

# The History of St. Helena Hospital

## Chapter VII

### The Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 and St. Helena Sanitarium

Many residents of the great State of California were jolted awake at 5:13 a.m. on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April, 1906. Desolation, death and destruction undulated throughout the entire bay area, leaving a trail of devastation over 290 miles long through Mendocino, Sonoma, Napa, Marin, San Francisco, Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties. The extended shock waves were felt from Coos Bay, Oregon to Los Angeles and as far east as central Nevada.

The hardest hit area was, of course, the City of San Francisco. South of Market street the tenements collapsed as the ground liquefied beneath them. Fire broke out immediately and many of the trapped victims could not be rescued. Fire Chief engineer Dennis T. Sullivan was mortally wounded when the dome of the California theatre and Hotel crashed through the fire station at 410 Bush Street. Unfortunately, his death carried with him the knowledge of the locations of various water cisterns located throughout the city. Firemen were unable to quench the flames, since the quake ripped through water and gas lines. Fires broke out all over the city. It is reported the plumes of smoke could be seen as far as 100 miles away.

The Post Office at 7<sup>th</sup> and Mission Streets was destroyed, as was a good portion of City Hall. The American Hotel collapsed onto the fire station at the corner of Hawthorne and Howard, killing a fireman who was drawing water for the horses. Fire broke out at Hayes and Gough and became known as the “Ham and Egg” fire—it started when a woman turned on her stove to prepare breakfast. This conflagration consumed part of the Western Addition, City Hall, the Mechanics Pavilion, and then jumped Market Street at Ninth

In 1906 the Richter Scale had not been developed. Seismologists used the Rossi-Forel scale, which measured earthquakes on a scale of 1 to 10. The San Francisco temblor was rated as a 9: “an earthquake that throws down badly built buildings and gives the streets of the city a large amount of debris. It is as severe an earthquake as can be experienced without total destruction, without great yawning chasms and complete destruction of life and property.” Chimneys and smokestacks toppled, crumpling wood frame buildings into kindling. Walls were thrown into the streets and twisted steel rails and cast-iron pipes were twisted like pipe cleaners. All the churchbells in the city were ringing, as if to signal the arrival of doomsday.

Telephone and telegraph lines were down and martial law was declared. Mayor Schmitz sent a messenger to Fort Mason to request that General Funston send all available troops to report to the Hall of Justice. The Governor ordered boats and trains to be sent to the city to help evacuate those who had been left homeless by the shake. The U.S.S. Preble from Mare Island landed a hospital shore party at the foot of Howard to help the wounded and dying who sought help at Harbor Emergency Hospital. Other wounded were taken to Golden Gate Park, Children’s Hospital and the Presidio.

Damage estimates from the fire and earthquake were estimated to be around \$250,000,000. The loss of life is officially recorded at 478—at least that is how many bodies were recovered. No one knows how many were trapped and then burned in the conflagration. Thousands were homeless and fled to outlying areas for refuge. A massive relief effort was organized around the Bay Area and the nation. Secretary of War Taft ordered 200,000 rations to be sent to the stricken city, along with every available tent from Army posts on the West Coast.

The *St. Helena Star* reported that the shock was felt here with great force. Chimneys toppled

over and a number of homes and wineries were damaged. The greatest loss was sustained by Beringer Brothers, whose stone winery and distillery buildings were badly damaged. The Beringer home was also severely affected when the chimney fell through the roof. At Oakville, the Brun and Chaix celler, owned by the California Wine Association, lost 100,000 gallons of wine when the tanks were thrown from their skids and burst open. In Calistoga chimneys toppled over and several stone buildings were damaged. But for the most part, the Napa Valley was left pretty well intact.

The day after the quake, over a thousand refugees from the City were arrived in Napa by train, and 200 of those were sent to St. Helena. Tents were set up in Hunts Park, along with supplies of food and cooking pots and utensils to be used by the refugees. Farmers were asked to donate produce and supplies and wagonloads of food and baked goods were delivered to San Francisco. Women in Pope Valley sewed baby blankets from bolts of flannel and sent them to the emergency maternity hospital set up in the City.

In the Minutes of the Board of Directors of St. Helena Sanitarium, there are reports of minor damage to the San. At a meeting held on April 23, 1906, the report indicates there was some damage to the roof. However, Sanitarium President L.M. Bowen, in his report at the Annual meeting held on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1906, makes the following statement: “On the memorable April 18<sup>th</sup> the earthquake and the fire which followed entirely destroyed our San Francisco Branch (*health food store, café, and treatment rooms located on Market Street*). Our investment in this institution was about Three Thousand Dollars. The loss was total.”

From a statement made by President Bowen at the Annual Meeting held the following year on March 13, 1907, one might surmise that many of those affected emotionally and physically sought respite and treatment at the St. Helena Sanitarium. Consider this statement from his address to the constituency: “During the first five months of the year 1906 we cared for a daily average of 41 patients at the St. Helena Sanitarium. For the remaining seven months an average of 86 per day . . . The patients’ bills for the year amounted to \$86291.89 (sic) . . . The largest receipts for patients’ bills for any preceding year was \$54917.34 (sic); hence the year just past the institution did more business than in any other year in its history.”

He goes on to state that the “greatest difficulty that we have had to overcome during the past year has been that of securing sufficient help in the institution, and had it not been for the devotion of our faithful workers, we could not have met the requirements that were made upon us by the rapid increase of our patronage. Frequently we have been obliged to place beds in the parlors to accommodate the large numbers that applied to us.”

Hospitals all over California are currently undergoing seismic retrofitting, but our current Hospital building, constructed in 1948, was apparently so well-built that no major changes are required until the year 2030. Geological studies have shown that St. Helena Hospital is built on an ancient riverbed, with the underlying sedimentary layer serving as a very stable base, thus making the facility quite sound during an earthquake. Truly God had his hand in protecting the little hospital on the hill during the Great San Francisco Earthquake in 1906, as well as in the 1989 the Loma Preita quake.

Sources: The photos in this article were found in the Hospital’s archives along with the actual negatives. Other sources include: Museum of the City of San Francisco website; Exploratorium website; *St. Helena Star*, April 20 and 27, 1906, and the St. Helena Sanitarium Minutes of the Board of Directors, 1906 and 1907.