Solano-Napa Earthquakes

By Ernest D. Wichels

Sunday, April 04, 1965

Last Sunday a devastating tremor rocked Chile; on Monday, it was the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. We are in the spring period of past earthquakes in Solano and Napa counties. Most of them have been in this eight-week period of March and April.

Some folks remember only the April 18, 1906, “San Francisco” quake. It caused some damage here in Vallejo; was severe in Napa Valley; and all but wrecked Santa Rosa.

But our own champion was the Vallejo-Mare Island earthquake of March 30, 1898 - at 17 minutes to midnight. Vallejo has had none other like it!

SPRING QUIVERS

Local tremors reported by the Vallejo Chronicle date from March 15, 1860; then March 5, 1864; again on March 8, 1865. The heaviest shock in California during the past 100 years was the Inyo Valley quake of March 26, 1872 - 200 miles away, but it stopped clocks in Antioch, Martinez and Vallejo!

Solano County was rocked on April 10, 1881; March 30, 1885 (when Napa really felt it); and again on April 11 of that year. The heavy “Grass Valley” earthquake of April 28, 1888, was felt here and in Napa.

Then came Solano’s slip of the Hayward Fault on April 19 and 21, 1892. Vacaville, Winters and Dixon suffered heavily. Every building on Main Street, in Vacaville was damaged or leveled. Elmira suffered to the extent that it never rebuilt. Winters was left without a habitable home.

The March 8, 1937, Albany-Berkeley quake did much damage in the East Bay. Most readers recall one on March 27, 1957.

OUR OWN EARTHQUAKE

Nearly every building on the Navy Yard was damaged. The Naval Hospital was severely twisted, and many patients suffered shock.

On Walnut Avenue the officers quarters were made structurally unsafe and had, to be torn. The present wooden; colonial-type homes were built on the original foundations, between 1901-1902.

The ends of Building 69, the Foundry, and the Boiler Shop laid in the streets.

**EARTHQUAKE COCKTAIL**

Some of the news stories of the Chronicle had humor, despite the gravity of the occasion.

“The odor of drugs in promiscuous mixture attracted many to Topley’s Drug Store.”

“Megarry & Company fared badly, too. Vinegar and pickles mixed with wine, gin and whiskey made a mammoth cocktail, the smell of which would turn an old toper crazy with delight.”

“Georgia St. hill got a heavy dose. Nearly every chimney is gone.”

Many of Vallejo’s present homes bear scars of the March 30, 1898 catastrophe. The Chronicle told of damage to S. M. Levee’s home (now occupied by the Wyman Riley family); to houses of Thoresen, Mead, Farrington, Topley, McLaren, Luchsinger, Pennycook, Tobin, Brownlie, Hodgkinson, Bergwalls, Cooper, Weniger, Greenwood, Halliday, Mrs. McDonald and Dr: Anderson. And 200 others.

Business houses which suffered included Harrier & Son, Wilson and Weniger, Ratto and Chelini, B. Passalacqua, Corcoran and Collins, John Frey, Power and Fleming, and Geary Bros.

**EVEN CEMETERIES SUFFERED**

Many monuments were overturned in Vallejo’s cemeteries. The Chronicle editor added this: “Thos. Doyle, owner of the Marble Works, is congratulating himself that all of his pieces were standing.”

Vallejo’s schoolhouses were damaged to the extent that classes were excused. The City Hall had cracks on both side walls.

St. Vincent’s Church, according to the Chronicle on May 31, “stood the terrible strain
in remarkable degree. Father Doogan is now investigating the crack in the steeple, and in the corner pillars. Damage to the dwelling place of the priests was insignificant.”

But the next day, April 1st, there was a different story. “The church building has been more severely damaged than first thought and is deemed unsafe to assemble there for divine services, according to Father Doogan, O. P. Until further notice all masses will be celebrated in St. Vincent’s Hall at the usual hours.”

BUSINESS AS USUAL

Even adversity has its silver lining. At least, the 1898 Chronicle editor thought so. On April 2 he said: “Now is the time for chimney builders to advertise. Use the Chronicle for quick results.”

Earthquakes cannot be predicted - Rob. Iacopi, “Earthquake County,” Lane publishers, 1964. It may take place while you are reading this, or it may not come during your lifetime. Hundreds occur annually in California, only a a few capable of doing damage in a local area. But no one, as yet, can predict them.