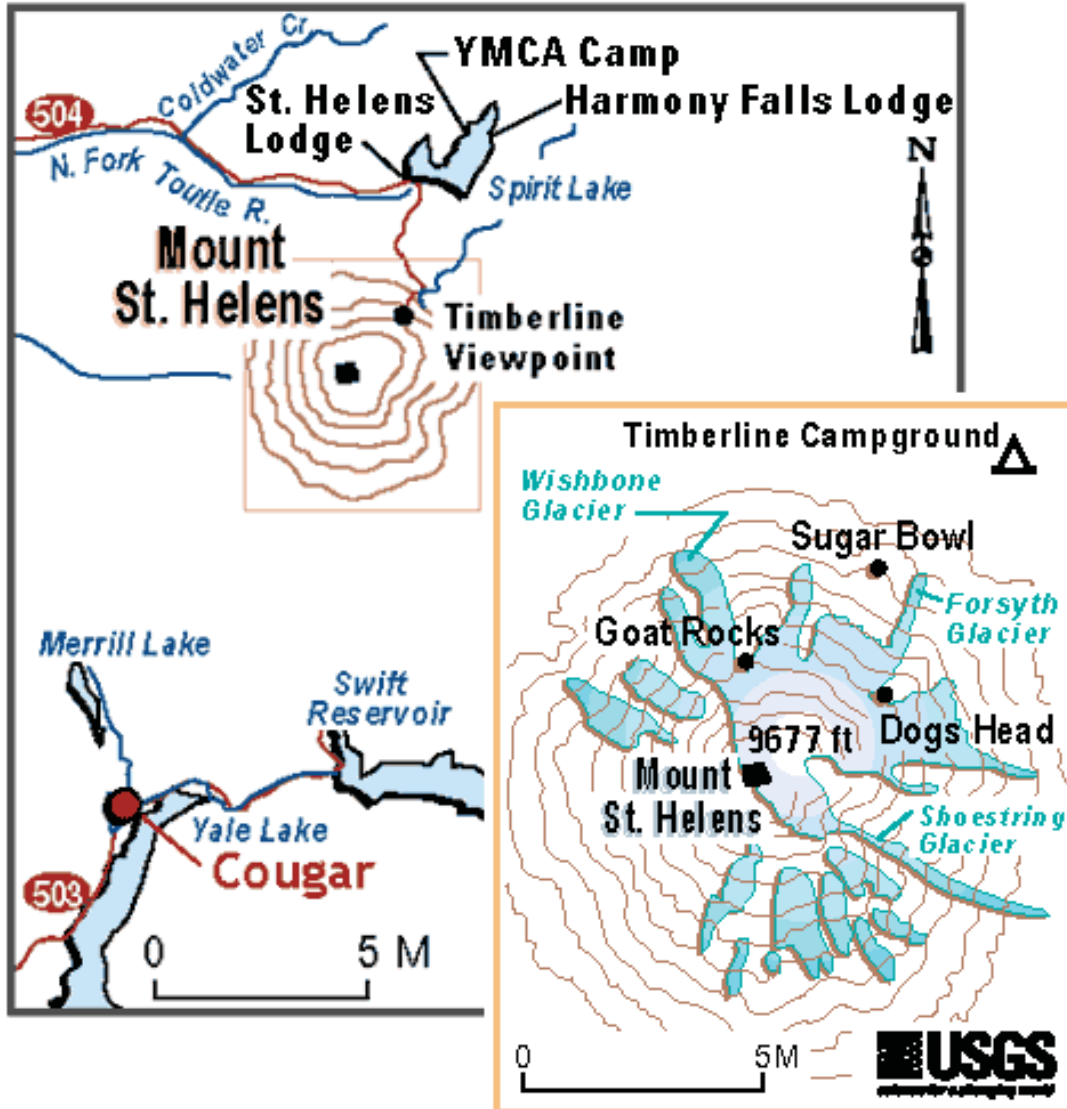
EVIDENCE



# EVIDENCE



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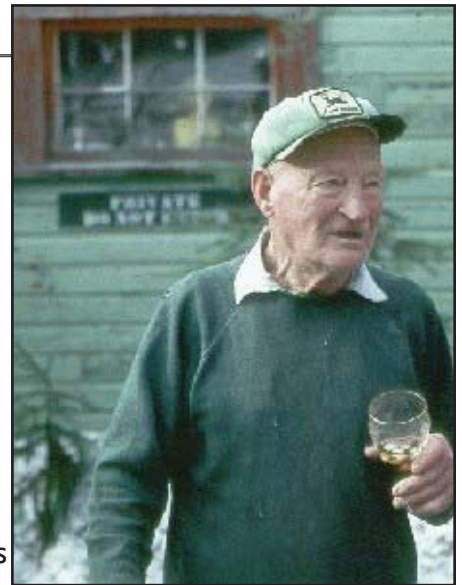
# EVIDENCE

**CASE FILE:** The Mystery of Mount St. Helens

**YOUR MISSION:** Review the evidence to determine what happened. Answer the questions below about the case, then write your own report about which type of natural disaster was responsible.

**EYEWITNESS STATEMENTS:** "There are dozens of quakes every... minute. There is never a dull moment. About the time things settle down, here comes one of those babies." - Harry Truman, lodge owner

"I've walked that mountain for 50 years. I know her. If it erupts with lava, it's not going to get me at Spirit Lake. Those geologists might know something about the inside of the mountain, but I know her contours. If I left this place, it would worry me to death. If this place is gonna go, I want to go with it, 'cause if I lost it, it would kill me in a week anyway." - Harry Truman, lodge owner



*What famous Washingtonian said, "I've lived here over 50 years... That mountain's part of Harry and Harry's a part of that mountain."? See if you can find the answer! Courtesy USGS.*

**WHEN DID THIS DISASTER STRIKE?**

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**WHERE DID IT TAKE PLACE? (DESCRIBE WHERE TO LOOK FOR IT ON A MAP)**

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**WHO WAS INVOLVED?**

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**WHAT KIND OF NATURAL DISASTER WAS IT?**

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**LIST TWO KEY "EVENTS" THAT LED TO IT AND ONE THING THAT HAPPENED AS A RESULT.**

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**USING YOUR NOTES ABOVE, WRITE A SHORT NEWS ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED AT MOUNT ST. HELENS. (Use the back of the paper if needed.)**

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