

Despite losses, family is thankful

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel staff writer

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WATSONVILLE — Tom Rider is thankful he can enjoy Thanksgiving dinner today with his family. And, his father, Clint, is thankful to still have a son.

Tom, 41, was injured at the family's apple-processing plant — H.A. Rider and Sons — during the Oct. 17 earthquake. The family operation sustained heavy damage as thousands of pounds of apples came tumbling down along with already packed boxes full of bottled apple juice. While monetary damages have not been estimated, two weeks of apple processing were lost, Clint says.

"This is our life," says Tom's younger brother, George, 39. "We have an awful lot of roots right here."

More than 2,000 pounds of apples and two heavy, wooden bins fell on Tom, who was trapped in the middle of two rows of bins, each stacked 17 feet high.

Tom's right leg was crushed, his left elbow broken and 12 stitches were required close a wound on his forehead. "I think the doctor stopped counting broken bones at around 15," Tom says, managing a smile. "He described my leg as 'mush.'"

Tom recently returned from the hospital. He will recuperate at home for at least



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Clint Rider surveys storage shed mess.

Earthquake 1989 - Watsonville

another month. By January, he hopes to be able to throw away his crutches, replacing them with a cane.

Yet, through it all, everyone is just happy that Tom is around to celebrate Thanksgiving.

"I'm happy to be here, too," Tom says. "If the bins would have come down two feet higher (on his body), it would have been really serious."

As it is, Tom has nine screws and a steel plate in his leg, and another two screws in his elbow. Even the family dachshund, Shadow, can easily outdistance him now.

"I'm still not sure how we got him out," says Clint, recalling the scene of destruction. The ground was ankle-high in apples.

"Apples had buried him up to his waist and two bins, one still full of apples, were on top of his leg. We had enough people or enough adrenalin, one way or another, to raise the bins up far enough to get him out from under."

Tom says he tried to run into the open when the earthquake started, but was too far from safety. "I got maybe 25 or 30 feet when the quake knocked me down. I was already down when everything started coming down on me."

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According to Clint, the timing of the earthquake couldn't have been worse. With the apple harvest completed, there were 8,500 bins of apples stacked at the plant. Hundreds of other cases of apple juice, also were stacked, awaiting shipment. It was the worst disaster in the family's 41 years of apple processing.

What's making the situation even worse is the lack of help from the government. Like many agriculturalists, the Riders can't qualify for the narrow, farmers' assistance programs operated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"I've talked to FEMA over the phone, went down in person and went to a public meeting, but haven't found help yet," Clint says. "The only aid I know of to date is an extension of

time for filing federal taxes."

Despite millions of dollars pouring in for those left homeless because of the earthquake, there remains no money for farmers — many of whom have been hit with a double-whammy. Not only have their businesses been damaged, but their homes, as well.

"We would have been better off if our homes were destroyed," says George. "This business is just like our home."

The only offer from FEMA so far, Clint says, is a loan of up to \$500,000 at 4-percent interest for 30 years. However, if farmers have good credit and can get a loan on their own from a bank, the interest rate doubles to 8 percent and must be repaid within three years.

The Riders continue to hold hope for a bill authored by Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, which was passed by Congress Tuesday night

and sent to President Bush (See story, Page A4). The bill allows for payment up to a certain percentage of the market value of crop lost from the earthquake, and guarantees loans from banks, which should lower the interest rates.

Panetta is pleased at the quick action by Congress. "I hope the president will be just as prompt in signing it into law," he said. "These farms and businesses do not rely on special federal subsidies. When they become the victims of a natural disaster, however, they should have the same chance to rebuild that others would receive."

Meanwhile, all Clint can do is "keep my fingers crossed."

Says Tom's 7-year-old son, Stephen, "I'm just glad my family is OK and that my Dad is going to be all right."