Early Motion Pictures, 1897-1920

Movie 17 of 26

San Francisco earthquake and fire, April 18, 1906 [Production company unknown].

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Part 1 of 4
- RealMedia format ... for 28.8 or higher modem
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Part 2 of 4
- RealMedia format ... for 28.8 or higher modem
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Part 3 of 4
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- MPEG format ... 28 megabytes
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Part 4 of 4
- RealMedia format ... for 28.8 or higher modem
- MPEG format ... 27 megabytes
- Quick Time format ... 12 megabytes

SUMMARY
This film shows the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake of April 18, 1906, and the devastation resulting from the subsequent three-day fire. The 8.3 magnitude earthquake struck at 5:12am and was centered along the San Andreas Fault, which slices through coastal California. Most of the cities of central California were badly damaged. San Francisco, with thousands of unreinforced brick buildings - and thousands more closely-spaced wooden Victorian dwellings - was poorly prepared for a major fire. Collapsed buildings, broken chimneys, and a shortage of water due to broken mains led to several large fires that soon coalesced into a city-wide holocaust. The fire swept over nearly a quarter of the city, including the entire downtown area. Dynamite was used with varying success to prevent the fire from spreading westward. Over 3,000 people are now estimated to have died as a result of the disaster. For the surviving refugees, the first few weeks were hard; as aid poured in from around the country, thousands slept in tents in city parks, and all citizens were asked to do their cooking in the street. A severe shortage of public transportation made a taxicab out of anything on wheels. Numerous businesses relocated temporarily in Oakland and many refugees found lodgings outside the city. Reconstruction of the city proceeded at a furious pace and by 1908, San Francisco was well on the way to recovery. The scenes in the film are preceded by titles, many of which are sensationalized. One entire scene showing a family eating in the street was almost certainly staged for the camera. The film was probably made in early May, as one scene can be precisely dated to May 9, and another to sometime after May 1.

