

San Jose and the
1906 Earthquake

An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th century, San Jose, California, has been through many hardships and has overcome each of them. However, on April 18, 1906, an earthquake struck and shook the entire Bay Area including the city of San Jose. Although much damage occurred, it did not interfere with the determination that the residents had to make a full recovery and to make San Jose one of the most successful cities in the United States.

The Growing San Jose

In the first few years of the 1900's, San Jose had become a growing, well developed city which was beginning to modernize. For example, the city had built the Naglee Park in 1902 and its new seven-story Garden City Bank in 1905.¹ San Jose's population had even grown to 21,500, and the residents still had a civic effort to bring more new settlers to the city.² San Jose had also begun to think about building its first skyscraper and installing new electric railroads. Furthermore, the city's mayor, from 1902 to 1906, Mayor Worswick, was improving the city with paved roads and improving public scenery in San Jose. The citizens were enjoying the peaceful environment that San Jose offered until early in the morning of April 18, 1906.

“The Big One”

The residents of San Jose were resting in their homes on the morning of April 18. At 5:13 a.m., every resident was awakened from their slumber by a tremendous earthquake that frightened and terrorized the entire Bay Area and very intensely the city of San Jose. The people knew it as the “Big One” and there were many reasons why it was named this.³ The earthquake moved the ground up to twenty feet and from eight to fourteen feet horizontally in some places in the city.⁴ Although the first shock was the most intense and the ones that followed were invariably light and harmless, it was all that was needed to turn the city into a picturesque ruin. When the people began to go outside to inspect the damages, they looked around the entire scene and cried out, “San Jose is gone!”⁵ The streets were piled with masses of bricks and glass. The windows from the buildings were shattered and the glass was all over the sidewalks. The massive buildings that the San Joseans went to sleep seeing were now torn out from the ground, looked twisted, out of shape, and were demolished by the “Big One”. Many buildings were on the ground, over the streets and the railroads. No one was less terrified than others. The poor and the rich of the city both suffered equally. The scene was one of general devastation.

The Business District

Compared to the damages in the entire city, the real center of the disaster was the business district, but especially the area surrounded by First, Second, Market, Santa Clara, and San Fernando Streets.⁶ The damage to the entire business section of the city could not be estimated due to the enormity of the damaged. However, aside from the damages that the buildings suffered from the earthquake, fires caused the entire city to burn for three days thereafter.⁷ However, the fires burned most intensely on Second and San Fernando Streets.⁸ In addition to the buildings, destruction of local attractions were also destroyed. Bridges all over San Jose were torn from the ground and the rails were twisted into knots which caused the locomotives to tip over. The “Big One” also caused giant rock slides that buried homes and small businesses. In many homes, gas and water pipes were broken which caused fires. San Jose was in complete chaos and the government needed to do something to help keep the order and control in the city. Mayor Worswick declared martial law and a “vigilance committee” posted notices saying that all looters would be hanged in the local square.⁹ Every San Josean was literally in complete terror.

San Jose's Damaged Buildings

San Jose's business district was hit hard and suffered the most from the earthquake of 1906. Many buildings came crumbling down while others were unharmed, but then burned to ruins. San Jose's Hall of Justice was completed in 1906 just before the earthquake and then it was demolished by it. The Hall of Records was another governmental building that crumbled. Many of these buildings that were destroyed were on Second Street. Including, The Nevada Building, George B. McKee Building, The Martin Building, and The Lieber Building among many others.

