

# 50 Years Ago Disaster Shook San Francisco; Menace Still Remains

(Editor's note: It has been 50 years since an earthquake brought down San Francisco the greatest catastrophe ever to hit an American city. Could it happen again? Here's what the experts say, along with the story of a disaster which left statistics that remain impressive in the day of the H-bomb.)

**SAN FRANCISCO (AP)—**California is sitting right on top of a destructive earthquake, just waiting for it to happen. When? The experts have no idea. Where? There are a couple of likely spots, but no seismologist will hazard more than a guess. Why? Because no one can anticipate the deadly San Andreas Fault line, which cuts a path of potential catastrophe almost the length of California, from south of the Oregon border into Mexico.

Pressures built up far below the surface push against this crack in the earth's crust. The U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey has found that the coastal, or western, side of the fault moves 20 inches northward every 10 years, in relation to the continental, or eastern, side. There is an almost constant rubbing and grinding action.

**Shock Sensation**  
As the earth of the fault line crunches, shock waves are transmitted outward in every direction. Take two files and rub them together. The tingling sensation that runs up your arms is similar to earthquake shock waves.

Some shock waves are so weak they can be detected only with delicate seismographs. Others are strong enough to rattle dishes in the cupboard and start light fixtures swaying. Californians long ago learned to live with such disturbances.

**Dwarfs Explosions**  
Occasionally there is a major slip, and the ground heaves with a force so great it dwarfs the greatest man-made explosions.

It was like that 50 years ago, at 5:12 a.m., Tuesday, April 18, 1906.

It came without a whisper of warning. One moment the city of San Francisco was asleep, serene and silent. Here and there a light flickered on as early risers rolled sleepily out of bed.

The next moment the earth buckled and rolled. Buildings shuddered, and toppled to the ground. Streets were filled with debris, and cobbled with twisted strands of dangling wires.

**Uneasy Rest**  
Twice again before 6 a.m. there were violent jars, then the earth settled back to an uneasy rest. That quake, with the fire that followed, was the greatest catastrophe ever to hit an American city.

People poured into the streets, appalled at the destruction. They didn't know—then—that the greatest damage was beneath them, silent and unseen. There, below the streets and sidewalks, water mains had cracked and burst.

Here a kerosene stove toppled over and flames raced across a floor. There a wall crumbled and live wires crossed, sending out a shower of sparks that ignited a pile of papers.

**Many Small Fires**  
All over the city, dozens of small fires broke out. Firemen raced to the rescue—then watched in horror as pressure died and streams of water turned to trickles.

For three days and nights the fire raged until firemen, police, soldiers and volunteers blasted away rows of buildings to create a protective belt of vacant lots.

Even in these days of H-bombs the statistics are impressive: More than 60,000 buildings destroyed, 285,000 of the city's 300,000 inhabitants made homeless, 2,933 acres of ruins totaling 490 city blocks, property damage of 250 million dollars—in an era of 5-cent beer and 8-cent prime beef.

**200-Mile Stretch**  
That was just the San Francisco part of it. The quake hit along a 200-mile stretch of the San Andreas fault.

At least 700 persons were killed in—or because of—the quake. No village of city along the line escaped. Palo Alto had three million dollars in damage, Salinas two million, Santa Rosa a million, Redwood City \$700,000, San Mateo \$500,000.

Sixty miles north of San Francisco giant redwood trees which had been standing since the time of Christ snapped and crashed to the earth.

Walls were still toppling when San Francisco officials jumped into action.

**Fire Chief Killed**  
The mayor, police chief and police commission gathered at the Hall of Justice. Fire Chief Denny Sullivan didn't report. He lay fatally injured beneath the mass of brick and mortar that had once been the California hotel.

The commissions' first official act was to close every saloon and smash liquor bottles in stores. Within minutes, fully armed troops were en route from the Army's Presidio nearby, to the stricken downtown area.

The mayor's first proclamation declared, "Troops and police are authorized to kill on sight any person or persons caught looting." The next day 14 men were shot down while trying to loot the San Francisco Mint, and 14 soldiers were strung up for looting a saloon.

News of the disaster spread quickly, despite ruptured communications lines.

**Trains Offered**  
Railroads offered free transportation to any who wanted to leave the city. Refugees fled, taking with them a few possessions and some highly exaggerated tales. One told a Mexico City news-

paper: "There are an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 dead. The city cannot be rebuilt for 40 years." A Los Angeles newspaper quoted an eyewitness as saying, "Mobs were screaming in the streets like hordes of fright-crazed animals."

There actually was little panic. But there was heartbreak and despair, and fatigue of the body and soul.

Families gathered what belongings they could carry and fled. Mothers were separated from their children, husbands from wives. Ferry boats criss-crossed the bay, dumping pitiful refugees at the Oakland docks and hurrying back for more.

