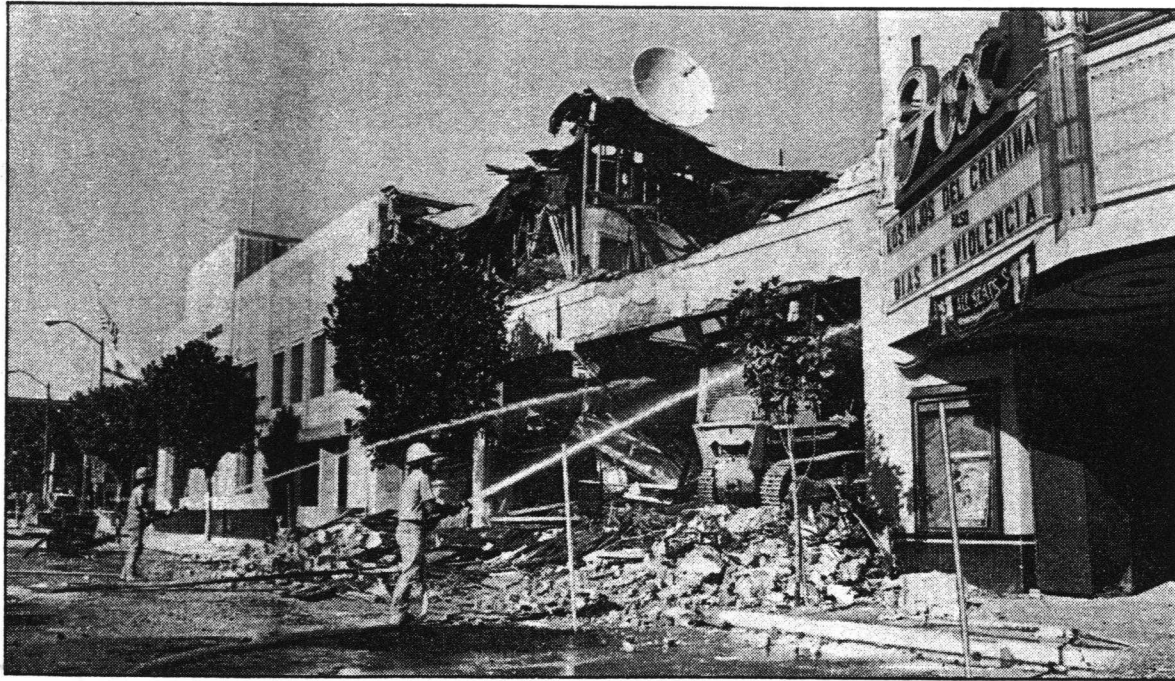


# The day Watsonville bent but didn't break



Kurt Ellison

After the quake hit many of the buildings in downtown Watsonville and Santa Cruz had to be razed.

'Everybody worked together ... it was a sight to behold. I was so proud of this town, you can't imagine.'

— Former Mayor Betty Murphy

By JUDY BRILL  
STAFF WRITER

**F**OUR YEARS ago tomorrow, Betty Murphy, then mayor of Watsonville, was standing in her kitchen, getting ready to ring doorbells in her last political campaign. Her husband, Bill, had just come home to lend a hand. It was 5:04 p.m. They never got to ring any bells.

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When the Loma Prieta earthquake struck, it didn't just change their plans that afternoon. It changed the lives of

**5:04 p.m., Oct. 17, 1989**

everyone in Watsonville.

The Loma Prieta quake demolished or severely damaged more than 900 homes, forcing an estimated 1,200 displaced residents to find alternative shelter, doubling and tripling up with friends and family, others resorting to tents and trailers. Four years later, federal emergency funds are still actively at work, trying to replace what was lost.

Murphy remembers the first shock: "All my grandmother's china came flying out of the cabinets. I knew I had to get to City Hall. But I can't say I was the

best prepared person. There was so much glass ..."

After sweeping away what they could to keep from getting cut, Murphy headed downtown where what might be called the first "parking Lot Session" of the City Council convened.

"Nobody knew what was safe or not," she said. "Everyone was afraid to go into the building."

The first thing Murphy did was to declare an emergency, putting in motion applications for state and federal emergency funding.

But despite the fact that Wat-

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sonville had "a very good" emergency plan, Murphy said, "For the first 72 hours we were on our own."

"The only thing open was the airport ... medical supplies and food came in," she said. "That's why I've always been such a staunch supporter of the airport."

Murphy said that at first, the press wasn't even aware of how hard Watsonville had been hit. "I saw a map in the Mercury News the next day," she recalled. "It had Morgan Hill and Gilroy ... and then nothing."

The press in Watsonville certainly knew what was happening. The power in town was out for a full day following the quake, and crews from the Register-Pajaronian drove to its sister paper in San Luis Obispo to produce the day's edition. Most subscribers got their papers just a few hours late.

Watsonville Fire Capt. Chris Johnson wasn't on duty at 5:04 p.m. that Tuesday. He was outside his house when the earth began to shake. But he and all available fire crews rushed to deal with the first calls.

"There were a couple of house fires right off the bat, and several injuries" Johnson recalled.

One of the earliest major problem struck at the Pillsbury-Green Giant plant, where the cooler refrigerant, toxic anhydrous ammonia, was spilling from a ruptured pipe. Crews hurried to seal off the building.

With the entire county involved in a local emergency, strike teams from around the state had to be called in to assist. "But we were operating on our own the first 24 hours," Johnson said, adding, "It was a good couple of months before we were running on our own."

There was obviously a percep-

tion problem outside the area. Murphy said her son called that evening from Marina County, wondering if she'd felt the earthquake.

She put in a call to then Congressman Leon Panetta, who came to Watsonville. He helped to make the outside media aware of what was going on.

State Sen. Henry Mello also got involved, letting state lawmakers know about the situation in Watsonville.

"Everybody worked together ... it was a sight to behold," Murphy said. "I was so proud of this town, you can't imagine."

She noted the emergency fund started for those people who had "fallen through the cracks" in receiving financial assistance — a \$25,000 check from Sonic Cable TV, another big check from the unions.

The late rock promoter Bill Graham came to town, coordinating a fund-raising concert at Watsonville High School, matching dollar-for-dollar the proceeds, then chipping in another \$100,000 from his own pocket to rebuild St. Patrick's.

Murphy said she doesn't really know why Graham took such an interest in Watsonville, but his efforts helped the city raise \$1 million.

She said one positive thing about the disaster was that amazingly, there was only death — a woman hit by bricks as she ran from a bakery. Murphy speculates that a big game at Candlestick Park in San Francisco that night may have drawn people who otherwise would have been heading home from work, out of town.

"It's almost miraculous to me that for the amount of buildings that came down, more people weren't hurt."

"I'll never forget it ... I don't think that anyone living in town will forget it," she said. "But we've done a good job building back. The city was very understanding with people."