

## Shaky Morning in Santa Cruz: Quake Rattled Town in 1906

*By Ross Eric Gibson*

In 1989, and again in 1906, the Santa Cruz town clock stopped shortly after 5 when the earthquakes hit. As the fourth anniversary of the Loma Prieta quake approaches, the memories of that 15 seconds of 7.1 vibrations are fresh. It also gives us an opportunity to revisit the damage, heroes and legends of the county's worst quake, a minute-plus of 8.3 shaking on April 18, 1906.

The Earth's alarm clock went off shortly after 5 a.m. in 1906 as steeple bells all over town spontaneously tolled. Brick buildings bore the brunt of destruction; wooden buildings were mostly hurt by falling chimneys or adjacent brick walls.

The electricity went off when Watsonville's boilers overturned, and its well filled. Workers in Santa Cruz risked electrocution shutting off a broken pipe gushing scalding steam onto a 2,500-volt generator. Santa Cruz power was restored by 3 p.m. And unlike many communities, Santa Cruz enjoyed uninterrupted phone service.

In the Beach Flats area, the riverbank erupted with numerous geysers spouting groundwater 20 to 30 feet high. The troughs at Brookdale's fish hatchery stayed put, but mini-tidal waves tossed thousands of young trout onto the floor. They were swept up in dust pans and returned to their troughs.

Trains attempting to leave Santa Cruz returned in reverse, finding all tunnels collapsed, most trestles wobbly and track twisted. Standing county bridges had offsets of two to eight feet. Fissures, landslides and fallen trees obstructed many roads, leaving the county sealed off from the outside world.

Worried relatives heard of far worse devastation outside the county. Yet for three days, the outside world reported Santa Cruz as obliterated. The only way in or out of the county was by foot, although youngster Ora Forman traveled all night by bicycle from Hollister to Santa Cruz. Roads became passable for wagons about the third day. Mail was delivered without postage, written on an odd assortment of scraps and cardboard and even written in chalk.

The only fatality noted in the city was B.W. Stevens, who returned six days later from his honeymoon to protest being listed as dead. A landslide above Boulder Creek completely filled in a canyon, burying eight mill workers. This, plus several other county deaths, set the toll at about a dozen.

Sea Beach Hotel owner J.J.C. Leonard was awakened from a sound sleep by his little son, who said he didn't like the noise and wanted to go back to the St. George. It didn't take Leonard further prodding to wake up, for the chimneys of the Sea Beach were falling like leaves in the forest. Dressing quickly, he telephoned for carpenters and masons. Failing to find all he wanted, he ordered a horse, and before 6 a.m. had men engaged to begin repairs. The kitchen chimney was quickly made serviceable enough to serve meals in the undamaged dining hall.

Equally quick was the Building Trades Council, which by 6 a.m. set up headquarters at the undamaged concrete Carnegie Library. The council members suspended all new projects to concentrate on residential repairs. Two days later, they organized a relief effort for San Francisco, engaging local benevolent orders to collect bedding, clothing and funds. Quilt-making machines were set up in the vast ballroom of the Sea Beach Hotel, and the nearby Bay State Hotel produced meals for the refugees.

Most homes suffered at least \$100 damage, which in some cases amounted to one-fourth the cost of the structure. Naval reservists began night patrols in Santa Cruz the day of the quake to guard against fires or looters. To kill temptation for arson, all insurance for Santa Cruz County was terminated, to cover nothing beyond two days after the quake.

Just four downtown buildings were seriously damaged. The new Pilot Hose Firehouse on East Church Street was demolished. The Business College, downtown's tallest structure, also was damaged. The Farmer's Union dropped bricks through the roof of wooden buildings on both Pacific and Soquel avenues.

The new Cooper Street Courthouse had part of its tower crash through two floors because the contractor embezzled funds for some of the concrete and rebar. To avoid demolition, the courthouse was partly dismantled and rebuilt as "essentially a new and sounder structure," correcting many defects of the original construction.

Other than these four, all downtown buildings remained occupied during repairs. And without incentives to demolish, downtown demolitions were kept to a minimum.

At the other end of the scale, the Neary Building, County Bank and buildings last known as Bookshop Santa Cruz, Chi Pants and the Ferrari Building were undamaged in 1906. Financial losses aside, within six months the downtown was back on its feet in 1906 after the worst shake in county history.

## Sources

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