



Survivors: Life in an '06 Quake Camp

Acknowledgements

This exhibit, *Survivors: Life in an '06 Quake Camp*, is dedicated first and foremost to my partner Tom, without whose patience, support—and ability to entertain himself in my absence—this project would have never materialized. Thanks also to my family and friends for their understanding in not seeing much of me in the past year, except in an altered state of panic. And finally, this exhibit is dedicated to Brian Revis, a former San Francisco State University Museum Studies Department colleague and friend whose premature passing in October 2002 often motivated me to continue on with the completion of my degree. Brian, this is for you, in spirit.

Countless others have given their valuable time and talents towards this project, so much so that I feel it truly has been a collaborative effort. Those listed here are but some of these gracious souls. My apologies to those inadvertently omitted from this list—your contributions are no less appreciated.

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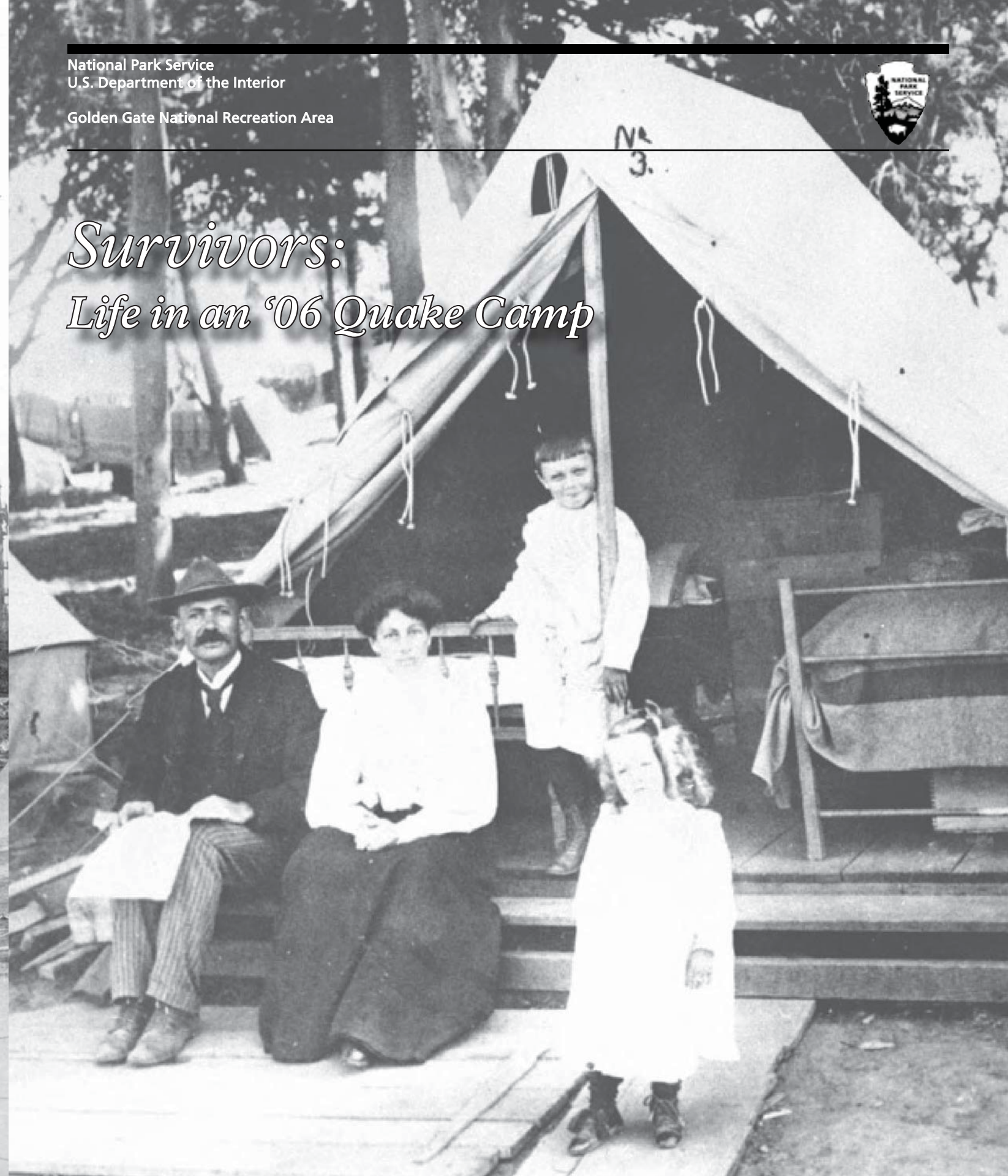
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1906 Music: Pat Spaeth and Larry Gibson

Recitations: Many friends and colleagues who lent their vocal stylings

Sanity Breaks: Canine Carly





This Exhibit

Survivors: Life in an '06 Quake Camp commemorates the centennial of the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire. But more than that, it pays homage to the quarter of a million residents made homeless and the thousands who were forced to live in tents and refugee camps throughout the city. It also serves as a reminder that regardless of where you live—and especially in earthquake-prone California—you are not immune to forces of nature that can dramatically alter your life in a matter of seconds.

As you use this program guide:

- **Read and listen** to the first-hand accounts of 1906 survivors, keeping in mind that some are modern-day recollections from elderly individuals who were quite young at the time of their experience. Consequently, some of the specifics may be imprecise or contradictory.

