

Not My Fault: 1906 quake highlights importance of social ties

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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113 years ago, the United States suffered its worst earthquake disaster. Shortly after 5:12 am on April 18th, rupture began on the San Andreas fault about two miles offshore San Francisco's Sunset District at a depth of about five miles beneath the surface. Like a crack following the impact of rock on your windshield, it grew to both the south and the north. By the time the fault rupture ended, it extended nearly 300 miles from Santa Cruz to Cape Mendocino.

The human toll was significant: at least 3,000 deaths, more than 28,000 buildings destroyed and 225,000 people homeless. The best coverage of impacts comes from an unlikely source: Gladys Hansen, and Emmet Condit's 1989 book *Denial of Disaster* (Cameron and Co., San Francisco). Hansen, a librarian, and Condit, a retired fire chief, document the politics and bigotry of the era that led to a decades-long cover-up of what really happened. Much of their work is at <http://www.sfmuseum.org/1906/06.html>

For much of the 20th century, the official 1906 death toll was between 700 and 800. Gladys Hansen took charge of the California collection in the main branch of the San Francisco library in 1963 and began a research project that would consume the rest of her life. She poured through every document related to the 1906 earthquake: census figures, death certificates, diaries, and print media. After 25 years of meticulous research, she came to the conclusion that the number of casualties had been deliberately underestimated and that at least 3000 and perhaps as many as 4000 people had died.

Hansen identified two main reasons for the undercount. The first was the desire of officials and businessmen to minimize the earthquake threat. San Francisco at the turn of the century was a boomtown and business depended on growth. In 1906, fire was considered a normal part of urban life. Only a week after the earthquake, the San Francisco Real Estate Board passed a resolution that the event be known as "The great San Francisco fire" and the earthquake not mentioned.

A second reason was more insidious. Chinatown was one of the most badly damaged areas of the city – first from

earthquake shaking and second from the fires that followed. About 25,000 people lived in Chinatown at the time and yet no Chinese names were included on the death lists. Hansen estimated the true number of Chinese lost was over 2000. After the earthquake some San Franciscans considered the 1906 earthquake an opportunity to rid themselves of the Chinese completely. A committee was formed to relocate Chinatown to Hunters Point. Ultimately the effort failed in because of economic arguments and pressure exerted by the Chinese government.

Hansen and Condit uncover other details of what happened in 1906 such as insurance scams, profiteering, incompetence, poor communication and deliberate withholding of information that contributed to fire losses. Their book was considered by some to be scandalous but never underestimate a librarian and Hansen's thorough research won out. In 2005, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors unanimously passed a resolution accepting Hansen's numbers.

The 1906 earthquake story is not only of historic interest but provides key information on how to prepare. Many factors made 1906 a disaster such as the size of the quake and proximity to populated areas, building density and construction, infrastructure and geology. But one of the lessons of 1906 is that the social and political context is also important.

Social scientists identify 'social capital' as an important factor in both loss and recovery after disaster. Social capital, loosely defined, is a measure of the factors that make a society function. It includes things like networks and communication, trust and connectivity to others, values and respect, empowerment, diversity and participation in shared activities. The failures of communication among national and local agencies in 1906, the segregation of the Chinese community, and competing political factions weakened social capital and exacerbated impacts of the San Francisco earthquake and fire.

Communication, shared experiences and values are just as important in 2019 as they were in 1906 in building disaster resilience. Intolerance and political rivalries take different forms today but still persist. Methods of communication have changed. The daily newspaper was the primary method of information exchange in 1906 and Hansen relied on 13 Bay Area papers for much of her research. Today newspapers compete with broadcast media and the internet, much tailored to individual

preferences initiating an era of selective versions of events.

Local media is one of the least expensive and most effective ways to build shared experiences and social capital. We are fortunate on the North Coast to still have an almost-daily paper and a public television station. We have a number of biweekly or weekly publications. We have a number of radio stations that work hard to communicate with a broad audience. But last Thursday, our social capital suffered a hit. KHSU, the North Coast National Public Radio affiliate went quiet. University administrators, in a sudden move, axed staff and volunteers and all local production. Since then, the station has sometimes streamed other NPR stations and content and sometimes sputtered in static.

I'm not concerned with the loss of the national content. I can stream it from numerous sources. But the local content, whether news, music, talk, local events or my short Shaky Ground podcasts, can't be found anywhere else. Whether you were a regular listener or not, its loss weakens us as a community. All of our local media builds social capital and we need that bank account to be as full as possible before the next disaster strikes.

Note: Please join me on April 18th for the Eureka Theater's Science on Screen airing of Tremors. The Movie has nothing to do with the 1906 earthquake and little about geology or seismology but it does include earth-shaking moments. I will be giving a short pre-movie introduction on the seismology behind the movie starting at 7 pm and I hope to see you there.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. Questions or comments about this column, or want a free copy of the preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground"? Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu

<https://www.times-standard.com/2019/04/18/lori-dengler-remembering-1906-social-connections-as-important-as-building-strength/>