

Yesterday in U.S. Stamp News: **When San Francisco Did the Wiggle**

by Anthony Fandino

(From *U.S. Stamp News*, June 2003)

(We bring you this article as an addendum to this month's Browsing the Web feature, "From Earthquakes to Marconi." We have added more photos to the original USSN article photos, including recently discovered unique color photos. JFD.)



<http://earthquake.usgs.gov/regional/nca/1906/18april/index.php>

This photograph, taken from a series of kites five weeks after the great earthquake of April 18, 1906, shows the devastation brought on the city of San Francisco by the quake and subsequent fire. The view is looking over Nob Hill toward the business district. The Fairmont Hotel, far left, dwarfs the Call Building.

Nearly one hundred years ago, San Francisco was destroyed by earthquake and fire—so severely that even today there is hardly a person on the planet who does not know of it. Of course Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy brought it vividly to the screen in the 1936 classic *San Francisco*—

"From Golden Gate Park after the Wiggle Apr 18-1906". Whoever wrote this annotation in ink on this card would have known that the writer, Alice McGill, had been camping in Golden Gate Park (along with thousands of others) as there is no mention on the card of where she had been staying after the destruction of the city. For months the homeless remained in tent cities. The post card was made from a box that had contained quality linen, probably brought out of the burning city with whatever



else could be salvaged. It is postmarked San Francisco Apr 22 7-PM, which was a Sunday. The fires were out only the day before, but the city still smoldered. Made by folding and then tearing, the card contains the following; "April 22, 06 Dear Lee: I wrote you a note Friday did you get it. We are home again now trying to get straightened up again, the house or rather the things in it are in a terrible mess. Nothing would suit me better than to go down there as it is positively sickening to have to look at ruins and homeless people here, but as long as we have a home and plenty to eat we will stay here. We were in the bread line from 6 to 7:30 yesterday, you can imagine what a crowd was there ahead of us. I would love to see you & hope you will come up as soon as you can. Yours sincerely Alice McGill Our letters are delivered so you can write." This card was addressed to Mr. Lee Denison, San Mateo, Cal and received there two days later at 8 a.m. The United States Post Office, by official pronouncement, permitted those in the earthquake zone (an area greater than San Francisco) to send mail without stamps, provided that the inscription "From San Francisco, Free" be placed in the corner. However, this rule was overlooked by most in their anxiety to write to family and friends through those offices still capable of functioning.

only 30 years after the event and being one of the first Hollywood “disaster films”. Seeing the roads and sidewalks opening and closing, falling masonry and collapsing buildings is so realistic on screen that one can understand how for many weeks thousands of people remained in tents in the open spaces and parks of that city, not trusting in homes that may have survived disaster, simply out of fear



One of the tent cities set up in parks.

The morning of April 18, 1906, started for San Franciscans as any other, early morning mist giving way to a light breeze as the cool air began climbing to 50 degrees. People slept on while early risers began making breakfasts. Over in the Palace Hotel the great Enrico Caruso slept, having had that evening sung Bizet’s *Carmen* with the touring Metropolitan Opera Company of New York.

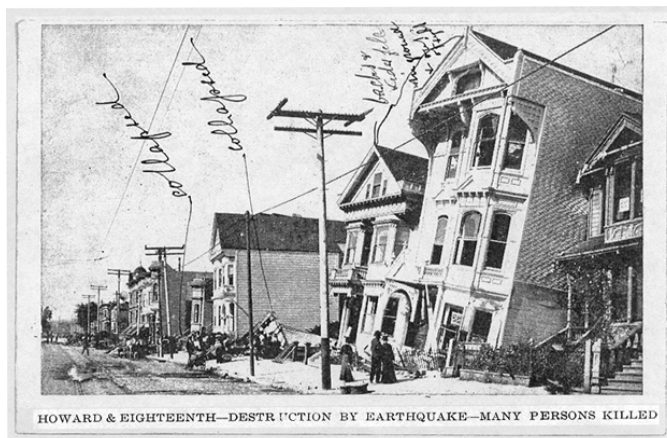
San Francisco was a proud city. Success was to be seen everywhere, splendid hotels, towering office blocks and crowning all, a new City Hall having taken 20 years to build at a cost of six million dollars. She was a rich and elegant city the equal to Chicago, New York and even Paris. Everything San Francisco touched turned to gold. No actor or play failed to have a long run in its theaters. She had lost most of her boisterous spirit of the early gold rush days and had acquired culture and gracious living.

