

How the Elks Helped Save San Francisco

PHOTO: TED STRESHINSKY/CORBIS



Within minutes, the earthquake that struck San Francisco on April 18, 1906, had reduced much of the city to rubble.

AT DAWN on April 18, 1906, San Francisco, California, was struck by a devastating earthquake. In the days that followed, fires destroyed more than half of the city's buildings and rendered hundreds of thousands of its citizens homeless. The city was unprepared for a disaster of such magnitude—but a group of people immediately stepped into the breach and mounted a large-scale relief operation. They were the members of the San Francisco Lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.

The Earth Erupts

The effect of the earthquake was described by writer Simon Winchester in his book *A Crack in the Edge of the World* as follows: "Some miles down deep within the zone of crushed rock where the rocks had been grinding together for decades, something suddenly gave. One by one the streets of San Francisco rose and fell under the influence of the spreading wave; and one by one the nearby towns and villages were affected and afflicted too.

BILL VOSSLER

It was as if a plowshare were being driven through their countryside."

Adolphus Busch, cofounder of the Anheuser-Busch Brewing Company, was visiting San Francisco on business, and he provided an eyewitness report to the *New York Times*: "The earthquake which shook San Francisco made all frantic, and was undoubtedly the severest ever experienced in the United States. The beautiful Hotel St. Francis swayed

from south to north like a tall poplar in a storm. Furniture was overturned, and people were thrown from their beds. I quickly summoned my family and friends, and urged them to escape to Jefferson Square, which we promptly did. An awful sight met our eyes. Every building was either partly or wholly wrecked, roofs and cornices were falling from skyscrapers on lower houses, crushing and burying the inmates. Fires started in all parts of

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vast conflagration from out on the bay. It was dead calm. Not a flicker of wind stirred. Yet from every side wind was pouring upon the city. East, west, north, and south, strong winds were blowing upon the doomed city. The heated air rising made an enormous suck. Thus did the fire of itself build its own colossal chimney through the atmosphere. Day and night this dead calm continued, and yet, near to the flames, the wind was often half a gale, so mighty was the suck."

The only way to stop the fire was to remove its supply of fuel. For four days, buildings in the path of the fire



San Francisco Elks set up a tent city for the earthquake survivors similar to the US Army-supplied camp shown here.



Food supplies provided by city officials and organizations such as the Elks helped sustain homeless San Franciscans.

were dynamited to create a fire wall. Eventually, the tactic was successful. But when the flames were finally stifled, most of the city lay in smoldering ruins.

The Elks Respond

Though the Elks' building at 223 Sutter Street had been destroyed and many members had lost their own homes, the response of the members of the San Francisco Lodge was immediate. Within ten hours after the earthquake, the Elks set up a tent city along Grant Avenue, called Elks Camp, and were taking care of approximately 2,000 people. Elks

members donated household items and clothing and even opened their own homes to other members whose houses had been destroyed.

Every hospital in the city except one had been destroyed, so the Elks set up field hospitals. The Sisters of Mercy, aided by physicians and lay workers, evacuated their hospital and home for the aged, and with the help of volunteers driving Wells Fargo horse-drawn trucks, transferred 170 patients and 99 elderly people to the side-wheeler ship *Modoc* on the Sacramento River. The patients and the elderly were then transported to the Elks Camp at Encinal City.

An article in the April 21, 1906, *New York Times* described the scene at the relief camps: "Long tables are covered with white oilcloth, and at intervals are great bowls of superb red roses. It looks like a banquet hall, and perhaps the roses may sound like a superfluous luxury, but the children have arranged them. And after the terrible vision of a charred and ruined city, they bring a sort of peace. A gas stove has been set up in the kitchen, and hot coffee in great quantities is being made. To each tired wayfarer is served on a plate some rice, some hard-boiled eggs, and sandwiches. There is hot coffee, and for most of the



Many survivors fled the city, often helped along the way by Elks who provided coffee and other sustenance to those in need.



Some survivors of the earthquake created temporary homes from their remaining possessions.

people an orange. And to each one are served three meals a day. The same schedule is practically repeated in all the relief centers of the city."

The Elks Grand Lodge leaped into action, initially with a grant of \$10,000 to the Oakland Lodge, where the relief effort was being coordinated. In *Proceedings of the Grand*

Lodge BPOE 1906, Grand Exalted Ruler Robert W. Brown wrote: "Sitting in my office and listening to the click of the telegraph as it flashed the news of lives lost and vast property destruction, it somehow seemed that messages were reaching me on wings of lightning and of love from every member of the Order and

that every message said 'Go to California.'"

