

Browsing the Web: **From Earthquakes to Marconi**

by John F. Dunn



My original intent in this “Browsing the Web” feature was to present a study of earthquake stamps, but it evolved into something much more far-ranging. So let’s begin with the original theme and see where it leads us.

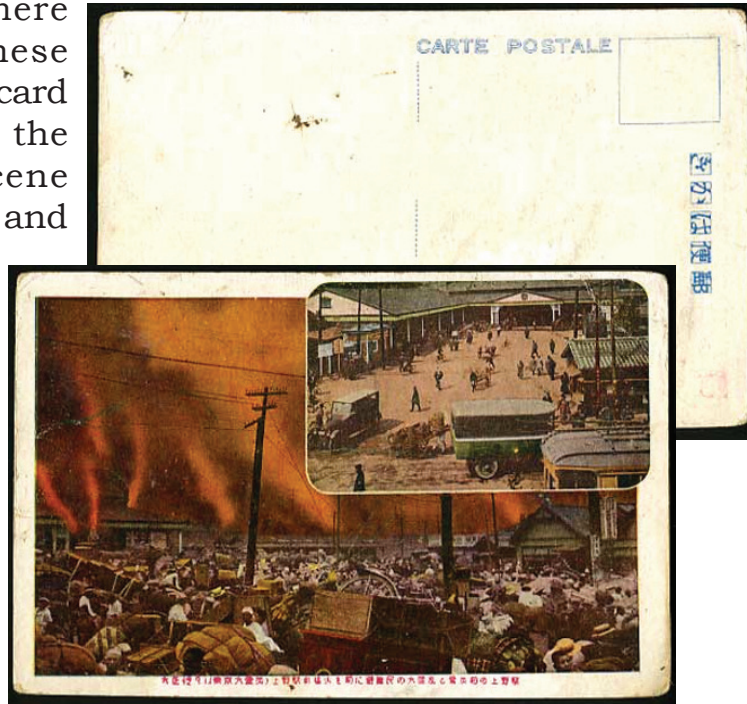
Of late, earthquakes and their subsequent tsunamis have taken a terrible toll, with thousands of lives and billions of dollars in property lost. The most recent, of course is the devastating magnitude 9 earthquake—one of the most powerful ever recorded—and tsunami that struck the east coast of Japan on March 11, 2011. Although they are sure to come, as of April 24 no stamps had been issued by Japan or any other postal administration to memorialize those who died or to raise funds for those who survived. In searching for them on the web, I did come across the graphic illustration shown above.

A previous earthquake that struck Japan in 1923 also was not memorialized at that time; however, two sets of stamps do serve as somewhat of a memory. The first is a 1923 Tazawa series set (Sc. 179-187) that had to be issued imperf and ungummed because the 1923 earthquake destroyed the perforating machine.



Scott 187

Shown here is a Japanese 1923 postal card illustrating the “before” scene upper right and the chaos in the fire that followed the earthquake that destroyed much of Tokyo, Yokohama and the surrounding area.



The other 1923 Japan issue of note that was affected by the earthquake was a planned set that was to celebrate the wedding of Crown Prince Hirohito. It was not issued, although specimens that had already been sent



The unissued sheetlet celebrating the wedding of Crown Prince Hirohito

to Micronesia were recalled and distributed at the actual wedding, and some examples have found their way into stamp collections.

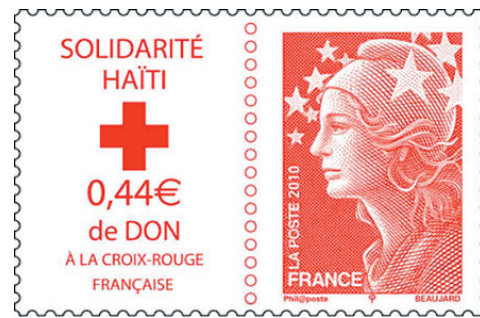
In modern times, we see many more memorial issues after disasters. The most devastating tsunami in recorded history is one that will be etched forever in the memory of most of us. That was the huge wave that followed an Indian Ocean earthquake on



Scott B287 1500 rupiah + 300r surtax

December 26, 2004 and took more than 230,000 lives in fourteen countries, primarily in Indonesia. We show here a stamp issued by Indonesia in 2005. As with many such “disaster” issues, it was a semi-postal, with the surcharge in excess of the postage value going to support victims of the disaster—in this instance Indonesia’s National Disaster Fund.

