

# 1994 Northridge quake changed L.A. forever

Frank Girardot, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 1-9-14

Expect a bombardment of remembrances this week recalling the 1994 Northridge earthquake.

It's human nature, I guess, to reflect on life-changing tragedy. So I might as well jump on the bandwagon early and recall some moments from a couple of days in January 1994.

Like most of Southern California I was asleep at 4:30 a.m. when the big one hit. I rolled out of bed and instinctively checked the gas main leading to the house. They tell you to do that. I did.

The next thing I remember is being in my car on the Hollywood Freeway, looking at a darkened downtown Los Angeles and listening to KNX as I tried to figure out where to go for the story. I had a pager, but no cell phone.

Somehow I ended up in Hollywood. It was relatively far from the 6.4's epicenter in Northridge, but historic buildings along Hollywood and Sunset boulevards took some heavy and permanent damage.

By the time the sun came out, I encountered a group of people, most still in their pajamas, who had been displaced when their apartment building — which was just off Van Ness Avenue above Sunset Boulevard at Harold Way — practically shattered. As we surveyed their very damaged building, a couple of guys no one knew were already ransacking the place.

There was an argument, some pushing and yelling. Somehow the beef got settled and the guys who didn't belong split. The group I was with left the area, worried about their stuff, but more worried about going into a building that was on the verge of collapse.

One of them said that a couple of blocks away a man was buried in rubble and killed when his elderly apartment disintegrated first thing in the morning. No one wanted to die at that moment.

Right about then my pager buzzed: "2827-911". The code meant "call the desk pronto." I pocketed my notebook and walked across the street to a Denny's that had a couple of pay phones in the parking lot.

Seconds after connecting with my boss, a large aftershock rattled the ground. Huge chunks of concrete dislodged and fell off the apartment building where I had just been.

I shouted an expletive — preceeded by the word holy — into the phone. Sometime after that I rolled back to the office to file a story. It was buried on an inside page in Tuesday's paper.

Our headline that day? "30 SECONDS OF HELL".

The next morning I was sent out to the Valley. Traffic was hell. I rolled on Van Nuys Boulevard and somehow got on to Devonshire before going down to Reseda to camp out for a while at the Northridge Meadows Apartments. Fourteen Angelenos died there and a bunch of us were standing around on ghoulish patrol (I think) waiting for bodies to be recovered.

Evidence that a disaster had occurred presented itself in many forms: Broken glass was everywhere. The smell of cracked-open booze bottles wafted in the air outside a shuttered liquor store. Batteries sold for \$20 each at a Seven-11 on Devonshire.

About 300 people — maybe more — waited in line for hours to fill their water jugs from a tap on a rusty U.S.

Government water tender pulled to the curb in a school parking lot.

That night I drove home via the Hollywood Freeway with a detour at Highland Avenue down to Wilshire and through Westlake before dropping down to Pico Union and back up through Skid Row to the San Bernardino Freeway via Alameda.

Sure it was winter, but January in Southern California can be mild. And, all along the route, families slept outside rather than finding themselves trapped in brick apartment buildings that had seen better days.

You won't hear from those people this week. You probably won't hear from the folks who lined up for water, or paid \$20 for batteries either.

Regardless, Northridge changed L.A. forever. We're only now emerging.

I say the proof lies in the restoration of the old Hall of Justice downtown. It closed that January and reopens this year.

As for the rest of it? Quakes around here are inevitable. If I learned any lesson that can be passed on it's this: Stock up on water and batteries. Keep a change of clothes and a pair of tennis shoes in your trunk. You'll thank me for the advice some day.