

Eye-Witnesses Tell Story of S. F. Fire 50 Years Ago

One Still a Fireman

San Franciscans who witnessed the Fire and Earthquake of 1906 were recalling to friends yesterday:

"I was there . . . One of them was Rudolph Schubert, only surviving fireman still on active duty. To Schubert, now a healthy 79 year old and serving as secretary to Fire Chief Frank P. Kelly, one of the strangest and most ironic things about the fire was the fact that not a single fire alarm was sounded.

"At that time," Schubert explained yesterday, "the fire alarm system was operated with glass batteries which were kept on shelves in a small fire-alarm house. The first shock of the quake tumbled them to the floor and they smashed to bits. CHIEF KILLED."

"But we firemen were in for a terrible shock. One of the first casualties was Fire Chief Dennis Sullivan. The explosion on his adjoining building crashed through the fire house in which he made his headquarters and smashed into the basement where we found him mortally injured. He died."

"So you might say we firemen were crippled at the outset—no fire alarm system and our chief dying. "But at first we were not too worried. We could see a column of smoke here and there, maybe a half dozen. We thought, well, it's bad, but we can handle it in a couple of hours."

"Our company dashed to Market and Stuart Streets, coupled our hoses and started to fight a fire there. There was a squirt of water, then a trickle, then a little mud soaked out."

It was only a matter of minutes until Schubert—and the city's other firemen—got the terrible news.

"Not only had the quake broken the main water (See 'I WAS THERE,' Page 8, Col. 5)



TELLS OF HORROR — B. W. Booker, shown as a student in 1906, recalls the treacherous winds that whipped the flames across the tortured city. "I thought the world was ending," he says.



FOUGHT FIRE—Rudolph Schubert, a fireman in '06, recalls: "We firemen were crippled at the outset."

RECALLS FURY—Thomas A. Brooks, as he appeared in 1906, says: "Flames spread like an inferno."



REBIRTH — B. W. Booker, now assistant State engineer, saw the city emerge, even greater, from the ruin of ashes and debris.



KEPT VOW — But Brooks, now city chief administrative officer, recalls how even amid flames, citizens vowed to build a better city. "They did, too."

'Quake Bride Recalls Honeymoon in Ruins

"We spent our time wandering, getting covered with soot and smoke," San Francisco's first bride during the 1906 fire recalled fifty years later.

"That was our honeymoon, instead of going to Lake Louise and Banff."

That's how Mrs. Helen D. Nichols remembers her marriage on April 19, 1906—while after-shocks from the great earthquake still rocked the city and the inferno downtown was creeping out toward Van Ness Avenue.

"We were frightened into getting married," Mrs. Nichols quoted her late husband, Charles, as saying. "We did it because we thought we might have to leave town."

FORMS BURNED

In the old files of the city clerk's office, there's an unofficial-looking foolscap page recording the Nichols' handwritten affidavit applying for a marriage license. It was used because all official forms were burned.

They got their license from Deputy County Clerk G. L. Munson, who had set up an emergency office in his home at 404 Haight Street. Incidentally, a relative, Robert Munson, now is chief deputy county clerk.

Mrs. Nichols, interviewed the other day at her 2 Mesa Avenue home, recalled that her plans for a formal wedding with all the frills, which had been set for four days after that fateful April 18, were quickly forgotten when her family home was wrecked by the quake.

"Oh, my Lord, no," she said, "we couldn't even get into the house to get the gown. I wore the same dress

I had had on for two or three days."

The Nichols were married in his flat at 563 Baker Street near Fulton, overlooking an entrance to Golden Gate Park through which thousands of refugees were crowding. Her memories of the fire and earthquake include these:

The saddening parade of refugees, "some of them carrying nothing but a birdcage."

The aimless crowds on the streets: "We wandered as

everybody else did. You couldn't get over one before another came."

"A wedding breakfast of a bottle of beer and a box of crackers, brought by two bachelors from downtown."

The no-lamps or fire order and the stern knock of soldiers at any door where lights shone.

And the thirty refugees who crowded into a stable behind her mother's wrecked home at Golden Gate Avenue and Masonic Streets.

INSURANCE MAN.

Nichols, she recalled, then was San Francisco manager of the Fireman's Fund Insurance Company. All of its key records were turned to black ashes inside its safe, she said.

But he had a remarkable memory for details of policies when it came to untangling claims," Nichols, who died last year, formed an insurance partnership after the fire with the late Philip Fay.

Mrs. Nichols, who was married at 22, now is a distinguished appearing gray-haired woman. As she recalled her wedding day and "the nasty black soot ash," she said "it just doesn't seem possible that fifty years have passed."



MEMENTO—Mrs. Helen Nichols displays her handwritten marriage certificate, the first issued by the city after the 1906 disaster.

Flames Raged Around P. O., But Mail Went Through

"The mail must go through . . ."

Fifty years ago this week when disaster struck San Francisco, the mail did go through.

When the flames were under control, the San Francisco Post Office still stood in the midst of a ruined waste, lights gleamed from its windows and its lamps on sidewalk and doorway. It was the only sign of life in a field of darkness.

big, granite structure like a rock in the sea, and the United States Mint its only companion. Steam poured from its roof pipes. Crews gathered about its doors. Cords and carriers, and mails came and went. Its flag fluttered in the clouds of dust that swept it and at night, lights gleamed from its windows and its lamps on sidewalk and doorway.