

# Oroville remembers 35-year-old quake

Mary Weston, Oroville Mercury-Register, 8-1-10

OROVILLE — Thirty-five years ago, on August 1, the citizens of Oroville say there was a lot of shaking going on.

The earthquake of 1975 rocked the town with two major blasts at 9:20 a.m. and at 1:20 p.m.

The afternoon quake caused major damage to several buildings and sent people fleeing into the streets. However, the aftershocks caused the most anxiety.

The Oroville Mercury-Register showed picture after picture of damaged storefronts and toppled merchandise inside stores.

Jim Moll, who was news director for KOVR Radio downtown, was inside a room at the courthouse where Judge Reginald Watt was being sworn in when the largest temblor rated originally from magnitude 6.1 to magnitude 6.4 blasted the room.

The Oroville Mercury-Register reported Watts was sworn in amid cries of fear.

Judge Jean Morony presided over the ceremony for the third Butte County Superior Court Judge ever sworn in.

"I knew this would be an earth-shaking occasion," Morony was quoted as saying, "but I didn't think the good earth would emphasize it."

Others recall experiences varying from frightening to humorous.

Clay Castleberry, the Butte County director of Public Works, remembered that he lived in the Lemon Hill area, and all the water jumped out of their swimming pool.

Castleberry was driving and didn't know there had been an earthquake.

He soon found there was major damage to the old county courthouse in the older part of the building on Bird Street now occupied by the Butte County Department of Education.

When he and inspectors went in, they found major cracks in the walls and the walls were separated from the ceiling and roof structure, so they could see the sky.

Castleberry and the inspectors ran outside when aftershocks hit.

"It was very scary," he said. "We vacated the building."

District Attorney Mike Ramsey was then an intern in the DA's office.

He was researching at the Chico State Library. The afternoon temblor shook the building, and Ramsey headed back to Oroville.

He saw toppled chimneys, and the DA's office was locked. He entered the building, which was near the old county hospital, across from where the courthouse is now on County Center Drive.

"It was a very nervous time for a lot of people because of the aftershocks that went on for weeks," Ramsey said.

Many people were afraid to go back into their homes, so they camped out in their front yards, Ramsey said.

"Everyone in town seemed to become quite expert in rating the aftershocks on the Richter Scale," Ramsey said. "People would say, 'Oh, I think that was a 2.2, or maybe a 2.3. Then they would check the newspaper the next day to see if they were right.'"

The Mercury-Register published a log of the aftershocks with ratings provided by the California Department of Water Resources.

In retrospect, many people reported incidents in a more humorous light.

John Allen was leveling the driving range at the Oroville Golf Course, then managed by the Feather River Recreation and Park District.

Allen said they had tripods set up with levels. About 50 people came running out of the clubhouse, and the bottles of alcohol fell on the floor and broke.

"One man said I'm going to be in church this Sunday for sure," Allen said.

A friend of Allen's was cleaning the Feather River Plunge, an Olympic size swimming pool at the Oroville High School District Office.

The water jumped out of the pool, and pressure from underground caused the stainless steel liner to crack. The pool is now filled in, and school buses park there off Bridge Street.

Al Simpson was a volunteer firefighter for El Medio Fire district. He was working at Ben's Market, then located on Myers and D streets.

Everything came off the shelves, so he sat down in the aisle until the shaking stopped. A woman who was working behind the meat counter, however, decided to get out.

"She actually scaled the meat counter getting out, and that was a pretty good jump," Simpson said

Simpson admitted he was a little scared, too.

Current Fire Chief Rusty Ohlhausen said he only remembers one structure fire, but they had to check all the chimneys in Southside and secure them, as so many were toppled.

Also, there were a lot of medical calls for cuts, chest pain and anxiety.

Former Fire Chief David Pittman said the earthquake didn't cause any fatalities or major injuries.

Before the earthquake, no one knew there was a fault in Oroville. Pittman said the fault appeared to run from

Palermo, meandering around Lincoln Boulevard and into the downtown on Myers Street and Mitchell Avenue where the most damage occurred.

Out in middle of Montgomery Street, they waited until the shaking stopped. Then they got in the fire engines, called all the crews and worked into the night answering medical calls and securing buildings.

More than 200 chimneys toppled and had to be secured.

A woman was trapped by pickle jars in Holiday Market. She had been shopping when they jars fell all around her and had jars and broken glass up to her knees.

All the bottles came off the shelves at the Town and Country Liquor Store on Olive Highway.

"There was a river of alcohol flowing out the door," Pittman said.

Telephone service was lost, which caused concerns.

According to another Mercury-Register article on August 2, news media converged on the town.

"It all happened within a two-hour period," said airport manager Grover Williams. "At least 60 airplanes carrying 150 wild, crazy reporters from all over the western coast landed at our airport."

Jim Moll said they were upset when they arrived and didn't find the town in rubble.

But it's no wonder the media came. A Mercury-Register headline read, "Citizens Gripped by Fear; Exodus of many reported."

Mayor Robert Winston contacted the U.S Geological Survey's Earthquake Research Center and was told they were going to study the quake.

One article that came from a newspaper in Pasadena speculated that the Oroville Dam had caused the quakes.

Paul Minasian of the Minasian, Spruance, Meith, Soares & Sexton LLP., said they looked into that.

Minasian brought in a man from U.C Berkeley named Richter, who was the son of the man who invented the Richter Scale. He essentially said filling dams can cause earthquakes by lubricating the tectonic plates or from the weight of the water.

But the law firm had to prove that happened here, and there was a simultaneous string of earthquakes throughout the state.

The law firm researched the possibility of a class action lawsuit with various types of legal arguments.

For one argument, the firm would have had to show that a public taking of private property caused damage to others.

But the kicker was that DWR would have to have known the danger, and supposedly not even the state knew there was a fault in Oroville.

Since then, Minasian said it has become a pretty well excepted theory that filling a dam can trigger quakes.

However, the earthquakes only come in the first several years after the dam is filled, Minasian said.

"Then that's the end of it," Minasian said. "Famous last words. Do you feel any shaking?"

Neither the Oroville Dam, nor the its facilities sustained any damage from the earthquake.

Since 1975, several scientific studies have been published about the earthquake. The Richter Scale ratings and conclusions about the earthquake vary from study to study.