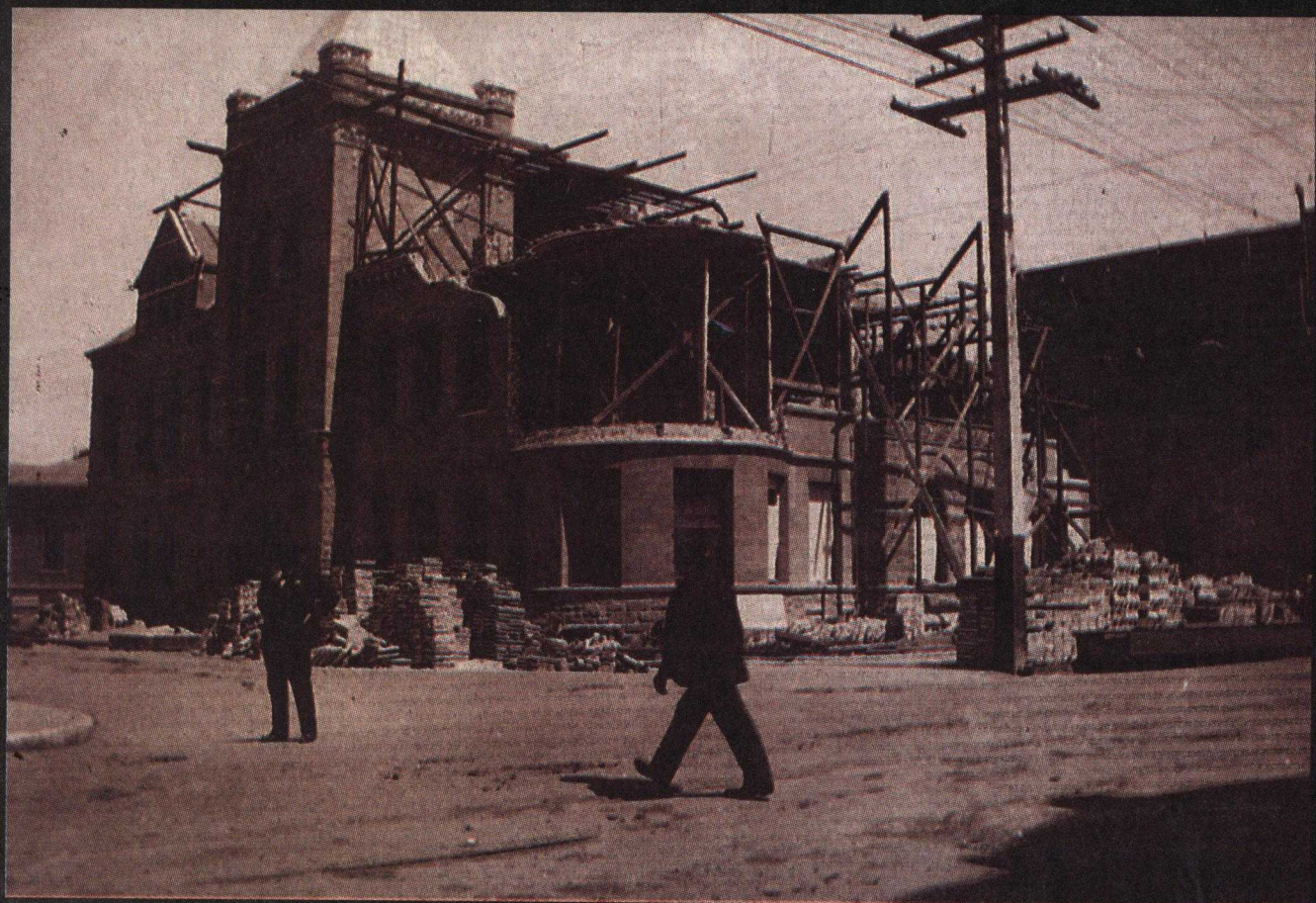


A DAY THAT SHIFTED SANTA CRUZ



The old Santa Cruz County building was one of the most badly damaged buildings in the 1906 earthquake. This undated photo shows reconstruction after the quake. Special Collections, UC Santa Cruz

1906 earthquake alters destinies of local families

Earthquakes

4-16-06

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first segment of a three-part series. | By **ROSY WEISER** *Sentinel correspondent*

It's been 100 years since California's coastal communities were violently shaken up, both physically and emotionally, by the enormous earthquake that struck on the morning of April 18, 1906.

