

Remembering the quake



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Marvin Byers, a volunteer at the Pajaro Valley Historical Association, uses a crane to hoist a large 1893 bell that once hung in a tower above the Odd Fellows building on West Beach Street before the Loma Prieta Earthquake destroyed the building. The bell will be rung at 5:04 p.m. Saturday at PVHA to mark the 20th anniversary of the earthquake.

PVHA to mark Loma Prieta's 20th anniversary with special program

By JON CHOWN

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Watsonville Deputy Police Chief Manny Solano says he'll always remember the site of Watsonville on Oct. 17, 1989. Coming back from San Jose, Solano, then a young police officer who had just joined the Watsonville Police Department a year earlier, was driving on Highway 17 when the Loma Prieta Earthquake struck at 5:04 p.m.

Maneuvering around rockslides, Solano said he wasn't aware that an earthquake had struck.

"There were major rockslides and I called into dispatch to report it," Solano said. "Then they told me about the earthquake."

As Solano weaved through traffic and broken road, he first saw Santa Cruz.

"It looked like Armageddon as I was dropping into the valley from the top of the pass," he said. "I had to dodge traffic, but I came into Watsonville within a matter of minutes. There were fires, smoke and traffic everywhere. I checked on my family, got my motorcycle, because you could hardly drive a car anywhere, and reported for duty."

For the next 24 hours, Solano stayed busy responding to emergency after emergency. Downtown lay open to theft, the emergency dispatch system was down, looters were found in Ford's Department Store, and there were more



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian file

The 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake destroyed the 1893 Odd Fellows building in downtown Watsonville.

looters at E.A. Hall Middle School. Getting around town was next to impossible, but the community pulled together.

"We were just swamped with calls," Solano said.

Solano will be one of half a dozen people to speak Saturday when the Pajaro Valley Historical Association presents "20 Years After the Loma Prieta Earthquake."

The program will be held from 3 to 6 p.m., starting at the Mello Center and finishing at the Pajaro Valley Historical Association. KSBW-TV sports director Dennis Lehen will serve as master of ceremonies. Gary Smith, Watsonville's fire chief at the time; Dennis Osmer, a

See QUAKE, page A3

QUAKE

From page A1

City Council member; Patsy Hernandez, emergency services director for the Red Cross; and Hal Hyde, former senior vice president of Ford's Department Store; are also slated to speak. Video, photos and other exhibits of interest will be on display as well. The PVHA has recovered the bell that was once on top of the 1893 Odd Fellows' Building on West Beach Street that was destroyed in the quake. The bell will be rung at 5:04 p.m.

Solano was at the home of Ron Haedicke on Friday going over videotape that will be edited. Haedicke, now known for

his video production work, was the fair manager at the time of the quake.

"It rolled us all over the place," Haedicke said of the quake. "After it stopped, standing at the fairgrounds, you could see plumes of smoke all over Watsonville, so we all tried to make our way home."

Smith, as Watsonville's fire chief, was in charge of the city's emergency response effort. With the city's emergency dispatch system crippled, he had his hands full.

"Our only dispatch was a dispatcher in the parking lot with a portable radio in one hand for the police and a portable radio in the other for the fire department," he said.

Twenty years later, both Sol-

ano and Smith said today's response effort would be much better because of what was learned. Smith said he will focus his message on "If the same thing were to happen right now, what would it mean to Watsonville?"

"It changed the town," Smith said. "You still see evidence of the damage — blank spots on Main Street."

Geri Simmons of the PVHA said the program was not intended to celebrate the quake's anniversary, but the date is important because it's history we can learn from.

"This isn't a celebration, but it is our history and it's important," she said. "And who better to tell this story than the historical association?"