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## THE QUAKE OF '89

Author and scholar Sandy Lydon has a front-row, center-aisle seat for the region's evolution

LYDON, Sandy



Karen T. Borchers — Mercury News

Historian Sandy Lydon on the deck of his Aptos hills house, which miraculously survived the quake.

By Richard Scheinin  
Mercury News Staff Writer

**S**ANDY Lydon is lecturing in the kitchen of his five-level redwood house in the Aptos hills. The cantilevered deck outside the window sits 49 feet above the ground and there is no good reason, a geologist friend has told him, that the deck or the house should still be standing.

For Lydon and his wife, Annie, live 1½ miles from the epicenter of the Loma Prieta earthquake.

Lydon is an author and scholar of Asian-American history who teaches at nearby Cabrillo College. He is known as a wild man in the classroom — he smashes meat and automobile keys through a meat grinder in one popular lecture on cultural assimilation.

He also is known for his exceptional knowledge of Monterey Bay history, which makes talking with Lydon a humbling experience. For Lydon seems to know the history of downtown Santa Cruz, Watsonville and Hollister on a parcel-by-parcel basis, reciting how every building fared in the face of earthquake, flood or fire during the past 125 years. He views natural disasters as "pivot points" in the evolution of towns and cities, as opportunities for redevelopment.

"Dan Rather's gone home, but this story's just beginning," Lydon says. "The story's not

the earthquake. That's just the set-up, the introduction. We are in Chapter One and I sure hope I'm alive long enough to see what happens. I'm sure writing it down as it goes along."

Lydon, who turns 50 this month, grew up in Hollister, where he once pitched for a semi-pro baseball team called the Hollister Merchant. Hollister is Earthquake Central. Lydon lived through about a hundred 2.0 earthquakes every year there and never blinked.

"We lived in an old-frame, turn-of-the-century house on the main street," he says. "There was a chandelier in the middle of the living room, and my mom and I used it as a seismograph. We played a game called 'Name the Magnitude and the Epicenter.' There were all kinds of earthquakes. There

were twisters, rollers, snaps. The chandelier would go around in a circle, or rock back and forth. You'd say, 'OK, that's a twister, the epicenter's in Gilroy and it's a 4.1.'

"I can remember earthquakes that knocked down hotels in Hollister. I can remember an earthquake in '56 or '57 that knocked the courthouse down, or caused it to be rebuilt. It's kind of a Hollister cowboy thing about earthquakes. It's kind of like Slim Pickens when he rode the bomb down in 'Dr. Strangelove.' It's weird to be with Hollister people in an earthquake, because they shout, they yell, 'All right!' Which is exactly what I did the other day. I said, 'Not bad. That had a nice pop to it.' It's a bravado, and I didn't realize how thin it is."

The Oct. 17 earthquake "knocked me to my knees," says Lydon, figuratively, not literally. He was at his Cabrillo College office at the time, returning home for the aftershocks. That was where he saw his ash-faced neighbors fleeing their houses "like refugees in a King Kong movie." Then there was the fire, visible in the surrounding hills of the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park, and the old borate bombers that flew over his house and dropped fire-retardants on the flames. Later there was the rain.

"I was ready for the locusts," Lydon says.

**"There ain't no place like this. Maybe that's why we're willing to ride the roller coaster."**

— Sandy Lydon

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## Cover Story

# Lydon sees quake as beginning, not end, of the chapter

LYDON, from Page 1C

For comfort, Lydon went to the library and began pouring through microfilm, an act of self-therapy for historians.

To understand this new earthquake, Lydon began scanning newspaper stories about the great earthquake of October 1865, estimated at 7.0, which had almost precisely the same epicenter as the Loma Prieta quake. He was looking for personal stories, and he came across this one, one of his favorites:

"It's the one about the fisherman who was offshore in a whale boat, a 23- or 24-foot New Bedford whaler. He was sitting about a mile out and he described this incredible thumping that was hitting the boat from below — Boom! Bam! Bom! And then he looked out at the shore and — this is the single most awesome description of the earthquake that I know — he saw a cloud of dust slowly rising above the land from Aptos all the way up the coast to Santa Cruz."