With no warning, at 5:15:20 a.m. disaster struck, starting with a distant rumble then instantly slamming in from the North side of the bay, thundering beneath the ground and snapping it back and forth, first throwing chimneys to the ground as buildings danced and reeled. Chunks of masonry were strewn like gun shots. Everywhere dust rose to the skies as buildings collapsed and streets sagged

as much as six feet in places. Water mains burst and all electricity ceased.

Within a half minute, as quick as it started, it ceased. Though San Franciscans had experienced quakes, this one left them stunned. With great relief people counted themselves lucky having survived another trembler relatively well. Parts of the city were spared the worst of the shock and heavy sleepers slept on.

Then came the second more awesome shudder. Cobblestones in the streets seemed to pop out of their beds and the great pillars of City Hall collapsed, leaving only steel girders supporting the dome. The City Emergency Hospital caved in, burying doctors and patients. Most of the housing collapsed—built on land-fill marshes that quivered like jelly. But parts of the city were spared the worst of these convolutions and the sturdier built homes and buildings survived intact.



Top: Written on the front of Post Card with a line drawn to each property "Collapsed / Collapsed / Back and sides fell in ground & out of sight"
Bottom: San Francisco's City Hall

The earthquake struck along what is now called the San Andreas Fault, rocking a swath of some 200 miles

and destroying many smaller towns, but San Francisco being an international city, is all that one hears of.

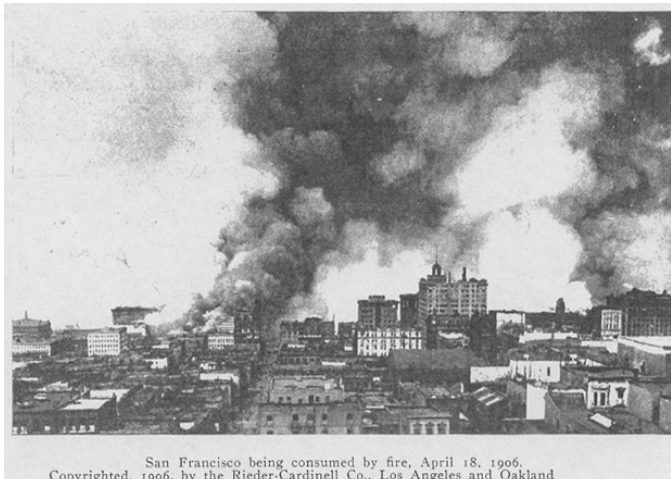
People wandered the streets in shock in whatever clothes they wore, many still in their night clothes. Others

helped the injured, and rescued those who could be reached. Everywhere people called to one another. Fire engines dashed everywhere as palls of smoke rose in several parts of the city. The earthquake had, including the short pause, taken but little more than a minute—but what it sowed would take three full days to control.

There was no water! The several fires which began in parts of the city united into a conflagration devouring all that stood in its path. Destroying the financial district, China Town, then working its way up the various hills where some of the more illustrious family homes stood. Fire engines were brought in from surrounding towns and the National Guard and other military services were called up. As a last resort dynamite was employed to create fire breaks but largely to little effect.



A crowd gathers on the other sidewalk to watch a rescue from the collapsed buildings while others flee the advancing flames.



A view taken at the height of the fire in the financial district as it burns its way toward Nob Hill.

The fires moved in one direction, then altering course and went into another district. Jumping wide streets, throwing sparks and flames to rooftops and sending an enormous black cloud more than two miles high. Finally, after three full days of roaring inferno—from April 18 until the morning of Saturday the 21st—the fires were at last controlled. Flames lingered in the ruins and smoldered for days.

Four square miles—497 city blocks and 28,000 buildings—had been destroyed, and 225,000 people made homeless, property damage being an estimated 500 million dollars. The great Post Office Building was spared and in



Residents on Sacramento Street watch the approaching fire.



THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE AND FIRE, SAN FRANCISCO, CAL., 1906.
LOOKING DOWN CALIFORNIA STREET FROM NOB HILL

The financial district from Nob Hill, after the fire. Note that all the buildings and houses seen in the bottom picture on page 5 have been destroyed.



