

"Oh, No!"—A Close Call at the Boulder Creek Library

By Fred Ulrich

I was sitting at my desk in the Boulder Creek Library talking on the phone with another member of the staff, Gary, who was the Central Library. It was a phone with an extra-long cord, so I stood up and paced away from the desk while still talking. I heard the rumble and soon found myself under the doorway leading to the circulation desk. I have no recollection of this, but Gary tells me that the last thing he heard before the phone line went dead is me saying "Oh no!"

In one of the first tremendous lurches and from my point of "safety" I saw an entire range (15 feet long and 8 feet high) of books and bound National Geographics crash down on my desk--where I had been sitting a few seconds before. It didn't slump or slide or cascade or tumble. The entire range slammed down in one thunderous motion. I would not have fared well if I hadn't had that long phone cord. Yet, I distinctly remember observing the event in a calm and open manner, as if the forces were so immense my personal endangerment was somehow inconsequential.

I saw another staff member, Suzette, dive under a protective shelf, I looked through the dust at the groaning ceiling and just held on. After about 10 seconds I knew this was big and wondered if this was IT, the BIG ONE. I seemed likely that the roof would give way at any moment. I also thought that the redwoods on our deck could crash down on us. Still, I remember being more awestruck than fearful. The event was so dramatic that I saw it with fascination and an odd nuance of delight.

When the shaking subsided I called out to ask if anyone was hurt. There was no reply. I called "Suzette, are you there?" Suzette emerged from her sheltered ledge saying she was o.k. I started to walk into the stacks and a strong aftershock made the floor feel like a boat at sea. There were only 2 patrons in the library at the time, both unhurt and relatively unfazed!

We evacuated the building but then I remembered that my keys were on my desk under the formidable rubble of the collapsed shelving. I gingerly returned to the building and, laying on the exposed side of the shelf which was at a 45 degree angle and resting on my desk, I reached through the shelving and began clearing away the debris to get to my keys. Of course, along came another strong aftershock and this time I did feel fear. Scurrying to the protective doorway until the aftershock subsided, I returned to my digging and found my keys.

Before leaving I took a quick tour of the library to make sure no one else was there. There wasn't but I noticed something amazing. The goldfish bowl on top of the young people's desk was still sitting there with goldfish swimming merrily about!

After returning to our parking lot where Suzette sat cross-legged on the asphalt, I noticed the restaurant chimney across the way had collapsed on to a car breaking its windshield. Two teenage girls had been on their way to the library and joined us in the parking lot. We all sat in there with aftershocks coming every few minutes. It's a strange sensation when the wave travels right out of the ground and into one's body.

After delivering the young people to their home, I drove cautiously down Highway 9 which was strewn with boulders large and small. Coming into Santa Cruz, I saw the fire and dust from downtown but headed to my home which was partially off its foundation. My family slept that night and the next few in our VW camper.

The following day the maintenance man and I climbed atop the Boulder Creek Library's very pitched roof to reattach the woodstove chimney which had broken loose. As we crawled slowing along the topmost ridge we defused the tension with dark humor about our prospects up there. But all went well and we're both still here today.

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