

*(This letter shares a first-hand Oakland account of the 1906 earthquake. It was dictated by Phoebe McElrath to her nurse and companion, in Oakland, California, for her brother Alden's granddaughter for a school project. It was retyped from the original copy in the family's private collection.)*

April 22, 1975

Dear Holly,

This is my story of the earthquake of 1906 as I remember of the fires and trials of April 18.

I was rudely awakened by the violent movement of my bed about 5:00 in the morning. It was as though a giant had taken hold of the headboard of the old walnut bedstead on which I had been asleep and was shoving the bed rapidly back and forth across the room. I jumped out and ran downstairs and out the front door with the other members of the household, onto the wide circular lawn, under the old giant bay tree. We were a large family and had houseguests so that there were numerous white-clad barefooted people on the misty lawn. My recollection is that it looked a party of the spirits at dawn. There was no terror only wide amazement wondering what nature was up to. My father who had risen earlier and was working in the garden had enough terror. We felt the earthquake, but he saw it. Our house was an old Victorian mansion made up of many additions and had several very large handsome brick chimneys on its roof. As the earthquake proceeded they started to fly in all directions. At each turn and angle of the old mansion there resulted a pile of bricks as big as a small hay mound. Then my father saw my brothers leap out the side door. He thought "Thank God the boys are safe." He said if he had not had his spade in the ground and clung onto it he would have been thrown flat. Such an early morning experience. Later one by one we sneaked back in the house and dressed and returned to the garden. But nobody was brave enough to sit in the house for several nights as there were dire predictions of earthquakes yet to come, so each one dragged their mattress and bedding out into the birch grove where they set up camp for a few nights.

Poor San Francisco! Little did we realize what had happened over there. Later we were to know. All night long the ferry boats brought hoards of folks across the east bay where they could seek shelter with relatives or friends.

I will tell you, all night long we could hear people shuffling on the sidewalk with packs on their backs, the family treasures including clothing rescued from their homes, hopefully seeking shelter in the east bay. Literally thousands of people had been shaken out of bed and now possessed nothing but what they could snatch before the fire reached them. The water mains had been broken and the fire department was helpless so they decided to use dynamite to blast a back fire path. Later when we went to tour the ruins from the ferry building to Van Ness Avenue there was nothing but a sea of ashes, not a building nor a stick in sight. Everything had been knocked down and burned up. One episode I remember hearing of was of a prominent local socialite who gave birth to a son on the ruins of Golden Gate Park. Another episode was that of Caruso who was the world-famous tenor who was shaken out of his bed in the Palace Hotel and was excitedly running around the streets of San Francisco in his nightshirt. With no homes, no food, no means of cooking, thousands of people would have gone hungry had it not been for the churches of the east bay. They set up centers and invited all to come in for free meals. All the neighboring cities and communities were generous and helped enormously. I remember being impressed by Petaluma who sent a carload of boiled fresh eggs. Other towns responded in like fashion. Finally order was restored in San Francisco and the wonder of it all was San Francisco was rebuilt earthquake and fireproof into one of the most beautiful cities of the world.

Dear Holly,

Use any part or all of this narrative as you see fit. I hope it is not late for your purpose. Events of which I had no control caused delay in answering your good letter which I enjoyed. Ask your teacher to give you a high mark for effort.

All my love,

Phoebe