

6. Earthquake and Fire of 1906

THROUGH THE WHITE dawn of April 18, 1906, the farmers in the Colma Hills moved from one chore to another, working to the rhythm of quivering eucalyptus trees.

Down from the hills in the dairyland, milkers and stable men worked through the morning fog waiting, it would seem, for something to enliven the day. When it came it exceeded by far their expectations.

First there was a rumble, then a quake, followed by a series of quakes that shook San Francisco and set fire to its center before moving down the peninsula.

Let it not be supposed that the earthquake of 1906 that devastated San Francisco by-passed her neighbors. Thundering through San Mateo County it caused landslides at Thornton Beach¹ and upset the construction of the Ocean Shore Railroad. Further south it shook the reservoirs that held San Francisco's water supply and smashed the pipes that carried the water to the city.

Many other places reported damage, including San Mateo, Palo Alto, Leland Stanford University, and Agnew State Hospital.

For the Daly City-Colma area, however, the truly great effect of the earthquake lay in the movement of people rather than in physical damage. By dozens and scores, refugees from the holocaust in San Francisco moved down Mission Road leaving the great city with the ruins of twenty-eight thousand buildings.² For days and weeks the people came from their demolished homes or from the unburned parks and streets where they had gone to escape the quake and the fire.

Edmund Cavagnaro, who was a boy living near the county line, recalled the coming of the refugees. He wrote that what he had seen on the days following the earthquake was a scene never to be forgotten. "I still remember the people coming, some with a dog, a cat or a canary in a cage. They walked out Mission Road, sometimes turning to look over their shoulders at the flames and smoke. It just seemed they couldn't get far enough away."³

Obtaining food and shelter became the first problem to concern the refugees. Sensing this, the residents near Daly's Hill provided as much food as they could. Indeed, John Daly and other dairymen earned the refugees' never-to-be-forgotten gratitude by donating many quarts of milk. This was supplemented by

the wagonloads of vegetables and flour that were sent by the farmers from the Colma Hills and other areas. All such efforts were coordinated by the American Red Cross. Remembering these efforts Mr. Cavagnaro wrote:

Within a few days of the disaster the Red Cross arranged with Mr. W. Powell, owner of the Colma Lumber Company, located at No. 42 Bismark Street (now Wilson Street) to set up a relief station in his lumber mill next door to Mission Road

People came from miles around to get the rations. West End School at 5630 Mission Street (now Longfellow School) was overrun with people who were burned out in San Francisco.⁴

Using wood from Powell's lumber yard and canvas from the supplies of the Red Cross and the United States Government the refugees built tents and shanties. In them they placed bits of furniture that they had salvaged from the ruins of San Francisco.

At night many people slept on the ground encircled by the fireplaces they had fashioned from rocks and bricks. For eating, some of the refugees walked back to San Francisco to salvage plates and cutlery; others ate from pots and dishes that were donated by the Red Cross and other charitable groups.

Meanwhile forces were at work to provide ways and means for the refugees to remain in the area. Real estate developers appeared to persuade the land owners to divide their holdings into building lots. With the deeds to such lots in their pockets these realtors moved among the refugees in the Daly City-Colma area and in San Francisco, selling land to anyone who could buy it. The price of lots ranged from \$200 to \$300 apiece. On them, homes could be constructed for as little as \$1,500, or remnants of burned out houses from San Francisco could be purchased for a few hundred dollars and dragged to the Daly City-Colma lots.



MASER FAMILY
WAITING EVACUATION TO
DALY'S HILL