

Southern California Disasters Visited Series

SEISMIC SUNDAY/SUMMER 1992

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Earthquake—1992

I was awakened in the wee morning hours Sunday, June 28, 1992, by a disturbance outside my window. I heard a shopping cart being pushed down the sidewalk in fits and starts, as if the person pushing it were listening or watching for something. Sometimes the cart would stop altogether. Other times it would move at variable speeds from slow to rapid walk, or run. In the background I heard the screech of car tires as if someone were rounding a corner too fast. After one such screech the cart began moving at a run. Though I was still half asleep, it seemed as if the cart pusher was in fear of pursuit.

Finally the cart sound disappeared. Shortly thereafter I heard the sound of vehicles pulling up outside and the voice of my next door neighbor, Tyrone. He was telling someone in which direction he thought "they" had gone. I was able to determine, without getting out of bed, that he was talking to police. He said that someone had stolen a bicycle out of his back yard two nights before, and that some homeless people had taken up staying in his yard overnight. He equated the two situations.

The police found the shopping cart but not the person pushing it. They did, however, apprehend a woman, apparently one of the homeless. She was pleading her innocence in a very high voice and complaining of persecution when, suddenly, the world began to shake. It was like one of those bad dreams where everything is heading in prosaic sequence when, suddenly, everything changes and you're in a totally different dream.

The first of many quakes that day started out as a brief jiggle. But that was just the first wave. Moments later everything began to pitch and roll, causing the house to creak and groan, and pictures to flap against walls, as wave after wave of ground motion turned the house into a semblance of my old ship, the Midway, during a storm.

The temblor lasted nearly a minute, a long time for a quake. The commotion on the street quickly ended as participants assessed the situation. My downstairs neighbors ran out of the house wearing only their undershorts, to be confronted by a squad of policemen. When things finally settled down, everybody scattered. The police sped off to facilitate their earthquake contingency plan, and my downstairs neighbors hurried back inside, more than a little embarrassed.

I found it a good time to get up, even though it was a Sunday, 4:57 o'clock A.M., and I was only three-quarters awake. (I have become so accustomed to heavy ground motion that I don't panic like I used to.) I went into the living room, turned on the TV amidst momentarily flickering power and still-quivering structure, and switched channels until finding one telling of the quake. Later, my neighborhood lost power for about fifteen minutes.

The entire day was spent watching news about the Joshua Tree temblor measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale (the strongest in California since 1952), the Landers one measuring 6.6, plus the many others either new or aftershocks. Reports came in, some by TV news staff who had been on their way to work at 4:57, claiming that Los Angeles was besieged by a ring of flickering greenish light, something like lightening, just before things began to shake.

When the Landers hit a little after 8:00 o'clock A.M., I was in the living room watching news about the Joshua Tree shock. Everything was rocking and rolling so badly that I thought it advisable to reach out and steady the tall bookcase just to my left. In any of the instances virtually nothing fell in my apartment except a statuette that had a very small base in relation to

Earthquake—1992

its height. Even that didn't break. On the other hand, the entire web of my apartment's seismic cracks were greatly exercised. Many widened, and new ones appeared.

Miraculously, only one death was attributed. A family that was originally from California but had moved back east was in California (near the epicenter) for a class reunion. Their little boy was killed by a falling cinder block from a collapsing fireplace at the house where they were staying.

There were many injuries from falls, since the epicenter was near Yucca Valley, an area heavily populated by retired people. Mostly, there was heavy property damage, especially to the mobile home communities in the area. Some area highways buckled, and as far away as San Pedro/Long Beach, bridges were closed either due to actual or suspected damage.

My friend Sandi's boss flew his small, single-engine plane over the area and took several revealing pictures. Then he landed and took more. Air shots of the fault line for the Joshua Tree quake showed it unmistakably carved across the countryside, distorting landscape and any roads it intersected. Ground shots showed stretches where the surface had dropped or lifted several feet. The series of photographs is on display near Lloyd's office.

Since June 28 there continue to be shocks and aftershocks. There are some theories as to what is happening. Most of these are centered around the San Andreas Fault. My personal favorite (my own guesstimation, as far as I know) is that Mother Nature has decided to place a volcano about where San Bernardino and Riverside counties meet. A high, centralized pressure of magma on the earth's crust in that area would account for the extremely heavy and frequent seismic activity. We may be looking at the birth of a new mountain range. Unfortunately, what happens between now and then could be fraught with catastrophe. I hope my theory is full of hot air, or perhaps steam.

P.S. Another shock just hit, at 11:14 o'clock A.M., as I was getting this ready to send to the printer. News said it measured approximately 5.1 and was centered twelve miles north of the city of Mojave, California, near a different fault. Mojave is perhaps one hundred miles northwest of the Landers quake. So the fun continues.

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