When an earthquake struck Haiti in 2010, that poverty-stricken nation had to depend on the rest of the world to furnish assistance. In addition to human assistance and supplies, money



poured in. Some of this was raised through the issue of semi-postals, one example being this semi-postal issued by France, which still has close ties to Haiti, where French is still an official language. The surtax of 44 Euros on the label accompanying this “Marianne” definitive issue was used to raise funds for Red Cross activities in Haiti.

In addition to the help they provide, these “disaster” issues sometimes have interesting and unusual collecting opportunities. One device used to issue semi-postals in a hurry and under sometimes-difficult circumstances is to overprint already-issued stamps. When you say “overprints,” that often means “overprint errors and varieties.” One example is this 1931 Nicaragua stamp, one of many

that were overprinted following a March 31, 1931 earthquake that killed 2,000 people. If you use your pdf magnifier you can see there are two surcharges, the first that was applied being “Vale / cs 0.20”. That would have been Scott C8. Then a second overprint reads “1931 /cs 0.15” but with that blue overprint inverted, making this Scott 14b.



In this period, inverts, doubles and other overprint varieties abound. One of the better ones is seen here, in the form of a first day cover for the June 7, 1931 release of the rightmost stamp, Scott C20, which bears a blue



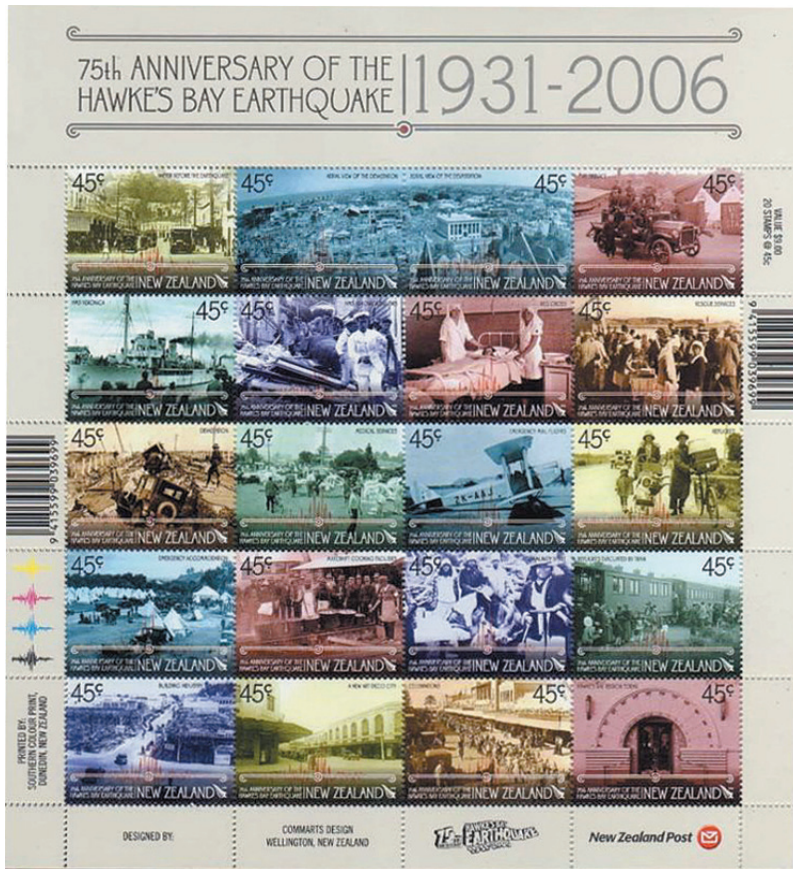
20c surcharge—visible when you magnify the image. But even more intriguing is the bisect of the May 29, 1931 issue, which shows a small portion of the ¢.002 overprint on this 10c issue, Sc. 536 bisect.

While we are on the subject of errors, on another stamp design, this perf shift error might not be very interesting; however, on this earthquake relief stamp it gives off the appearance of having been itself subjected to an earthquake while in production. The correct printing is shown at right, Greece Sc. RA89, which was issued to raise funds for



the reconstruction of the Ionian islands following a series of mid-August 1953 earthquakes, with the most destructive hitting on August 12.

Before we turn to our other primary subject, let's look at a few more interesting earthquake issues. First, here's one of the more comprehensive earthquake issues, released by New Zealand on February 3, 2006 to commemorate the February 3, 1931 Hawke's Bay earthquake. The stamps show before and after scenes of the area that was destroyed by an earthquake that killed 256 people.



