



# The 1964 Earthquake: An Investigation into Scientific Inquiry, Restoration, and “Breakup”



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### Overview

The photograph below was taken after the 1964 Earthquake in Alaska. When the original 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue location of Mac’s Foto Shop was destroyed in the quake, the shop moved to a new building on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and C Street (UAA Archives). The pictured sign informed customers that the new location was open for business.

The sign represents the resilience of the people in Alaska and the efforts to rebuild after a catastrophic event. The new location of Mac’s is an example of the continuation of life even in the face of disaster.

Historically, the 1964 Earthquake impacted both the city of Anchorage and the state of Alaska in both the short and long term. Structurally, the Earthquake caused damage to buildings, wildlife, and the Earth itself. Long-term, the quake changed policies and building codes in Anchorage and Alaska.

The term *breakup* in the sign is a pun which demonstrates the use of humor in the face of disaster as well as an Alaskan understanding of the term *breakup*.

### Scientific Investigations

- The State of Alaska borders the Pacific and North American Plates (Urban Regional Research 1994). This location makes it especially prone to earthquakes.
- At an 8.6 on the Richter Scale and a 9.2 on the Moment Magnitude Measurement, the 1964 Earthquake is the strongest recorded earthquake in North America and the second strongest recorded quake in the world (Barry 2010).
- The Earthquake impacted wildlife, infrastructure, and the lives of people across the city and state (Barry 2010).
- The Earthquake also helped broaden scientific knowledge around seismic activity. Research began immediately after the event when the Coast and Geodetic Survey moved in to help with the reconstruction of the city and to investigate the quake (Barry 2010).
- Motivated by the 1964 Earthquake, the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center (WCATW) “was established in 1967 by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)” (Barry 2010).

### “Breakup” as a Pun

- The sign utilizes the term *breakup* as a pun in order to announce a new location for Mac’s Foto Shop. An analysis of the linguistics behind the pun helps to shed light on the sign writer’s (and, subsequently, the residents of Anchorage’s) understanding of *breakup*.
- In order for a word to work as a pun, it has to have multiple meanings which are understood by the reader. According to Hempelmann, a pun often contains “just one punning word, a similar or identical target word (which may or may not be present), and two meanings that are spuriously appropriate in light of the joke’s setup” (Hempelmann 2014).
- In the case of the *breakup* pun, the punning word and the target word are both the term *breakup*. The pun plays on two meanings of the term that are understood by the people of Anchorage.
- According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, as a noun, *breakup* has two meanings: “1. an act or instance of breaking up [and] 2. the breaking, melting, and loosening of ice in the spring” (Meriam-Webster). The second definition is the one that is commonly used to reference a time of year in Alaska; the pun also plays off of the definition of *breakup* as having been smashed to pieces.
- The two forms of *breakup* which the puns reference are homonyms that are pronounced and spelled the same (Attardo 1994).
- A pun is an example of “non-casual” speech, meaning that the speaker and the hearer are aware of the phonological structure of the language (Attardo 1994).
- Thus, in the case of the artifact, the speaker was aware of multiple meanings of the term. *Breakup* as a season is an Alaskan use which was at the level of consciousness of the speaker and demonstrates an aspect of Alaskan vernacular which is still part of the lexicon over 60 years later.
- On March 26, 2016, Rick Sinnott published a column in Anchorage’s newspaper, *Alaska Dispatch News*. The article referenced a sign that Mac’s Foto Shop posted on their demolished 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue location. The sign contained the same *breakup* pun as the below artifact, demonstrating that both meanings of *breakup* hold true today (Sinnott 2014).



“Mac’s Foto. Business as usual (more or less) in spite of early breakup!”  
Photo Courtesy of the Department of Archives & Special Collections, UAA Consortium Library

### Destruction and Restoration of Anchorage

- The Mac’s Foto sign was photographed in Anchorage and highlights the destruction in the city.
- Immediately after the Earthquake, the residents of Anchorage and the surrounding area were without electricity, water, and sewer; they also had only limited access to communication (Barry 2010).
- The original Mac’s Foto was damaged in the “Fourth Avenue Slide” which “impacted 14 city blocks” (Urban Regional Research 1995).
- It was this particular slide which caused the business core to be moved away from the bluff and the area between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue to be designated for parking lots and park spaces (Urban Research 1995).
- Very few people who owned property in Anchorage at the time—including business owners—had earthquake insurance; however, people still repaired or rebuilt regardless of insurance coverage (Barry 2010).
- The opening and relocation of Mac’s Foto Shop demonstrates the beginning of this rebuilding and the resilience of the community.

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