

Saints and the San Francisco Earthquake

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William G. Hartley

In mid-April 1906 about one hundred and twenty-five Latter-day Saints lived in San Francisco, the “Paris of the West,” whose hilly neighborhood straddled the San Andreas fault line. In addition, the city constantly drew visiting Saints—tourists, business people, travelers, and guests. LDS medical and university students were also temporary residents. The local branch had several dozen members scattered throughout the crowded city. The headquarters building for the California Mission, where President Joseph E. Robinson, his young family and several missionaries lived, stood at 609 Franklin Street—affectionately called “Six-Ought-Nine” by missionaries.¹

The dramatic experiences of the Saints who witnessed the terrible earthquake on 18 April 1906 became etched in memory but not written in the historical literature of Mormonism. The best surveys of LDS history in California, Dr. Eugene Campbell’s dissertation and Leo J. Muir’s two-volume history, give the earthquake only brief mention. To piece together the story of the Saints and the earthquake, this account draws from materials published in 1906, from contemporary diaries and correspondence, and from oral and written reminiscences by Saints who were there.²

The Pre-Earthquake Conference

Upon his return from the April 1906 LDS general conference in Salt Lake City, President Robinson called a California Mission conference, which took place at “609” on Sunday and Monday, 15 and 16 April. The conference provided Saints a spiritual “high” barely before tragedy taxed their inner reserves. “The Lord . . . poured out His Holy Spirit in rich abundance and power at our meetings,” President Robinson reported to LDS Church President Joseph F. Smith; “it is seldom that I have seen more love, humility, and trust manifested.”³ When President Robinson arose to conclude the meetings late Monday afternoon, he closed by quoting prophecies about the last days, including Luke 21 in which Jesus warns of wars, pestilences, and *earthquakes* in divers places. The meaning of that scripture became much clearer to him two days later.⁴

“Six-Ought-Nine” hosted one last gathering before its Wednesday destruction, a Mutual Improvement Association social on Tuesday night to conclude the mission conference. In attendance were missionaries, San

Francisco Branch members, and LDS visitors to the city, including former Apostle Matthias Cowley and wife Nora, and Bishop John R. Welker from Arizona.⁵ Also joining the party were five Elders bound for Samoa and Australia: Leo L. Gardner, William Keison, R. S. Rimington, Mark Hardman, and Alex Layton. The five had arrived in the city that afternoon, left their baggage at the train depot to be transferred to a steamship wharf, and checked into a local Hotel.⁶

Although the social lasted until after midnight, Elder J. R. Shepherd was called upon at 10:00 to offer a family prayer for the group. He prayed that something awful would happen to wake up San Francisco and make it receptive to the gospel. President Robinson and Elder Cowley could not say “amen” and told the elder it was not right to “pray for trouble.” The next morning, after the earthquake, the Robinsons had to comfort the elder and convince him that his prayer had not caused the disaster.⁷

At the social the Saints were encouraged to attend a branch picnic to be held the following day at Golden Gate Park. Then, leaving “609,” the Cowleys, Bishop Welker, the Pacific elders, and other guests and missionaries returned to their hotels or rented rooms throughout the city. About twenty missionaries spent the night at “609.”⁸

The Earthquake

Early Wednesday morning, 18 April, while most of the Saints slept, two former Utahns worked. Race Whitney and Wally Young, newspapermen with the *San Francisco Chronicle*, finished an article for a morning deadline. When they stepped from the *Chronicle* office and walked on Eddy Street toward their hotels, they noticed the eastern horizon above Oakland, across San Francisco Bay, turning blue and the San Francisco streetlights dimming for the expected sunrise.

Suddenly, at 5:13 A.M., they heard a deep rumbling in the distance, then a concussive sound. The streets and buildings started to move and shudder, and power lines and cable car tracks jerked and swayed. They heard the creaking, grinding and splintering of wooden buildings. Brick chimneys and walls crashed through roofs and tumbled to sidewalks. “We were standing in the front of the Auditorium Hotel [113 Eddy Street] when the crash came,” Race wrote to his Apostle-father, Orson F. Whitney. “Instinctively we started for the middle of the street, and where we had stood less than one second before, there was a pile of bricks seven feet high.” Then, spreading their legs apart for balance, they waddle-ran sixty feet, barely outdistancing four more stories of the hotel that tumbled down. Surviving the hotel’s collapse was their first miracle that morning. Wally moved into the middle of the street for safety, but then Race yelled to him and pointed to a dangling mass of waving electric wires overhead. Wally jumped

to the sidewalk while “the wires came down; sputtering and tearing up everything they touched. That we were not both electrocuted was the second miracle of the morning,” Race wrote. Astounded by what was happening to their city, the two wondered if perhaps they were the only newspaper reporters to be witnessing the sudden devastation.⁹

A massive tear in the earth’s crust had moved across the Pacific Ocean floor at a speed of two miles per second, or 7000 miles per hour, and struck the California coast ninety miles north of San Francisco. Following the San Andreas fault, it wrecked Fort Bragg, ripped south and demolished forests of redwoods, shifted billions of tons of earth, collapsed the Russian church at Fort Ross, destroyed the city of Santa Rosa, cracked through San Francisco, made shambles of Stanford University at Palo Alto, jarred San Jose, destroyed the state insane asylum at Agnew, and sped south to Salinas. The quake shook a path of destruction twenty to forty miles wide and two hundred miles long. As instant furrows showed, the surfaces along the crack line sometimes shifted twenty feet apart. The quake rated 6.3 on the Richter scale.¹⁰