A couple days after the Oct. 17 quake, Lydon was at the hardware store when he ran into a friend named Jim Christmann, who owns a 50-foot charter boat called the Shana Rae. Christmann had been out on the boat when the quake struck. "He was a mile out, coming around Lighthouse Point," Lydon says, "and I asked him 'Well, what was it like?' And he said, 'Well, there was this noise from underneath the boat — Boom! Boom!' He killed the motor ... The thumping stopped and he looked over his shoulder, and from Santa Cruz to Aptos, there's a cloud of dust coming off the land just like that other guy said."

Lydon identifies five key events, or pivot points, in the history of Santa Cruz, Watsonville and Hollister: the earthquake of 1865 (Hollister was barely on the map for this one), the earthquake of 1906, the flood of 1955, the flood of 1982, and the earthquake of 1989. For Santa Cruz, he backtracks and adds a sixth event: The great fire of 1894.

He says that the 1865 quake served as a "seismic hazing" for



Mercury News Library

The 1906 quake caused ruin all over the Bay Area, Lydon points out — including Hunkin's Machine Shop in San Jose — not just in San Francisco

ence between this latest earthquake and the earlier disasters. Through 1955, when the flood ruined Santa Cruz's Chinatown and much of its downtown business district, merchants really had no choice but to re-open downtown: "People shoveled the mud out and they went back to business."

But in the decade since, as everywhere, regional shopping malls have grown up, creating a "centrifugal force" that sucks businesses out of the old downtowns and deposits them in the suburbs.

"This time," Lydon says, "the earthquake came and ripped out

the historic hearts of Santa Cruz, Watsonville and Hollister. In the old days, the people could sort of jump-start their hearts and get it going again. This time, the shopping centers are just sitting there waiting."

Lydon is waiting for a new group of Fred Swantons to make their appearance and show the way.

Now that Dan Rather's gone, Lydon may chronicle the coming events in a series of television shows for KCBA, Channel 35, in Salinas. The station is a Fox network affiliate, and there is some

talk of national syndication.

Lydon is not lacking for things to do. He's rewriting a history of Capitola that was published 12 years ago. He's co-authoring a history of Point Lobos. In December, he goes on sabbatical for a year, and will work toward completing a history of the Japanese communities in the Monterey Bay region. He has devoted 10 years of research to the project, which will be the sequel to his opus to this point, "Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region."

Then he has several more projects to get to.

“Santa Cruz and Watsonville are in the shadows of the media stars — San Francisco and the Cypress overpass.”

— Sandy Lydon

County,” he says. “Straight-up French. German communities. Portuguese.

“California talks about its multicultural future. Go to downtown Watsonville,” Lydon says. “The multicultural future is here. And because the scope is smaller and the scale is smaller, maybe we have a better chance to pull it off. And maybe that’s what the earthquake will do for us. I’ve been a lot of places on Earth, and there ain’t no place like this. Maybe that’s why we’re willing to ride the roller coaster. The epicenter is a mile and half from here. Man, I’m sitting on the edge of the sucker, and it’s been a hell of a ride so far.”

“There’s a great Basque story in the southern part of Monterey

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# Second pair's on him



He says that the 1865 quake served as a "seismic hazing" for Yankee pioneers who came to the region after California achieved statehood in 1850.

The fire of 1894, which occurred during a severe national depression, destroyed the old Santa Cruz County courthouse and a large number of wooden buildings downtown. Town leaders wrangled, then rebuilt over a period of years, constructing a handsome new courthouse that later was known as the Cooper House and was demolished last week. After the fire of 1894, a new leadership emerged in town, "enlightened captains of industry" Lydon calls them. These included an entrepreneur named Fred Swanton, who established what would become the boardwalk and helped cook up a spectacle on the San Lorenzo River called the Venetian Water Carnival, a big party to keep the tourists coming.

In 1906, the only local earthquake fatalities occurred in the mountains near where Lydon's house now sits. A mudslide buried a lumber crew and its Chinese cook. There were probably seven people who died, but the exact number wasn't established because the Loma Prieta Lumber Co. decided that it was more important to recover equipment than bodies. In his files, Lydon has some of the letters written to the company by incensed relatives of the victims.

Lydon has some thoughts on the labeling of the 1906 quake as the "San Francisco Earthquake," particularly since the same thing may be happening again this time: "The 1906 earthquake leveled towns like Santa Rosa, Petaluma — leveled. . . . The Salinas River changed its course.

"But it was the 'San Francisco Earthquake.' In 1906, it didn't matter. But now there are political wheels that have to turn to get help. And Santa Cruz and Watsonville are standing in the shadows of the media stars — San Francisco and the Cypress overpass."

Lydon mentions another differ-