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The ghost of Myrtle St. past



On house after house, signs say 'condemned'

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THE CEMENT steps at 136 Myrtle St. lead to nowhere. Left hanging ominously in the air, the stairs are now a jungle gym in a blackened playground for the neighborhood kids. What was once the home for a family of 10, is now covered with nothing but ashes and the burned out heap of a car.

At 103 Myrtle St., Edward Hagan's bedroom leans to the side like a crooked room in a carnival fun house. The broken shutters to the bedroom window are left scattered outside, where they were dropped by emergency workers who pulled Hagan to safety. The front door to the house is boarded shut.

At 145 Myrtle St., 70-year-old Knight Johnson who has lived on this street all his life, stares at his chimney. It's sitting inside his fireplace. At night, he sleeps at his neighbor's house. He doesn't feel safe at his home, which was built in 1906.

This residential block of family homes in downtown Santa Cruz sustained some of the heaviest local damage during Tuesday's catastrophic earthquake, called the second largest quake in the nation's history. Of the nearly 83 homes condemned in Santa Cruz and the San Lorenzo Valley, at least 11 are on this single block. In addition, the only major fire in downtown Santa Cruz following the earthquake, broke out in a home in the middle of the block. The house burned to the ground.

Amazingly, there were no deaths on the block, and no serious injuries have been reported.

In the days following the devastation, evicted residents have returned to salvage what belongings they can. Residents who are still living in their homes have begun to assess the damage and look for help. There are no early estimates of how much it will cost to repair the damage. Some homes are irretrievably lost; others have severe structural damage.

Up and down the street, tilted pillars precariously hold up sagging roofs, telephone wires still hang from the branches of trees. For days following the quake, sightseers have come to gawk in amazement at the destruction, and the media has descended on the street in droves.

DEALLA Hagan, 80, stands outside her home two days after the earthquake, tears welling in her eyes. A white notice condemning her house is posted to the front door. She's lived on this block for 32 years.

"This is the first time she's seen the house since the quake," says her stepdaughter, Sharyn Halstead. She leans over, hugging Hagan as the two just continue to stare.

Hagan was walking up what used to be her front porch steps, when the earthquake hit Tuesday at 5:04 p.m. The ground shifted, creating an open gap between the foundation of the house and the front lawn where Hagan fell in and got stuck.

"All of the sudden I was underneath the house," says Hagan, a small woman who had been wearing the same bathrobe for days. She had returned to her home to get some clothes and personal belongings. She doesn't plan on



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

This house and at least 11 others on Myrtle Street have been condemned by the city due to severe damage caused by the earthquake.

ever living in her house again.

"The neighbor across the street helped me get out. I don't know who it was, but I want to thank you."

While Hagan was being pulled to safety, her husband Edward Hagan had been suffering in silence inside the house for hours. He had a mild heart attack before the quake ever hit and remained there in bed, struggling to breathe. Emergency crews arrived shortly after the quake and had to pull him from the bedroom window to safety. Rubble blocked passage to the front door.

The house has shifted on its foundation. The walls of Edward Hagan's bedroom are slanted at an angle. The floor boards have been forced up, personal possessions cover every inch of the

floor, plaster is still crumbling off the ceiling and walls.

The Hagans spent the night at a neighbor's home, a couple they met for the first time on Tuesday. Their daughter panicked when she arrived later in the day, and they were gone.

"I almost passed out when I saw this house. I was running around the house screaming, 'Are you in there?'"

The house, a two-bedroom beige home with brown trim at 103 Myrtle St., is the last home on the block.

IT WAS only a few houses down from there that flames shot up in a blaze, leaving a heavy cloud of smoke hanging over downtown Santa Cruz. Just minutes before, the earthquake virtually de-

stroyed the Pacific Garden Mall a few blocks away.

An hour after the quake, the home was nearly burnt to the ground; neighbors walked up and down the street, dazed; residents gone at the time of the earthquake, came rushing home, aghast at the damage they found.

Elsie Olivieri, 66, sits on a folding chair outside her home, part of her roof resting on the front porch. She reaches behind her to hold up her back, which was hurt when the earthquake threw her against the refrigerator.

"This is my brother," she introduces John Olivieri, who had rushed from his apartment across town to help. "And this," she gestures toward the house, "used to be 111 Myrtle." The Olivieris' parents moved into the home in 1928 when it was brand new; Elsie was born there.

The house now stands empty. A familiar white poster is tacked to the door declaring, "Unsafe to occupy."

According to Dale Pendell, owner of a house at 149 Myrtle St., the block which stretches from Laurel Street to Jenne Street was built at the turn of the century on a flood plain. Like many of the damaged homes on the street, the Pendells' home is old. It was built in 1904, but recently was reinforced and managed to escape any severe damage.

Directly across the street from the Pendells, 140 Myrtle St. stands condemned. Much of the second floor dropped through the first floor. A few days after the quake, kids from the neighborhood have thrown an old mattress on the sidewalk, and are soaking up the celebrity status of disaster victims as reporter after reporter stops to interview them.

Two teen-age girls sitting on the sidewalk used to live next door at

136 Myrtle St., the house that went up in flames. Fortunately, no one was inside.

"I saw the smoke. I didn't think it was my house," says Shelly Cruz, 16, who was at Santa Cruz High School when the quake struck. Stretching out on the mattress, she sifts through burned pieces of letters that she's retrieved from the ashes of her home.

Cruz lived at 136 Myrtle with her seven brothers and sisters. They spent the first night after the quake at the Salvation Army and are now staying at the home of relatives. "They're trying to find a place to live," says Sandra Alvarez, a cousin. "They don't know how to go about it. There's so many people without housing. It's hard just waiting."

Cruz's next door neighbor, Brian Fleming, 20, is also hanging out on the sidewalk. His home, 140 Myrtle, has also been declared uninhabitable by the city.

"Everything is still inside," says Fleming, who lives with a family of four in the home. The rest of his family has been on vacation in Baja California and, by Friday, still didn't know what had happened.

"I can't go inside to answer the phone," said Fleming. "I've heard it ring."

It's quiet now on Myrtle Street. The neighbors go inside and close the doors. Police block off the street to traffic.

Curiosity seekers still walk up and down, some carrying cameras, most staring in disbelief.

"So this is the hardest hit street, huh?" said one teen-ager riding by slowly on his bicycle. His companion stared open-mouthed at the crooked stairs and slanted windows, then continued on in silence.