

A 1950s relic is destroyed

By Tom Schmitz
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WATSONVILLE

For hundreds of merchants in this devastated town, the future can be read in three colors: red, yellow and green.

A red tag means their building is severely damaged, most likely condemned to the wrecking ball. A yellow tag indicates a structure has passed an eyeball inspection — merchants may enter at their own risk but only to clean up or remove inventory. Green signifies safety — and hope.

Along Main Street, Watsonville's historic central business district, there are a lot of red tags.

On Friday, Ernestine Rodriguez learned that she was one of the unlucky ones. The building she occupied will be demolished along with her Ernie's Ladyfair fashion boutique. "I'm ruined," she said.

In the aftermath of Tuesday's earthquake, Watsonville residents are learning that the face of their city has changed forever. Officials estimate that 25 percent of the Main Street district — where some buildings date to the 19th century — will have to be torn down.

By the end of the week, the damage estimate had reached \$150 million, making Watsonville one of the hardest-hit places in Santa

Cruz County. City officials say it could take as long as two years for their \$600 million economy to recover.

"When something like this happens, you never really get back to where you were," said city Finance Director Terry J. Stigall. "It's obvious a lot of businesses are totally lost."

The mourning is particularly deep for the Main Street district, the wellspring of the city's physical charm and its \$250 million in annual retail sales.

"We had a 1950s downtown, an American Graffiti downtown," Stigall said. *See WATSONVILLE, Page 7C*

The Quake of '89

Watsonville mourns loss of Main St.

WATSONVILLE, from Page 1C
gall said. "That's gone. Or it will be."

Less affected is the agricultural industry, the core of the area's economy. Fruits and vegetables are big business in Watsonville: Its food-processing plants handle more produce than any other town in the United States, according to the local chamber of commerce. The raising, packing and marketing of farm products from the Pajaro Valley amount to \$350 million a year.

Most growers and packers were affected by the quake, and many suffered substantial losses. Twenty-foot stacks of apples came crashing down in cold storage rooms, splintering the crates that held them. Trays of strawberries spoiled as power failures shut down refrigeration units. At the American Foods plant, huge wooden vats of apple cider vinegar split at the seams, sending rivers of vinegar down the city's streets.

At week's end, most agricultural businesses were still trying to calculate the damage. But as the cleanup progressed, they reported more disruption than disaster.

"They're well on their way to recovery," said Rick Bergman, deputy agriculture commissioner for Santa Cruz County. "Things are getting back to normal."

Many expressed relief that the quake had come at the end of the growing season, when picking was light, and many of the area's migrant workers had already gone home.

At New West Foods Corp, the state's third-largest shipper of strawberries, President Red Bryan said his volume was down to 8,000 crates a day when the quake hit, compared with 90,000 in July and August.

"We're fortunate it wasn't the peak of the season," Bryan said. "That would have been really devastating."

For the area's apple growers, the crates of crushed fruit were an unhappy addition to a miserable year. This summer's scare over Alar — a chemical used to delay ripening and enhance color — had

knocked the bottom out of the apple market. Several growers said the quake spilled more red ink on their books.

"Business was already down 80 percent," said grower Ray Travers, who owns a large fruit packing and shipping company in Watsonville. "We'll be lucky to break even, and we'll probably take a loss."

Damage was more severe at the Green Giant frozen-foods plant on the west side of town. Its 100,000 square feet of refrigerated storage was crammed with produce when the quake knocked out power and spilled ammonia from the plant's cooling system.

