

# Finding a fault

**Patrick S. Pemberton, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 10-12-10**

The worst natural disaster in California history was caused by the San Andreas Fault in 1906. And one very recent seismic study suggests the fault is overdue for the next Big One.

Despite that ominous prediction, photographer Joe Johnston and I decided to head to the belly of the beast for our latest day trip.

While the tiny town of Parkfield is stalled in time, it's a happening place when it comes to seismic research, contributing to its reputation as the Earthquake Capital of the World (though Coalinga and Hollister, oddly enough, are also fighting for that grim distinction). While Parkfield is probably a lot more interesting if you're into quake research, we found it to have many charms. And the road to and from it revealed many interesting sights.

After cruising up to the North County (You'll want to get gas in Paso Robles since fuelling options will be nil on this trip.), we started out with a quick stop at Chapel Hill, off McMillan Canyon Road, in Shandon. The church, open to all faiths, was built by William P. Clark, a former Reagan confidant, after surviving what he called "God's little wake-up call" in 1988, a single-engine plane crash that nearly killed him.

Inspired by the designs of the Spanish missions, it is indeed a divine donation with its large wooden doors and impressive church bells. With splendid hilltop views it's no wonder the Festival Mozaic Orchestra likes to perform on its patio every summer.

Not far from there is the Jack Ranch Café, a historic building that once housed a post office and grocery. But mostly what it's known for is the James Dean memorial just a few yards away. That silver memorial, donated by a Japanese businessman, supposedly reflects the site of the infamous car crash that ended the promising actor's life just down the road from the café.

Joe and I had a burger at the café -- which, as you might expect, has its share of Dean memorabilia -- and headed off. The Cholame Valley Road, which runs through the Jack Ranch, is very much a road less traveled. Cutting through bright golden fields, it eventually took us past the Monterey County line toward Parkfield.

I just happened to see a sign for the Parkfield Cemetery and had Joe turn around so we could check it out. Located at the end of a long gravel road, this is clearly a place to rest in peace.

There's no sign at the beginning of this small cemetery, no grass and no noise, except for the wind blowing through a few pines. It feels and looks much like an Old West graveyard, especially with several stoneless graves.

Standing under the sun in the warm stillness, you could feel the haunting sense of sorrow others experienced at this desolate dead end.

Curiously, many of the 94 buried here were laid in their graves young, including 4-year-old Hugh Hamill in 1886; 2-year-old John Edwin Cahill in 1886; 6-year-old Mary Alice Draper in 1885; 2-year-old Laurie Ettie Gillet in 1885 and Sarah Murley, 19 years, five months and 15 days in 1891.

There's no documentation of major epidemics from California during that time, but the closeness of deaths suggests perhaps a local outbreak.

In one plot there's a whole family of tragedy with the graves of sisters Edith (7 months) and Lottie May Jones (7 years) who died just three years apart in the 1890s. Next to them lay their father, John, who died three months before Lottie May at age 34. Mother and wife Josephine didn't last much longer, dying six years after her husband just after her 37th birthday.

Another interesting tombstone belonged to Louisa Kidwell Lee, who died in 1893. According to the modern tombstone dedicated by the Fresno Daughters of the American Revolution in 1996, Lee was the "granddaughter of Rev. Jonathan Kidwell, soldier of the American Revolution." After leaving the cemetery, there was a long stretch to town, as we traveled further away from civilization, prompting the age-old question: "Where do these people shop for groceries?"

Finally, 17 miles past Cholame, we made it to the intersection of Parkfield-Coalinga and Cholame Valley roads, where we saw a bridge marked with the sign "San Andreas Fault." Under it was another: "Now Entering North American Plate."

"That's it," Joe said as we got out of his Honda Element.

"That empty creek bed?" I asked.

"Yeah."

I was a little underwhelmed. "Shouldn't there be a big crack or something?"

The creek bed wasn't exactly empty -- there was a 2-foot wide stream of water running through. But for a fault that killed 3,000 in San Francisco a century ago, it seemed rather . . . harmless.

Yet, apparently it's not. Less than a month ago, researchers said the fault is packed and loaded for another big shake.

While there hasn't been a really big one in a while, the plate is constantly shifting, which explains why the guard rail over the bridge is slightly bent.

As we crossed the bridge, I quipped, "Hey, everyone has their faults" -- because I like puns.

"Speak for yourself," Joe said, obviously not into puns as much.

On the other side of the bridge, a sign announces, "Now entering Pacific Plate."

We continued to the town of Parkfield, which, according to the sign has a population of 18. Yet, the V6 Ranch website claims it's 37, and I'm inclined to believe the locals.

Across from the office of the U.S. Geological Survey, which conducts quake research, I was intrigued to see a 1-room school house, Parkfield Elementary. I was further intrigued to see a girl walking a donkey across the school yard.

The girl, 5th grader Kathryn Varian, was bringing her donkey, Bray, in for show and tell. We're sure her 15

classmates -- grades K-5 -- appreciated the visitor.

A couple of blocks from the school house is the Parkfield Inn, which boasts the slogan, "Sleep here when it happens."

"What's the 'it?'" I naively asked Joe.

"The Big One," he said.

Across the street is the Parkfield Café and near that a row of 17 mailboxes, which I assume is the only stop the mail carrier has to make in Parkfield.

We continued onward, where the terrain became much more hilly and eventually the thoroughfare became a well-graded gravel road. Somehow we crossed the Fresno County line, where there were large stretches of open space. No buildings, power lines or roads for as far as the eye could see.

When the Big One hits here, it probably won't change a thing.

We drove Parkfield-Coalinga Rd. (which turns into Parkfield Grade) to 198 and then Highway 101, which dumped us off in San Lucas, just a bit South of King City.

After eight hours on the road, we were both pleased to have seen parts of California we'd never witnessed before. And we got an up-close look at that trouble-making Andreas Fault.

As for that Big One prediction, let's just hope it's not all it's cracked up to be.