

P-10-82

'I Saw The Ceiling Coming In On Me'

By JOHN McNICHOLAS

Sentinel Staff Writer

Mark Sturdevant, his wife and 22-year-old daughter usually would be asleep in their rooms at 11 o'clock on a Monday night. But when the hillside gave way behind the Cadillac Drive home in Scotts Valley last Monday, and tons of mud, dirt and trees thundered into their bedrooms and demolished the house, only Sturdevant was at home.

And after a 45-second nightmare settled around him, the San Jose homicide detective crawled unhurt through the rubble of what was once his living room wall.

Sturdevant's family had stayed with friends Monday night because of the storm. He had spent the early evening helping a neighbor keep mud away from his house. They knocked off about 7:30 p.m.

Back at his own house, where he's lived for 10 years, he checked "where the water's supposed to be, and everything looked beautiful," he said.

Alone in his house without power, Sturdevant built a fire in the fireplace and lay on the couch, "killing time until about 11," he said.

"About 11 o'clock, I heard something outside. It was something like the wind through the trees," he recalled. "Then there was a big-volume noise.

"Then all of a sudden, I heard the back end of the house coming in. I had some illumination from the fireplace, and I saw the ceiling coming in on me and the walls shoot toward me real fast.

"I had no time to get out — it was all over in 45 seconds — so I stayed on the couch with my hands over my head while the house came in on me. When it stopped, I was wondering if I was alive or dead."

Disoriented and covered with debris, "I looked straight down and I could see the ground under me, but I was still on the couch." Sturdevant found his flashlight and stumbled in his underwear into the storm outside. The only injuries he sustained were cuts on his bare feet from broken glass. His dog, which had been lying beside him, had disappeared.

The house had been pushed some 20 feet, and the what wreckage remained above the ground was skewed across the lot and into the road.

"The worst moment was when I saw the walls rushing at me. I thought 'This

is it, I'm going to die.' But the beams formed sort of an arch over me, almost like it was planned."

He spent the night with a neighbor. His dog turned up the next morning, having spent the night trapped in the house.

Saturday morning, a crew of more than 20 persons were salvaging what they could of the lumber and materials. Sturdevant plans to rebuild, perhaps with the help of a low-interest disaster loan.

A soil engineer has already told him at least eight concrete or wood piers must be sunk in what remains of the hillside, and a retaining wall must be built.

"They won't even give me a building permit until that's done," he said.

As the crew of friends, neighbors and a few people Sturdevant had never seen before swarmed over what remained of the house, Sturdevant mused, "I'm used to giving. I'm not accustomed to being on the receiving end. I'm really amazed how much compassion there is, considering how cold and cruel the world seems to most people. Working in police work, you come across the worst of people, not the best."