A vast refugee camp was established in the Presidio, another in Golden Gate Park (18 babies were born in the park April 22). Governor Pardee proclaimed a legal holiday every day from April 19 through June 2, thus averting a run on the city's 48 banks. The bankers, who had agreed that none should open until they all could, asserted that vaults had survived the flames. But it was weeks before they were proved right.

**May Have Been More**  
In San Francisco the official casualty list numbered 452 dead, 1,500 injured. The actual death toll may well have numbered hundreds more. San Francisco was a bustling city, thronged with transients from all over the world. It is probably that many died in the ruins and were never found.

But life went on, too. According to the Examiner, "Women driven from their homes and left destitute have appealed to the men to whom they were engaged, and immediate marriages have been effected."

And there was the story of Thomas W. Billingsley and Anne Kernerlober: "They had no thoughts of marriage, but they found themselves homeless and destitute with just \$1.20 between them. So they were married, in the midst of the ruins."

Amid all the horror, there were a few stories that later were good for laughs.

**Takes Vesuvius**  
Old timers tell of Enrico Caruso, who sang in the opera "Carmen" the night before the quake. The next day he was seen and heard trudging up Nob Hill with a heavy suitcase, shouting: "Give me my Vesuvius." One newspaper observed: "If all the people who said they sheltered Caruso that day were laid end to end, doused with gasoline and set afire, it would be a good thing."

Young John Barrymore was tumbled from bed by the shock, and went to Union Square to see what was going on. Federal troops soon had him on a work detail. Actor John Drew, his uncle, later remarked: "It took an act of God to get him out of bed, and the U.S. Army to put him to work."

**Clad in Top Hat**  
Thomas A. Brooks, now city administrator, has one recollection that is as clear today as it was at the moment of disaster: He saw a man, dressed only in a top hat, running out of a house. The man was carrying just one item—an oil painting of himself, fully clothed.

As the story of the quake and fire spread across the nation, cash donations and relief shipments started rolling to the stricken city. Philadelphia sent more than \$100,000; Jefferson, Ind., sent 75,000 blankets; Oregon sent five trainloads of food; Los Angeles sent 63 freight cars of food, mineral water and medicine; Americans in London sent \$12,500; Boston sent a freight car of baked beans.

Around the world they wrote the obituary of a beautiful city—but they wrote it too soon. Like the mythical bird Phoenix, San Francisco rose from her own ashes. Only nine years after the quake and fire she was host to the world at the Pan-Pacific International Exposition.

**Quake-Resistant**  
And she built well. Her modern buildings are designed to withstand quakes. Her underground water pipes have flexible joints that will give—but not break. She has developed one of the world's most efficient fire departments, and has nearly 10 million gallons of water stored in 150 underground cisterns at key spots around the city.

For 50 years San Franciscans have insisted: "It wasn't the quake, it was the fire." And a seismological expert at the time,

considered as a disturbance of the earth's crust, the quake was positively insignificant. It has been rated at 8.25 on the Richter Scale, which runs up to 8.6 for the heaviest earthquake ever recorded—Tibet, 1850.

In the past 50 years, California has had six major quakes, causing upward of 1,000 deaths and damage at Long Beach in 1933.

The most recent were in 1933, when tremors in the Tehachapi and Bakersfield areas killed 10 and caused 120 million in damages. Others were in Santa Barbara, 1925, and the Imperial Valley, 1940.

Californians know that the San Andreas Fault does not rest easy for long. To the experts, this much seems certain: Another big earthquake is due, sooner or later.

**Time Unknown**  
Dr. Charles Richter of California Institute of Technology says seismologists would need accurate records for a thousand years before attempting to predict earthquakes with even partial accuracy. He feels California may go 10 years or more without a San Andreas quake—but one could come tomorrow.

It is his personal belief that the most likely place for the next big quake is in the area of Fort Tejon, on the ridge between Bakersfield and Los Angeles. This is because there has been "no movement of consequence" in that area since a great tremor in 1857.

Dr. Hugo Benioff, another Caltech expert, told a recent meeting of the National Academy of Science that he believes the next big San Andreas quake will be between San Luis Obispo and San Benito counties. This is a long stretch of the fault line which was not disturbed in either 1857 or 1906. Referring to this section, Benioff told newsmen, "I'm surprised it hasn't happened already."

Californians don't worry about the next big earthquake. It may not come in their lifetimes, or if it does, it may spend its vast fury in the sparsely inhabited desert or mountains. The threat is always there, but it's too indefinite to be really worrisome.

What can you do about an earthquake anyway, but sit and wait for it to happen?

## Fire, Quake Left City Hall an Empty Shell



The fire-ravaged cupola of the San Francisco city hall stands starkly against the sky following the catastrophic earthquake and conflagration which struck the Bay City on April 18, 1906. While the cupola refused to collapse, remainder of the structure was reduced to ruin and rubble as were numerous other public buildings in the city. This and other photos on this page were loaned to The Statesman by John Freeborn, 1610 N. Church St., and were taken by a sister, Nelly Freeborn, Osborne, Kansas, who was in San Francisco at the time of the quake.