Nearly a minute of intense ground-shaking knocked most buildings in the heart of San Francisco to the ground. Along with the ensuing fires, the catastrophe left thousands dead and almost a quarter-million people — more than half the city's population — homeless.

Damage in Santa Cruz, though, was minimal compared to the widespread destruction in San Francisco.

Countywide, there were about a dozen casualties in what was then a rural, relatively undeveloped outpost with only moderate tourist appeal.

Tunnels collapsed, bridges buckled and railroad tracks needed repairs. Trees and mud came down, as did a few brick buildings in downtown Santa Cruz. Most homes lost chimneys but were still habitable.

Finding personal stories in Santa Cruz to mark this terrible natural disaster isn't easy, as most of the people from that era are dead.

But shoot the breeze with the region's old-timers, descendants of Italian, Japanese, Chinese and other immigrant families, and you'll see that links to this historic day still remain.

Today

Santa Cruz families share how the 1906 earthquake shaped their lives.

Monday

A little cottage in Live Oak is an unlikely relic of San Francisco's massive recovery.

Tuesday

Rebuilding San Francisco ignited the economic engine of Santa Cruz County, where the cement and timber industries flourished.

More Inside

■ Officials say San Francisco is ready for the next big one, but not everyone is so sure.

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■ Visit the Sentinel's Web site for video coverage of the quake.
SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM



Photo courtesy of Gilda Stagnaro

An unusual honeymoon: The Stagnaros

At 82, Gilda Stagnaro, the second-oldest surviving member of Santa Cruz's Stagnaro family, still works 9-to-5 everyday at the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf restaurant that bears her name.

"I've got the Dolly Parton shift," she says chuckling, as she brightly escorts a steady flow of customers to their tables in a dining room that's been a popular establishment since opening day in 1973.

The earthquake anniversary marks a memorable time in her family history.

Three days before the 1906 quake, her mother and father,

Cottardo and Batistina Stagnaro relocated to Santa Cruz from San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. There are many descendants of the Stagnaros living in Santa Cruz County today.

See **QUAKE** on **PAGE A4**

REMEMBERING THE BIG ONE

A magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck the capital of the western United States, a shining city built on the promise of silver and gold with little thought to the destruction rock could also produce under enough pressure.

After April 18, 1906, neither San Francisco nor an America just learning about the natural and man-made hazards of urban life could ever again be so willfully innocent.

It was 5:12 a.m. and most San Franciscans were still in bed when the quake hit, first as a foreshock that sent people scrambling. The main temblor, its epicenter offshore from the city, arrived with such fury that it flattened crowded rooming houses, was felt as far away as Oregon and Nevada and in 28 seconds brought down City Hall, which took 27 years to build.

From cracked chimneys, broken gas lines and toppled chemical tanks, fires almost immediately broke out and swept across the city, burning for days. Ruptured water pipes left firefighters helpless, while families carrying what they could fled the advancing flames to parks that had become makeshift morgues.

Taking in the devastation afterward, Jack London wrote:

"An enumeration of the buildings destroyed would be a directory of San Francisco. An enumeration of the buildings undestroyed would be a line and several addresses. An enumeration of the deeds of heroism would stock a library ...
An enumeration of the dead will never be made."

Researchers are still trying to set a death toll for the disaster, which ranks as one of the costliest in U.S. history — a benchmark to which later calamities are compared. Reliable estimates put the loss above 3,000, and possibly as high as 6,000.