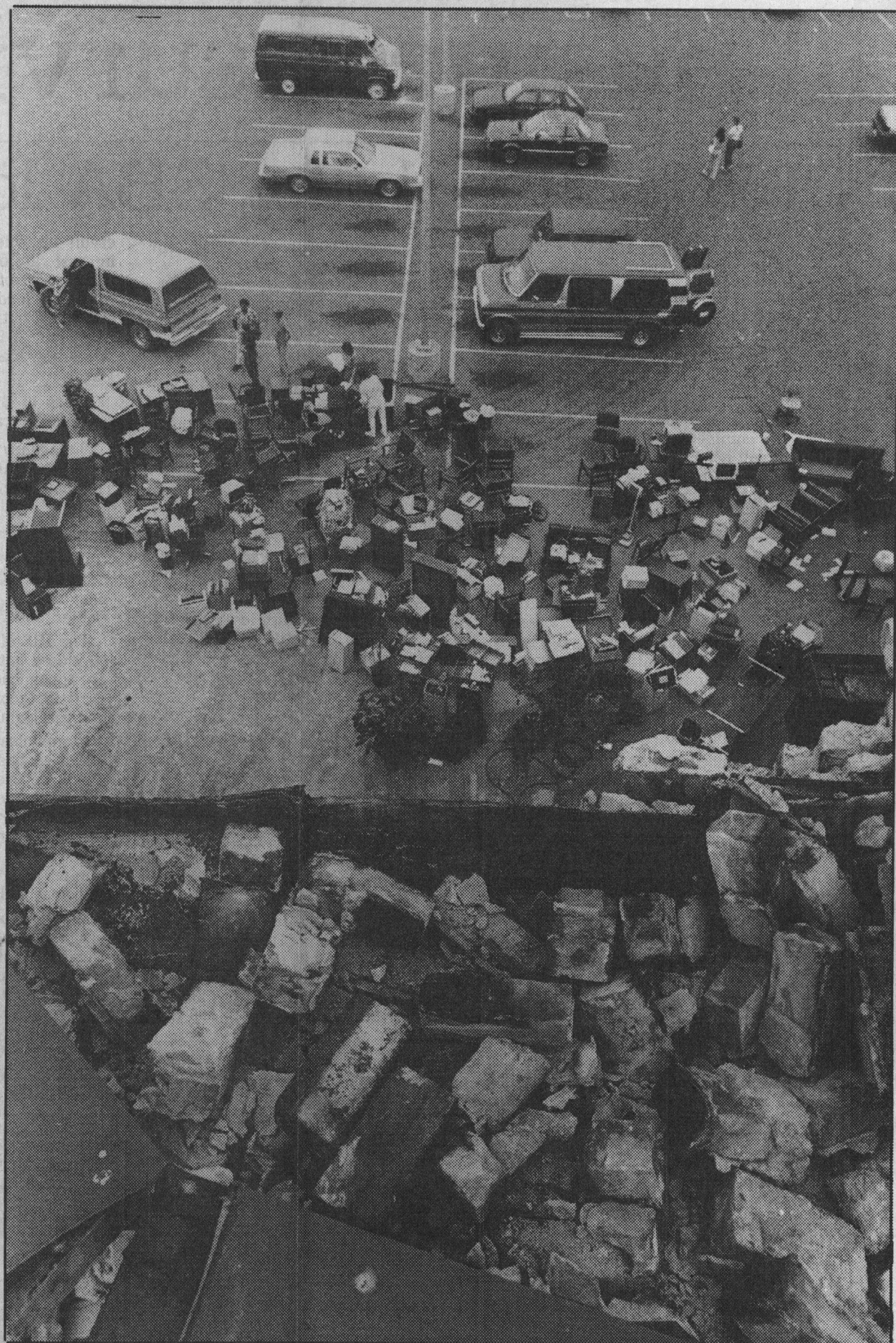
Dave Woolley, manufacturing manager with Pillsbury Co., Green Giant's parent company, said all of the vegetables being processed when the quake occurred were lost. He said the plant would be closed for at least a week more while technicians check the production equipment and repair the huge refrigerators.

Things were also grim at the nearby NorCal Frozen Foods warehouse, which had been operating at top capacity to freeze broccoli, cauliflower and brussels sprouts — all of which are at the peak of their season.

NorCal also lost its day's production, and only one processing line was back in operation Friday. Ray Wallace, vice president, said the company hoped to be back in full production by the end of this week.

But he said he was concerned that much of his 1,000-person labor force would be unable to come to work because of the number of homes damaged or destroyed by the quake. The company is setting up an emergency fund for its employees and has asked its customers and suppliers to contribute.

Indeed, as the lights, power and gas come back on in Watsonville, money is becoming the primary topic of conversation. Only a tiny minority of the city's businesses carry earthquake insurance, and most people had been too busy even to contact their agents. And the city is emptying its coffers at a dizzying rate for emergency personnel and services.



Michael Rondou — Mercury News

OFFICE WITHOUT WALLS — Workers moved furniture, files, computer equipment and even potted plants to the parking lot of Watsonville's historic Odd Fellows building, which was damaged in the earthquake. This photo was taken from its roof.

"We're spending money like it's a bottomless pit," City Manager John Radin told a hastily called merchants' meeting Friday. "I don't know where it's coming from."

The city government and its displaced businesses are counting on help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Santa Cruz, told the merchants Friday they could

apply for loans up to \$500,000 to cover any uninsured losses.

"We're going to rebuild this town," Farr said. But he warned merchants to get their applications in quickly, before the twin spot-