## Salem Answered Bay City Quake With Generous Relief Campaign

**By THOMAS G. WRIGHT JR., Staff Writer, The Statesman**  
Shock waves from the San Francisco earthquake and fire quickly reached the heartstrings of Salem area residents fifty years ago this week, launching a generous campaign of relief.

Salem newspapers in the days following the disaster were full of telegraph stories from the scene, and of the concerted effort by mid-Willamette Valley folks to help their stricken southern neighbors. While the newspaper accounts dwell heavily on the death and desolation in San Francisco itself, the damage caused in other towns of the area seemed proportionately severe.

A double line eight-column banner in the Oregon Statesman of April 19, 1906 read "EARTHQUAKE AND FIRE SPREADS DESOLATION IN SAN FRANCISCO." The entire front page of the edition, as was the one of the following day, was devoted to stories of the disaster.

Included that first day was a two-column box appeal for citizens to meet the following morning to organize a campaign of relief for the earthquake and fire victims. The meeting was called by Mayor F. W. Waters and F. N. Derby, president of the Salem Commercial Club and launched a two-week drive for money, food and clothing to be sent to the bay area.

**Asked to Bake Bread**  
Major effort in the relief was a telephone campaign to Salem women urging them to bake as much bread as possible for shipment to

San Francisco. This plea paid off the following day when 10,000 loaves were placed aboard a Southern Pacific relief train which also carried a carload of potatoes and a carload of flour from Salem donations.

Within a week some \$7,000 had been raised, the Statesman pointing out much of it coming "from the poor people." Additional carloads of foodstuffs were readied with the people of the Pratum, Shaw, Aurora, Jefferson and Hubbard each filling up a boxcar with potatoes, bacon, flour, etc.

A few days after the tragedy the people of Salem responded to a new plea for help, this time to feed hundreds of refugees from the ruins who were being transported north by railroad. The women of Salem turned out with buns, boiled eggs, milk and coffee to feed two train loads one Sunday evening and fed another a couple of days later.

At this stage a new plea was heard, this time for clothing and Salem citizens got busy sewing and providing clothes for the stricken Californians.

Intervened in the stories of the scene and relief were the reports of anxiety by Salem area persons who had relatives and friends in the bay area at the time. Communications was slow and several days passed before reports filtered to the area of the fate of these, but two weeks after the tragic day all Salem area citizens had apparently been safely accounted for.

Graphic Account  
Mrs. Edyth Tozier Weathered,

a former Salem woman, who was a guest at San Francisco's Palace Hotel when the earthquake struck, gave a graphic account of her experiences in a letter to her brother, Albert Tozier in Salem. She told of being buried under plaster by the first impact and of later huddling with other hotel tenants for hours, fearing to venture into the street.

One newspaper report listed several Salem people as safe and unharmed in San Francisco. It included L. A. Matthews, C. J. Pugh, Charles L. Parrish, S. A. Matthews and wife, Maybelle Spalding, Lewis Strauss and wife, Sylvan Strauss and wife and Martin E. Meyer.

Two weeks after the earthquake reports, the Statesman carried stories of plans for rebuilding the shattered cities; the headlines shifted to a manhunt for "Killer" Smith who left one Oregon City and two Woodburn police officers dead on his trail of violence; Salem housewives returned to baking bread for their own families; and another topic of barbershop conversation was the nomination of Democrat George Chamberlain for governor.

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## Quake Toppled House Against Its Neighbor



These picturesque residences escaped flames that followed the great San Francisco earthquake, but the one in center was shaken off its foundations by the tremendous earth jolts and had the appearance of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. A resident poses in the doorway while doubtless speculating about the cost of renovations.



All that remained of San Francisco's YMCA building (above) after the 1906 quake and conflagration was charred, broken walls. Masses of brick shaken loose by the earth jolts can be seen piled in front of the structure. Few were the business and public buildings which escaped damage in the catastrophe and death toll was placed at 452 persons. Damage ran to \$350 million.

## Radioactivity Spots Tools In Aircraft

**ST. LOUIS (AP)—**McDonnell Aircraft Corp. reported Saturday it has found a way—through radioactive materials—to combat an industry-wide problem of insuring removal of small tools from new planes before flight.

The firm said its industrial engineering department devised a method of imbedding a small radioactive source in the body of each tool so it can be located in the aircraft during pre-flight inspection.

A McDonnell spokesman said insuring removal of all rivet bucking bars and small tools from aircraft and sub-assemblies prior to flight has "long been a subject of serious concern throughout the entire aircraft industry."

McDonnell reported the proper amount of shielding is provided to make the activated tools safe for workers and yet permits enough radioactivity so scintillation counters can detect the misplaced items.

If a tool breaks at the point where the source is imbedded, McDonnell said the container can be easily located and disposed of without contact contamination of the surrounding area.

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Maximum doses of radiation to which workers are exposed, McDonnell said, are "well within the established tolerance limits established by the Atomic Energy Commission."

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