The Nevada Building was located on South Second near Santa Clara Street. It suffered from the earthquake by crumbling down and a portion of its front wall fell clear across the street. Furthermore, The George B. McKee Building, which was on the corner of Second and San Fernando Streets was also destroyed. Its upper story completely collapsed, but hardly any damage was done to the first floor. The Martin Building, which was located on Second Street, was a three-story brick building which was thrown down and instantly burst into flames. The fire then spread to its neighboring buildings to the north and to the south. Then, unfortunately, the Lieber Building was also destroyed. It was partially destroyed by the earthquake but the building was next to The Martin Building which had caught on fire, and therefore spread to The Lieber Building. Shortly after the Lieber Building caught on fire, the five-story Dougherty Building also went up in flames. The Dougherty Building was a residential building that was filled with tenants. It was spared by the earthquake, but the fire from The Martin Building made it a complete loss. A large amount of casualties were found after the front

wall fell in and the entire structure caved in itself. Nothing was removed and the entire building was determined to be a complete loss. Then shortly after the Dougherty Building was destroyed, the three-story Louise Building was next in the fire's tracks.¹⁰

Although the buildings of Second Street suffered the most damage, many others were also almost as badly wrecked. For example, The Phelan Building, The Elks Hall, The Auzerais Building, The Odd Fellows Building, The El Monte Lodging House, The Grand Opera House, The Vendome Hotel, The Native Son's Building and many more. The Phelan Building, that was located on the corner of First and Post Streets, was a grand three-story building, but after the earthquake it was a pile of rubbish, flat on the ground and disfigured. From the ruins that fell, three people were buried underneath.¹¹ Many of the citizens of San Jose were the first to become the rescue unit in the city, and some were able to recover a pioneer dentist from underneath the ruins.¹² Moreover, the three-story Elks' Hall on the corner of Santa Clara and Lightstone Streets, became a shapeless pile of bricks that blocked roadways of the city. Aside from The Elks' Hall, The Auzerais Building was also greatly damaged. Its entire upper story was completely ruined by the quake. Then on Third Street, the south rear wall of the Odd Fellows' Building fell outward, which caused damage on a neighboring building's wall. Furthermore, The El Monte Lodging House on Locust Street was one of the buildings that suffered from the fire. However, not only the building suffered but also seven people who were trapped inside and roasted to death by the flames.¹³ Another building that burned was the Grand Opera House; it was one of the first theaters to be destroyed by the earthquake. Another building in which a citizen died was the Vendome

Hotel. The structure completely went down killing one person.¹⁴ Also, the hotel suffered when one of its wings fell and the estimated value of damage was \$40,000.¹⁵ In addition, on Third and San Fernando Streets, The Native Sons Building's upper floor was demolished, but the lower floor which was occupied by the Santa Clara Valley Wine Co. only suffered a little damage.¹⁶ Furthermore, on the Alameda, The Golden West Hotel was badly damaged. Its entire front fell out onto the street and finally, The Art Gallery of San Jose was destroyed by the earthquake. General Henry Morris Naglee's, who was a wealthy property owner and a veteran of the Mexican and Civil Wars, valuable collection of foreign and domestic art was in the gallery on display and the entire collection was ruined.¹⁷ Although many of the buildings of the Business District were ruined, not all suffered. Most of the modern steel buildings remained intact, but aside from this San Jose's economical section was facing devastation and all of it was caused by the earthquake of 1906.

San Jose's Damaged Schools

In addition to the Business District's buildings, many of San Jose's schools were damaged or destroyed. These included, The Normal School, San Jose Great High School, Santa Clara Street School, Grant School and many others.

San Jose's Normal School suffered little damage but it was shaken up considerably. Its was one of the brick structures that did not suffer as much, and was not in unsafe condition. The Normal School even continued with their school year and school was held for its students on the 23rd of April, Monday morning in the Grammar School Hall of their annex room because it was entirely in good and sound condition.¹⁸

However, other schools did not have the same amount of luck during the earthquake as The Normal School. San Jose's Great High School in Normal Square was complete destroyed. The shock of the earthquake "peeled off" each brick wall on the upper portion of the building.¹⁹ The roof was also completely demolished so that portions of it fell threw the upper floor and other parts slid off onto the ground and onto the roads. Every window of the building was broken and laid on the sidewalks and each wall was warped out of shape. The buildings were described as a complete loss and beyond repair, and what was left needed to be torn down. The school was so dangerous that guards were posted in front of it to prevent anyone from getting hurt, because the building had bricks hanging and they could have fallen at any moment.²⁰

