

# Eye-Witnesses Tell Story of S. F. Fire 50 Years Ago

## One Still a Fireman

San Franciscans who witnessed the Fire and Earthquake of 1906 were recalling to friends yesterday:

"I was there . . ."

One of them was Rudolph Schubert, only surviving fireman still on active duty. To Schubert, now a healthy 79 year old and serving as secretary to Fire Chief Frank P. Kelly, one of the strangest and most ironic things about the fire was the fact that not a single fire alarm was sounded.

"At that time," Schubert explained yesterday, "the fire alarm system was operated with glass batteries which were kept on shelves in a small fire-alarm house. The first shock of the quake tumbled them to the floor and they smashed to bits.

### CHIEF KILLED.

"But we firemen were in for a terrible shock. One of the first casualties was Fire Chief Dennis Sullivan. The cupola on an adjoining building crashed through the fire house in which he made his headquarters and smashed into the basement where we found him mortally injured. He died.

"So you might say we firemen were crippled at the outset—no fire alarm system and our chief dying.

"But at first we were not too worried. We could see a column of smoke here and there, maybe a half dozen. We thought, well, it's bad, but we can handle it in a couple of hours.

"Our company dashed to Market and Stuart Streets, coupled our hoses and started to fight a fire there. There was a squirt of water, then a trickle, then a little mud oozed out."

It was only a matter of minutes until Schubert—and the city's other firemen—got the terrible news.

"Not only had the quake broken the main water (See "I WAS THERE,"

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**TELLS OF HORROR** — B. W. Booker, shown as a student in 1906, recalls the treacherous winds that whipped the flames across the tortured city. "I thought the world was ending," he says.



**FOUGHT FIRE**—Rudolph Schubert, a fireman in '06, recalls: "We firemen were crippled at the outset."



**RECALLS FURY** —Thomas A. Brooks, as he appeared in 1906, says: "Flames spread like an inferno."



**REBIRTH** — B. W. Booker, now assistant State engineer, saw the city emerge, even greater, from the ruin of ashes and debris.



**KEPT VOW** — But Brooks, now city chief administrative officer, recalls how even amid flames, citizens vowed to build a better city. "They did, too."

## 'Quake Bride Recalls Honeymoon in Ruins

"We spent our time wandering, getting covered with soot and smoke," San Francisco's first bride during the 1906 fire recalled fifty years later.

"That was our honeymoon, instead of going to Lake Louise and Banff."

That's how Mrs. Helen D. Nichols remembers her marriage on April 19, 1906—while after-shocks from the great earthquake still rocked the city and the inferno downtown was creeping out toward Van Ness Avenue.

"We were frightened into getting married," Mrs. Nichols quoted her late husband, Charles, as saying. "We did it because we thought we might have to leave town."

### FORMS BURNED.

In the old files of the city clerk's office, there's an unofficial-appearing foolscap page recording the Nichols' handwritten affidavit applying for a marriage license. It was used because all official forms were burned.

They got their license from Deputy County Clerk G. L. Munson, who had set up an emergency office in his home at 404 Haight Street. Incidentally, a relative, Robert Munson, now is chief deputy county clerk.

Mrs. Nichols, interviewed the other day at her 2 Mesa Avenue home, recalled that her plans for a formal wedding with all the frills, which had been set for four days after that fateful April 18, were quickly forgotten when her family home was wrecked by the quake.

"Oh, my Lord, no," she said, "we couldn't even get into the house to get the gown. I wore the same dress

I had had on for two or three days."

The Nichols were married in his flat at 563 Baker Street near Fulton, overlooking an entrance to Golden Gate Park through which thousands of refugees were crowding. Her memories of the fire and earthquake include these:

The saddening parade of refugees, "some of them carrying nothing but a bird-cage."

The aimless crowds on the streets: "We wandered as

everybody else did. You couldn't get over one before another came."

"A wedding breakfast of a bottle of beer and a box of crackers, brought by two bachelors from downtown."

The no-lamps or fire order and the stern knock of soldiers at any door where lights shown.

And the thirty refugees who crowded into a stable behind her mother's wrecked home at Golden Gate Avenue and Masonic Streets.

### INSURANCE MAN.

Nichols, she recalled, then was San Francisco manager of the Fireman's Fund Insurance Company. All of its key records were turned to black ashes inside its safe, she said, "but he had a remarkable memory for details of policies when it came to untangling claims." Nichols, who died last year, formed an insurance partnership after the fire with the late Philip Fay.