The first quaking lasted forty seconds, but it seemed longer than that to the two reporters. Then, after a ten second pause, the quake resumed for another twenty-five seconds. Thirteen minutes later came the first of several strong aftershocks. During the quake the city resembled “a terrier shaking a rat.”¹¹ The earth sometimes rose three feet, streets cracked open, water and gas poured up from holes in the ground, and church bells jangled with abandon.¹²

Florence Hill, a Latter-day Saint who lived outside the city’s center, was asleep when the earthquake hit:

I cannot describe the feeling that came over me as the earth began to rock and the house to grind and twist. The bed was a toy tossed about by unseen hands. I lay staring at the ceiling, expecting every instant to see the walls crashing about me . . . I knew not where to go for one place seemed just as safe another. A rumbling, roaring noise added to the horror.¹³

The Ernst J. Broberg family, members of the local branch, lived on the second floor of a row-house near Golden Gate Park. When the quaking commenced, Mrs. Broberg rushed from her bed to stand under a door-frame for protection. She held their three-month-old baby, and her five- and three-year-old boys clung tightly to her legs. The boys, Wally and Todd, remembered for the rest of their lives that moment when they saw pans flying off the stove, cupboard doors flapping wildly, and groceries and dishes tumbling to the floor.¹⁴

“Six-Ought-Nine,” three stories high, rocked as though shoved by “a giant’s mighty hand.” “I was awakened by a most terrible and horrible rending and tearing sound,” President Robinson said, “and the house at

once began to sway and rock as though it would be dashed to the ground.” He called to his crying daughters to be calm and then “a more terrific shake came and I jumped out of bed to the middle of the room” but “by this time I could scarcely keep my feet.” He noticed “a haze, brown-like, seemed to darken the room, while the building groaned with rending and twisting.” Chimney bricks burst through the ceiling in another room. In the parlor the mantle and fireplace and a candelabra crashed to the floor. Finally, when “609” stopped shaking, President Robinson reached and comforted his terrified children. The mission home survived the quake with but slight damage.¹⁵

Looking out through a window he saw three dogs, tails tucked, trying to gain entry into any building, and a bewildered old man leaning on his cane in the middle of McAllister Street with his legs wide apart. “Then like a flash the street was full of people, most of them in their night clothes,” President Robinson said. The sidewalk beside “609” “was covered with a great heap of bricks from the chimney of the house south of us.” Broken glass was everywhere. President Robinson climbed into bed with his children to calm them.¹⁶

Mrs. Robinson noticed something ominous: “Papa, there are fires breaking out down town. Great clouds of smoke are rolling up everywhere!” “Papa” Robinson dressed quickly and went outside. He saw a fire burning three blocks uphill (west) from “609” on Golden Gate Avenue and another one three blocks south near Octavia and Fell streets. He rushed back into “609” and instructed Elder A. T. McCarty, the mission secretary, to pack up the mission records in case the fires spread. Someone tried the home’s water faucets, and no water came—the city’s water mains had broken.¹⁷

President Robinson worried about his missionaries, the branch members, and Saints scattered around the city. He felt official church responsibility for the welfare of all Mormons in the area.

Meanwhile, the first earthquake barely disturbed the sleep of the five Pacific-bound elders, even Elder Leo Gardner who slept with an arm draped on the sill of an open window. The previous day’s travel and late night party made them too tired to react. They were lodged in two rooms on the third floor of a five-story brick hotel. When noise down in the street became too disturbing, Elder Gardner peered out and saw people running in all directions and buildings collapsing amid dust and smoke. He and the four other dressed leisurely to go out and investigate. They had trouble prying their door open and then found “the hall was completely covered with plaster and rubbish.” They picked their way downstairs and then outside. There they discovered that the front and back brick walls of the hotel had sluffed off, creating giant rubble heaps on the ground. A crowd in the street “all seemed to be going in one direction,” so the elders joined the

stream. "It was just a mob of people in panic," Elder Gardner commented. Then, fearing their luggage might be in danger, they hiked to the train depot. The baggage agent said their trunks had been moved across the street to a warehouse then engulfed in flames. Two disappointed elders threw away their baggage claim tickets, but Elder Gardner picked them up, just in case.¹⁸

The five elders, strangers in the large, broken city, walked back to their hotel. This was about 8 A.M. Suddenly, an aftershock hit while they were in a narrow alley, showering down bricks and chunks of wood. Unhurt, they entered their damaged hotel, returned to their rooms, and, Elder Gardner said, "to our great astonishment we discovered that the two rooms which we five missionaries had slept in were the only two rooms in the entire building which were intact. There was not even so much as the plaster knocked off the ceiling of either room." Collecting their few belongings, they left the battered hotel and hiked to "609."¹⁹

