

A Loud Roar - The Earth Trembled

By John Rico

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ALL ALONE ON MAIN STREET AND THEN... Nightwatchman S. N. Bettis found himself in an eerie position at 3 a. m. on April 19, 1892, as he patrolled his beat on Vacaville's lone downtown business thoroughfare. In his previous duties he had come across burglars at work, had discovered fires burning out of control, and had assisted many a drunk out of the gutter. But on that morning in April 1892 he readily admits he had suddenly become alarmed and a bit afraid.

Here is what he had to say when later interviewed:

"The morning was clear and starlit and a cold breeze was blowing. I was walking down Main Street, from west to east, when my attention was attracted by a rumbling sound which came from the hills west of the town. The noise resembled distant thunder or the roaring of water which had suddenly been let loose by the bursting of huge dam gates. In a few seconds that noise increased to a roar and the ground beneath my feet seemed to heave up."

"The motion at first was west to east, and then several violent shocks passed from north to south. I felt as if I was on the deck of a vessel during a heavy storm, and I put my hands to the ground to prevent myself from falling to my face. After the brick walls and chimneys began to fall all around and the noise for a minute or so was deafening. Occasionally I could hear the shrieks of women above the din and soon people began to rush into the streets in their night clothes."

The tremor on the early morning in April 1892 lasted less than one minute, but damage to brick structures was extensive. Not only in Vacaville, but throughout the surrounding areas, including Winters, Dixon, Fairfield, brick chimneys toppled.

Fortunately, although damage to buildings was extensive, there were no serious injuries reported, and of more importance not one fire had been started by the tremor.

Every brick building downtown suffered damage, especially the two-story structures which lost their facing.

Reports reveal an energetic rebuilding plan was put under way and in about three months the damaged buildings were repaired. Practically every brick building on Vacaville's Main Street today had been a victim of that earthquake about 89 years ago.

In 1884, a two-story brick grade school was constructed on the approximate present site of Andrews Park. In the 1892 quake, damage to the structure was extensive and it was decided to demolish the building and replace it with a two-story wood structure.

The California Normal College, which also stood on the Andrews Park site, was heavily damaged by the earth shock, and it, too, was torn down but was never rebuilt.

In the construction of school and other public building not much attention was given to the possibility of earthquake damage. In later years building codes, enacted by the State of California, made it necessary for many school districts to abandon buildings which could not meet provisions of the state codes.

Vacaville voters in 1924 approved \$100,000 for the construction of a new elementary classroom building and auditorium on the corner of School and McClellan Streets. After being in use for 25 years, it was decided the building was a hazard and ordered demolished.

For many years Vacaville clamored for a high school gymnasium building, and in 1930 voters made available \$62,000 to be used for construction of a two-story brick gym and classroom structure. In 1953 it was determined the ornate structure could not meet earthquake standards, and it, too, was abandoned. It burned mysteriously in 1953.

The 1892 earthquake gained prominence because of the visible damage inflicted. Without a doubt there have been other, and perhaps more severe quakes in the local area throughout early history.

Today, predictions on earthquakes which may shake the earth in our immediate areas are a dime a dozen. There are those giving us a date of between now and the turn of the century; there are others who have actually picked a certain date; and have found themselves completely wrong.

To flatly say we are subject to additional quakes, could be accepted as a fairly precise statement. But, will it be tomorrow, next year or within another 100 years?

The earthquake here, although doing extensive damage to buildings, may have been a blessing in disguise. It helped awaken the people from their lethargy. Up to the date of the quake Vacaville did not enjoy the status to being a town. Incorporation was voted in July 1892, and Vacaville had its first board of town trustees. Up to that point, Vacaville was unincorporated, and was ruled by the Board of Supervisors in Fairfield.

The threat of continuing earthquakes has fostered rigid revisions in building codes, especially for public buildings.

There is that constant awareness that earthquakes are unpredictable - that the earth far beneath us may slip and slide at any moment. And, unfortunately, there's not an iota of preparedness which can be taken.

Records show that back in 1556, an earthquake in China claimed 830,000 lives; and another, also in China, in 1976, took 656,000 lives.

Our big earthquake in 1892 caused about \$100,000 in property damage; there was no loss of life; and no serious injuries. We can label the quake as a disaster, but let's look at the aftermath as a miracle.

The devastating earthquake and fires which struck San Francisco at 5:13 a. m. on April 18, 1906, rate as one of the major catastrophes of all times, yet only 452 lives were lost. The greater portion of damage done to the city was by fire which burned out of control when water mains were split by the twisting earth.

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