



In the wake of destruction, people lined up for hours Wednesday in Santa Cruz to shop for food at Zanottos Market, in photograph taken from helicopter

Judy Griesedieck — Mercury News

Finding a pattern

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in tremor's ruin

Aerial view shows damage wasn't random

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At ground level during Tuesday's endless half-minute, the earthquake seemed an indiscriminate monster, holding 5 million people and all they owned in its malevolent grip.

But from the air a half-day later, high enough in a helicopter to sense the vastness of the region, the earthquake seemed a precise and willful thing, selectively testing the places where people had pushed the limits the most: a double-decked freeway, aging buildings founded on land-fill, foothill towns and mountain houses challenging the San Andreas Fault.

In the bright, oblivious sun of Wednesday morning, thousands of other buildings around the Bay Area and millions of shaken people still stood, shaken but not broken. Traffic moved, though sparsely. People jogged past wreckage. Even with significant numbers of lives lost, this was no Armenia, no Mexico City, no Anchorage. This was not The Big One of our worst imaginings.

A larger force

But in an eerie, purposeful way, the earthquake showed how large were the possibilities, now and evermore: a ruined storefront here, a cleaved highway there, a broken water main, a shattered house. It reminded us who runs this place.

In downtown Santa Cruz, old buildings condemned one another

The earthquake showed how large were the possibilities, now and evermore.

as they fell, pulling down shared walls, shattering adjacent roofs, turning history to plaster dust. In San Francisco's land-filled Marina District, an antique apartment house teetered and then stopped, leaning impossibly over the street like a snapshot of a falling building. In Los Gatos, a clot of people stood on the sidewalk, considering the vulnerability of a once-solid brick wall that had turned to rubble at their feet.

From the air, if those buildings seemed liked battered toys, it was because they had been toyed with, flicked by a monstrous finger, the same finger that punched out a single span of the Bay Bridge and tore a wide, deep scar into Highway 17, slashing through the four-foot concrete median barrier as it went.

Nimitz in ruins

But what happened to Interstate 880 in Oakland was more than toying, more than some cosmic amusement. What happened to I-880 was unbelievable.

The double-deck stretch of I-880 that approaches the Bay

Bridge from Oakland has taken on the look of a fever chart, its top deck rising here, dipping there, plunging steeply, easing gradually up again. Almost every place where the plane of the deck heaved up or down in those seconds of cataclysm, a car or two or three rammed the broken concrete. Those cars and a few big trucks sat there Wednesday where they had crashed, as did other vehicles tossed to the street below.