"My room was the only undamaged one" stories became commonplace in the city and among the Saints. Sister E. Wolfinger, a young LDS nurse at French Hospital, reported that all of the hospital's rooms were damaged except the one where she was on duty. (After the quake she helped evacuate patients to tents in a nearby lot.) Elders E. H. Clark and S. A. Bunnell, lodged across the street from "609" at 606 Franklin Street, left their undamaged room only to find their building filled with cracks and broken plaster. "You Mormons got off easy," the proprietor told them.²⁰

Elders looking for Matthias Cowley found his Market Street hotel terribly damaged. "You are lucky to be alive," rescuers told Elder Cowley while helping him down an outside ladder. He said his own room was undamaged, not even a crack in the ceiling. When he reached "609" he told the Saints that he was not harmed because "I dedicated my room to the Lord last night." One amazed listener, six-year-old Inez Robinson, later said this was her "first testimony of prayer."²¹

Gradually several Saints from throughout the city collected at "609," including Bishop Welker and Sister Nash Rowlands, who was "terribly frightened—hair full of plaster." By midmorning the Pacific-bound elders as well as the Cowleys had reached the mission home. Sister Robinson fed the excited group some sandwiches and, because there was no water, the thirsty received bottled fruit and juice. President Robinson divided his missionaries and the Pacific elders into teams and sent them out to check on San Francisco Branch members. He visited a Hooper family and found the children upset. He administered to Sister Hooper, bedfast with rheumatism, and "she arose and dressed and was made whole" for the moment. Before noon the teams returned and reported. "I was thankful to my Heavenly Father to find all well so far as we could learn, and we heard from nearly all of them," the president said.²²

The horrible stories the Saints heard about looters and pillagers marauding in their direction added to the Saints' fears. Brother Ernst Broberg, an American National Bank cashier who had just inspected his downtown bank and was carrying a gun, told President Robinson to arm himself "for the denizens of the Barbary Coast were coming up town before the flames, drinking, cursing, pillaging, and demonlike committing all kinds of abuses and wickedness. There was no law or order." Militia soon appeared on the streets, "young and untried boys," according to the worried mission president. He felt much better later in the morning when General Frederick Funston, recently returned from military duty in the Philippines and commander of two thousand troops at the city's Presidio garrison, began patrolling with "soldiers of experience." When the troops "with bugle calling and flag flying" rode down Golden Gate Avenue, a block from "609," President Robinson "wept for joy because I felt now the dread we had anticipated from Brother Broberg's warning was passed. The civil and federal authorities were getting the situation in hand."²³

Having viewed nearby damage, heard wild rumors, and watched the sky fill with smoke, Saints at "609" became curious to see more of the incredible disaster. So they explored nearby neighborhoods, ruining their shoes on streets and sidewalks covered with broken bricks, boards, cement, and glass. Streetcars, their tracks twisted, severed, and blocked, could not run. Many houses tilted on twisted frames. The roaming Saints encountered shifting hordes of curiosity seekers and people fleeing fires which burned freely in several neighborhoods because firemen could pump no water from broken city water mains. "The sun looked like a huge ball—blood red—through the heavy smoke," President Robinson said. "As I noted the havoc wrought by the seismic force," he recalled, "I thought what poor, impotent things we are compared with the powers of the Infinite One. Here I could see how mountains shall rise and sink as He wills."²⁴

The Saints learned, some the hard way, that martial law had been declared to prevent looting and to force-enlist laborers to aid the rescue crews. The militia had strict orders to shoot suspicious looking characters. Even shop owners could not enter their own shops nor grocers give away their own food.²⁵ According to Elder Gardner, a police officer stopped him and six other elders at gunpoint and "ordered us all into a basement and to help clear out the rocks and brick" and to look for survivors. They found no one, dead or alive, but saw bodies being pulled from nearby buildings.²⁶

The Death of "609"

The morning fires near "609" were contained. But about 11 A.M., less than four blocks away, a woman tried to cook breakfast, and her chimney flue caught fire. Firemen were too busy elsewhere to respond to this new

fire, now known as the famous “Ham and Eggs Fire.” It spread slowly toward “609.” By midafternoon the Saints knew they must evacuate the mission home. Quick-thinking Sister Robinson had visited the nearby grocery when it opened that morning and bought loaves of bread and then, before the Saints deserted “609,” she packed up “a good basketful” of food to take along.²⁷

In the early afternoon, firemen came to “609” and ordered everyone out. The mission home stood in a block being dynamited to stop the “Ham and Eggs Fire.” Before leaving “609,” Elder Cowley led the Saints in a prayer for safety, and then the group hauled into the street about two dozen trunks, bedding, mission records, carpets, furniture, and the hand organ which the city’s mayor, Eugene Schmidt, had recently donated to the branch. President Robinson said they had a “strenuous time” emptying the home before the dynamiters arrived. To transport the piles of belongings, he flagged down two horse-drawn carts and willingly paid exorbitant fees demanded by the drivers. The “609” group, meanwhile, carrying trunks and loose belongings, joined their neighborhood’s evacuation uphill and north two blocks and west one to Jefferson Park, a full city block of open space that became an instant refugee center. Carpets helped wall and roof in their possessions, giving a few lucky Saints some privacy and shelter that night.²⁸

About 4 P.M., “609” was partly blown up by demolition teams. The rampaging fires then burned what was left of it. But the sacrifice paid off, and that flank of the fire line did not spread beyond the block where “609” had stood.

