

Santa Cruz Mountains

Picking Up After the Quake

By Rick DelVecchio
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Boulder Creek,
Santa Cruz County

The silence on earthquake-torn Blue Ridge Drive was almost complete except for the choppy sound of electric guitar music that came from somewhere far down the slope.

Close by, there was no sign of life. Then, faint as wind chimes, the tinkling of broken glass came from behind a cabin heaved off its perch by the violent shock waves that ripped ridgetops all over the Santa Cruz mountains.

Balancing himself on the slope of a ravine 120 feet deep, Robert Buonasera poked with a garden rake through a large split between the back and side walls of his wrecked redwood cabin. He worked slowly, scraping up broken glass, pens and oddments from what used to be a sun-soaked back-room office facing south, through a break in the fir trees.

Buonasera wore a LaCoste windbreaker and a blue wool cap. He looked tired. He did not wear gloves as he picked over the shards.

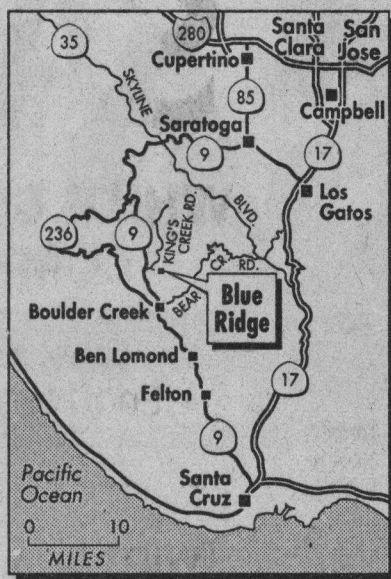
"I'm trying to fish out a Breuer's chair," he said.

Buonasera, 41, who builds convention exhibits for a living and often works at the Moscone Center in San Francisco, retrieved two of the fancy web-backed chairs. He loaded them into his car for the trip down into the valley, where he is staying in a rented home near a golf course.

His wife would be pleased with the day's haul. The chairs were among her favorite articles of furniture in the little house.

Lonely Task

Like hundreds of other mountain dwellers, Buonasera had begun the lonely task of salvaging his belongings. There was no one around to help him. Five of the six homes in



his immediate neighborhood had been condemned by the county, and their occupants had been evacuated or had moved away.

That left Buonasera alone with his rake and pitchfork and a neighbor's homeless kitten to keep him company.

He said he was home when the quake hit. The house "must have been moving eight feet," he said. "I couldn't believe something could move that far off center and come back."

He remembered staggering outside, the earth's violent rocking throwing him down three times and the Jaguar parked outside bouncing so high off the dirt road he could see underneath it.

Toward the end of the shake, the house gave way, tipping six feet over the edge of the ravine and coming to rest at a 45-degree angle. A madrone tree and a big freezer in the basement kept the structure from tumbling down the ridge.

Buonasera moved to the mountains in 1981, buying a one-bedroom cabin on a narrow lot three miles north of Boulder Creek. It reminded him of the Catskills in his native New York.

"It's got most of the things I enjoy," he said. "It's 30 minutes from the ocean. I get a lot of sun. It's a nice neighborhood."

Shattered Neighborhood

But it was vacant now. The summer place of a San Francisco architect was shattered. Next door, the house of a retired couple from San Jose was condemned. The only habitable dwelling in the area was a new place with cedar shingles and a solar panel on the roof.

Buonasera was insured, and his agent had been encouraging. But he had no clue whether the county would let him rebuild on the site — a strip so narrow that a proper septic tank could not fit on it.

"I think they'll take the opportunity to condemn everything up here," he said. "I was talking to a guy from the building department. He said they'd love to close some of these places, take the load off the system."

Buonasera took a look around. It was late afternoon, but he was so high on the hill that the sun was still shining through the gap in the trees in front of his house. On the road behind him, a row of country mailboxes on wooden posts were in view.

"I'd like to rebuild," he said. "It'd be hard to find a spot as pretty as this."

But those decisions were far off. In the coming days, Buonasera will be occupied with the job of salvaging.

His immediate goal is to recover a file cabinet crammed with copies of rare writings on early American history. Buonasera, a history enthusiast, had amassed the collection over the years from books at university libraries.

"Anything I get out of here, I think is a plus," said the earthquake victim, rake in hand. "Something I don't have to buy."