

The Loma Prieta Earthquake and The Santa Cruz Public Libraries

By Library Staff

The magnitude 7.1 earthquake hit at 5:04 p.m. on October 17, 1989 and lasted 15 seconds. A 5.2 aftershock occurred 40 minutes later with 45 more serious aftershocks on through that terrible night.

The ten Branches of the Santa Cruz City County Library System did fairly well in the big shake. We had roof damage at our Aptos Branch, we lost most of the shelving on the second floor of the Downtown Branch, and we estimate that System-wide about three quarters of our collections ended up on the floor. But as everyone was quick to agree, we were alive and none of our patrons was injured.

The Library System served the community during the emergency as it always had. Staff answered phones, kept up to date on services and practical information, and performed tasks in other agencies. Still more staff were busy putting branches back together again. As a loved institution in the community, getting the libraries open and operational was a powerful symbol of life beginning to get back to normal.



Earthquake Damage at the Downtown Branch – Photo by Donna Swedberg

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Oh, No! : A Close Call at the Boulder Creek Library

by Fred Ulrich

I was sitting at my desk in the Boulder Creek Library talking on the phone with another member of the staff, Gary, who was the Central Library. It was a phone with an extra-long cord, so I stood up and paced away from the desk while still talking. I heard the rumble and soon found myself under the doorway leading to the circulation desk. I have no recollection of this, but Gary tells me that the last thing he heard before the phone line went dead is me saying "Oh no!"

In one of the first tremendous lurches and from my point of "safety" I saw an entire range (15 feet long and 8 feet high) of books and bound editions of *National Geographic* crash down on my desk--where I had been sitting a few seconds before. It didn't slump or slide or cascade or tumble. The entire range slammed down in one thunderous motion. I would not have fared well if I hadn't had that long phone cord. Yet, I distinctly remember observing the event in a calm and open manner, as if the forces were so immense my personal endangerment was somehow inconsequential.

I saw another staff member, Suzette, dive under a protective shelf, I looked through the dust at the groaning ceiling and just held on. After about 10 seconds I knew this was big and wondered if this was IT, the BIG ONE. I seemed likely that the roof would give way at any moment. I also thought that the redwoods on our deck could crash down on us. Still, I remember being more awestruck than fearful. The event was so dramatic that I saw it with fascination and an odd nuance of delight.

When the shaking subsided I called out to ask if anyone was hurt. There was no reply. I called "Suzette, are you there?" Suzette emerged from her sheltered ledge saying she was o.k. I started to walk into the stacks and a strong aftershock made the floor feel like a boat at sea. There were only 2 patrons in the library at the time, both unhurt and relatively unfazed!

We evacuated the building but then I remembered that my keys were on my desk under the formidable rubble of the collapsed shelving. I gingerly returned to the building and, laying on the exposed side of the shelf which was at a 45 degree angle and resting on my desk, I reached through the shelving and began clearing away the debris to get to my keys. Of course, along came another strong aftershock and this time I did feel fear. Scurrying to the protective doorway until the aftershock subsided, I returned to my digging and found my keys.

Before leaving I took a quick tour of the library to make sure no one else was there. There wasn't but I noticed something amazing. The goldfish bowl on top of the young people's desk was still sitting there with goldfish swimming merrily about!

After returning to our parking lot where Suzette sat cross-legged on the asphalt, I noticed the restaurant chimney across the way had collapsed on to a car breaking its windshield. Two teenage girls had been on their way to the library and joined us in the parking lot. We all sat in there with aftershocks coming every few minutes. It's a strange sensation when the wave travels right out of the ground and into one's body.

After delivering the young people to their home, I drove cautiously down Highway 9 which was strewn with boulders large and small. Coming into Santa Cruz, I saw the fire and dust from downtown but headed to my home which was partially off its foundation. My family slept that night and the next few in our VW camper.

The following day the maintenance man and I climbed atop the Boulder Creek Library's very pitched roof to reattach the woodstove chimney which had broken loose. As we crawled slowing along the topmost ridge we defused the tension with dark humor about our prospects up there. But all went well and we're both still here today.