“That Terrible Wednesday”

Wednesday, 18 April 1906, was perhaps the longest day in San Francisco’s history. During the long afternoon, unstoppable fires forced thousands of frightened people to flee to safety. Streams of people pooled in the city’s open areas—vacant lots, public parks, cemeteries, and military bases. Mayor Schmidt appointed relief committees with authority to draft laborers to create needed medical, sanitary, cooking, and camping centers.

Lorenzo Lamont Snow, visiting the city, was lodged at the Graystone Hotel when the quake shook him awake. Forcing his jammed door open, he rushed into the crowd outside the hotel. “We were driven hither and thither by the fire,” he said. Unable to reenter the hotel before it burned down, he lost \$200 and all personal effects. From then until 4 A.M. the next day he labored with city work crews.²⁹

LDS medical student Parley Pratt Musser, with his wife and baby, lived in a four-story apartment house at 915 Minna Street in the South-of-Market section. The tenants deserted the building after the initial quake, but Martha Musser handed the baby to Parley and said she would join them outside. Smelling gas, she found a wrench and bravely descended

into the dark basement where, riding out three aftershocks, she turned off about thirty gas meters to the many apartments. When safely outside, she and Parley decided to save their household belongings despite approaching fires. Into deserted street they hauled a 150 pound trunk. Parley's medical library bundled in a blanket, and two canaries. After one hour of back-breaking retreat, they were trapped by drifting smoke and advancing flames. Parley found some soft dirt and a tin bucket, dug a hole, and buried his books. Fleeing unbearable heat, they hiked two more miles before finding safety. Then Parley, although exhausted, saw that his medical skills were needed, so he spent thirty consecutive hours dressing wounds and burns at an emergency hospital. Later he rescued his buried books, and on Saturday the family boarded a boat for Oakland.³⁰

A seventeen-year-old Mormon, Harold Jenson, whose rewritten diary entry³¹ of first-person accounts of a San Franciscan's experiences that disastrous Wednesday, helped his family barely escape from morning fires sweeping the area south of Market Street. His father, a tailor, pulled a hand truck carrying a trunk, loaded with tools and clothes, that "weighed a ton." Harold's mother pushed her husband's wheeled sewing machine. Harold, his pockets full of small items, pushed his "wheel" (bicycle) on which were strapped a harp, two mattresses, and a bundle of belongings. The sidewalks—old, torn up, and "mostly wooden"—made progress slow as they moved south and then west, making a sweeping "U" to skirt and parallel the westward spreading fires.

The diary indicates that near Brannan and Sixth streets, Harold's father became exhausted and stopped to rest. Fires burned within a hundred yards of them, and the family wondered, "Would we beat the fire?" When soldiers ordered everyone to move on before they dynamited the block, the father shook his head and murmured he could go no farther. Said Harold:

At that moment in my desire to get him out of the way, I was gifted with the strength of a Sampson, and how I thanked God after, that He had guided me from bad habits and also for the wonderful strength He gave me that day. On the impulse of the moment I picked him up as though he were but a mere child and sat him in the truck against the trunk. I got hold of the handles again and the big load seemed light as I wheeled it across the street and for half a block, while mother was close behind me wheeling the sewing machine.

Harold wrote that while dynamite concussions shattered windows next to them, they "struggled and pushed" their way through the crowd. They managed to hire "an old wagon ready to fall to pieces," but even with it they moved slowly, having to dodge trunks, pianos, and furniture "strewn all over the street." Their course was west on Fourteenth Street and north on Valencia. Near Market Street they avoided "soldiers who were confiscating all wagons," and turned west to Octavia, then north. Reaching Golden

Gate Avenue, they found “a long train of wagons there in front as well as behind us.” They skirted Jefferson Square—“one great mass of furniture and humanity”—hours before the “609” staff moved there. Joining the Hooper family, also LDS, they went up Turk Street to Fillmore, north to O’Farrell, and south on Divisadero to McAllister. Atop McAllister Hill, Harold said, “We got a splendid view of the burning city. All was, fire, oh God how our beautiful San Francisco did burn.”

According to Harold’s diary, the Jensons continued west and then south across Golden Gate Park. By midnight they reached a ranch outside the city, but they could still see “the awful red sky” and hear “the reports of dynamiting.” They gathered in the house “and a prayer was offered up to God for our deliverance and thanked Him for His protection and also for our city and its suffering thousands.” Harold “tried to sleep but only a nightmare came; I dreamed I was in a burning building with no chance to escape.”

