

David Steeves, 1923-1999

# 'He knew what was right'

Former SC building official voiced quake concerns before deadly temblor

By **DARREL W. COLE**  
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — In 1987, David Steeves took on the business community and the city's elected officials, warning that if city buildings weren't remodeled to withstand an earthquake, lives would be lost and the damage would be catastrophic.

Steeves, the city's chief building official at the time, lost his battle to politicians and business owners, who said the costs would put merchants out of business.

Steeves then retired out of frustration and for health reasons. Less than two years later his warnings proved true as the Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed 27 of the 46 buildings he had warned about. Collapsing buildings killed three.

Steeves died Tuesday, 23 days after the earthquake's 10th anniversary. He died of heart failure at Dominican Hospital. He was 76.

People who knew him and worked with him said he was a man of conviction who often butted heads with city leaders and businesses.

"He loved his work and cared about it, not just for the buildings that went up, but for the people he dealt with," said Sue Steeves, his former wife and lifelong friend who cared for him his last few years. "It wasn't easy for him, but he knew what was right."

She said his true character was most evident during a tumultuous few months when he closed the Loudon Nelson Center in 1986 because of a report the building would collapse in the event of an earthquake. Shock and anger greeted the decision because the building served as a hub of activity for many organizations and activities.

Sue Steeves said the criticism hurt him, but he knew lives were at stake.

"He kept things mostly at the office, but once in a while, like with the Loudon Nelson closing, you could see it affected him," Sue Steeves said. "I remember at one point there was a phone call for him and he said, 'Just tell them I'm in Hawaii.' He was laughing, but he cared so much ... and enough to keep at it, and stand by his convictions. David's thing wasn't about the costs but about the people."

Steeves was a member of the U.S. Coast Guard from 1941 to 1946 and served in Alaska, Africa and the South Pacific during World War II.



**Steeves**

Retired in 1987  
as city's chief  
building official

From 1946 to 1969 he worked in the construction industry. In the early 1950s, he donated his labor to help restore the sailing ship *Balcutha*, now part of the National Maritime Museum in San Francisco.

In 1969, he was hired as the chief building official for Santa Cruz County. He moved to the same position for the city in 1979.

After his retirement, he ran for the City Council in 1988, finishing ninth in a field of 17 candidates.

After retiring, he headed a nonprofit dedicated to preparing the community for natural disasters.

In his honor, a Sea Scout ship was named

the SSS Steeves. He had been a member of the group while growing up in San Francisco and later worked with the organization in Santa Cruz, passing on his knowledge about ship maintenance.

He was also a member of the Santa Cruz Lions Club.

He is survived by sons David A Steeves Jr. of Napa, Timothy D. Steeves, Thomas M. Steeves of Martinez, Donald Rossini of Santa Cruz, Frank Rossini of Carmel and Ron Steeves of Santa Cruz; daughters Elena M. Steeves of Santa Cruz, Peggy Lee Terronez of Watsonville, Mary Ann Grimes of Concord, Carolyn Begley of Kentucky and Merry Gaborit of Seattle; sister Shirley Steeves Jones of San Lorenzo; and numerous grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

A memorial is scheduled for 3 p.m. today at Santa Cruz Bible Church Youth Center, 440 Frederick St. His ashes will be spread at sea at a later date.

Arrangements are under the direction of Norman's Family Chapel in Soquel.

Contributions are preferred to the Sea Scouts.