

A perspective on the San Francisco earthquake, 1906

Introduction

At 5:12 a.m. on April 18, 1906, a great earthquake broke loose, with an epicenter near San Francisco. Violent shocks punctuated the shaking, which lasted some 45 to 60 seconds. The earthquake was felt from southern Oregon to south of Los Angeles and inland as far as central Nevada. The city was then destroyed by a Great Fire that burned for four days. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of trapped persons died when South-of-Market tenements collapsed as the ground liquefied beneath them. Most of those buildings immediately caught fire, and trapped victims could not be rescued.

A recently discovered account of the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco written by US Commissioner Silas W. Mack vividly describes the devastation, with 700 lives lost and a city left in shambles. Accompanying Mack's solemn letter is a proclamation stating that law enforcement was "authorized [by the city] to KILL any and all persons found engaged in Looting or in the Commission of Any Other Crime." This broadside, issued by San Francisco Mayor E. E. Schmitz, exemplifies the mass hysteria that occurred following the quake.

The 1906 quake was the most destructive earthquake on record in North America until the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. The San Francisco earthquake and the fire that followed left approximately 250,000 people homeless, destroyed 25,000 buildings and resulted in an estimated \$350 million in damages.

Excerpt

Silas W. Mack to Clara W. Mack, April 20, 1906:

Wednesday, April 18th. will go down in history as the date of the most terrible calamity the United States, and particularly California, has ever known. I do not feel much like writing about it. Would feel better if I could cry but I cannot.

We were awakened at 5:15 A.M. by the shock of the earthquake. There have been several since I have been in California but only two before this were sufficiently pronounced so that I remember them. They did no damage. This one was much more violent even here and was accompanied by a dreadful rumbling noise and roaring, not particularly loud but coming as it were from mighty forces at war in the distance. The house swayed back and forth, it seemed quite a while but I think not more than [*inserted: 2*]5 seconds, then with a sudden wrench stopped. I had gotten out of bed and rushed to the front door but it was so foggy outside that I could see nothing, the first fog of the season. The shocks continued throughout the day but were

A perspective on the San Francisco earthquake, 1906

so light frequently as to be hardly noticeable. There was not the least damage done in the house and no dishes, vases or anything breakable hurled to the floor. And this was the general experience in Monterey and Pacific Grove.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction, the transcript of the letter, and the broadside, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Why did San Francisco Mayor Schmitz issue a “darkness until daylight” curfew?
2. According to the letter written by Silas Mack, what caused the most damage and loss of life?
3. Why did Silas Mack express doubts about when his sister would receive his letter?
4. Use a map in order to locate San Francisco, Monterey, Pacific Grove, Salinas, San Jose, Palo Alto, and Santa Rosa—all specifically mentioned in Mack’s letter.

A perspective on the San Francisco earthquake, 1906

Image

LAW OFFICES
SILAS W. MACK
 PACIFIC GROVE MONTEREY

Monterey City, California, Apr. 20, 1906.

Clara W. Mack,
 Ayers Cliff, P.O., Canada.
 Dear Mother:-

I sent you a telegram yesterday worded "No damage whatever at Pacific Grove nor Monterey. All well". Most likely it is still in the office at Salinas and, for all I know a letter may reach you first. I might have written before, but no mail has yet gone out since the 17th, and I do not know when it will go.

Wednesday, April 18th, will go down in history as the date of the most terrible calamity the United States, and particularly California, has ever known. I do not feel much like writing about it. Would feel better if I could cry but I cannot.

We were awakened at 5:15 A.M. by the shock of the earthquake. There have been several since I have been in California but only two before this were sufficiently pronounced so that I remember them. They did no damage. This one was much more violent even here and was accompanied by a dreadful rumbling noise and roaring, not particularly loud but coming as it were from mighty forces at war in the distance. The house swayed back and forth, it seemed quite a while but I think not more than 25 seconds, then with a sudden wrench stopped. I had gotten out of bed and rushed to the front door but it was so foggy outside that I could see nothing, the first fog of the season. The shocks continued throughout the day but were so light frequently as to be hardly noticeable. There was not the least damage done in the house and no dishes, vases or anything breakable hurled to the floor. And this was the general experience in Monterey and Pacific Grove.