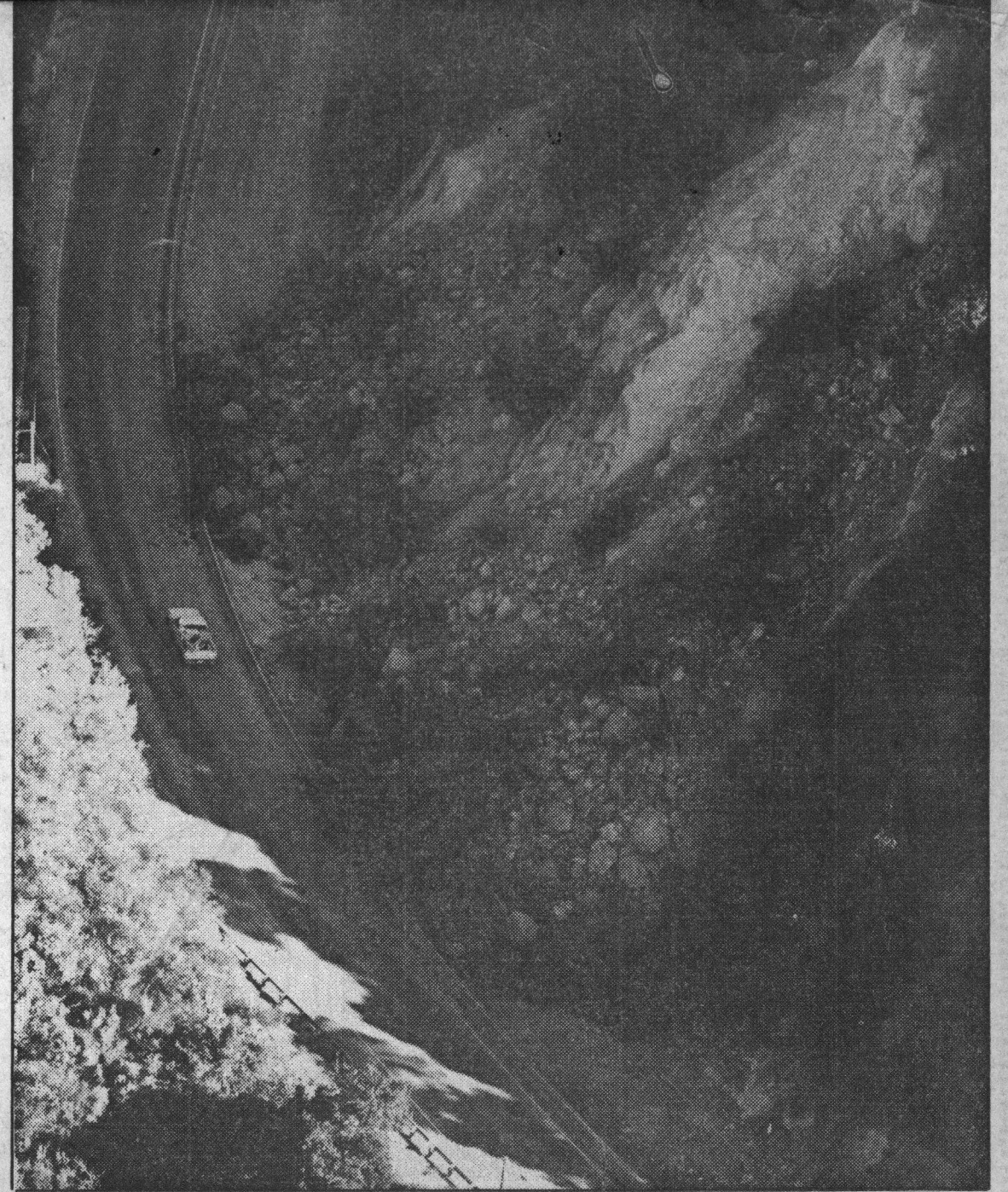
Dwarfed by wreckage

Beneath each fallen slab of the upper deck, unseen, were more vehicles, how many no one could know for days and perhaps weeks. Around the edges of the fallen highway, a puny brigade of emergency vehicles worked, pecking futilely at a mile of devastation, where dozens of people may have died.

Mexico City? Armenia? Along this stretch of highway, all things seemed possible. If this vast construction could fall, how could anything be standing? But most everything *was* standing.

From the air, the evidence said we had survived a 7.0 magnitude earthquake, not succumbed to it. Building codes and technology had made a difference in the 83 years since San Francisco fell before. Roaring flames filled television screens the first night, but by Wednesday, fire hoses played on just one cindered quarter-block of San Francisco, and the only signifi-

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Tuesday's earthquake set off rock slide at the summit of Highway 17

View from air shows pattern to quake's ruin

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cant flames anywhere else came from a forest fire whose smoke drifted over Highway 17 north of Santa Cruz from far to the south-east.

There were still neighborhoods without power, but in the early morning, the Oakland Coliseum's floodlights blazed over the empty stadium in a pugnacious declaration of normalcy.

Of course, from the air, much of the real damage wasn't visible — the precious things in pieces on the floor, the terrified children, the missing cat.

For all the loss of life, at home was where the earthquake did its sternest work, finding the soft spots in our personal sanctums, rattling our courage along with our china and leaving us a little bruised with the thought that this business of earthquakes is real stuff, not just history and science.