Fires near Market Street also forced Utah artist John Willard (Will) Clawson and family from their home. Clawson’s studio was gutted and fires destroyed their priceless art treasures and household belongings.³²

Toward evening, the hotel where reporter Wally Young had been lodged caught fire, destroying his furniture and trunks. Race Whitney knew that his hotel, the Rex, at 242 Turk Street, was doomed as well; so the two newspapermen packed Race’s trunks, grips, and typewriter and took them down to the sidewalk. “While in the hotel,” Race recalled, “we helped some women to get out their traps [personal belongings], and Wally went to help them into a place of safety.” When he returned, word came that the hotel would be dynamited in fifteen minutes, so, Race said, “I lugged my goods for a couple of blocks and finally secured an expressman to haul them a half mile further beyond the fire lines.” He finally camped Wednesday night at a cemetery. Meanwhile, Wally Young found passage on a boat to Oakland where he helped publish a special earthquake edition of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.³³

Rumors compounded the terror of the day. The quake had severed San Francisco’s telephone and telegraph connections with the rest of the world, so Saint and gentile alike had no way to know how true stories were about Chicago sinking into Lake Michigan, New York and Los Angeles being destroyed, and Salt Lake City being inundated by the Great Salt Lake.³⁴

When nighttime drew Wednesday to a close, people could not sleep due to excitement and fear. Near dusk President Robinson moved his family and others from Jefferson Square. He took Bishop Welker, who was recovering from an operation, two or three expectant mothers, and the Cowleys to Sister Vandenberg Spurrier’s home at 440 Broderick Street. Mr. Spurrier, a professed atheist who had treated President Robinson coldly before, welcomed him into the home, shook his hand, and rejoiced:

“Thank God, now we are safe!”—a strange utterance for an infidel, President Robinson observed.³⁵

Many Saints, including the Pacific elders, spent Wednesday night at the Mormon camp in Jefferson Park. “It was a real trial”, Elder Gardner said, “to endure our thirst and to go without washing our faces and hands which were getting blacker with the dust and smoke”. He added that “there wasn’t much sleep that night.” The spreading fires lit up the horizon for miles around and there was no need for lamps or candles.³⁶ “During the night, President Robinson said, “we would go occasionally to watch the progress of the fire, which grew longer on its front line and came nearer.” Mrs. Robinson had a small child, and the family spent a cold night sleeping on the grass.³⁷

Thursday and Friday of Fires

Wednesday’s fires burned most of the South-of-Market section and the business district. On Thursday, “miles of flames” burned northward, eastward, and southwest into the Mission District. Smoke billowed two miles high and clouded the city. Van Ness Avenue became the battle line, and firemen and dynamiters succeeded by early Friday in holding the fire line near there. On Friday, crackling flames fed hungrily between Russian and Telegraph hills and moved northeast to torch North Beach neighborhoods. By early Saturday morning, fireboats doused the last fires along the bay.

To escape the spreading fires, refugees moved again and again to find safety. Vehicles were scarce. Men, women, and children swarmed up and down San Francisco’s hilly streets, a scene President Robinson described:

People were moving out of the doomed district by the thousands, dragging trunks too heavy for the strength of the infirm and weak. Improvised vehicles were made of cots, lounges, baby buggies, etc. Heavy bundles were carried by children and weak women, whose tear-stained faces and terror stricken countenances revealed the nature of their minds and souls. Some in grim humor joked, others were hysterical, some apathetic, others beside themselves with fear or anguish. I saw some who were drunken, or overcome with fatigue, laying on the hard sidewalks, near the fire line, oblivious to all their surroundings and wrapped in the deepest sleep. These would be awakened by the soldiers and almost prodded back to safety.

He thought it was wrong for people to worry more about pets than children, food, and clothes. Some inconsiderate souls, he noted, “called people uncharitable who would not share their last blanket or crumbs of bread with them to cover or feed their measly dogs or parrots.”³⁸

In addition to Parley Pratt Musser’s medical service, several Mormon men helped during the catastrophe, not always voluntarily. Civil officers commandeered manpower as needed, sometimes at gunpoint, to distribute food, dig sanitary trenches, set up kitchens and bakeries, clear streets,

drive vehicles, search for and remove the injured or dead, and fight fires. Among California Mission elders pressed into service were Elders A. T. McCarty (dispensing food), A. H. Clark and A. G. Benson (clearing rubble and building bakeries), John Nelson (pick and shovel work clearing streets), and J. R. Shepherd, who had prayed for trouble to strike the city (two nights working on fire engine detail).³⁹

On Thursday morning the Pacific elders joined one of the great bread lines (four people abreast and many blocks long), and obtained two or three loaves each. Needing a change of clothing, if it could be salvaged, they returned to the railroad depot where they found only piles of charred luggage and assumed theirs had burned too. Walking back toward Jefferson Park they entered a large grocery store about to be razed, and, by police permission, filled their pockets and arms with canned goods and other food. They showed their groceries at the Mormon camp and then returned to the store for more, taking other Saints along. Inside, Elders Gardner and Franklin Badger froze when an armed officer first ordered everyone out and then shot and killed the man standing beside them. Dropping their baskets and raising both hands over their heads, the elders rushed out, "glad to get out with our lives," Elder Gardner said. They then discovered they had entered the wrong store by mistake.⁴⁰

On Thursday the main Mormon camp at Jefferson Park, including President Robinson, moved to Golden Gate Park, fifteen blocks away. Someone noted that the branch was having its Golden Gate Park "picnic" after all, although a day late. A few Saints, however, stayed at Jefferson Square, where, President Robinson noted, "the sanitary conditions are exceedingly bad because of the lack of care and water to flush sewers." Some families, in their efforts to move household belongings from the fire zones, became separated. To help Saints find each other, President Robinson posted a sign in the "609" ashes informing the members about the LDS camp relocations. Thousands of San Franciscans, including some Saints, crossed the bay to Oakland where refugee camps and relocation centers sprang up.⁴¹ After earthquake tremors subsided and fire paths were scrutinized, Saints whose homes seemed safe, perhaps a dozen places total, opened them up to their church brothers and sisters. On Friday, with fires still burning, President Robinson "visited the Saints" and then in the evening moved his belongings to the Broberg's row-house, near Golden Gate Park, where he, the Wolfinger family, and some elders slept that night.⁴²