A photograph showing the buckling of the pavement and bent lamp post in front of the Post Office.

the ensuing days handled tons of packages and mail sent to and from worried families and friends. (See page 9.)

The United States Mint also came through after a hard battle was fought to save it. In its silver vaults was an estimated \$200 million in bullion and coin, and its great quantities of silver quarters soon became the chief medium of exchange in the city of half a million people.

Wells Fargo had distributed its large fleet of wagons and teams to enable people to remove valuables and household goods out of the burning city. They continued in use after the fire and it was noted that the estimated 300 wagons and horses were all safely returned. The Red Cross gave succor to the injured and homeless and the steamships and railroads helped those who wanted to leave. Southern Pacific evacuated a quarter of a million people at no charge. Channels eventually took over in food distribution, ending Martial Law.

Within days of the catastrophe, businesses opened in private

residences or in tents set up in open spaces or parks. On their sides were painted the names of their companies.

People lived in the same manner,

washing and cooking in the open. Rubble was removed by running carts on temporary rails and dumped into the bay at a cost of \$20 million. Insurance companies met their obligations. The money was put into rebuilding the city with lumber from Northern California, Oregon and Washington, taking but three years to complete.



"Cooking on the Streets after the earthquake and fire".



Printed on the back of the card: "Mr and Mrs Wong Sun Yue Clemens (pictured lower right) RELICS DUG FROM THE RUINS 535 Grant Avenue San Francisco Calif". San Franciscans learned after the fire that China Town was not as wicked as was thought. All the tunnels leading to opium dens was only a rumor and did not exist at all .



*"SF All the bricks & debris is cleared now.
So one can walk on the sidewalk again"*

Just like the mythical bird Phoenix, San Francisco rose from the ashes anew. By 1915 this once again proud city, was hosting the Panama-Pacific Exposition partly in celebration of its own brave recovery.

Neither rain nor snow...nor earthquake

As noted in the original USSN article, the San Francisco Post Office continued to serve the businesses of citizens of San Francisco under the worst of circumstances.

The post office was still standing and functional after the earthquake, but had to be destroyed by dynamite in an effort to stop advancing flames.



The San Francisco Post Office on a picture post-card mailed just three days before the April 18, 1906 earthquake.

Still standing after the earthquake (right), the Post Office had to be destroyed and its work carried out in tents, such as in Golden Gate Park (lower left) and a tent camp in Hamilton Square (lower right).



In an October 30, 1982 article in *STAMPS Magazine*, Herman Herst, Jr., wrote "Although the post office was not badly damaged in the temblor, and work continued, dynamite



was resorted to, in order to save part of the city. There was time for postal equipment to be moved, and the building was quite well emptied before the walls came down. Their work was continued in a tent.

Non-business mail, on the authority of Postmaster Arthur G. Fiske, was allowed to be mailed free of postage for several days, simply by writing "FROM SAN FRANCISCO" in the place where a stamp would go. Most offices recognized this "frank" and delivered the letter, without postage due. Even the British post office recognized this, and Liverpool arranged a special postmark to be used on San Francisco letters to permit their being delivered free of postage....

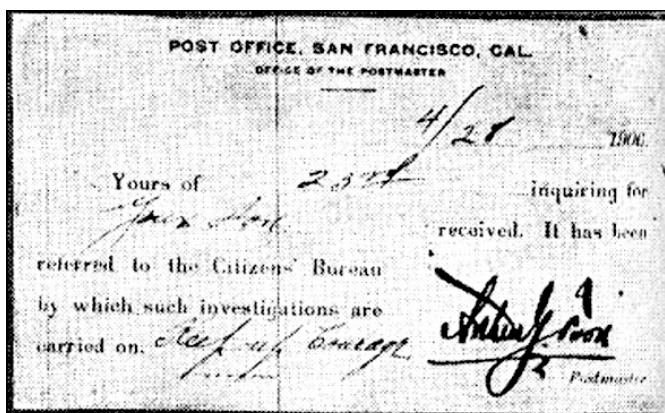


A homemade postcard sent unfranked with San Francisco April 25 machine cancel to Indianapolis, where a precancelled 2¢ due was added (indicating payment was not required). The message on the reverse reads "4/24/06. Office gone. Had a look at it today. Home still safe. Plenty to eat and not worrying. Sincerely yours, W. Elliott Judge".