The following is a scene-by-scene description of the film: [Frame: 0318 (part 1)] Title: "The first scenes that meet the eye on landing." We see a pile of smoldering debris above a roadway. Location unknown. [0857 (part 1)] Title: "There were ruins on every hand." The camera pans left among ruins. The address on the wall (left) suggests a location near Gough and Grove streets, near the western edge of the burned area, north of Market Street. The advertisement for coffee continues in the next segment. [1446 (part 1)] Title: "Every fireman worked to save the residential districts -- and here ruins burned unchecked." This scene is a continuation of the previous pan. If the address is correct, the camera is close to where the fire was "checked." Much of San Francisco's residential area survived the fire. [1923 (part 1)] The camera pans slowly from left to right (southwest to north) through smoking ruins and piles of steel column supports. Structural steel frames were still a novelty when this building was constructed some decades earlier. The distant Call Building, seen at the start of the sequence, suggests a location near Mission and Spear streets, where ruins smoldered for weeks. The site is two blocks south of the Ferry Building. [3495 (part 1)] Title "Walls were ordered razed by the authorities." The dangerous demolition work involved pulling down teetering brick walls with cables winched by donkey engines. The location of this ruin has resisted identification. [3610 (part 1)] Note the water heater tower (?) at the start of the sequence. The camera pans past ruins to a wall about to be demolished. The slope behind the ruins may be Nob Hill, which would place this scene on a street to the south and west. [4022 (part 1)] The demolition of the wall and tall facade framing is seen. [4760 (part 1)] The camera is located on Mission Street between 4th and 3rd streets, a block south of Market Street. The pan starts at the northwest, facing the distant St. Francis Hotel on Union Street (with the pre-earthquake, unfinished frame of the north wing visible) and swings east (right) past the unfinished frame of the Butler Building [5975 (part 1)] (now I. Magnin department store), also adjacent to Union Square. [Frame: 100 (part 2)] Title: "St. Patrick's Church, Mission Street." The camera documents the demolition in progress. This same scene, along with the cameraman and camera making this film, appears in the film Scenes in San Francisco, No. 1. The demolition took place on May 9, 1906. St. Patrick's Church was rebuilt on this site in much the same style, using the same bricks over a steel frame. [1145 (part 2)] The location changes to Natoma Street, an alley just north of and parallel to...
Mission Street, between 3rd and New Montgomery streets. The camera pans to the right from northwest to northeast. The large building with sets of triple windows is the Rialto Building, south of the Palace Hotel. The distant narrow white building to the right, beyond the nearby ruin, is the Union Trust Building on Market Street [1387 (part 2)]. To its right, the lower building with heavy roof cornice is the Wells Fargo Building at 2nd and Mission streets. A man is seen in the foreground as the pan continues to Natoma Street. [1485 (part 2)] Title: "At mealtimes, when there was food to be had, troubles were banished. The street served as both kitchen and dining room." While food was short only in the first few days after the fire, citizens were ordered to cook (but not eat) in the street until chimney inspection could be carried out. Few, if any, families camped out in the ruins, as shown here. If unable to stay with relatives, refugees went to camps or left the city. This family group (?) "having tea" in the ruins is attended by servants dressed in Russian style, possibly from San Francisco's Russian emigre community. The camera pans to the right (from northwest to north) from the northeast corner of Market and Powell streets. [3477 (part 2)] The view swings past the steps of the ruined St. Ann's Building (the area was a swale between sand dunes, called St. Annes Valley, during the gold-rush). Note the mailbox. The ruined facade of the Columbia Theater [3720 (part 2)] is seen next to the St. Ann's Building on Powell Street before pointing farther up Powell to the distant St. Francis Hotel on Union Square. [4110 (part 2)] Title: "Market and Powell Streets that memorable April of 1906." The pan continues across Powell Street to the southwest corner of the Flood Building [4463 (part 2)]. Note the signs: "Office of the Treasurer [of the City and County of] San Francisco," "Safe Deposit Vaults Undamaged by Fire or Water - Vaults for Rent Prices Unchanged" and "Office of the Western National Bank." [4820 (part 2)] The Flood Building was refurbished and is currently (1993) undergoing a second refurbishing. [5060 (part 2)] Title: "Soldiers guarded the banks. They shot to kill at looters." These are true statements but the uncompromising street justice of the first few days had eased into a more casual duty by the time this film was made. These soldiers seemed very relaxed. The pan continues to the northeast and the view down Market Street is obscured by dust [5315 (part 2)]. Men work in the foreground to lay temporary streetcar tracks up Powell Street. The permanent line was soon restored and still runs to the turntable at this corner, a tourist hub. [Frame: 0102 (part 3)] Title: "Man's faithful friend, the horse, worked tirelessly. There was no water, except what was brought to him by ferryboat." Horses were the unsung heroes of the disaster. Nearly 17,000 horses were worked to death in the following months. The camera view, from the northwest corner of Market and East streets (the Embarcadero), pans right (northeast to east) across the Ferry Building. Most businesses temporarily relocated in Oakland across the Bay. As all ferry traffic to there passed through the Ferry Building, this was a busy spot. The severe shortage of public transportation led to the use of any conveyance, from buggies to drayage carts, to get to the Ferry Building. [0530 (part 3)] Note the overwhelmed traffic policeman at center right. [2500 (part 3)] Title: "First refugees were in too much haste, even to take their effects." More of the same view. While this title may have been true in the first days of the disaster, this scene shows commuters weeks after the fire. [3190 (part 3)] Title: "Women wore their Easter bonnets, Chinamen wore their queues." One possible Easter bonnet is visible [3511 (part 3)], but no queues are seen. [3914 (part 3)] Title: "Looking down Market Street. The first trolley." It is very unlikely that the first official electric streetcar (trolley) of May 1, 1906 was allowed to have so many passengers [4208 (part 3)]. This is surely a later scene. The pan is probably a continuation of the earlier pan series at this site, the northeast corner of Powell and Market streets. After looking northeast down Market at the approaching streetcar, the camera pans right (south) as the streetcar passes the ruined Emporium department store [4600 (part 3)]. Note the banner reading "New Home of the Emporium," which was rebuilt on the same site. Note also the pedestrians clambering over the streetcar tracks, laid in haste directly on the paved street. [4845 (part 3)] A heavily-laden streetcar approaches the Ferry Building, viewed from the northwest corner of Market and East streets. [5690 (part 3)] The camera looks northeast from the Ferry Building as the Southern Pacific ferry "Oakland" approached the dock on a sunny afternoon. Goat Island (now called Yerba Buena Island) in the background became the central anchorage for the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. [Frame: 0103 (part 4)] Title: "First ferry boats to land at Oakland were loaded to capacity with refugees." This is a view of the "Oakland" docking at the Ferry Building in San Francisco, not Oakland. The passengers are commuters returning home (a few, perhaps, to refugee camps). [0800 (part 4)] Note the supervising
second officer, deckhands, and capacity crowd. The "Oakland," a 1671-ton ferry rebuilt from the earlier "Chrysopolis" in 1875, was destroyed by fire in 1941. [1895 (part 4)] Title: "Arrival of refugees in Oakland." Note the different title style; the segment may have been added to the film at a later date. Morning commuters are seen leaving a ferry at the Oakland Mole to board trains for Oakland, Alameda, or Berkeley. The camera view is probably northwest. The Mole was a ferry dock halfway out Oakland's Long Wharf and was used by Southern Pacific ferries. It ceased operation in 1958. [4000 (part 4)] Title: "San Franciscans have claimed that this is how Oakland got her start - but they are wrong." [4210 (part 4)] More commuters pass the camera. While the title rightly dismisses a popular myth, Oakland's business certainly got a major boost in 1906.

NOTES
Copyright: no reg.

Duration: 3:39 (part 1), 2:59 (part 2), 3:13 (part 3), and 3:08 (part 4) at 15 fps.

Received: 2/2/1976 from LC film lab; ref print; preservation; AFI/Adams (L.F.) Collection.

SUBJECTS
Earthquakes--California--San Francisco.
Fires--California--San Francisco.
Buildings--Earthquake effects--California--San Francisco.
Ferries--California--San Francisco.
Street-railroads--California--San Francisco.
San Francisco (Calif.)--History.
Oakland (Calif.)--History.
Transportation--Earthquake effects--California.
Actuality--Short.

RELATED NAMES
AFI/Adams (L.F.) Collection (Library of Congress)

MEDIUM
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