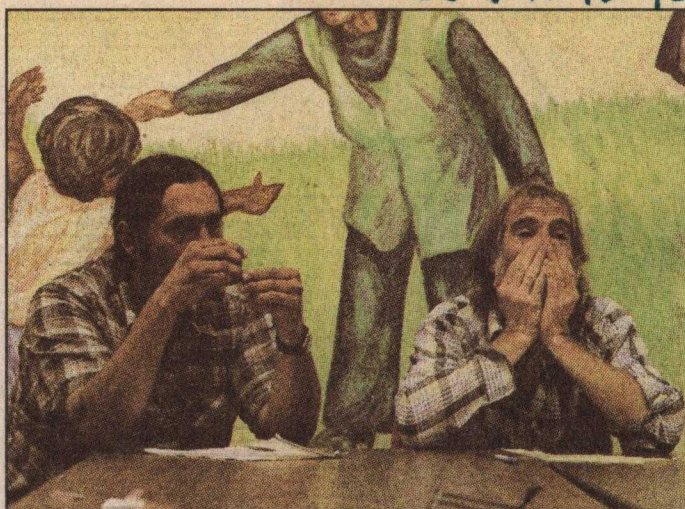


Watsonville's displaced languish while recovery efforts stagnate

# The Quake's Forgotten Victims



Photographs by Joe Cavaretta — Mercury News

Frustration is evident in the faces of Robert Chacanaca, left, and Michael Costyal at a Housing Action Committee meeting. Above, a cherub from the old State Theater is hauled off by wrecking crew worker Jose Quintero.

By Ann W. O'Neill  
Mercury News Staff Writer

**I**T IS HARD to hope in Watsonville these days.

Huge gaps blight the smile that used to be a bustling Main Street. Late in the afternoon, when the wind whips through the vacant lots, downtown becomes a dust bowl. The hospital and the high school await the wrecking ball.

In some neighborhoods, boarded-up homes have been invaded by junkies and gang members. The interiors are littered

with used syringes, stained mattresses and gang graffiti.

Watsonville is still struggling to recover from the Oct. 17 earthquake that caused \$300 million damage in the farming city of 30,000. The quake destroyed 195 homes, 106 mobile homes and three apartment buildings. Many more homes were damaged, and much of Main Street was leveled.

Except for a new bank and post office, which were in the planning stages before the quake, little has replaced what was.

Rents have skyrocketed. Two-bedroom apartments cost \$1,100 a month, nearly double what they were. Migrant workers,

who used to sleep in their cars, have found shelter in dozens of boarded-up buildings the city says are unfit for human habitation.

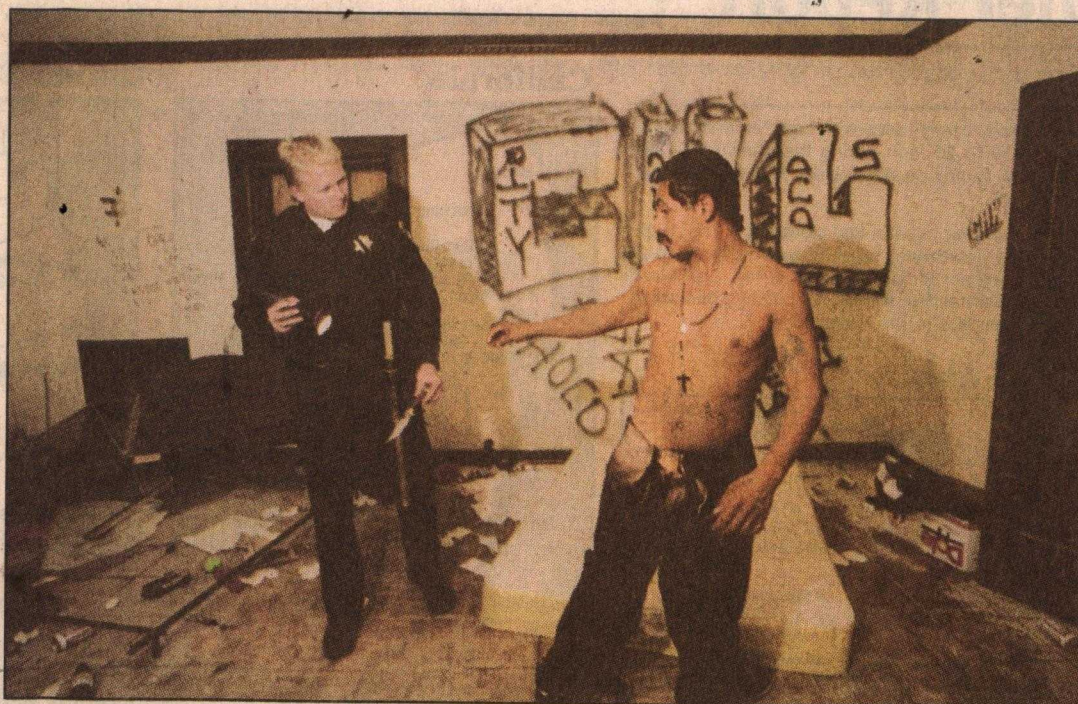
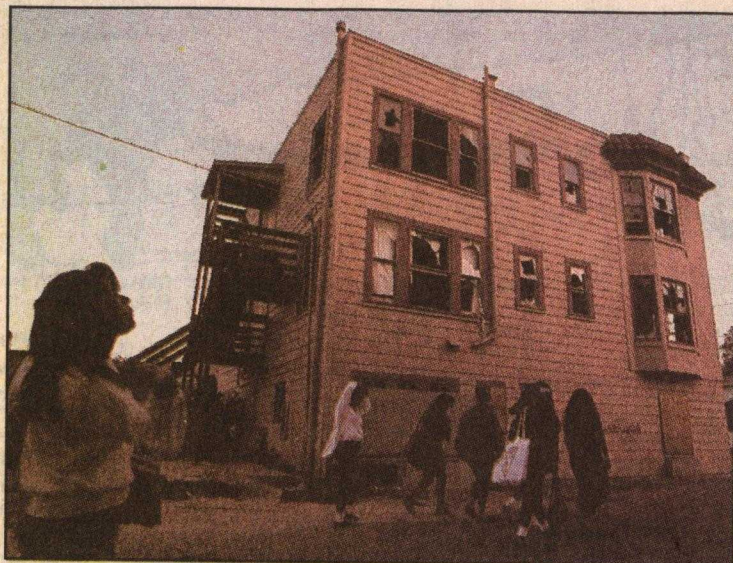
"We still have about 1,400 people who are displaced," said Ray Vigil of the Migrant Media Education Project. "Everyone is tripling or quadrupling up with friends or relatives."

