

“San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, April 18, 1906”

By Daniel Eagan



Aftermath from the April 18, 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

The San Francisco earthquake struck the city at 5:12a.m. on the morning of April 18, 1906. (For years it was thought that the quake registered 8.2 or 8.3 on the Richter scale, but recent measurements indicate that the quake was closer to 7.9). The quake lasted less than a minute, but destroyed large portions of the city. Water mains broke, leaving fire hydrants dry; when crumbled chimneys, shorted-out electrical wires, and ruptured gas pipes ignited, there was no way to stop the spreading fires. The disaster ultimately killed at least 3,000, and left 225,000 people –over half of the 400,000 who lived in San Francisco at the time – homeless.

Civic response was remarkable. That morning General Frederick Funston alerted the Presidio military base, and within two hours his soldiers were patrolling the city. Mayor Eugene Schmitz, his administration dogged by accusations of corruption, took a strong stand, ordering looters shot. He also authorized Army engineers to begin dynamiting unsafe buildings. And he sent boats to Oakland asking for help.

The Navy dispatched help immediately. The first relief train arrived that night from Los Angeles. By 4:00 a.m., the next morning, William Taft, President Theodore Roosevelt’s secretary of war, sent rescue trains west. Legislation passed through Congress to pay relief bills. Rations came from Oregon and the Dakotas. The Army

donated almost all of its tents, and within a month almost 10 percent of its soldiers were taking part in the relief effort. It's hard not to contrast the government's response to the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans almost one hundred years later.

The footage that makes up "San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, April 18, 1906" was shot sometime between the actual earthquake and early May. It is a stark account of what happened in the city; a combination of static shots depicting the aftermath of the quake, and solemn pans across devastated landscapes. The photographer, producer, and distributor are unknown, but the footage was seen widely throughout the country. Many other cameramen came to record the disaster, including Robert K. Bonine from Edison. But for impact this footage is hard to dismiss.

Accustomed today to structured news stories shot in color and heavy with voice-over, we may find it hard at first to piece together a "narrative" from individual shots. But you can fashion a story out of the film, a fairly far-reaching and linear account of the aftermath of the earthquake. It starts with stark, featureless landscapes, smoldering piles of rubbish, tiny humans scurrying about the wreckage. We see the first attempts to deal with the destruction as firemen tear down the tottering brick walls of St. Patrick's Church. But soon the camera records happier scenes, bearing in closely on stoic, upbeat survivors picnicking in the streets. By the end of the film crowds overflow the frame. Trolleys, cars, wagons, and ferries have returned, life and commerce have resumed. The message for viewers is that San Francisco and its people survived, and that the city, or something like it, would recover.

The reality was harsher. It took years for the city to regain its footing. Once the largest U.S. city west of the Mississippi, it was superceded by Los Angeles and Seattle. This film and the other actualities shot at the time became important fundraising tools. "San Francisco" could be the most effective of the lot, in part because of the story it tells about the quake. So it's all the more striking to note that it's impossible to determine who actually gave the film this structure. To a large extent, the shots in the film could have been taken in any order. Newspaper accounts pinpoint the razing of St. Patrick's Church to May 9, 1906. (In fact, another cameraman recording the event also captured this cameraman in his frame.) Trolley service didn't resume until May 1st. Those dates are fixed, but just about everything else in the film could have been photographed any time after April 18th.

Did the unknown cameraman picture the story as he was shooting it, or was it assembled later, by trial and error, over the course of many screenings?

Bonine, the Edison cameraman sent to record the effects of the San Francisco earthquake, shot thirteen separate short films: panoramas, rescue scenes, even a travelogue from a car. He made no attempt to tie the films together, although they were assembled by others into a program used for fundraising. So little of Bonine's footage remains that it's unfair to compare it to the anonymous "San Francisco." Still, many of the preceding films in the Registry came from Edison workers, "San Francisco" is also interesting as an example of a different style of filmmaking.

Compared to most Edison actualities, the camerawork here seems a lot freer, looser. The pans feel smoother, less jarring, and the general quality of the cinematography—exposures, focus, composition—is more assured. Notice how the cameraman avoids backlighting, which would make it harder to see the characters in his shots. Often he's closer to the action, to the center of focus, than the Edison cameramen. At this point in film history, the cameraman not only determined the visual style of the film but was essentially the director, production designer, producer, and often the editor as well—since in most releases, shots simply began and ended and then were glued together. Within half a decade, all these jobs would be taken over by professionals devoted to specific crafts.

Intertitles are used to break up many of the shots, a decision that could have been made later by the distributor, or by anyone who purchased a print. (Toward the end of the surviving versions of "San Francisco," a different typeface is used in a shot of passengers disembarking from an Oakland ferry. That could have meant that the film was cobbled together from different sources, and may have in fact been shot by more than one person.)

Today we see these intertitles as interrupting the action, but at the time viewers may have been more comfortable with their presence. In some venues the intertitles would have been replaced by a narrator standing behind or next to the screen. The decision of when to break a shot with intertitles would continue to be a vexing one right up to the introduction of sound. Thus, intertitles may have contributed to the development of the reaction shot, a way of cutting away from and then back to a character.

“San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, April 18, 1906” was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2005. The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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Daniel Eagan has worked for Warner Bros., MGM, and other studios as a researcher and story analyst. He edited HBO’s Guide to Movies on Videocassette and Cable TV (Harper Collins) and MGM: When the Lion Roars (Turner Publishing), to which he also contributed articles. His work has appeared in Smithsonian, The Nation, The Hollywood Reporter, and other outlets.