

Not My Fault: Statue under fire tells tale of quake, flames

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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That statue is in the news again. You know the one – our 25th President who six months into his second term was assassinated. It's a quick, if painful, way to become famous. There are 16 towns in the U.S. named after McKinley, including the one I live in. The tallest mountain in North America officially bore his name for nearly a century. The Arcata McKinley statue is not unique. At least a dozen other states feature his monumental likeness.

I won't use this column to debate whether the statue should go or stay. Our McKinley statue has an interesting backstory and means something very different to me than most others. The bronze McKinley is a survivor of the 1906 earthquake and almost never made it to Arcata.

Arcata pioneer George Zehndner had met McKinley in 1901 just months before the assassination. Zehnder was deeply affected and in 1905, commissioned San Francisco sculptor Haig Patigan to cast a bronze statue for \$15,000. Newly completed and only days before its scheduled shipping date to Arcata, the great San Francisco earthquake occurred.

According to the Humboldt Historian (Nov-Dec. 1987), the earthquake knocked the sculpture over but broken plaster cushioned its fall. This was only the beginning of the sculpture's peril. Patigan's studio was located near the waterfront south of Market Street. The entire neighborhood burned to the ground in the fires following the earthquake.

Earthquakes and fire are a deadly combination. The 1906 San Francisco fire destroyed 552 city blocks. It is impossible to determine the exact number of lives claimed. In 1907, the toll was listed at 478. A study done by NOAA in 1972 suggested 700 to 800 was a more reasonable estimate and attributed most of the deaths to fire. This was the number I first heard when I was first studying geophysics.

A quiet archivist in San Francisco was to change that perception. In 1963, Gladys Hansen began working in the San Francisco Archives Room at the the Public Library. She was often asked about victims of the 1906

earthquake and was surprised to find that there was no official list. Thus started a life-long project to uncover the identities of those who died. She pored through newspapers, examined death and burial records and queried historical and genealogical societies. Year by year her death toll grew.

She uncovered a darker side to the story and asserted a deliberate under-reporting of the impacts on Chinatown. In 1906, about 15,000 people were living in a 24-block area that was the largest concentration of Chinese outside of Asia. It was hit hard by the earthquake and soon after destroyed by fire. Yet Chinese deaths were not included in any accounts.

Teaming up with former San Francisco Fire Chief Emmet Condon, Hanson published the findings in the 1989 book "Denial of Disaster". Her final estimate brought the toll to over 3000, with many in in Chinatown. Both shaking and fire were to blame – the earthquake trapping people in areas that the fire later consumed. Her research earned the 1906 earthquake/fire a second place ranking in US natural disasters, exceeded only by the 1900 Galveston hurricane.

There is a fire story to most major earthquakes. Japan's Great Kanto earthquake of 1923 is probably the worst. The magnitude 7.9 earthquake occurred at lunchtime when many people were cooking meals on small hibachis that tipped during shaking, triggering thousands of fires. Experts concur that at least a half to two-thirds of 140,000 casualties were fire related.

Closer to home and on a much smaller scale, the 1992 earthquake sequence caused two significant blazes. A fire destroyed the Petrolia fire station and the fire engine inside because the shaking jammed the station doors. A much larger fire was triggered in the Scotia shopping center after the first large aftershock at 12:42 am.

It was a week after the 1906 earthquake before the sculptor Patigan was able to return to the ruins of his studio. He had assumed that the McKinley sculpture had melted in the conflagration and he would find only a puddle of metal.

Much to his surprise, it was lying in the street surrounded by a group of local workmen. According to The Historian, they had been interested in Patigan's work and had followed the sculpture's progress. Right after the earthquake, some of them had removed it from the building and left it in the street. There was all eight and a

half feet of McKinley, somewhat smoke damaged, lying on his back in a San Francisco street hand pointing upwards.

After a bit of minor repair work and buffing, the statue arrived Eureka on May 1, 1906 and was officially presented to the City of Arcata and installed in the Plaza on July 4, 1906. According to "From the Pages of the Arcata Union and the Arcata Eye: On This Day in Arcata," Zehnder called it a "gift for all time to come."

So when I see McKinley and his pointing hand, I don't think about expansionist trade policies, the Cuban crisis or Civil Rights. To me he is asking, "Do you know how to turn off your gas line? Do you have a working fire extinguisher and can you use it? Fire comes hand-in-hand with earthquakes. Believe me, I know."

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