On Friday, fires spread to the Russian Hill area. Among homes incinerated was that of Ina Coolbrith, a Mormon by birth but not by baptism or affiliation. Born Josephine Donna Smith in Nauvoo, she was a niece of Joseph Smith, after whom she was named, but kept her Mormon background secret. By 1906 she was already a highly regarded and dearly loved

poet (in 1915 she was named Poet Laureate of California). Burned with the house were many of her writings and her personal library of books. Today, Coolbrith Park marks the spot where her house stood, a memorial to her poetic achievements.⁴³

Immediate LDS Assistance

News of the San Francisco catastrophe shook Utahns. Starting the morning of the quake, crowds collected to eagerly scan each new bulletin hand-posted on bulletin boards or in sidewalk windows of the local newspaper offices. Those with relatives or loved ones in San Francisco anxiously looked for mention of names in the bulletins. Within twenty-four hours after the earthquake, Utahns were receiving accurate information about the welfare of the Mormons in San Francisco. Early Thursday morning President Robinson had sent elders across the bay to Oakland to telegraph President Joseph F. Smith, and soon the General Authorities and then Utah Saints heard the glad message: “Lives of Members and Elders Safe Mission Home Burned Loss Nominal Elders enroute to Islands, with us.” Gradually letters reached Utahns from San Francisco as postal authorities forwarded messages, on paper or shingles or anything similar, without requiring postage stamps or envelopes.⁴⁴

LDS and Utah government officials took immediate steps to send relief supplies to San Francisco. On 19 April, Thursday, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve met and agreed to send \$10,000 to California Governor George C. Pardee for the general relief of earthquake victims.⁴⁵ General Relief Society officers “came with all haste” to a meeting called by President Bathsheba W. Smith in Salt Lake City. They contacted railroad men, secured space on a train car, and arranged for a load of flour to fill the car. They purchased ready-made clothing and bedding at ZCMI. “All day and far into the night the sisters worked faithfully, going themselves to the depot to see that the things were packed carefully in the car,” the General Board minutes note.⁴⁶ The women leaders also spearheaded “systematic work in the nearby stakes and wards,” thus producing a supply of goods and money very quickly—along with a storage problem. Society officers contacted architect Don Carlos Young, who let them stack materials in his office in the downtown Templeton Building.⁴⁷ By late Wednesday the Society had shipped one carload and “several parts of carloads” in the care of the Red Cross. During subsequent days they sent linens, hospital supplies, layettes, and bedding, including about 350 quilts and blankets. One stake’s Relief Society labored a long day and night to finish and send off ninety-three quilts.⁴⁸

In Salt Lake City, wards were asked to bake bread. Bishop Joseph Christenson of the Tenth Ward, in his diary, noted his ward’s response: “April 20:

Got word that bread was needed in San Francisco. Had Joseph [his son] and some of the boys notify the people. All seemed willing to bake bread for the hungry.” The next day he wrote: “Today we gathered the bread and took it down to the depot. We had two wagon loads, also two big bundles of bedding, gathered by the Relief Society.”⁴⁹ Other wards responded similarly, including one that donated 500 loaves of freshly baked bread. One woman wrapped her loaves in oil tissue paper to keep the bread from drying out, tucked in notes asking for recipients to write to her about the disaster, and received answers, including one from a person living on Utah Street in San Francisco.⁵⁰

Within a few weeks Utahns had shipped dozens of train-car loads of food and supplies to San Francisco. Utahns also supported a benefit concert performed by the Tabernacle Choir and the U.S. Army Band from Fort Douglas. When railroads provided free rides to quake victims, hundreds headed east, making overnight stops in Utah. There, local people provided the refugees free lodging, meals, clothes, and baths. Appreciated the most, apparently, were the baths. Utahns’ money donations for earthquake relief purposes exceeded \$100,000 by early summer.⁵¹

Aftermath

On Saturday, 21 April, the Pacific elders moved to a hotel in Oakland. “What a relief it was to get in contact with some water once more and wash ourselves for the first time in four days,” Elder Gardner said. They ate their first good supper in days and slept well in real beds. However, Elder Gardner awoke in the middle of the night when “a strong impression came to me that our baggage was not burned.” So he arose, dressed, visited Oakland’s city hall, waited three hours in line, obtained a permit to cross the bay, ate breakfast, and then rode a ferry to San Francisco and visited the train station. “What in the hell do you want now?” the angry baggage man demanded. Elder Gardner insisted on examining the baggage room and the man finally consented. The minute the door opened the elder spied his trunk in the middle of the room “with all the baggage of the other four boys piled around it.” Even boxes of books and literature the Church was sending with the elders for the Hawaii Mission were there. Elder Gardner produced all the needed baggage claim tags, and the agent marked “hold” on the items with red crayon. The elder ferried back to Oakland “with a light and happy heart,” where his companions hardly believed his news.⁵²

The next day the five crossed the bay and found that none of their personal effects was missing. They managed to move their baggage to the wharf, hoping to sail soon, but their ship delayed its departure. “We were heart sick as none of us had money to stay in California that long,” Elder Gardner recalled. “We wondered if we should return to our homes in Utah.”

