

Remembering the lessons of Southern California's history of earthquakes

Robert Rector, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 2-13-16

We were tired. Dead tired.

Parents of a three-month-old daughter, we had stumbled through endless nights of breast feedings, diaper changes, colic and all those other assorted issues that called into question why having a baby seemed like a good idea. But as my wife continually reminded me, "you can't send them back."

So we laid sprawled on our bed, enjoying a brief few hours of blessed slumber.

It was February 9, 1971, 6:01 a.m. And at exactly at that moment, an earthquake centered in the San Gabriel Mountains north of Sylmar ripped along a 12-mile-long fault line resulting in a temblor that measured 6.6 on the Richter Scale.

It was frightening, devastating and deadly. And unbeknownst to all of us, it was a moment that was to repeat itself all too frequently over the next two decades.

On that particular morning, our house suddenly lurched like it had been hit by a missile. I was born and raised in Southern California but this was like no other quake I had experienced. I sat bold upright, motionless, and watched incredulously as lights flickered off and on, furniture inched across the floor and a swag lamp in an adjoining bathroom bounced off the walls. The noise was deafening.

My wife cried out, "the baby" and I dashed to the nursery where, her crib still rocking from side to side, our bundle of joy was smiling as if I was bouncing her on my knee.

An uncle here on business from Missouri ran outside his motel room when the quake hit. He said he watched as the water in the pool spilled over the sides. After 45 years, he still refuses to come back to California. This from a guy who lives in tornado country.

We were lucky. We lived in an older home with lots of unreinforced brick and our chimney came down but did no damage to the house. Inside, a large mirror over the fireplace fell but strangely enough, while the frame broke, the glass did not.

In the kitchen, cabinets flew open and dishes crashed to the floor. A bottle of good whiskey fell from a cabinet and shattered into a pile of Quaker Oats that had rocketed off a counter. Too bad, I could have used a shot or two of Old Courage even at that early hour.

While we were fortunate, many others were not. 64 people died and more than 2,500 were injured. The estimated damage cost exceeded \$550 million.

Freeways buckled. Sewer lines broke. Gas lines exploded. Power lines fell, telephone service cut. Chimneys toppled. Windows shattered. And thousands of homes, businesses, hospitals and government agencies were turned upside down, according to reports in the Daily News.

Contractors, some legitimate but many who were bogus, poured into neighborhoods soliciting repair business. If they asked for cash in advance, it was wise to walk away.

Then there was the Van Norman reservoir near the L.A. Aqueduct. It threatened to burst, spilling 3.6 billion gallons of water into nearby Granada and Mission Hills neighborhoods. More than 80,000 people below the dam were evacuated for three days while engineers pumped out its water.

If the earthquake had struck a year earlier, engineers later said, the dam topped with 6.5 billion gallons of water would have likely collapsed, killing more than 100,000 Valley residents, the Daily News story said.

It was as though we had suddenly found ourselves on another planet, one where danger lurked at every turn and our fears were punctuated by sharp aftershocks. It was the day the myth of laid-back Southern California died.

And it was just the beginning.

The Whittier Quake struck on Oct. 1, 1987 at 7:42 a.m. I was standing on my driveway waving goodbye to my kids as I left for work when it struck.

I think it was the first time I had ever been outside in a major quake.

Two memories stand out: the street in front of our house undulated as if it was built atop a layer of Jell-O. And shortly afterwards, a number of dogs from the neighborhood who fled their homes ran wildly up the street in fear.

Again, we were fortunate. Minimal damage. But a large number of homes and businesses were impacted, along with roadway disruptions. Damage totals amounted to \$358 million with many injuries, three directly-related deaths, and five additional fatalities that were associated with the event.

In 1991, the Sierra Madre quake struck, a 5.6 temblor with its epicenter 7.5 miles northeast of that city. At least three roads leading up to Mount Wilson were blocked by landslides and Pasadena City Hall suffered moderate damage. A woman was killed when a steel beam fell on her at the Santa Anita racetrack in Arcadia. A basketball backboard, shaken loose in the tremor, hit a 10-year-old boy in the head, driving a nail into his skull. He survived.

Once again, we dodged the bullet. The only damage was to our nerves and peace of mind. Surely, I thought, this would be the end of it.

But one year later, the Landers quake struck. It was centered in a remote area of the Mojave Desert but at 7.2 on the Richter Scale, it was felt throughout Southern California. A 6.5 magnitude Big Bear earthquake, which hit about three hours later after the Landers mainshock, was originally considered an aftershock. However, the United States Geological Survey determined that this was separate, but related.

The shaking lasted from 2 to 3 minutes. I had time to get out of bed, throw on a pair of jeans and shoes, soothe the kids and walk through the house and into the front yard before the shaking stopped.

Two years later, the Northridge quake hit, a 6.7 temblor that produced ground acceleration that was the highest ever instrumentally recorded in an urban area in North America.

The “official” death toll was placed at 57; 33 people died immediately or within a few days from injuries sustained in the earthquake, and many died from indirect causes, such as stress-induced cardiac events. Some counts factor in related events such as a man’s suicide possibly inspired by the loss of his business in the disaster. More than 8,700 were injured including 1,600 who required hospitalization.

Earthquake-caused property damage was estimated to be between \$13 and \$40 billion, making it one of the costliest natural disasters in U.S. history.

The quake soon became my life.

I worked for the Los Angeles Times Valley Edition located in Northridge when the quake struck. I spent the next year and beyond helping to produce stories on the near and long-term effects of a disaster that even in retrospect seemed shocking.

What have we learned in the 45 years since Sylmar? That the “Big One” still hasn’t struck. That when it does, we will have to survive on our own for at least three days and should be prepared. That scientists can now better map fault motions and the probability of future quakes. But not the when. That it took state legislators until this month to help fund an earthquake early warning system that has been under development for years. That we need to remember to drop, cover, and hold on.

That maybe we should heed the words of Johnny Carson after an aftershock of a quake rumbled through his “Tonight Show” set: “The God Is Dead rally has been canceled.”