Oddly, the Los Angeles post office did not recognize the frank, and postage due was collected on letters sent there from the victims of the disaster. It is understandable that post offices in other countries may not have been aware of it; our collection includes letters to Austria and to Hungary, all bearing postage due stamps.

The San Francisco Post Office even went to the expense of printing special postal cards which it sent out, postage free, with the "penalty clause", to inquiries seeking information on loved ones. We have one addressed to W. H. Rhawn, of Catawissa, Pa., who had asked for news of his son. The post officer referred the request to the "Citizens' Bureau", which had been set up to conduct such investigations. Since the date of the reply was April 28, nine days after

the holocaust, the Postmaster added the words “Keep up courage” (lower left of card).

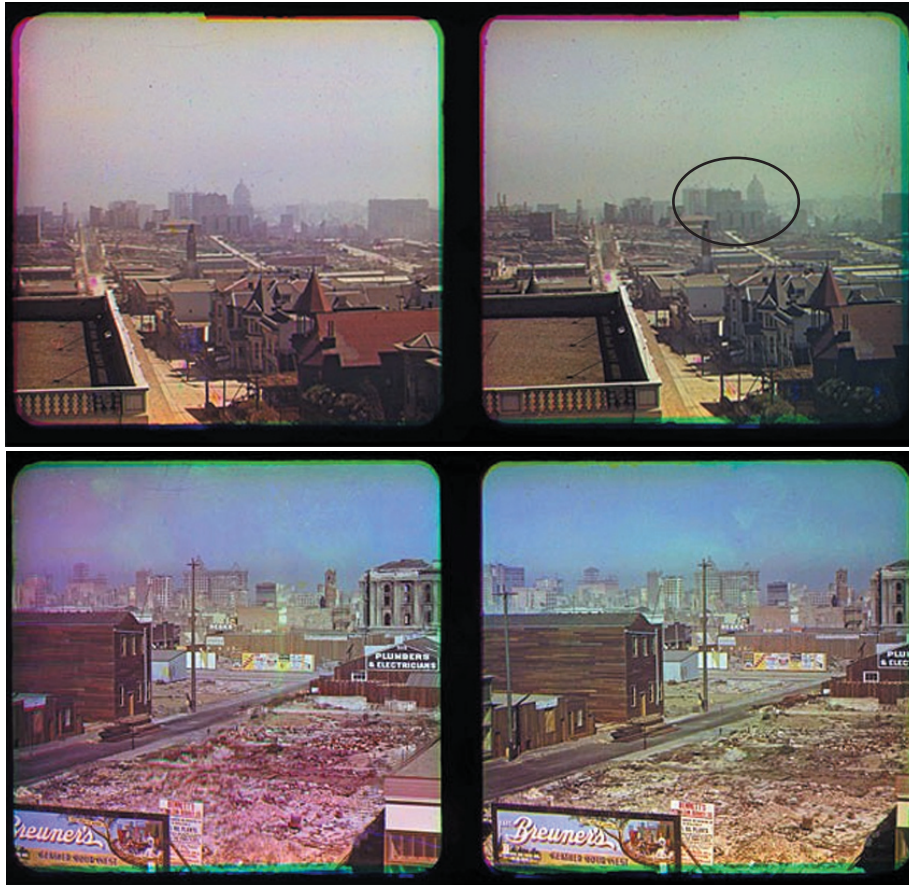


Unique color photos



From a Google search for San Francisco earthquake color photos we learn from a number of sites, that the first, and perhaps only, color photographs of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake were discovered in 2009. The six never-published images were taken by photography innovator Frederick Eugene Ives. Most were taken from the roof of the hotel where Ives stayed during an October 1906 visit. They were among some items donated by Ives' son, Herbert, and discovered in by National Museum of American History volunteer Anthony Brooks while he was cataloguing the collection.

“Although hand-colored photographs of the quake’s destruction have surfaced before, Ives’ work is probably the only true color documentary evidence,” Shannon Perich,



associate curator of the Smithsonian's photography history collection, told the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Ives was one of only a few photographers experimenting with color photography in the early 20th century. His San Francisco images were meant to be viewed through a 3-D device he invented but which never became a commercial success.

No descriptions of these scenes were provided; however, the tall building circled in the upper right photo looks to be the Call Building and the Fairmont hotel would be one of the two large buildings in front and to the left of it. (The photo on page 1 shows these buildings at the far left.)