Mrs. Nichols, who was married at 22, now is a distinguished appearing gray haired woman. As she recalled her wedding day and "the nasty black sooty ash," she said "it just doesn't seem possible that fifty years have passed."



**MEMENTO**—Mrs. Helen Nichols displays her handwritten marriage certificate, the first issued by the city after the 1906 disaster.

## Flames Raged Around P. O., But Mail Went Through

"The mail must go through . . ."

Fifty years ago this week, when disaster struck San Francisco, the mail did go through.

When the flames were under control, the San Francisco Post Office still stood in the midst of a ruined waste, scarred and shattered, but at work. All around, buildings had been razed by fire or stood in blackened ruins, leaving the

big, granite structure like a rock in the sea, and the United States Mint its only companion.

Steam poured from its roof pipes. Crowds gathered about its doors. Clerks and carriers, and mails came and went. Its flag fluttered in the clouds of dust that swept it and at night, lights gleamed from its windows and its lamps on sidewalk and doorway.

It was the only sign of life in a field of darkness.



## 'I Was There'

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mains," he recalled, "but the water connections had been ripped from almost every house in town. It was no time at all until the pipes were drained.

"Then we knew we were in for bad trouble. But we fought on through the day and finally we started getting water from a large cistern on Nob Hill.

"By that time it was night and I was with my company in Chinatown.

"We made good headway against a big fire there — then the cistern went dry. Within a half hour the fire had driven us back to where we had started.

"The next day, we tried everything. We tried getting water from San Francisco Bay, but we couldn't get enough. And anyway, the pumps wouldn't work with salt water—it corroded them.

"So we started backfiring on the third day. We made our stand on Van Ness Avenue—the widest street in town—and touched off the backfires. For six or eight hours, we kept at it, even putting out embers with our hands to keep the fire from jumping the street."

### PHOTOGRAPHER REMEMBERS.

Harry J. Coleman, retired manager of the San Francisco Bureau of International News Photos, then an Examiner cameraman, recalled:

"On the top floor in my Pine Street house, where I was awakened by the swaying of my bed, the noise from outside was deafening. Chimneys were wrenched apart. Bricks bounced over sloping roofs into the street. Long rows of houses twisted and swayed. There was the shattering noise of thousands of windows breaking. Yet I heard few human cries in all the din.

Outside, streets were clogged in the middle with stupefied people massed in terror.

"To make my first picture, I climbed to the roof of the Hearst Building and counted sixteen ribbons of smoke stretching skyward. Each marked a separate fire. Later, I saw miles of

flames racing. Smoke blackened firemen stood helplessly by dry hydrants, watching their hoses curl up in the fire."

### BROOKS BUSY.

Chief City Administrative Officer Thomas A. Brooks recalled:

"The first I knew, my bed was rolling from the west side of the room to the east side and back to the west side again, like it was on wheels.

"Yet a milkman was delivering milk, as though nothing had happened."

He dressed, reported for work at the offices of the Pacific States Telephone and Telegraph Company at 140 New Montgomery Street. A watchman warned Brooks not to enter the building. But he did, and helped remove records to horse-drawn drays dispatched to the building.

"I was among those who worked all day among the rapidly spreading flames," Brooks recollected, "removing the vital communication records to a new telephone company building at 455 Bush Street.

"But the building burned before night," he added. "All we had to show for our work was exercise."

At that point, Brooks returned to his family home.

"We saved a bicycle and two gold framed pictures of our father and mother," he said. "I found a wheel barrow to haul the pictures, and my brother pushed the bicycle. We camped at a school yard at Bush and Taylor Streets that night.

**RETREAT TO PARK.**  
"Our salvage efforts were foolish, of course. Our parents were alive and we didn't need their pictures. Yet we forgot to take our clothes and other necessities.

"Flames forced us from the school yard. We retreated to a park on Clay Street, west of Van Ness Avenue.

"I remained there, like so many others—thousands—camping in the open and eating in bread and soup lines while directing the work of the telephone company messengers trying to

deliver inquiries from a temporary headquarters at Pine and Steiner Streets.

"Finally—the flames continued to spread like infernos—I found a home with a friend on Webster Street."