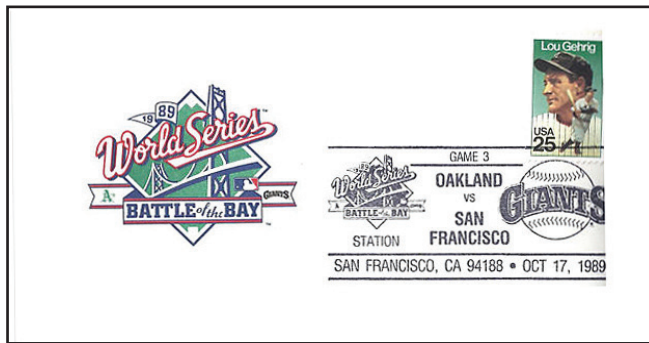
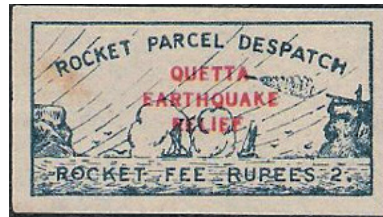
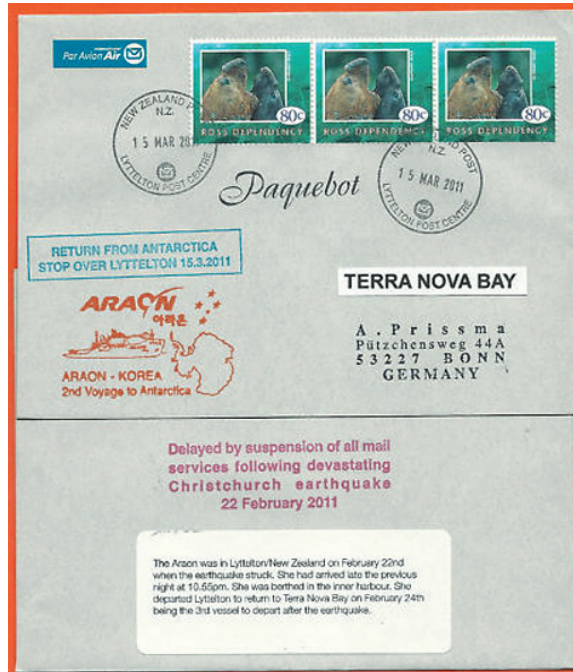
Next we see a reminder of the 2011 Christchurch, New Zealand earthquake that killed more than 170 people, with the toll still mounting. This is a cover that was carried on the Korean scientific expedition ship *Araon*, which had arrived in New Zealand the night before the February 22 earthquake. She departed the inner harbor on February 24—only the third vessel to be able to leave—and

returned to Antarctica. The processing of mail was delayed until March 15 and duly noted by the magenta handstamp on the reverse of the cover. The stamps on the cover are those of the Ross Dependency, which is located in Antarctica and administered by New Zealand.

Still another unusual earthquake collectible is this India Rocket Mail private issue, with a “Quetta Earthquake Relief” overprint, which hit in what is now part of Pakistan, but was then part of India, in 1936.

No coverage of earthquake issues would be complete without mention of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. For our purposes, we will defer to a separate article, by Anthony Fandino, that is part of this *Stamp News Online* issue as the “Yesterday in U.S. Stamp News” feature, which also is part of this month’s *SNO*.

The 1989 earthquake is represented by this example of a souvenir that was prepared in advance of the third game of the 1989 World Series. The cancellation is dated October 17, 1989, but the game that was scheduled to start at 5:35 p.m. was not played until October 27 after an earthquake struck the San Francisco



Bay area on October 17 at 5:04 p.m. It has been theorized that a lot more lives would have been lost on the freeways and the Oakland Bay Bridge if not for the fact that people had left work early or stayed late or at home in order to watch the game, which was played between the San Francisco Giants and Oakland A's. (On a personal note, I can still recall working at my desk—in White Plains, New York—with a small TV tuned to the pregame show. All of a sudden the screen went black. Turning to another station I realized it was a local problem. Turning on the radio expecting to listen to the pregame I first heard the news of the earthquake before it even came across the TV news. Most likely, many of you have memories of the ensuing hours and days. JFD.)

The 1908 Messina Earthquake

And now we come to what has been described as the fourth worst earthquake and tsunami in recorded history. It is the 1908 earthquake that hit Messina, Sicily, in 1908, which was followed immediately by



a 40-foot tsunami that combined resulted in the loss of more than 70,000 lives and the destruction of 93% of the structures in Messina. Shown here is one of many photographs of the rubble that can be found if you search “Messina 1908 earthquake” on the web. If you search for “earthquake stamps” in ebay stamps, among the many pieces you will find are a dozen or so that focus on charity stamps that were issued to help the victims. Shown first is an old folder that was produced by Littleton Stamp Co. that describes the earthquake and the stamps. Briefly, these labels were issued in a number of currencies to be purchased and either retained or used on mail. They were not valid for postage, but the Italian government decreed that they could be postmarked.

