



Mostly about People

By Wally Traling

You people are on a tefrestrial roller-coaster and probably don't even realize it.

Or—our terra firma is not as firma as you think.

Thomas Turcotte, assistant seismologist at the University of California seismograph station in Berkeley, spoke to me of things disquieting the other afternoon.

Speaking verticclay, he mentioned that when the ocean is at high tide, the earth under you rises a foot and a half toward the moon. Of course, the bulge is so general that the sensation of rising is lost.

Speaking horizontally, Turcotte came up with the jaw-dropper that Santa Cruz and surrounding areas are moving across country in a northwesterly direction, 10 feet every 30 years.

This means we should arrive in San Francisco—umm, let's see, 75 miles time 5280, divided by, ummmm—then multiplied by—ummm—well, 1,188,000 years from now, on August 23, about noon.

But don't clap your hands yet. The trip won't be all that easy. Something's got to give, as they say in the suspender factory testing-room.

So this brings us to the scary part.

A big earthquake is overdue along the coast.

"I don't want to be an alarmist," said Turcotte, alarmingly, "but the signs indicate this."

Major earthquakes in northern California have occurred in 1838, 1868 and 1906. A pattern has been established here, but the seismologist said it does not necessarily follow that future shocks should hold to the pattern. If this had been so then we should have had a major shock around 1940, he said.

But this steady horizontal movement of the earth near the San Andreas fault, which runs through the Santa Cruz mountains and rings part of the Pacific ocean, has furrowed the brows of some quake specialists.

Pressure is building all the time like a glass rod bending. "Something is holding the fault together, we don't know what," Turcotte said. "These small earthquakes which we feel from time to time are called local adjustments in the earth. But they do not relieve the main tension."

His next ominous words were: "The more time that passes from the last big one (1906) the closer it gets to the next one."

Up in DeLaveaga park there is a small telemeter station. It is one of eight in northern California which sends quake impulses directly to UC.

He said an earthquake is recorded about once a day in this area. The great majority of the tremors are too light to be felt by a person.

Seismologists still don't know exactly what causes an earthquake, but some day they hope to anticipate them. These small telemeter stations are part of this study.

"Right now, we can't do much about earthquakes, except to build our buildings to withstand their intensities," Turcotte observed.

Old San Andreas, which is at fault most of the time, is about 10 miles deep and about 270 miles in length. It cuts through San Francisco, misses Santa Cruz about 12 miles and cuts around close to Watsonville and cracks over to Hollister.

So strap the china closet to the wall, mother, and get seat belts for the divan.