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LETTER FROM SAN FRANCISCO

100 Years Later, Learning From Disaster

By GREGORY DICUM

At 5:12 a.m. on Wednesday, April 18, 1906, the San Andreas fault near San Francisco snapped and slipped some 13 feet. The resulting earthquake destroyed hundreds of buildings and initiated a fire that raged for three days, gutting the commercial and cultural capital of the West Coast. Between 3,000 and 5,000 people lay dead in the ruins of almost 30,000 buildings.

This April 18, San Francisco celebrates, warily, the centennial of the Great Earthquake and Fire — the archetypal American natural disaster.

What does a city do 100 years after its near-annihilation? Seemingly everything: the Web site of the Earthquake Centennial Alliance lists films, concerts, dance parties, religious services, earnest workshops, incongruous cocktail parties, conferences, readings and more.

But commemoration is not the same as remembering, especially in a city where memorials must at some level also anticipate the next Big One, which is thought likely to kill tens of thousands of us. Fittingly, San Francisco has no permanent memorial or museum dedicated to the 1906 disaster.

"We forget by celebrating," says Philip L. Fradkin, whose Pulitzer Prize-nominated book, "The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906," has just been released in paperback. A new introduction draws sobering parallels that suggest nothing has changed from the unpreparedness of 100 years ago.

The largest official celebration will begin before dawn at [Lotta's Fountain](#) at Market and Third Streets, a popular meeting place after the quake. On April 18 every year since 1908, the fountain has been the site of an impromptu gathering. It's an appropriate place to celebrate forgetting: in 1910 this was the site of a Christmas Eve concert by the soprano Luisa Tetrazzini that marked the disaster's official closure. Enrico Caruso was the quake's opening act, singing the night before it struck and occasioning a Caruso Sing-Along in Yerba Buena Gardens on April 17.

The [Palace Hotel](#), where both opera stars stayed, will be commemorating the destruction of its original and supposedly fireproof building with a gala dinner and a breakfast.

But the official commemorations (complete with a parade) also call to the minds of at least some local residents the darker side of the quake's aftermath a century ago. In 1906, ad hoc posses were empowered to summarily execute whomever they saw fit. The traumatized homeless legions of poor and minority residents found themselves targeted, and many were shot for "looting." Indeed, the contrast between the plight of the San Francisco's poor and the situation of its wealthy elite is

reminiscent of the similar divide in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina last year.

The city had shaken and burned several times before 1906, leading firefighters to beg for better equipment. The firefighters' efforts during the fire will be marked by a three-day exhibition at Pier 48 of steam and horse-drawn firefighting equipment and a muster (a competitive firefighting meet) with teams from around the world. There will be a section devoted to preparedness — part of an effort by emergency-services agencies to infuse the week with something other than self-congratulation. Most ambitious will be a citywide drill on April 22.

The 1906 fire proved so devastating because the quake destroyed the city's water system. A single working fireplug near [Mission Dolores](#) was discovered by a group of youths, who commandeered an abandoned fire wagon to halt the fire on 20th Street in the Mission District.

Each year this "Little Giant" is painted gold by a ceremonial hierarchy that starts with the city's Fire Chief, then moves on to small children, then to survivors of the 1906 quake and fire (at least 15 will be on hand at various events this year), San Francisco natives and residents transplanted from elsewhere. Politicians come last. This year the event has acquired an official sheen, and it is expected to swell from the usual couple of hundred participants to thousands, yet it is likely to remain the most heartfelt and genuine remembrance.

The 1906 disaster was thoroughly photographed, and the several photographic exhibits currently under way affirm the power of the medium. At the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#), prints by professionals like Arnold Genthe will be shown along snapshots taken by amateurs wielding the then newly popular Kodak Brownie cameras. An exhibition at the Legion of Honor, called *After the Ruins*, features Mark Klett's modern rephotography of images taken after the disaster. See these, then go on one of the walking tours to once-devastated sites to take your own photos. More personal still is the searchable online exhibit from the Bancroft Library at the [University of California](#) at Berkeley — I found my own house there, standing just two blocks from charred ruins.

After the quake and fire, up to a quarter of a million San Franciscans were refugees. Many were taken in by cities and towns throughout the West, and 16,000 were housed in wooden "earthquake shacks" erected in city parks — the FEMA trailers of their day. Twenty-seven shacks are known to be still standing, and one has been restored and brought to Yerba Buena Lane near Market Street, where it houses an exhibit that will include occasional visits from Hurricane Katrina refugees.

A monthlong observance at the [Presidio](#) (the former Army base that served as a refugee center following the quake) examines the experience of those who were displaced. In the aftermath of the disaster, the city's leaders attempted to remove Chinatown from its prime real estate. However, Chinatown was rebuilt quickly — embellished with architectural touches with an eye toward attracting tourists, which it still does admirably. These events are reviewed in an exhibition now showing at the Chinese Historical Society of America in Chinatown.

The 1906 earthquake led to the development of modern seismic science. A conference at the [Moscone Center](#) for the centenary both of the quake and the Seismological Society of America will include a number of public events. At the United States Geological Survey exhibit in the East Bay

city of Fremont, part of the Hayward Fault — thought to be the most likely site of the next major quake — has been exposed for all to see.

But even in the face of such ominous portents, a jittery boosterism fills the space between dread and denial. The frenetic celebration is a temporary holiday from reality: after all, what are the chances the Big One will hit precisely 100 years after the Great Earthquake and Fire of 1906?

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