The Littleton booklet mentions France, England, Germany and the United States. We also found on ebay stamps in the currencies of Hungary and Russia. We did not find a French set, but we can show you the others.

Messina Disaster

No one can predict when an earthquake will release its titanic forces and spread ruin and destruction over cities and towns. Not the people who lived in Messina, a flourishing and beautiful city located in the area between Southern Italy and Sicily. They had perhaps felt the slight shift of the earth many times in the past months; not realizing that far below the surface the great fault was slowly removing all obstructions in preparation for the final push that would, in its few moments of life, create havoc and death to thousands.

At the early hour of 5:20 on the morning of December 28th, 1908, Messina and Calabria were visited by an earthquake that wiped from the map twenty-four towns, killed more than two hundred thousand people, wounded and demented many thousands and destroyed millions of dollars' worth of property. It was easily the greatest disaster in history.

It is by no means an easy matter to give a clear account of the catastrophe, since individuals who were actors in the fatal drama differ so essentially in their descriptions of just what happened during the few seconds between five twenty and five twenty-one.

One survivor who was awake at the moment of the catastrophe described it as a violent shuffling of every movable object in the room, including himself, accompanied by terrifying roars and subterranean thunder claps. Many report that their first consciousness of impending danger came with the sudden upward and downward movement of the bed and of the apparent swaying of the buildings. Most of the survivors, however, emphasized the violent vertical movements which accompanied the first convulsions.

While the fatal shocks were of brief duration, many people reached the streets only to be killed by falling stones and timbers or smothered by the pulverized debris which filled the streets to a depth of ten to twenty feet. Thousands were found on the streets and pavements buried beneath a rubble of mortar, brick and stones. The violent vertical motion lifted the great solid structures high in the air and the accompanying horizontal motion ground the thick walls into a mass of rubble which fell to the earth in all directions. The solid walls of the great business blocks were literally pulverized and thousands were buried as in a colossal sand storm.

A great tidal wave, preceded by a considerable subsidence of the waters in the harbor, swept over the marina and the lower parts of the city and rolled for miles inland over the lower portions of the surrounding country. Submarine cables were broken and at the moment of the receding of the waters, vessels rested upon the bottom of the bay. A heavy rainfall followed in the train of the earthquake and continued for five days. This prevented the fires which might have cost even more lives, but it delayed and complicated the work of rescue.

The work of rescue was necessarily slow and many who were wedged between fallen timbers died from continuous suffering before they could be released. English and Russian war vessels were the first to appear and they labored heroically until organized help from Palermo, Naples and other cities could systematically take up the work of succor.

(Continued on back page)

GERMAN ISSUE



Sets issued for use in France, Great Britain, Germany and the U.S.

Three Russian marines found several women and children clinging to the remnant of a fourth story floor attached to the facade of a building that had not fallen. There were no ladders, but by means of a rope and pick, one of the marines climbed the wall. With this rope he lowered the women and children and then climbed down himself. As one of the naked children was being wrapped in the coat of a sailor, the great wall suddenly fell and killed women, children and marines. This was one of the difficulties which plagued the work of the rescuers. Walls that were left standing by the first destructive movements were so weakened that they became veritable death traps for the brave men who engaged in the rescue cause.

The great depth of the debris required endless labor to uncover those parts of the city from which piteous cries issued. In one case it required the labor of thirty men for forty-seven hours to rescue one man who was buried many feet under pulverized building material. In some instances metal pipes had to be forced through the powdered debris; and through these tubes liquid food was brought within the reach of starving men and women until the work of disentanglement might be completed.

A priest was buried under a mass of powdered debris, his face only lying exposed. A cat was entombed in the room with him, but it was free. The third day it attacked the ear of the priest, but fortunately, help came at the critical moment. An instance came to light of a woman who was buried in a sleeping room a week before she was rescued, the door having been blocked by fallen timbers. She had no food and during her imprisonment she gave birth to twins. When she was found both she and the twins were strong and well. Two children who were entombed for eighteen days subsisted on an onion and a small bottle of wine. There have been some reports of persons who were dug out alive twenty-three days after the date of the earthquake.

The city was practically leveled and many thickly settled sections were reduced to dust. Facades of buildings here and there withstood the shocks and a few frame structures were left intact. But in the great city of nearly one hundred and sixty thousand inhabitants, practically all were left homeless. How many perished in Messina will never be known with any degree of exactness. Certainly more than a hundred thousand.

