

On memories and Mount St. Helens

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“History” rarely happens in a single day. But it often seems that way. That was the case on May 18, 1980, when Mount St. Helens erupted in what would be the deadliest volcanic eruption in US history. It was history long in the making, of course, part of a series of eruptive periods that would shape and reshape the mountain and surrounding landscape over millennia. The mountain, and its volcanic activity, also shaped the lives of the human inhabitants of the region. Known as Lawetlat’la to the [Cowlitz people](#), and Loowit or Louwala-Clough to the [Klickitat](#), the erupting mountain held an important role in Native culture, and volcanic activity was recorded by Hudson’s Bay traders as early as 1835. But for those alive forty years ago, the history of Mount St. Helens happened one bright Sunday morning.

History is sometimes described as change over time. Change that can be measured in a single moment or, as with Mount St. Helens, in geological epochs. (Mount St. Helens formed within the past 40,000 years, but the pre-1980 summit cone began rising about 2,200 years ago during the [Holocene](#) epoch). As a history museum, we at MOHAI help people explore the past on both the personal level and from the perspective of a much longer timeline. Understanding both contexts is critical to understanding our world, and finding the patterns, both granular and grand, that give meaning to our experiences and help us make informed decisions for the future.

On that spring day in 1980, life in our region was upended. Beyond the unparalleled devastation and death, the eruption impacted people in ways that may seem fleeting now but remain as a kind of immutable truth in our memories: Face masks and showers of ash, school cancellations and closed highways are some of the totems that have stayed with us these past four decades.

On the anniversary of the eruption, I asked a few of my MOHAI colleagues to share their recollections of the day, and the sights and sounds that remain with them. Here is some of what they shared:

I was a lifeguard at Medina Beach in the summer of 1980 and would ride my bike back and forth to work, wearing a mask to protect myself from the ash in the air.

I sailed out of Lopez Island enjoying a beautiful weekend, and early Sunday morning was awoken by an odd noise, like drumming on empty freighters in the harbor. But it wasn’t until we were docking at Anacortes, and discovered that the highway was closed, that I realized that what we heard was Mount St. Helens exploding.

I remember being eleven and seeing a giant cloud of ash in the sky, and my six year old brother being very frightened and getting a respirator from some construction workers. And I remember the ash on the cars, and all the souvenirs made with Mt. St. Helens ash, including endless glass



Christmas ornaments and feeling how cool it was to have the vials (and then how gimmicky it seemed as I grew older.)

We lived on Tiger Mountain and could see the sky change from Issaquah. I was just a kid but the news of the huge flows of mud and lava are forever imprinted on my mind. I purchased a little souvenir bottle of ash right after that, and have kept it all this time.

From the distance of four decades, it is easy now to look at the big numbers, and the broad patterns of the Mount St. Helens story, the lessons from scientists and seismologists, and forget that the broad sweep of history also contains a multitude of small stories like those my colleagues shared, intimate moments of lives that changed in ways subtle and at times quietly profound.

Today, as we adjust to a very different historic moment, and once again make sense of the changes we face in our daily lives, memories are just now forming of the details of life during this historic period, recollections that will stay with us for years. While unlikely to find their way into history books, or be showcased in museums, these memories will weave themselves into the fabric of the personal stories that collectively, over time, shape the broad patterns of life in the Northwest. And as history-keepers, MOHAI will be there to record and share that changing story. Thank you for being a part of helping us tell that story.