When Brown arrived at the Oakland Lodge, where he had decided to set up operations, he discovered that a committee of one thousand Elks had already been organized. Provision wagons from the Oakland Lodge were the first supply wagons to enter the shattered city of San Francisco. The Elks' supply houses were emptied as fast as they could be filled. More than 300,000 San Franciscans were evacuated from the city, but some stayed and many of them continued to be fed in Elks camps.

Elks from many California lodges participated in the relief efforts—including lodges in Alameda, Berkeley, Vallejo, San Jose, Santa Cruz, Petaluma, and Salinas. And Elks lodges across the United States contributed a total of \$109,000 to the aid effort—the equivalent of \$2 million in today's dollars. Brown wrote: "Meanwhile the exodus had begun, and as the trains moved eastward with their fleeing freight it was inspiring to see how the Elks at every stop—at Sacramento and Reno, at Ogden and at Salt Lake City, at Portland and Seattle and Tacoma and

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Olympia, at Los Angeles and Cheyenne and Denver, along all routes—were on hand with hot coffee and substantial without stint to feed the traveler and cheer him on his way—impromptu hospitality fit for a king.”

A Grateful City

A month after the disaster, Governor George Pardee of California wrote to GER Brown to express his thanks to the Elks for their role in the earthquake relief operations: “The sympathy and material aid, which your Fraternity so promptly, lavishly and kindly bestowed upon the stricken and destitute people of San Francisco and

vicinity, has deeply touched our hearts and given us renewed courage to face and solve the tremendous problems of the future. The whole nation, the whole world, has been good to us in our hour of greatest need. But, among all those who responded so nobly to our cry of distress, there was none who did so with more benevolence than did the Order over which you so ably preside as its Grand Exalted Ruler. The food, shelter and comfort which, to individuals in the Elks’ Camp in Oakland, your Fraternity distributed to so many of our distressed and destitute sufferers from the great fire, have endeared you and your Order to us all. Words written or spoken cannot express our gratitude. Believe me, however, when I say that we all

recognize the great debt of gratitude we owe to you and your brother Elks, and are deeply grateful for what you did for us. . . . The Elks were the first to render assistance and have valiantly headed the relief procession ever since.”

The words of GER Robert W. Brown himself provide a fitting epitaph to this proud moment in Elks history: “Other fraternities and beneficent instrumentalities were also to the rescue—indeed the heart of humankind was gushing forth its treasure without stopping to count—but it was the excelling glory of the Elks that they were invariably at the front of the column. The story of our California relief has been written in letters everlasting by the angels.” ■

Romance among the Ruins

UNDER the heading “Earthquake as Cupid,” the May 12, 1906, issue of the *Oakland Tribune* described the romance and wedding of carpenter Joseph Krieg and Miss Marie Beranek. They had lived in the same building before the earthquake and were forced to take refuge in the Elks Camp in Oakland because of the fires. Romance bloomed, and they were married less than a month after the earthquake at the office of the justice of the peace in Oakland. Upon returning to the camp, word of the wedding spread rapidly, and a reception was hastily organized. The soldiers of Company D marched down to the Elks Camp, and the bugler played songs for the young couple to the accompaniment of anything that the other camp residents could thump or make a sound from. As the day came to a close, Regimental Quartermaster Smiley donated his tent to the newlyweds as a bridal chamber.

The *Oakland Tribune* also printed a story about a member of the Oakland Elks who tried to marry his sweetheart without attracting any fuss or attention. But William James O’Neill was a popular conductor on the Southern Pacific Railroad, and when he and his fiancée went to get the marriage license, the clerks secretly tagged their luggage with the words “To be married soon.” In the words of the newspaper article: “The clerks arranged a little celebration in advance when they should go out. A burst of hand-clapping signalized their reception of it.”

The events of April 1906 seemed to focus the minds of many of the survivors on connubial thoughts. The office that issued marriage licenses reported that it issued



Cupid was active in the aftermath of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, bringing love to survivors thrown together by the disaster.

more permits than at any time in the history of San Francisco. People married on impulse. One couple married because the future husband had saved one dollar and twenty cents, and it would cost one dollar to rent a room whether one or two persons lived in it. Another pair met on a train while they were fleeing to Seattle, were engaged before the end of the journey, and married the next day. Couples who had considered divorce changed their minds after the earthquake; there were even several cases of divorced people remarrying.

A recent study of matrimony in the wake of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake summed up the subject in a nutshell: “Sometimes people do not realize how much they need each other until disaster strikes.” —P.H.