At the Hotel Del Monte it was different. This establishment had some 40 chimneys, very large and since the introduction of steam for heating, useless but still retained, though there had been talk of removing them, to give the appearance of some baronial castle. These swayed back and forth and when the final wrench came at least one-half of them came toppling over onto the roof and fell with deafening roar to the ground, and the remaining half were so damaged that all of since been removed. Unfortunately there was one chimney towering far above the rest from the tower over the main entrance. This struck the roof and went through into one of the chambers where a bridal couple were sleeping carrying their bedstead and all into the chamber below. He was instantly killed and she has since died. No one else was hurt here.

None of us, for a moment, realized what was going on elsewhere. But as the day wore on we found that we were isolated from the rest of the world. Then parties got through from Salinas and reported over a \$1,000,000.00 damage there but all communication from the rest of

1.

Silas W. Mack to Clara W. Mack, April 20, 1906. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC08697)

A perspective on the San Francisco earthquake, 1906

LAW OFFICES
SILAS W. MACK
 PACIFIC GROVE MONTEREY

world still cut off. The enterprise of the great San Francisco newspapers is such that we knew in the afternoon, as the hours sped by and no boats put into port for news, that San Francisco must be having troubles of its own. The papers will tell you the rest.

350,000 people homeless and the number of killed will never be known as they were mostly cremated, or will be when the fire is finally extinguished. The earthquake shattered the watermains and although building after building was blown up by dynamite nothing could stop the progress of the flames. I have talked with several Pacific Grove people who were there and they say that the sight was terrible though the direct effect of the shock was not so noticeable. It was the fire. The great skyscrapers stood the earthquake quite well but fires at once broke out in twenty places, mostly caused by electric wires.

San Francisco is under martial law. As I write the troops are marching out from the Presidio of Monterey to re-inforce those on duty there and also to guard San Jose. The State militia, including Troop "C" of Salinas with Daisy's brother either first or second in command is also marching North. Thieves and criminals of all descriptions, are bent on crime and are being shot on the spot if caught at their work.

The captain of the torpedo-boat destroyer Paul Jones which brought orders here for the troops this morning from Mare Island stated that as he passed out of the Golden Gate S.F. was a wall of fire. The residence portion is now burning. Dr. Goodell and wife were in S.F. and thus far no word from them. She was in a precarious condition anyway and I fear she will not pull through.

We all have many friends, and many of us relatives, in the city and, as you may imagine, the suspense is dreadful. We have not yet scarcely begun to realize the extent of the disaster. Thousands upon thousands of destitute people are headed this way and we must help take care of them. Congress has voted \$1,000,000.00 for relief of S.F. but what is that among so many? San Jose, Palo Alto, and other wealthy cities in the line of march, are themselves damaged to a great extent. It is said that Stanford University buildings are nearly all wrecked and \$5,000,000.00 will not replace them.

What the effect will be on Monterey and Pacific Grove it is very difficult to say. It may be even beneficial or it may be very injurious. These two towns stand on a peninsula of granite formation and no earthquake is likely to damage them to any great extent. S.F. was build up on sand dunes, or made land, which is worse.

A perspective on the San Francisco earthquake, 1906

LAW OFFICES
SILAS W. MACK
 PACIFIC GROVE MONTEREY

There is no doubt, however, that San Francisco will be rebuilt and in a far grander style than before. Building materials of all kinds will go away up in price and labor as well.

Some people are beginning to draw their deposits from local banks and as a good deal of their cash is locked up in safes which are still red hot, they may create a money panic but I trust that this will be prevented by getting in gold from Los Angeles. We have many thousands of dollars in New York but even N.Y. exchange is regarded with suspicion by some of these characters. It is a pity that that they could not be shut up a while in the U.S. Mint at San Francisco with millions, millions everywhere but not a drop to drink.

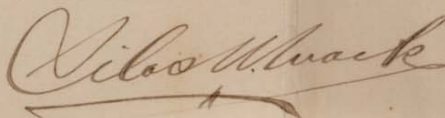
Well, I must close. It will be strange if this letter is very well written as I do not feel at all like writing. The air is very hot and at night we can see the glare of the fire reflected in the northern sky.

The morning of the earthquake I intended to leave on the 7:55 A.M. train to attend the meeting of the Congregational Association of the Santa Clara District and was at the train. The latter is still in the Grove and may be for a long time to come. Miss Clara L. Ewalt, Primary Field Worker of the Ohio State S.S. Association, who has been helping us in the State for three months, was going with me to San Francisco, to get things in readiness for the State S.S. Convention at Santa Rosa next week. She is much distracted as her parents will think she is killed. Santa Rosa, by the way, is reported as wiped out of existence. I hope not.