Meanwhile, other scientists and historians, facing better-than-even odds that another Big One will hit Northern California by 2032, work to separate facts from the folklore that envelops the 1906 quake.

Even before the earthquake, San Francisco had chosen the symbol of the phoenix for its municipal flag. And though downtown was destroyed and more than half of the 400,000 residents were homeless, the city labored to live up to that rising-from-ashes image by rebuilding as quickly as possible.

Quake

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Cottardo and Batistina Stagnaro, then residents of San Francisco, were married at Saint Peter and Paul's church in North Beach on Easter Sunday. They celebrated by going to hear Enrico Caruso, the great Italian opera singer, at a performance in the Mission District.

The next morning, their home was in ruins.

20 ethnic communities.

Gilda Stagnaro's grandfather, named Cottardo like her father, had been living in Santa Cruz since 1874. He'd come aboard a merchant vessel from his hometown of Genova in Italy to unload cargo, and had jumped ship.

But, it was the earthquake that really established the Genovese in Santa Cruz. The few dozen families already living in "La Barranca," the Italian section of town on Santa Cruz's Westside, were joined by dozens more fleeing San Francisco.

"People when they migrate rarely do it in a vacuum. There is some connective tissue here there were the



destruction," she said. "They had so much fear they didn't bother but to save their lives and abscond."

Stagnaro's grandfather, who already had an established fishing business that operated between Santa Cruz and San Francisco, picked the newlyweds up by boat and brought them down the coast, where they were to live, temporarily, in a barn.

Most of their belongings were lost except for a special plate made of empire china and embossed with gold, depicting pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. A wedding present to her mother from her employers, the plate has survived several subsequent quakes intact, including the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. It's now proudly displayed in Stagnaro's china cabinet in her home on Bay Street, the same property where she was born and her parents originally settled in the barn.

In those days, the county population numbered less than 25,000. The area was a definitive melting pot of more than

familial roots, plus the opportunity for fishing," said Geoffrey Dunn, a local historian and Gilda Stagnaro's nephew.

"It went from being a small group to a large one overnight," he said, estimating the numbers of Genovesian fishermen and their kin living in the area grew six-fold, to about 300, following the quake.

"There's probably 1,000 descendants of that fishing colony," he added, guessing that including his father's side of the family, another prominent Italian family with long established roots, his cousins number in the hundreds.

From those early days, the Stagnaro family went on to own numerous fish-related businesses, from restaurants to fish markets to rental boats and fishing fleets.

There's still a Stagnaro presence at the Santa Cruz wharf, but with the demise of the fishing industry and the death of the family's patriarchs, descendants have moved into other areas from landscaping to plumbing.

Fading Memories: Harold van Gorder

With his parents and old friends long dead, Harold van Gorder, 104, has only one fading memory to rely on when he thinks about the "ought-six" earthquake, as he calls it.

"All I remember about it is standing in the middle of Baldwin Street in my night clothes with my mother holding my hand," he said.

It's a powerful first memory, especially when you consider it has stuck for 100 years.

Van Gorder, an amazingly vibrant-looking fellow wearing jeans, a plaid dress shirt and a bolo, sits propped up in an armchair, his legs straight out in front of him. A baseball cap covers a shock of white hair and frames his bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows.

