



The view from a hot air balloon showing the extent of the destruction to the city by the earthquake and resulting fires.

# Great quake disaster pulls carriers together

**D**udley Cameron was apologetic.

In May 1906, the secretary for San Francisco Branch 214 confessed that up until April 18, he didn't think the branch had much to contribute to the pages of *The Postal Record*. "Now that we have something to say," he wrote, "the problem is what not to say."

Indisputably, Cameron had a great deal to tell. He was one of 300 letter carriers among the tens of thousands of Bay Area residents who faced the monumental challenge of "picking up the pieces" after the single worst natural disaster to hit the United States in the 20th century: the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

One hundred years later, on this April 18, Bay Area letter carriers will join millions of Northern Californians in commemorating the 7.8 magnitude quake that struck at 5:12 a.m., just as dawn was breaking. Violent shocks and strong shaking lasted nearly two minutes. The quake was felt from southern Oregon to south of Los Angeles and inland as far as central Nevada. In places the surface of the Earth shifted by eight feet.

According to modern reckoning, more than 3,000 people were killed by collapsing buildings, falling debris and the ensuing fires that destroyed

much of the city. The temblor ruptured underground gas pipes, many of which ignited, and broke underground water pipes, frustrating firefighters.

Only one letter carrier died during the disaster. Fred Stanley lived in the Brunswick Hotel in the city's Mission District and was killed when the building collapsed and burned. Of the carriers who survived, nearly half—around 150—were rendered homeless.

## Carriers save the mail

Amazingly, letter carriers reported to work shortly after the quake struck. Branch 214 member Conrad Trieber recounted his experiences at Station C, which was located at 20th and Mission St. "At the office, about thirty of a force of forty-six carriers reported on time and started to case their mail," he wrote in the May 1906 *Postal Record*.

It wasn't long, though, before the fires closed in. "(T)he clerk in charge ordered all hands to take their mail home with them," Trieber recalled. "Hastily tying the same in bundles and throwing them into our satchels, we departed."

Meanwhile, Cameron himself had arrived at Station C to battle the blaze as it advanced through the downtown area. The firefighting efforts proved futile, however, and the post office building was destroyed. (Station C, in fact, was the last building in the Mission District consumed by the flames.)

All told, the fires took several days to extinguish and leveled hundreds of city blocks. Afterward, "(t)he city was strictly under martial law; soldiers were everywhere in evidence," Cameron wrote. "Everybody (cooked) in the streets...and the little water obtainable (had) to be boiled before using."



Images of the aftermath, including the skeleton remains of the city hall (top).

With construction of the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges still 30 years away, those who wanted to flee across San Francisco Bay to Oakland had to crowd onto whatever boats would give them passage. An item from Oakland Branch 76—today part of Greater East Bay Merged Branch 1111—noted that Oakland’s population rose from 125,000 to 200,000 after the quake and the number of carriers shot up from 57 to 90.

## Generosity abounds

Responding to the tragedy, NALC President Jeremiah D. Holland of Boston used a letter in the *Record* to urge members to give “as liberally as our means will permit...for the benefit of those who have sustained losses by the awful calamity.” By August 1906, the San Francisco Relief Fund had collected more than \$5,000—over \$100,000 in today’s dollars.

Holland and other national officers met with Postmaster General George B. Cortelyou and California Sens. George Perkins and Frank Flint to secure some assurances that the nearly 200 Bay Area carriers displaced in the quake’s aftermath would not lose their jobs or their pay.

San Francisco Branch 214 President George Spiller was overwhelmed by all the support. “The generous response of the brothers all over the country has been deeply appreciated by all,” he wrote in the July 1906 *Postal Record*. “We sincerely hope that it will never again be necessary for any Branch to respond to a like appeal for aid.”

But that, unfortunately, was not to be: Over the next 100 years, carriers have been called upon time and again to help their

brothers and sisters following natural disasters, most recently Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Today, despite the continuing danger—illustrated most recently by the deadly “World Series” quake of October 1989—the Bay Area is a thriving metropolis. And if this unsigned June 1906 dispatch from a carrier from Santa Cruz, about 70 miles south of San Francisco, is any indication, the risk is offset by the benefits of living in the city by the bay:

“Those who want may have the East with its cold winters and hot summers and thunder storms and cyclones...but for me, give me beautiful California with its sunshine and flowers and earthquakes.

“An earthquake is different from a cyclone in that after it has passed you do not have to go to the next county on the east to get your threshing machine, or in some neighbor’s field twenty miles to the south to find your cow.” ✉



**Top: Citizens gather to look down Sacramento Street at the approaching fire.**

**Above: A stereoscope slide (a card placed into a viewer to give the illusion of three dimensions) of the makeshift post office.**