While debating what to do, they watched a large crane loading crates into a boat, and one crate broke open and scattered oranges on the wharf. A man motioned for the elders to help themselves. "Never did oranges taste so good before or since," one said. The elders returned to Oakland until 29 April, when four of the five sailed on the *Alameda*.⁵³

On Saturday, 21 April, many Saints and elders, including the Robinsons, moved to Oakland. That day President Robinson wrote to LDS President Joseph F. Smith: "We are all quite well but worn and weary through watching and labor." Because several families lost almost all they possessed and "will need some assistance," he requested that President Smith send \$1500 to \$2000 to help the Saints. By 22 April he obtained a permit excusing him from forced labor details, letting him move freely into and out of San Francisco to shepherd his flock. Each day he carried two suitcases filled with bread to San Francisco and distributed it to "the women and children in greatest need in four parks we visited." During the week after 21 April his main task was shuttling between Oakland and San Francisco trying to reunite LDS families fragmented by the quake and fires. "Family separations worried me more than the fire and its attendant discomforts," he said.⁵⁴

By 24 April, half the elders of the California Mission left San Francisco to return to their normal fields of labor, and half stayed to help the relief effort. One week after the earthquake, on 25 April, Race Whitney wrote a newsy letter about San Francisco conditions to his Apostle-father. "The people here are in a state of panic," he began. "The city is under martial law. Over 50,000 people are camping in the streets and public parks, weather cold, provisions dealt out by the government, one can at a time, one load at a time, and an occasional smaking of butter, meat and sugar." Although trainloads of supplies were arriving, the main problem was "how to get it to the people with the limited number of teams at the disposal of the relief forces." The sewer system was wrecked, he said, and "Garbage holes and closets have been bug in the middle of the principal streets by the score." One striking feature of the calamity, he decided, was the equalizing the disaster caused:

Men who were in affluent circumstances a week ago, today are on a level with the humblest laborer. I have seen multi-millionaires dressed in long frock coats and silk hats—all they saved, perhaps, standing in a line two blocks long, behind Chinese or Italian laborers, waiting their loaf of bread. . . . "We are all even now," they say, "we'll start again and see who gets the money."⁵⁵

On 25 April *Deseret News* special correspondent George C. Carpenter took a twelve-mile walking tour of the charred city. He described the area between where City Hall and "609" had been as "ash heaps." All that remained of "609" was part of an iron fence, a bathtub, and a half-burned telephone pole "to which was tacked the cards of several elders and notice

to latter-day Saints to gather at Jefferson Park.” From ashes of “609” he picked up two heat-warped spoons as souvenirs. He then visited Saints staying at the Spurriers’ home, Golden Gate Park, and the William P. Wolfinger residence. The latter had become the temporary mission headquarters for elders still in the city, and there he found thirteen elders “well, safe, and happy” and affirming “they would not have missed the experience for anything.” Carpenter established a *Deseret News* information bureau where Utahns could register. He reported that 122 Saints and elders had been in the city when the quake struck. During the next days he cabled names of Utahns to Utah so people back home could know who was safe. Survivors, he noted, attributed the fact that no Latter-day Saints were killed or injured to “the intervening hand of the Almighty.”⁵⁶

General Authorities decided to help a non-Mormon quake victim and friend of the Church, Dr. Winslow Anderson, a prominent surgeon. They sent him \$500 to replace scientific materials he lost when his sanitarium and office were burned. He was a man “so kind to my family and the saints,” President Robinson observed.⁵⁷

Aid continued to reach President Robinson for Saints in need. The Relief Society in the Hawaii Mission sent \$50. Other Saints and friends sent money, clothing, and writing materials. Because of George Carpenter’s articles in the *Deseret News*, President Robinson noted, “one little crippled sister of Salt Lake City sent me a pair of shoes and hose because she read . . . of my much walking. The shoes were a perfect fit and good.” Eight days after the quake, President Robinson received \$1500 from Church headquarters. He tapped \$500 of it, and he sent or took checks for \$10 and \$25 to “several of the Saints in need.” During the next several weeks he disbursed another \$250 from the fund, along with \$250 from other donations. On 28 June, two months after the disaster, he reported that some San Francisco Saints were still living in tents. The “Paris of the West” had become a tent city.⁵⁸

Setbacks for Mission and Branch

For reasons not spelled out, President Robinson decided to move the California Mission headquarters out of San Francisco to Los Angeles. Probably, like many others who experienced the 18 April disaster, he worried that the city would have similar quakes in the future. He moved his family to Los Angeles on 28 April, the second Saturday after the earthquake, and initiated the construction of a new mission home there. He left San Francisco “glad to know we had warned the city and discharged our obligations as ‘ambassadors of truth.’” Regarding missionary labors in San Francisco, he concluded that “our most promising and largest fields is now wiped out” and asked General Authorities to send no new missionaries to

his mission. The weekend after moving to Los Angeles, he returned to San Francisco “and was engaged there for some time helping the Saints readjust themselves, etc., and in disbursing the funds in my hands to those in need.” Then he assumed residency in Los Angeles.⁵⁹

