

An Earthshaking Event April 18, 1906

Account written by Roy Graves in July, 1959

My chore was to take the 5:30 AM train at San Rafael Depot for Sausalito where I had to get my engine ready to take out, the Cazadero train connecting with the ferry that left San Francisco at 7:45 AM.

Breakfast finished, prepared by my sister Clarice, I was adjusting my necktie in front of the bureau mirror when at 5:13 AM there was an ominous rumble followed by quite an earth shock. My father, who was still in bed, made a low whistle and said, "That was a beaut" when the real shock came that shook the house like a dog shaking a rabbit. The bureau walked out from the wall into the middle of the room. My sister started screaming but held onto a portable dish closet in the kitchen so that it would not tumble onto the floor thus saving the dishes. The cat that had been let in when we got up, made a dive for the door and was gone for a couple of days. My father tumbled out of bed and opened the front door of our cottage which was located in the rear of a house on Fourth Street in San Rafael where the elevated freeway now crosses Fourth Street. He stood on the porch in his nightgown and Mrs. Dwyer, who lived in the front house came out her back door in her nightgown and while the shake was still going on she called to my father, "Oh, Mr. Graves, sure you are out in your nightshirt." The poor German lady who lived next door, next to the creek, was in hysterics screaming her lungs out. My sister asked me to look at Mt. Tamalpais to make sure it was not erupting. I assured her it wasn't and then she said she would go next door and see if she could do anything for the hysterical woman. She walked over the fallen chimney that fell in our passageway to the street. I left then for the Union Depot a half block away on Tamalpais Avenue expecting to see the long shed, that was then the depot, collapsed; but there it stood staunch as ever. A long crack about four inches wide and about a half block long had opened up on west Tamalpais Avenue. I was surprised that the power to run the electric trains was still in service so the train left at 5:30 AM on time. At every stop between San Rafael and Corte Madera passengers getting on the train would have a general question to ask, "Did you feel that shake?" How could we help but to feel it? Many told tales of their own experiences.

The train ran along normally but would have to hesitate at every block signal, That was the only fault along the track as the bonds were probably broken and caused all the signals to be set at "Danger." But running on a double track it was permissible to proceed with caution. At the Corte Madera tunnel where the track converged to a single line, that was another question. It was then necessary to proceed the train with a Flagman through the tunnel. The Brakeman did not like the idea of going alone so one of the passengers and I volunteered to go through with him. This we did, and I many times have given thought to what reactions we would have had if another violent quake occurred while we were walking through that tunnel. Safely through, we waited for the train to catch up with us and after boarding we again switched onto the double track from the tunnel to Sausalito. After rounding the curve on the south of the tunnel and coming out of a bank, one of the passengers said, "Look at the fire in the 'City.' " (In those days San Francisco was always referred to as the "City.") It was a bright day, clear as a bell and the sun was now up. There was a column of smoke rising straight up from downtown San Francisco and as the train came out of the bank and a full view of the City could be seen, four more columns of smoke. The train slowed down at the roundhouse platform so that any enginemen who were going to work could get off. There was much talk at the roundhouse with

the night crew that was there during the quake. After getting my engine ready to go down to the Sausalito depot, we noticed that the side track we were on was rather crooked. On arriving at the depot, I noticed that the passengers who came down on my train from San Rafael were still milling around and were not allowed to board the boat as word had come through that the water supply had been cut off from San Francisco—the water mains having parted—and the City was doomed. That was then 8 o'clock and the boats coming over from SF were already crowded with refugees fleeing with what goods they could carry from the fire. There was no fare asked and everyone could travel to wherever they could find haven.

Our train left with a full load at 8:30 AM but only got as far as San Anselmo when we were annulled as word got through that a trestle had collapsed at Irvings near Camp Taylor, falling across the county road and thus tying up the railroad as well as the highway. A train at Point Reyes Station had turned completely over from the violent shake that occurred there. Our train was returned to Sausalito and that night I was assigned to a yard engine to do what switching was necessary. She was a woodburner, so after doing a little switching I could leave her with a small wood fire and go out on the Navy Landing at the depot and watch the progress of the fire in the City.

By that time all the downtown was ablaze and the heat rising from the fire forced huge amounts of cinders and burned paper to fall down all around us at Sausalito. The boats kept bringing the refugees over by the hundreds. Many camped out anywhere they could find by a water supply, but I never knew just where they all eventually landed.

The second evening of the fire, April 19th, I was again on duty with the woodburner. I stood on the dock and watched the fire come over Nob Hill; the new Fairmont Hotel was then ablaze. The fire rolled down to the north and I then knew that the house I was born in at Clay and Mason Streets was doomed. The scene was like looking at a city at sunset when all the windows would be aglow with the reflected setting sun. You could see the houses burst into flame and be consumed.

That evening after our little switching, we asked for passes to go through the fire lines in the City from the mayor of Sausalito who granted them to us. Taking the boat over we were the only ones aboard besides the crew. We were four in number. We went ashore in SF and walked around the fire lines to Harrison and Fremont Streets where we sat on the fence around the old "Sailor's Home" and watched the flames. St. Brendan's church was then all ablaze as well as everything in sight. It was now very dark and the only light was from the fire. There were several firemen with a hose that squirted water that was pumped from the bay two blocks away, but they only played the hose into a lot that was already burned out and I still think the poor devils were fast asleep from being on their feet for two days and nights.

We retraced our way to the Ferry building and there we witnessed a sight that has stood in my memory ever since. Under the nave in front of the building were hundreds of people, families that were camping there on cots, blankets, and whatever other covering that came to hand, on the concrete. There was left only room enough between families to allow a passageway to each of the ferry lines. The only illumination was from the fire uptown which was sporadic. First, total darkness as smoke obscured the flames and then a flash of red light as the fire would flare up. Seeing all those people with their crying children, some coughing with colds and whooping cough, and the low murmur of the

crowd put me in mind of the story of "The Last Days of Pompeii." We returned to Sausalito with many more on the boat than when we came over.

Friday evening it started to rain which added misery to misery to the refugees camped on the lots around Sausalito, but it greatly aided to put out the fire in the City. Many more tales I could tell of those days, but I think I should pull down the curtain on those fateful days of fifty-three (One Hundred) years ago. Roy D. Graves July 1959 }