One Story of Many: Giving Help Wherever It Was Needed

At 5:04 PM, on October 17th, our Outreach worker, Catherine Steele, and her assistant were about a hundred yards down the road from Murphy's Camp, a migrant farmworker housing facility. They drove into the camp and began translating into Spanish the English-language radio broadcasts which brought news from the outside world of what had happened and what was going to happen. They continued for two and half hours, stopping when Spanish language broadcasts began.

Catherine subsequently worked round the clock for the next two days, catching some sleep on a cot. She and other library staff answered the Community Information Service phones at the Civic Auditorium. Then until mid-December, she served as a translator for the Red Cross staff who helped to find permanent housing for hundreds of displaced people in and around Watsonville.

One Week Later, Story Hour as Usual:

Getting La Selva Beach Branch Open Again

by Dorothy Allen

The interesting thing to me was that only ONE wall of books, the north wall, came down. But that wall also included our Storage/Work Room, and it was a mess!

These notes are from my Monthly Report, October 1989.

October 18, I checked into the Branch about 7:00 am, noted the "mess", but also lack of real destruction, thank goodness--no windows broken, computers safe. There were tents on the lawn behind the Library; the only sign driving through La Selva Beach that the Quake had happened here, too! Later in the day, I went back to check inside (no power, no phone), and started to pick up.

Firemen came in to see what I was doing there and "ordered" me out--until the building was inspected. Their concern was the upper windows, and that we would have further shocks. They

used our wrench and turned off gas for the whole complex, although they saw no sign of problems.

Got a call at home, from Anne Turner, [Library Director] about 5:00pm, to start clean-up Thursday; an Aptos Branch staff member was to report to work at La Selva with me. We worked 5 hours Thursday, and got all the books reshelved. With power on, we appreciated phone and computer mail contact.

Received message to report to work on Friday, but the Firemen did not want us in there until officially inspected ...waited for the Inspector 4 hours Saturday, no show. Reported in at 8:30am Monday, read Mail communications, discharged returned books, cleaned house, did catch-up, waiting for the Inspector--no show. The Recreation District (owners of the building) inspected, but agreed we should not open to the public until the official inspection and Green Notice.

Finally cleared by the Inspector at 12:00 noon, Oct. 24. [Library Director Anne Turner shanghaied an inspector and drove him to La Selva Beach.] We opened to an eager public at 10:00 am Wednesday, Oct.25, with Story Hour. Our phone lines and power stayed on, computers up!

During the following days, I did a thorough housecleaning, and rearranging of shelves, storage, etc., and created a specific corner for the tool box, first aid kit, flashlight batteries, emergency lanterns, and wrench (for outside turn-offs).

Also created a ready reference section specifically for information on chimney inspections, repair and safety...the biggest damage in La Selva village was to chimneys, and a number had fallen during the Quake. Our patrons and neighbors felt that Library was a safe, familiar place to drop in for respite, to share stories with neighbors. Many volunteers assisted with the pick-up as soon as they were allowed in the building!

[Dorothy Allen was Branch Manager of the La Selva Beach Branch Library.]

There was No Place to Hide: A Staff Member's Experience

At the Downtown Branch

by Donna Swedberg

What I remember most about the earthquake is noise. Rumbling and roaring. When the earthquake began, I was walking down a hallway on the second floor of the Central (Downtown) Branch library. The hallway is outside the storage area where row after row of books and magazines were tumbling to the floor and bookshelves were tipping over like dominoes. [See photograph of the storage area, below.] I looked around for a place to take shelter but the hallway was bare and all of the doors were locked so I dropped to the floor and put my hands over my head. Fortunately, no ceiling tiles or light fixtures fell in the hall.

When the movement stopped, I continued down the hall to the Art and Music Department (now the Young People's Department) where there were books and broken light covers scattered over the floor. Clouds of dust were in the air and people were grabbing their stuff and running for the stairs. The staff person in that department was urging them to use the front stairs since it leads directly to the lobby and out the door.



