

## The Quake of '89

# Fascination draws gawkers to sites of quake's power

By Jack Fischer  
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A little more than three days ago, people ran in terror from the gaping fissures that yawned across the front yards of the houses along Summit Road in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

By Friday morning, some folks were clambering into them to pose for photographs.

Call it a sign of life returning to normal, or maybe a bit of nervous energy, but, as the Bay Area ended its worst week in a half-century, a lot of people seemed unable to resist that most basic of human urges: gawking.

Rubbernecks gaped at cracks in the mountains and ogled precariously cocked buildings from Watsonville to San Francisco. Some drove miles to photograph themselves in front of the devastation at the collapsed Nimitz Freeway in Oakland. Others walked to the scenes of carnage simply to mill and stare.

"It's a universal phenomenon," said Dr. Alan Brauer, director of the Brauer Medical Center in Palo Alto and clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Stanford. "I think it's related to the sense of 'I'm OK.'"

### Sense of well-being

"When one sees someone else who's not OK, there's a personal superiority and power, a sense of well-being, of strength," Brauer said. "I'm all right, but look at that poor person."

That certainly seemed true in Oakland, where a steady stream of onlookers seemed drawn to the horror of the collapsed section of the Nimitz Freeway, where the death toll is expected to be the greatest.

"Lots of people have been trying to get through our lines," Officer Jeff Ferguson of Oakland said. "They usually know they shouldn't be here, and when you catch them, they act like little kids with their hands caught in the cookie jar."

Several hundred people have been at police barricades around the Nimitz. Although the crowds had diminished by Friday, many people were still arriving for a personal view of the destruction.

"I guess I'm here because I thought we would see cars being pulled out of the bridge with bodies hanging out," Jimmy James, 18, of West Oakland said candidly.

A Union City couple, Paula and Bob Smith, drove over with their 2-year-old daughter, Jimina, to the collapsed freeway for a family photo.

"It's historic, and we wanted her to know later that she was here," Smith said.

At John and Freda Tranbarger's house, near the earthquake's epicenter at Loma Prieta in the Santa Cruz Mountains, a steady stream of onlookers gravitated Friday to what may be quickly becoming the most photographed hole in the ground in California.

### A learning opportunity

"You can live all your life being a geology student and not see anything like this," said James Bell, a Redwood Estates resident with a degree in geology. "This is a prime opportunity to see what I learned in school."

In Santa Cruz all day Wednesday and Thursday, the area around the Pacific Garden Mall, where the city saw its worst destruction, took on an almost festive atmosphere, with crowds of people on foot and bicycle. Others, perhaps granted an unexpected vacation from their jobs by the earthquake, surveyed the city from the levees of the San Lorenzo River downtown.

But if the urge to look seemed universal, that didn't mean everyone approved.

In Los Gatos, Tom Fortini, 41, who helped Shirley Henderson move merchandise out of her quake-rattled antique store, was angry that town officials decided to open downtown streets. Cars full of families parked along Main Street, their occupants emerging with cameras to stroll and shoot the rubble.

"Why the hell did they make a decision like that?" Fortini said. "We're struggling to get this stuff out, and now we've got cars zipping by our backs making things worse."

Councilman Bob Hamilton of Los Gatos agreed.

"I've tried to tell the chief to stop the public from getting in right now," Hamilton said. "It's just not a wise move. These people have business to do."

"But nobody will listen."

*Mercury News Staff Writers Fran Smith, Connie Skipitares, Lee Quarnstrom and Steve Wright contributed to this report.*