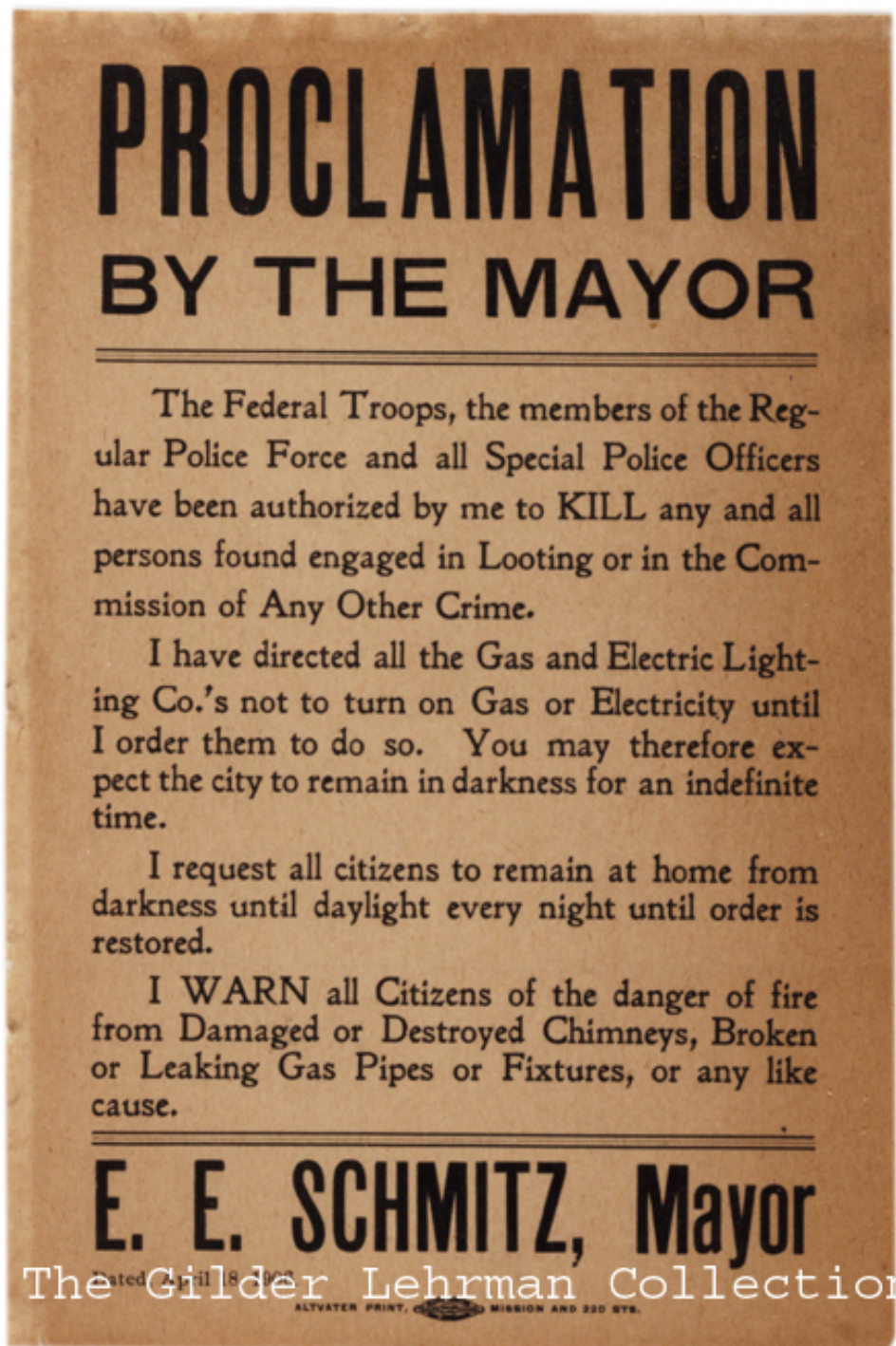
Now, do not worry as we are no more apt to get killed by earthquake than you are by lightning. Mt. Vesuvius is now repeating the scenes of Pompeii and Herculaneum and in 2000 years San Francisco may be again destroyed. But I expect to move before then.

We are having the upper part of the house finished off so as to get two more fine bedrooms. Daisy is doing her own work for a time until we can get a girl as the one we had was called back to New York State by the illness of her father. Uncle Charlie and family are well and it may be a long time before his enemies get him out of the Post Office.

From your affectionate son,



Image



Eugene E. Schmitz, Proclamation by the Mayor broadside, April 18, 1906. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC04967.01)