Downtown Branch Storage Area – Photo by Donna Swedberg

Seeing that the situation was under control in Art and Music, I continued down the central staircase, stepping over ceiling tiles and broken light covers. Downstairs, staff was calmly helping patrons out of the building and making sure no one was hurt and that no one was stuck in the elevator.

I walked through the nonfiction section looking for people in need of help and saw books piled knee-high down each row. No bookcases had fallen over in the public areas but several were leaning toward one end, looking like a parallelogram rather than a rectangle. All of the public were out, in some cases abandoning their school books, backpacks, purses and all.

The day after the earthquake, many of the staff were back at the library-- putting books back on shelves.



Stacks in the Reference Area – Photo by Donna Swedberg

I Can't Reach My Aunt Mary. Can You Find Out If She's Ok? :

The Library's Community Information Service

by Anne Turner

Damage from the earthquake occurred throughout the County and, because of slides and other road damage, the County was geographically isolated from the rest of the state for at least 15 hours. Erratic telephone service was restored in many areas within 24 hours and electrical service after 48 hours.

At the request of the Santa Cruz Police Department, the Library System established and staffed a community information hotline on Day 1 of the disaster recovery, October 18th. It was staffed through the following week. Its purpose was to relieve the Police Department 911 number, the City Emergency Operations Center and other city phone numbers from answering citizen queries in two categories:

"Welfare Checks" (a term which had to be explained to the Police had two meanings) -- "I'm calling from Minnesota and I can't reach my Aunt who lives at.... Could you find out if she is okay and call me back?"

Emergency Related Information: who to call for a building inspection, where to volunteer, where to send money, where the shelters were, when water would be restored, was the water safe, where to get meals, were the banks open, could a building on the Mall be entered, was there really a tidal wave coming, which schools were open, etc.

During the first three days of the emergency, most of the calls were of the first type, which staff responded to by locating the person (sometimes using a reverse phone directory to check with neighbors), and calling the person or the neighbor to send a message. Staff estimates that it handled more than 200 calls of this sort, from all over the United States and from abroad.



Civic Auditorium, 1989

The Community Information Service was located in offices at the Civic Auditorium, which was the City's principle Shelter site for the first five days of the emergency. The Civic had generator power, water, and Red Cross-provided food, none of which amenities were available at the Central Library. We moved the Community Information Service to the Central Library when we restored service on October 23rd.

What a Mess! 295,000 Items on the Floor:

Cleaning up and Re-opening the Branch Libraries

by Anne Turner

On Day 1 (October 18) we began re-shelving books and clearing up the mess at nine of our ten Branches. I was not able to communicate with some of the Branch Managers for several days, but each of them took that approach independently.

We opened most of our Branches on the Monday following the quake, after a spectacular effort by staff and volunteers who came in off the streets to help. Volunteers included a group of University of California, Santa Cruz, students who walked down from campus to help.

In fact, we cleaned up and reopened so quickly that many people did not realize the library branches had had serious earthquake damage. It was truly galling for staff who had slogged through mountains of books on the floor, re-shelving by flashlight while the power was still off, to be told by patrons, "Gosh, the library sure did okay in the quake. At my house everything was on the floor."

The Santa Cruz Central (Downtown) Branch reopened for service on Monday, October 23rd. And very complacent I was, as I talked to Library Hotline on the phone, began returning worried phone calls from colleagues around the State, etc. At 4:30PM on Tuesday we had to evacuate the Central (Downtown) Branch because a lab report (ordered by a worried staff person) revealed that the asbestos level of dust on the second floor exceeded safe standards. Seven days later, after two rounds of testing, consultation by Cal OSHA, the purchase of something called a HEPA vacuum and wand kit (\$1,200), further cleaning, and infinite reassurance meetings with staff, we opened again.

The periodical mess is something that needs to be experienced to be appreciated. Thirty years of *Time*, *Newsweek*, *New Yorker*, etc., interfiled on the floor... and the recurring nightmare that an aftershock will knock down the entire storage collection of back periodicals AGAIN.



*Reshelving Magazines – Photo
by Donna Swedberg*

It is the library's intent to provide accurate information, however, it is not possible for the library to completely verify the accuracy of all information. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the library.