Falling upon a poor country like Sicily, the blow was keenly felt and the sympathy and material aid of the civilized world were needed to rebuild. To bring relief to the remaining, a set of stamps was issued for sale in France, England, Germany and the United States. The stamps issued for the various countries bear monetary inscriptions of their respective countries. By a Royal Italian Government decree the stamps were allowed to be used and postmarked, but they had no value as postage. Regular Italian stamps would have to be included to cover prepayment of postage.

Messina was founded by Cumaen pirates and Chalcidians in 730 B.C. on the site of an ancient Sikel town, and was named Zankle on account of its sickle shaped harbor. It was captured by fugitives from Samos and Miletus in 493 B.C. and its name subsequently changed to Messana after Messene in the Peloponnese.

LITTLETON STAMP & COIN CO., INC. Littleton, New Hampshire 03561



The stamps that go with this story are enclosed in a separate glassine envelope marked S-35, Price \$1.00.

This story is part of the enclosed approval selection and must be returned if not purchased.



The Germany set—or part of the set—is shown on page 8. The Russian set is shown here in mint form so that you can get a good look at the designs. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you what they depict other than the center bottom stamp that shows Mt. Etna, and the bottom right stamp appears to be Italian King Victor Emmanuel III and Queen Elena. Perhaps someone can help us out with identifications of the other scenes.



And here we see examples of, left to right, the Great Britain, Hungary, and U.S. denominated stamps with the postmarks that were allowed to be affixed.

In 2008, Italy commemorated the centenary of the earthquake with a single stamp, Scott 2909, shown here on a November 3, 2008 First day Cover.

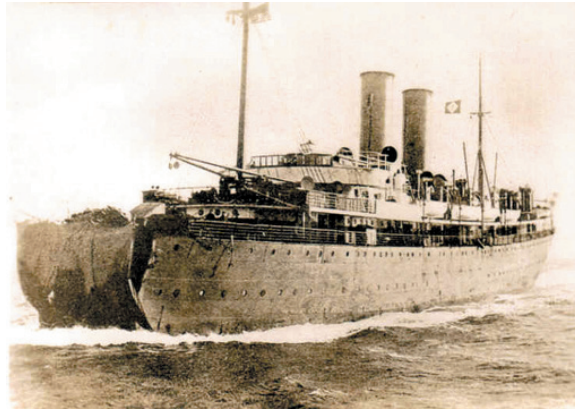


Messina to Marconi

But the story of the Messina earthquake and tsunami does not end there. As part of the efforts to help the survivors, some of them were moved to other areas of Italy as well as to other countries. Among those were 850 citizens of Messina who in early 1909 were placed on board the cargo ship, *Florida*, to take them from Naples to New York City.

But off the coast of Nantucket, on the morning of January 23, 1909, *Florida* ran into dense fog and collided with a luxury passenger liner, the *Republic*, which attempted warning horns and evasive action without success. Three people on board the *Florida* were killed, most survived and were transferred to other ships, and the damaged vessel was able to make its way to New York despite a gaping hole in its bow.

Republic did not enjoy the same fate, but its passengers did. Only six passengers and crewmen were killed in the collision. But the ship began to become flooded and the lives of more than a thousand passengers were threatened. Fortunately, *Republic* was equipped with the new Marconi wireless telegraph system, and became the first ship in history to issue a CQD distress signal. As a result, other ships including the *Florida*, the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Gresham*, and the liner *Baltic* came to the rescue of the



Florida, with the bow folded down into the water from its collision with *Republic*.



Republic, starting to take on water after the collision.

passengers. The *Republic*, the largest ship to have sunk up to that time, ended up at the bottom of the Atlantic.

The rest of the story

Again, there is still more to the story. With its illustrious passengers, it was to be expected that there would be some valuables on the *Republic*. Even more enticing to fortune hunters, however, was the belief that there were millions of dollars in gold still on the *Republic*. Ironically, one of the theories was that the gold had been destined for Europe to assist the earthquake and tsunami survivors.

Whether that was true or not, in an ensuing legal battle, the exclusive salvage rights to the wreck were assigned and in the search, some of the Civil War era gold coins that went to the bottom of the sea have already been recovered, with many more still to be recovered.

One other question I could not answer was whether mail was on the *Republic* and, if so, was it rescued or recovered. I searched as best I could, but perhaps a collector of shipwreck covers might be aware of such a cover. It would make for a fitting finish to this fascinating story.



1995 Germany stamp, Sc. 1900, commemorates Guglielmo Marconi's invention of the radio.