The Santa Clara Street School, which was Horace Mann School in 1892, was another school that was destroyed by the earthquake. The

building was three-stories high and was located on the corner of Seventh and San Fernando Streets. Furthermore, Grant School, on Empire Street, was completely twisted out of shape and was thrown from its base and practically destroyed. Many of San Jose's schools were in such bad shape that, in most cases, the schools were closed for thirty days, but others did get back to normal as soon as they could.²¹

San Jose's Other Damaged Attractions

Many other important places in the city of San Jose, such as hospitals, churches, and banks, were also impacted by the earthquake. Some of these places consisted of the Hospital for the Insane at Agnews, the First Methodist Church, the St. Patrick's Catholic Church, and The Garden City Bank.

The Agnews State Insane Hospital was just a huge, disfigured pile of bricks after the earthquake of 1906. The piles of bricks buried many doctors, nurses and patients. One official and more than 100 patients died on the morning of April 18th. Many of the crazed patients tried running away and a few were lost.²² In fact, a rumor went around the city of San Jose that when the patients had run away and had not been found, the deputies of the city found 100 patients dead with white sheets covering them and many of the patients were chained to trees and shrubs.²³ An estimated 150 patients were injured in the hospital for the insane and it was estimated that there were \$700,000 in damages.²⁴ Another hospital that was in bad shape after the earthquake was the County Hospital, where two people were killed and seven were injured.²⁵

Besides the hospitals, many churches were destroyed during the earthquake. One was The Central Christian Church, which was located on South Second Street. The entire rear of the building collapsed, portions of the side walls fell out, and the roof entirely caved in. In addition, the First Methodist Church on North Second Street cracked from end to end, but it still remained standing. Also, The First Presbyterian Church on Second Street near St. John Street, had its steeple fall down across the street and one

of its walls fell against the side of the YMCA. The Trinity Episcopal and The Unitarian Church both were a complete loss. Portions of their walls fell across the streets. Furthermore, the St. Patrick's Catholic Church, on Santa Clara and Forth Street was destroyed. The building had also suffered pain before, during the 1868 earthquake but it had suffered more in 1906. The tall, massive, handsome, building was a picturesque ruin. Its tower and front sides and rear was slammed into the auditorium next to it.

After the earthquake, many banks were closed because of the amount of damage done to them. For example, the Bank of San Jose on the northern corner of Santa Clara and First Street was in bad condition because one of the brick walls collapsed. Besides that, the foundation was in good condition while The Hibernia Savings Bank, on Market, was transformed into a hideous aspect.

The Impact on the People

Besides buildings, many citizens of San Jose were severely hurt. The April 24 issue of the San Jose Daily Mercury, reported that 100 people were estimated dead and 5000 were injured.²⁶ Many people died within the fires of the building in the Business District and others were crushed by the buildings that came tumbling down on them. At this time, many citizens believed that the fact that the Business District was hit the hardest instead of the residential area was an advantage because the majority of the people were in their homes and since the residential district was not as hit as hard as the Business District, many lives were spared.

The World Responds to San Jose

After the earthquake of 1906, San Jose and the entire Bay Area needed help. The city needed help economically and emotionally. Economically, the city was in ruin. San Jose had an estimated loss of \$3,000,000 and emotionally the city's people were in complete distraught and pain, but the San Joseans were a strong community.²⁷

