

Six years after Loma Prieta

Memories of earlier earthquakes fade

Earthquake - City of Santa Cruz - Rebuilding
Santa Cruz
economy now
coming alive

BY JOHN WOOLFOLK
 Mercury News Staff Writer

Oh, yeah . . . it is Oct. 17.

Six years ago today at 5:04 p.m., the Loma Prieta earthquake rattled downtown Santa Cruz to rubble, killing three people and destroying 29 buildings along the pedestrian-friendly Pacific Garden Mall.

Today, with Pacific Avenue busier than ever and bustling with activity late into the evening, it seems a distant memory.

City Manager Richard Wilson had not even thought about the earthquake's anniversary until asked about it. Mayor Katherine Beiers paused a while before the date registered.

"It's hard to believe it's Oct. 17," Wilson said.

Stalled by the recession and a tough lending climate, Santa Cruz's earthquake recovery was slow. For years after the earthquake, businesses operated out of tents among vacant lots.

Even last year, with Pacific Avenue sparkling from a \$20 million face lift and major downtown projects in the works, earthquake scars abounded. City officials and

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SANTA CRUZ COUNTY HISTORICAL TRUST COLLECTION

After the 1906 earthquake, the firehouse, left, was demolished. The Cooper Street courthouse, seen from Church Street, was rebuilt.

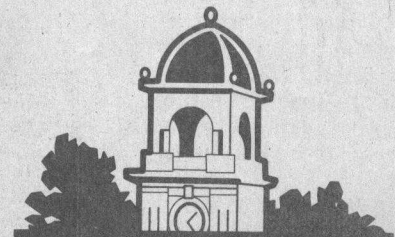
19th-century
 temblors were
 'big ones' then

BY ROSS ERIC GIBSON
 Special to the Mercury News

TODAY IS the sixth anniversary of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, which at 7.1 magnitude pales next to the magnitude 8.3 in 1906. Yet Santa Cruz demolished only three downtown buildings in 1906, compared with 60 percent of downtown landmarks in 1989.

While the 1906 and 1989 quakes remain the two biggest quakes locally, they have replaced in the public mind other major 19th-century quakes that have faded from memory. Who remembers that the first major

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Damaged by an earthquake during its construction in 1868, the Alexander Building still stands at Pacific Avenue and Locust Street. A third floor and Spanish facade were added.

19th-century earthquakes were considered 'big ones'

■ HISTORY

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California earthquake since the Spanish arrived was centered in Santa Cruz? This occurred in October 1800, calculated in the 6.5 range, and did considerable destruction to the vulnerable adobe buildings of the Santa Cruz mission.

Then in 1836 and 1838, two major Bay Area quakes in the 6.8-7.0 range were felt at a lesser magnitude in Santa Cruz, again damaging and weakening local adobes. The Santa Cruz earthquake of 1840 didn't need to be a major one to bring down the deteriorating mission bell tower, but it did send a tidal wave up the San Lorenzo River 600 feet and washed away many roof tiles stored on the riverbank.

The town of Santa Cruz wasn't established until 1848, when the first business was constructed downtown where the clock tower now stands. So a 5.7 earthquake in 1852 became the "big one" in the memory of most settlers. But at that time, most buildings were wood-frame shacks, or tent-frame structures, which rode out the quake without damage or at least were easily repaired. Unpredictable aftershocks compelled many adobe-home owners to replace their tile roofs with lighter wood shingles or build wood frame homes instead.

On Jan. 8, 1857, an earthquake was felt from Sacramento to San Diego. Later, this caused the facade of the Mission Santa Cruz chapel to collapse. It wasn't the



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magnitude of the quake, in the 4.8 to 5.5 range, but its occurrence during a severe local cold snap, when ice formed a half inch thick. A lesser aftershock came on Jan. 20. Then on Feb. 16, Santa Cruzans were awakened to a loud roar and brief tremor. But instead of a quake, it was the southwest corner of the mission chapel collapsing.

On Nov. 26, 1858, a midnight quake centered in San Jose was felt in Santa Cruz for less than a minute and was called the most severe since 1852. In the east Santa Cruz Mountains, small holes opened in the ground, emitting steam. Locally at the wood-frame San Lorenzo Exchange, the chief hotel at the time, the ballroom was alive with Friday night revelers. Some dancers attributed their dizziness to one drink too many.

In 1865, a Civil War aftershock hit with a bang. The midnight quake on Oct. 8 began with a gentle motion that lasted a second. Then another shock commenced, twisting chaotically with a magnitude of 6.3, the strongest yet. It

emptied shelves, toppled most chimneys and cracked several brick buildings, causing \$1,000 damage. The San Lorenzo Exchange was being replaced with the brick Pacific Ocean House, but the only wall it lost was one erected the day before, in which the mortar hadn't cured. Half a dozen 4-foot waterspouts erupted from the San Lorenzo riverbanks, lasting several minutes.

The quake was stronger in Watsonville. The Corralitos flour mill burst open, dumping 1,400 sacks of grain into the creek. Clouds of dust rose from the collapsing coastal cliffs.

Those in boats noted the sea turned rough and then turned as calm as glass as the bay became full of little bubbles rising to the surface. Numerous aftershocks followed.

This quake was soon forgotten when the Oct. 21, 1868, quake topped it, leaving 12 dead and \$300,000 damage in San Francisco alone. Santa Cruz fared better, as chimneys recently replaced were lost again, and some brick buildings developed gaps. The brick Alexander Building at Pacific Avenue and Locust Street was damaged during construction. It was reinforced with iron bolts. About 50 local quakes followed, leading up to the 1906 temblor.

Local historian, architectural consultant and author Ross Eric Gibson writes a weekly history column for the Santa Cruz/Monterey edition.