

LOMA PRIETA QUAKE
DETAILS FROM KIOSK

15
SECONDS

62
DEAD

3,757
INJURED

\$6 billion
COST OF DAMAGE

Learning at the epicenter



JUDITH CALSON — MERCURY NEWS

Historian Sandy Lydon sits on a log traversing a crevice created by the earthquake of 1989, centered near the site of the former town of Loma Prieta.

Earthquake - Ten years later

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MARKER FOR 1989 QUAKE SERVES AS REMINDER OF NATURE'S FURY

By David L. Beck
Mercury News

It happened here first.

Far beneath the Forest of Nisene Marks in the hills above Aptos, the two sides of the San Andreas Fault moved four feet up and four feet over on Oct. 17, 1989. The steel doors of Aptos-La Selva Fire Station No. 1 shook violently, downtown Santa Cruz began to collapse and, in an ever-widening circle, Victorian mansions in Los Gatos crumbled, the fill beneath San Francisco's Marina District liquefied, the Bay Bridge ruptured and a freeway in Oakland fell in on itself.

Today, you can sit on a state park bench at what folks have agreed to call the epicenter area and read the

numbers: 15 seconds, 62 dead, 3,757 injured, \$6 billion in damage. The numbers in a glass-fronted information kiosk turn terror into History, with a capital letter: "The Loma Prieta Earthquake Epicenter."

As you read, Aptos Creek murmurs and the wind rustles through the redwoods. Nature is tricky, said Santa Cruz historian Sandy Lydon, who lives nearby. "She just sort of lures us out, and then it's lesson time."

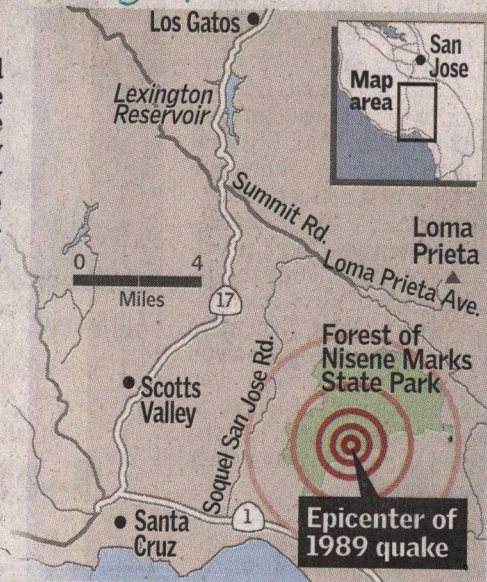
And what was the lesson of '89?

"Get ready! Be prepared! It's the old Boy Scout thing," said Lydon. "Every year I come up here to just kind of reconnect with it."

This year, Lydon is throwing a party. About 100 people, many of

them members of neighborhood Community Emergency Response Teams, will be driven up the fire road Sunday, along increasingly steep and twisting trails to a leafy clearing near White's Lagoon. There they will picnic and listen to geologists, historians and preparedness experts.

Some will follow Lydon as he goes loping up and down Big Slide Trail, pausing to see where the earth fell away in 1906, gazing at the fir trees that have warped crazily in their struggle to rise vertically from a quake-wracked, out-of-plumb base. They may poke a toe into the crevices — "the dotted line for the future,"



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Lydon calls them — that ripped open in 1989. And everyone will at some appropriate moment raise their plastic stemmed glasses in a sparkling apple juice toast to the land the San Andreas Fault created, “and vow to heed the lesson.”

Named for town

The 1989 earthquake is named for the town of Loma Prieta, which thrived while Southern Pacific Railroad owned the land and logged the redwoods — peak population about 350 circa 1900, according to Lydon — but has since vanished. The last buildings came down in the 1960s, when the second-growth forest donated by the Marks family became a state park.

And like the town of Loma Prieta, the earthquake's physical effects have faded. Crevices that were 12 to 15 feet deep are now nearly brimming with “duff,” 15 years' accumulation of leaves and sediment and forest detritus. In nature, scars fade.

“We're talking subtle stuff here,” said Lydon. “It's not like a crater on the moon.”

But unlike the concrete forest of downtown Santa Cruz, where two deep holes remain from the 1989 quake, in Nisene Marks the devastation was just part of a natural process. A quarter-century ago, Lydon recalls, White's Lagoon was green water; today it's an expanse of vegetation, with a muddy hog wallow for wild pigs along the shore.

“The ground heals,” said University of California geologist and oceanographer Gary Griggs, remembering how the Laurel Slide that closed Highway 17 “was a pile of rocks that almost buried people. The whole hillside shook down. But if you go by today,” said Griggs, “it's all clear, covered with all kinds of vegetation. And so you would have no idea. Most of the cracks in the Santa Cruz Mountains have healed up or been covered with grass.”

Not a good idea

Having no idea is not a good idea, Lydon and his friends stress. We have “short-term disaster memory.”

“Everything's been retrofitted — except us,” he said.

In Nisene Marks, you can hike or bike up to the epicenter marker on the road. Or you can hike up a lower, narrower trail to another epicenter marker, a mile or two away.

Neither is official. Neither is “correct.” The sign at the Porter picnic area that once read “Epicenter 1.5 miles” now reads “Epicenter Area.”

“I'm sure it shook like heck in Aptos,” said Griggs, “but the epicenter itself is a hypothetical construction ... It's not the core of a volcano, where there's a point you can look at.”

Right after the earthquake, said Lydon, a man from Rio del Mar (the coastal section of Aptos) hiked up “as best he could” through the closed park. “He went up Aptos Creek Trail to where it stopped,” and there he put up a cardboard sign.

“Epicenter,” it read.

The sign remained, and over the years it “metamorphosed into metal. It had a little state park logo on it.” The visitors tramped out a nice, solid, wide trail to it — so solid that the park's advisory committee joked about mov-

ing the sign up another mile or so, to keep the trail-making process going.

People came by the thousands. They came in penny loafers, even, Lydon swears, in high heels and cocktail dresses. “They wanted to see

the epicenter ... They expect a spot. Kind of like the Blarney Stone.”

Now they have two.

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JUDITH CALSON — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

A stand of redwoods and Douglas firs in the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park struggle to grow vertically on a slide created by the 1906 earthquake which affected the area.

“They wanted to see the epicenter ... They expect a spot. Kind of like the Blarney Stone.”

— SANDY LYDON, RIGHT