The entire nation and world were willing to help the city. President Theodore Roosevelt expressed deep sympathy along with the rulers of the foreign countries. On April 19th, the day after the disaster, the San Jose Daily Mercury published a letter from the desk of President Theodore Roosevelt. He said that he "...shared the terror and grief of the country at the distaste that had befallen in California." Also that he was "... inexpressibly shocked by the dreadful calamity which had befallen California..." and that he had "...a deep personal concern and sympathy over the destruction of the buildings..." and the city.²⁸ Not only did domestic officials show their sympathy but foreign rulers as well. These included, President Fallieres of France, President Pardo of Peru, King Frederick of Denmark, King Haaken of Norway, Earl Grey of Canada, Premeir Seddam of New Zealand and the King of Portugal, the Emperor of Russia, and the King of Italy.²⁹ In addition to these rulers, German Ambassador, Baron Speck von Strenberg, called on the President and extended his deepest condolences toward the American people.³⁰ He assured the President that the emperor felt sure that the catastrophe created a widespread sympathy and mourning among all of the German people.³¹ Also, all over the nation, people wanted to help the Bay Area. Rations, tents, and supplies of all sorts were rushed to the Bay

Area in aid of the people of the stricken area. Also, clothing was sent from all parts of the U.S., Europe and Asia, to relieve some of the suffering. Besides supplies, the army of the South Pacific rushed to clear the debris, repair the lines, and to help reopen the tunnels. The National Guard also moved into the city to restore the peace in San Jose. However, besides receiving supplies, the people of San Jose also needed refuge and a safe place to sleep. Since many were afraid to return to their homes, again, they took their chairs, hammocks, and beds onto their front lawns.³² Almost everyone abandoned their homes and camped outside their homes, in parks, or public squares. However, the hardest hit families were set up at the Agricultural Park race track.³³ Thousands of people were homeless and were in panic. But the San Joseans did all they could to stay united. Many people formed prayer groups and praise sessions to keep each other's feelings hopeful.³⁴ In a few days the environment shown in San Jose was so calm and full of hope that many victims of other cities flocked to San Jose hoping that they would feel the same security that the San Joseans offered.³⁵

The Reconstruction

Now with San Jose's hope up, the citizens began to reconstruct their beloved city. Within the first week, it was San Jose's citizens that did a lot of the work in the city. They cleared out great quantities of debris from the streets and homes. Every resident had the determination to help in the reconstruction of their city. Easier tasks were done by them and were done quickly. By April 21, the water was back and running and by April 25 the streets were clean.³⁶ By April 30, calm was restored.³⁷ However, the ordinary citizen could not have done all of the work. The National Guard and carpenters of the city did a lot of the work. Slowly the city of San Jose was reconstructed. The Phelan and Hale buildings were rebuilt and made larger and better. The lines were fixed quickly to receive the transport in and out of the city. Repairs were done to the fire houses, pavement and local buildings. For example, the First Methodist Church's wall was rebuilt and its steel bands were strengthened. Also the First Presbyterian Church's structure was rebuilt and made stronger, larger and finer. In addition, many specific things were done to the city. The historic Auzerias neighborhood was remolded and new and better schools were built. For example, Lincoln, Washington, Lowell, Grant, Horace Mann and St. Joseph's Schools were constructed.³⁸ Then after three years, 20,000 new buildings were completed.³⁹ In 1907, \$1,128,138 worth of buildings and 4000 new homes were completed.⁴⁰ After seven years there was a new City Hall, a new public library and electric tramways. Although it was in only a few years that San Jose was reconstructed and prospering smoothly again, it must have felt like an eternity for the San Joseans. But each resident had that hope and

desire and each refused to feel that defeat that the earthquake of 1906, might have instilled in them to feel. San Joseans had before felt destruction from other things prior to 1906, but they recovered fully and more strongly each time, just like they did after the morning of April 18, 1906, and how they would continue to do later in history.

Notes

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8. Eugene T. Sawyer, History of Santa Clara County, California (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company., 1922), p. 174.
9. James, Op. Cit., p. 140.
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16. "Native Sons Hall," San Jose Daily Mercury, April 19, 1906.
17. James, Op. Cit., p. 448.
18. Fischer, "City Schools Closed For Thirty Days," San Jose Daily Mercury, April 21, 1906.
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31. Ibid.
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33. Beilharz, Op. Cit., p. 129.

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