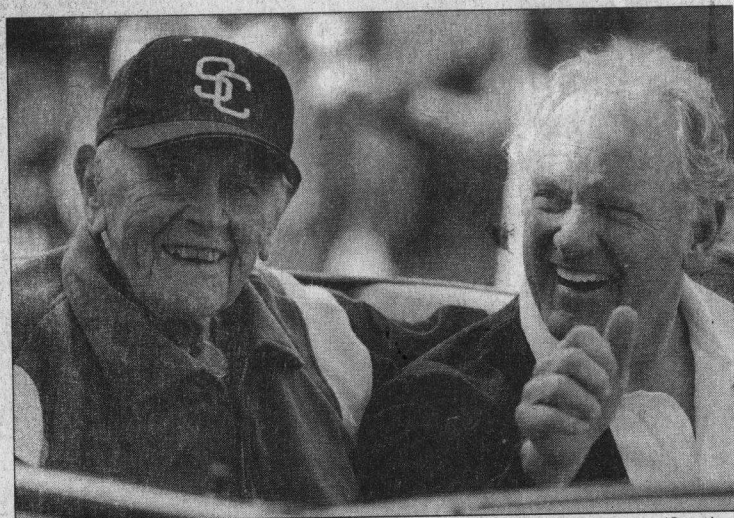
And while many of his sentences end in half-thoughts, his infectious smile is a glimpse of more youthful days.

Van Gorder is quite possibly the oldest survivor of the 1906 earthquake who has lived in the county continuously.

"I've lived so long and I try to reach back in the past and things get kind of confusing," he admits, eventually deferring a reporter's interview to his son, Jud van Gorder, 76.

The two men are the only van Gorders in Santa Cruz.

The family came to America from Holland in the 17th century and eventually found its way to Iowa.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Harold van Gorder, 104, who lived through the 1906 earthquake, rides with Secretary of State Bruce McPherson last April in a downtown parade celebrating Santa Cruz High's state basketball championship. Van Gorder is the oldest living Santa Cruz High grad.

Harold van Gorder's parents had only been in Santa Cruz for about six months when the earthquake struck their home on the Westside.

"He told me his mother said 'Let's go back to Iowa before we're all killed,'" Jud van Gorder said, adding the earthquake and his grandmother's uneasiness was cause, at least in part, for a family rift that ended in his grandparents' divorce.

In the years following the quake, Harold van Gorder often rode as far as San Francisco in a horse and buggy accompanying his father on piano-tuning excursions. Later, when he was about 10, he worked for a

neighbor who had a dairy, delivering milk on a bicycle.

In 1921, he graduated from Santa Cruz High School and worked at various jobs, including one at his father-in-law's dry cleaning business and at the Davenport cement plant.

He moved into his current home with his late wife shortly after high school.

Today, on his rare outings, he says he hardly recognizes the town he's known almost all his life.

"I see so many changes of neighborhoods and a lot of new construction," he said. "Many of the old, old homes have been painted and really gussied up."



George Ow Jr. spends a moment next to the San Lorenzo River in Santa Cruz, where his grandfather almost perished in the 1906 earthquake.

Shmuel Thaler/
Sentinel

Dodging Chimneys: The Ows

While earthquake destruction in Santa Cruz was limited, one falling chimney almost cut short a family legacy in the city's longstanding Chinese community.

It collapsed into the kitchen of the 30-acre Riverside Hotel, a lush resort near the San Lorenzo River, owned by the Barson family.

Lam Pon, a Chinese immigrant who worked as a cook, was sleeping on a cot in the cookhouse when the shaking began and he ran outside.

"He looked back at the building and the big chimney crumbled and fell and crushed the cot he had just been sleeping on," recounted his grandson, George Ow Jr., a prominent real estate developer and investor.

Pon left China at the turn of the century and stayed in Santa Cruz until 1930, when, after

becoming a successful businessman, he decided to go back to his homeland.

His adopted son, George Ow Sr., came back to set his roots down permanently in the region a few years later. From his small grocery store in Monterey to a host of larger propositions, Ow picked up where his father left off.

"I'll think of Lam Pon on the '06 quake anniversary," the junior Ow said. "If he would have been killed and didn't get out of that room, my father wouldn't have been adopted and I wouldn't be here fat and happy and comfortable."

"I probably wouldn't have existed," he said, adding the chimney story, originally told to him by his aunt, is "like a family legend," one he tells his kids and grandchildren.

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