Like the mission, the San Francisco Branch suffered long-term damages. The quake destroyed its rented meetinghouse, which probably was the Red Man’s hall at 220 Golden Gate Avenue. Many members faced severe personal property losses. Branch President Justus Swanson, the Oscar Jensen family (including teenage diarist Harold), and a family named Hughes lost their homes. Ardella Cummings lost \$2000 worth of belongings. “We did think the fire would come up to us,” she lamented, “all we could do was take some clothing and walk out of our house and let it burn down.” Artist Will Clawson lost his house and studio, including twenty portraits valued at \$50,00. Brother Hooper, with a family of nine depending on him for support, lost his tools valued at \$200. Several LDS women in the city had been dressmakers, but, in President Robinson’s opinion, they would be out of work for a long period until the city could be rebuilt. “Quite a number” of San Francisco Branch members moved to Utah and other took refuge in Oakland. The Broberg family’s row-house was not burned, but Ernst sent his family to Utah for six months, and then they reunited to live in Oakland, away from San Francisco’s earthquake danger. The Jensen family spent two years in Oakland before returning to San Francisco. The Oakland Branch’s population doubled, and it became an independent branch headed by Oaklander Norman B. Phillips.⁶⁰

A small colony of Saints stayed in the decimated city. On the second and third Sundays following the earthquake, they gathered for unofficial Sunday School services outdoors, attended by twenty-two at the first meetings and thirty-five at the second. However, after that, Sunday meetings were discontinued that summer. With the public transportation system ruined, travel to meetings became too difficult. Also, many of the men could not attend meetings because they were employed on Sunday “owing to the rush of rebuilding the city.” The branch held no official meetings after the quake until 12 August. When Sunday School resumed in August, its attendance was down by two-thirds from pre-earthquake figures. It was reduced from independent branch status to being a branch dependent upon the Oakland Branch. By 1907 the branch was listed in the San Francisco street directory as meeting at 1443 Baker Street.⁶¹

Interpreting the Calamity: LDS Views

The earthquake and fires destroyed nearly 500 city blocks of San Francisco, or five square miles, including the business district. The 28,000 buildings destroyed included 30 schools and 80 churches. Estimates of property

dollar losses approach \$500,000,000. Thousands lost homes, and more than 450 people died.⁶²

Nationwide, and particularly in religious circles, the question of God's relationship to the disaster was debated. Many Protestant leaders disclaimed any connection between sin and cosmic events, causing President Joseph F. Smith to observe that there seemed to be "a general feeling among the Protestant religious bodies that God has little to do with nature or her laws." This, he said, was "a mistaken view." Because so many people were saved "in a providential way," it seemed to him that

the quake was for the purpose of calling attention, by the finger of his power, to the wickedness and sins of men—not alone to the sins of the people of the stricken city, but to the transgressions of all mankind, that all may take warning and repent.⁶³

He suggested that because of worldwide numbness to religion and "insensibility to God," God uses calamities to "bring a sense of himself and his purposes home to the minds of men." Saints know, he added, that "God rules in the fire, the earthquake, the tidal wave, the volcanic eruption, and the storm" and that He speaks to people by the "voice of earthquakes." President Smith stressed that natural disasters are "schoolmasters to teach the people to prepare themselves, by righteous living, for the coming of the Savior."⁶⁴ As if proving the point, President Robinson noted two months after the cataclysm: "The Saints are more attentive to their duties since the dread calamity."⁶⁵

James E. Talmage, respected then as both a geologist and commentator on LDS doctrines, expressed disbelief "that the greatest sufferers in this disaster are necessarily those who were most wicked."⁶⁶ To this, President Smith agreed, adding that the righteous often suffer for the unrighteous, as the innocent Christ suffered for others' sins.⁶⁷

However, beyond warning and schooling people, President Smith said earthquakes triggered and released man's inherent goodness:

We believe that these severe, natural calamities are visited upon men by the Lord for the good of His children, to quicken their devotion to others, and to bring out their better natures, that they may love and serve him.⁶⁸

Relief Society leaders expressed the same belief, saying that the tragedy gave people "an opportunity to prove their benevolence, their pity, their generosity, and their genuine love for humanity."⁶⁹ President Robinson likewise was impressed by "the ready and magnanimous response that was made to the call of help, not a long way off, but close at hand, in the Ruined City itself where the Divine in men ran true to the call of suffering and distressed humanity"—even among the depraved and degraded.⁷⁰ Elder Talmage felt this charitable instinct was proof of divinity in mankind. "The

voice of disaster was Nature's call, and with its first note the brotherhood of nations burst forth as the impulse of love." He invited the infidels to study "this masterly picture" of family love, and then he challenged them: "Canst thou yet deny the hereditary attributes of Fatherhood divine?"⁷¹

President Robinson saw another aspect of divinity at work during the disaster, a notable calmness that enveloped the faithful Saints despite the crisis. "There was no hysteria, abandonment to grief, despair or complaint manifest. All seemed to possess that 'peace of mind that surpasseth understanding' which comes only to those whose 'hopes were secure in the promises of the Father.'"⁷²

William G. Hartley is a research historian for the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History and an assistant professor of history at Brigham Young University.

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