Among his other duties, Brooks escorted feminine telephone company employees to street cars at night. He also survived a robbery attempt near the Fairmont Hotel.

### TALK OF FUTURE.

"Even then, as the fires continued to rage," Brooks recalled, "people said 'We'll rebuild—a greater and more beautiful San Francisco.' And they did."

Assistant State Highway Engineer B. W. "Barney" Booker was a senior at Polytechnic High School.

"I was there," he remembers. "We were living on the west side of Van Ness Avenue, near Turk Street, in a three-story wood frame flat. My most vivid impression during the earthquake was that it seemed to me that it might never end, and that this could easily be the end of the world.

"My uncle and sisters and myself immediately left the house following the end of the main shake, and walked down Golden Gate Avenue, where the fronts of many of the apartments had fallen into the street."

"Men were shaving," Booker recalled, "and women were dressing in rooms separated by partitions which looked much like the stage version of house sections. We went on past the Grant Building, a five or six story sandstone type office building, which showed no evidence of being affected adversely.

### TRACKS RAISED.

On our way down, we noticed the street car tracks, which had been raised a-la-roller-coaster, to six feet or more above the former street level. People were pouring out of the hotels and residences in the area, each one carrying as much of his or her effects as he could, or dragging a trunk along by a rope, and nearly everyone had some sort of pet, a dog or a cat or a bird, riding along on the luggage.

"A fireman arrived at the scene of the fire in his rubber tired buggy, stood up in the vehicle, and with the help of a megaphone, advised everyone to leave the area and go to the parks, as the fire lines had broken and they were unable to get water to the blaze.

"I remember the nights spent in Jefferson Square, along with thousands of other people; the grim warnings of the military authorities consisting of a man propped at each end of the park, with a placard on his chest, one labeled 'shot for looting' and the other labeled 'shot for rape'; the night fires; the effect of spending the night in so much company.

"And the ashes, which covered the ground and the people sleeping on it; the bread lines and the meat lines, and the small amount of work required in clearing up litter to earn the right to get a portion of each; cooking on the sidewalk in brick Dutch ovens, since use of gas was prohibited because of danger of additional fires.

### ERRATIC COURSE.

"I remember the erratic course of the fires burning everything from the east side of Van Ness Avenue to the downtown area, then

coming from the north as far as St. Mary's Cathedral, and the flames in the belfry of the cathedral; the wind changing and blowing the fire back over the burned over district, coming again from the south, west of Van Ness, burning St. Ignatius Church, coming north to Golden Gate Avenue, one block from where we lived.

"And the wind changing again and blowing the flames over the burned over district; the cordon of civilian police and Army protecting the burned over district from looting . . . the flames, spreading and spreading . . ."

One of the oldest survivors of the fire and earthquake is Louis Livingston, a resident of the Hebrew Home for the Aged in San Francisco.

At 93, Livingston the other day recalled vividly the temblors and flames.

"I was there," he said. "My first sight was furniture being thrown out of an upper window in Hayes Valley.

"Next a housewife started a fire to cook and serve breakfast at Laguna and Hayes Streets. This fire started the burning out of Hayes Valley. The shake had cracked the brick chimneys and the heat ignited the wooden building.

"I saw Gen. Frederick Funston sitting astride a horse at Van Ness and Broadway, directing soldiers to blast homes to prevent fires from spreading.

"Residents saturated blankets with water and hung them out windows to prevent the heat from igniting their homes.

"The shake opened cracks at Van Ness and Broadway. Some one in authority gave orders to fill these three-foot cracks of earth immediately. The fire was at its greatest height. Sparks and ashes were flying everywhere, in all directions.

"At one time I observed two grocers, with doors open, attending rushing customers, with pistols handy for use should customers attempt to help themselves. And then the food began to arrive in the city, from diverse points. I was there . . . fifty years ago . . . yet it seems like only yesterday."

## East Bay Water Safety Classes

Three session of Red Cross water safety classes will be offered this summer at Acalanes High School in Lafayette, Mrs. George Hearne, water safety chairman of Mt. Diablo Chapter, American Red Cross, announced.

Students of the Lafayette area will attend the first session July 10 to 17 while the second course July 24 to 31 is intended for those in the Orinda, Danville, San Ramon, Alamo, Canyon and Moraga district. The third session will be August 7 to 18 for Walnut Creek students.

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