About 125 people are living in temporary trailers provided by FEMA, he said. An additional 25 to 30 people remain in hotels.

Demolition crews were still working along Main Street last week. The old State

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Abandoned buildings such as this are common as a result of the Loma Prieta earthquake. Far right, Watsonville police officer Greg Ingram takes a knife from Narcisso Quezada in one such building. Quezada was warned but not arrested.



Below, Isabel Magaña hangs laundry at the FEMA trailer park at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds. Children of the Casteneda family, bottom, fix a meal in their one-room apartment in the Freedom area of Watsonville. The 11-member family had been living in a three-bedroom apartment before the quake.





## Watsonville gropes to find hope amid the hardships

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Theater building came down then, drawing a crowd. Old-timers have watched so many buildings fall that they have acquired an insider's knowledge of demolition techniques.

Many in the Santa Cruz County town can tell a tale of personal hardship:

✓ An old man and his wife have become prisoners in their home since gangs took over the quake-damaged apartment building across the street: "If you go out there, you're liable to get a rock in your head," he said. His fear kept him from giving his name.

"They should do something with it — either tear it down or fix it up," his wife said. "I would like to see a little smoke coming out of it, frankly."

✓ Virginia and Jose Rodriguez and their nine children have lived in seven places during the past year: the veterans center shelter, a Red Cross shelter, twice in their car, two hotels and a one-room apartment that rents for \$700 a month. They paid \$500 for their old, damaged house.

When Rodriguez received a letter from the Watsonville Area Interfaith Disaster Recovery group saying she had qualified for assistance, she did not believe it. Bureaucrats and agencies had broken so many promises before. But the group came through with the money, and for now the family has a home.

✓ Isabel Magaña and her daughter, Marta Teresa Leyva, spent six weeks at the tent city in Callaghan Park before being moved to the Buena Vista labor camp. Finally, in February, they moved into a FEMA trailer at the county fairgrounds.

It seemed like a chance to start over, but utility

bills, at more than \$100 a month, are triple what they used to pay. Leyva's husband is out of work, and she is not working either. Their first child is expected any day. They are three months behind on the electric bill. When they have to leave the trailer in February, Leyva said she doesn't know where they will go.

Townfolk still sarcastically refer to the temblor as "the San Francisco earthquake." More affluent and accessible areas received most of the media attention in the days immediately following the quake, and Watsonville was an afterthought.

While some communities have recovered, rebuilding Watsonville may take from three to five years, said Mayor Todd McFarren.

Some have visions of a Mexican open-air market downtown. Hispanic housing groups want to buy the Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers and install them on city-owned land at Watsonville airport. Over the advice of its staff, the city council has agreed to study the proposal. Privately, officials say it seems unlikely.

Downtown merchants, who have been planning the rebuilding effort for months, received a boost recently when the Small Business Administration granted \$24 million to rebuild Ford's department store, the anchor of the old downtown. It was the second largest loan in the agency's history.

The high school and damaged sections of the hospital will be rebuilt, city officials say. Meanwhile, at the hospital, employees are working

reduced hours — and receiving smaller paychecks. At the high school, plans are in the works to expand the damaged auditorium to a 1,000-seat performing arts center. Construction at both could begin as early as 1991.

Since the quake, the political climate has improved. Watsonville had been deeply divided after a lengthy legal battle over Hispanic voting rights. Disenfranchised Hispanic groups sued the city, contending that the old citywide election system diluted minority voting strength. The courts agreed. City council elections were held in December under a federal court order, and a more liberal council was elected.

Now, the parties on both sides of the protracted court case are talking.

"The earthquake came and broke the ground, but it united our hearts," a woman said in Spanish at a recent meeting of the committee charged with organizing Watsonville's observance of the quake anniversary.

But for every item of good news, bad news seems to follow.

The Green Giant food processing plant announced recently that it was closing in January and moving to Mexico, where laborers work for \$4 a day. Although the plant closing was blamed more on a changing economy and foreign competition, the result is still devastating to Watsonville. About 400 jobs will be lost.

On Wednesday when Watsonville pauses to reflect on the anniversary of the quake, officials know the city will once again receive attention. Watsonville has a message, said Vigil:

"We're appreciative of all the help we've gotten, but we're also not out of the woods yet. We have a long way to go. We still need help."



Staff photographs by Joe Cavaretta