

Thankful just to be alive

EARTHQUAKE '89 -
Watsonville

Not a happy holiday in Watsonville

11-24-89

From staff and wire reports

WATSONVILLE — Many people here on Thanksgiving Day were grateful just to be alive. The Oct. 17 earthquake killed only one person in Watsonville.

In some ways, though, the holiday seemed to be another slap in the face to a community that was knocked down hard by the disaster.

With almost 10 percent of the housing left uninhabitable, many families ate turkey in shelters and tents.

And Friday, the traditional start of the Christmas season, shoppers are finding downtown stores they have patronized for generations reduced to rubble.

The downtown demolition toll hit 17 as a wrecking ball began ripping out the heart of the shopping district on Main Street, Ford's department store.

"I feel like crying," one woman said sadly.

Almost the entire 300 block of Main Street was eliminated.

By the day's end Wednesday, Ford's Department Store was half-down. The Masonic Temple was gone, and the Odd Fellow's building was on its way down.

City Manager John Radin said the work would resume after the Thanksgiving holiday, and most of the demolitions would be complete by the middle of next week.

Unlike the scene in Santa Cruz over the past several weeks, few people watched the destruction Wednesday. As Santa Cruz' Pacific Garden Mall was razed,



The wrecking ball ripped into Ford's department store this week in the heart of downtown Watsonville.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

crowds would routinely gather.

Several major buildings are still under evaluation and may have to join the demolition list, however.

The fate of other buildings downtown have yet to be decided. Several of them suffered major

damage, and the building owners are still mulling whether to demolish them.

The Fox Theater remains red-tagged and closed, but it has not been approved for demolition. Damage is estimated at \$1.2

million.

The old theater building looked abject and fragile Wednesday with a gaping hole next door, where the buildings that once housed El Morelia Restaurant and Gonzales Jewelers had been re-

moved.

But even as the heart of downtown Watsonville is being demolished, many in town are grateful just for the kindness of its

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people.

"So many people are giving — including people who have so little for themselves," the Rev. Mike Martin said. "I think people are focusing this year on the true meaning of the holidays."

Even some of the more traditional — and commercial — aspects of the holidays remind consumers that not everyone is celebrating as usual this year. Grocery ads for low-priced turkeys tell readers that stores also are donating food and money to quake victims.

"Everybody is so quiet this year," said Tonia Stepik, who, with her husband, owns a camera store on Main Street. "People will celebrate the holidays, but maybe they'll keep more to themselves."

Meanwhile, another kind of holiday spirit is evident daily at two

city in Callaghan Park. Residents and volunteers lend a hand whenever they can: a bottle of cough medicine for children, a sack of groceries for a family, or a ride into town to look for housing.

"Everybody has been good to us," said Gabino Peres, 25.

The migrant worker, his wife and two small children live in a tent with three other families at a Red Cross shelter. The earthquake forced the Pereses and another family out of the two-room garage apartment they shared for \$800 a month.

"We don't know what the future will bring, but ... people have been good to us," Peres said. "So we have hope."

The Red Cross served turkey dinner Thursday to as many as 1,000 people at the fairgrounds, spokeswoman Donna Korn said.

Meanwhile, Leticia Camposano remains optimistic. She stays busy

dren in her tent, including her daughters, Lucy, 4, and Yesenia, 2.

"We are alive and we have our dignity and hope," she said. "That is the most important thing."

A better life had already come by Thanksgiving for some earthquake victims, including Alma Davis and her husband, Lloyd Tomacder. They spent the day with about a dozen relatives in the couple's new home in Salinas after living more than a month in the tent city at Callaghan Park.

Davis and Tomacder were the first of more than 150 people who moved into the park immediately after the earthquake. Last week, she and Tomacder, 47, happily pulled up their stakes and loaded their few belongings into a Chevy pickup.

Although she spent all her 46 years in Watsonville, Davis said, she had "no regrets at all" about