- **Look** for the tent furnishings highlighted in this program. None of the furnishings can be attributed to any known refugee camp. They are solely intended to convey a sense of the times, based on written and photographic records of the period.

- **Imagine** yourself thrust into communal living, sheltered by tents and sleeping on cots—cold, wet, and hungry—for a period of months to years. Could you muster the physical strength and emotional courage to face the challenges that confronted these 1906 refugees? In many ways, their experiences were similar to those made homeless by present-day disasters such as hurricane Katrina.

“The streets so recently thronged with violently active refugees seeking any place of safety were lined with tents and shanties. There are hundreds of decent shelters made of fire-warped corrugated iron, of window-shutters, of doors torn from wrecked buildings...tents were made of coats and bed-comfortables ...”

—Louise Herrick Wall, “Heroic San Francisco,” *The Century Magazine*, August 1906

Open April 1 to 30, 2006

Weekdays, 12 noon to 1 p.m.

Weekends, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Group tours and school programs by appointment

Information and group reservations:

(415) 561-4323

Front Cover Photo: GGNRA, Park Archives, GOGA-3327. Back Cover Photo: Lengemen Collection, 35d. Left: Robert W. Bowen Collection. Above: Photo courtesy of Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.





Robert W. Bowen Collection



“People were dragging trunks down the streets or carting household goods on sofas, sewing machines, cycles, or anything they could drag. They were coming into camp with fresh tales of loss and horror, and death and disaster were so close neighbors to us, one on each side, that we grew familiar...”

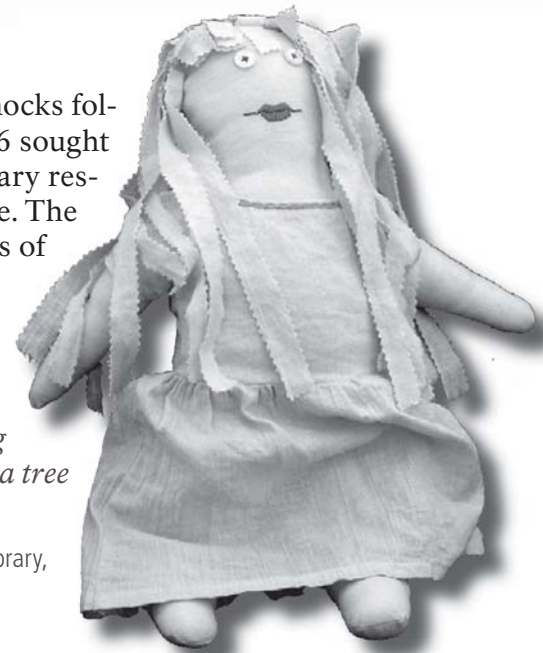
—Charles to Flora, May 8, 1906, personal letter, San Francisco Public Library

Shelter from the Cold

San Franciscans driven from their homes by fire or aftershocks following the city’s devastating earthquake of April 18, 1906 sought refuge in public squares and parks, vacant lots, and military reservations. Each family took possession of the first spot available. The more fortunate separated themselves from others with barriers of trunks, boxes, or blankets.

“Golden Gate Park was swamped with tens of thousands of desperate people, many of who were children. Some lay on the grass, others prayed in groups. One woman rocked a dead baby in her arms. A child nestled up to her dead mother, cooing and talking in sweet baby talk to her. One little girl sat silently in the shade of a tree caressing her doll.”

—J. J. Conlon, *Tale of a San Franciscan* (unpublished, undated memoir), Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley



National Archives

“We decided to stop here for the night. We are in the middle of an immense field—there must be thousands camping here—people of all nations thrown together higglety-pigglety...”

—Mary Edith Griswold, “Three Days Adrift: The Diary of a San Francisco Girl during the Earthquake and Fire,” *Sunset Magazine*, June–July 1906

Tents, Barracks, and Shacks

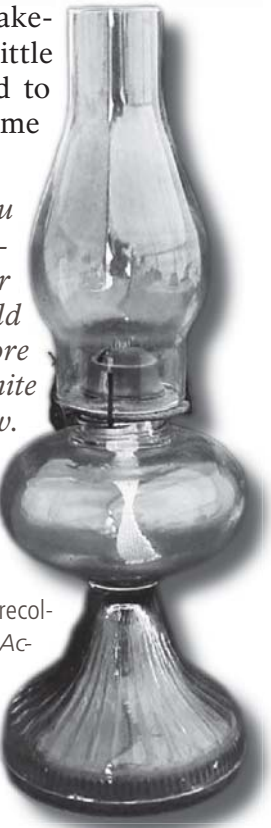
Tents were provided in the first few days by voluntary agencies, citizens’ relief committees, the army, and the American National Red Cross. Official or “permanent” camps were set up in Golden Gate Park, the Presidio, Fort Mason, Harbor View (the present-day Marina District), and city squares and parks. Acres of the city’s open space were covered with tents on wooden platforms, barracks, and later, small shacks known as *earthquake cottages*.

Feeding the Hungry

Those forced to flee their quake and fire-ravaged homes had from minutes to hours to pack food and essentials before taking refuge in the city’s numerous parks and open spaces. Stores that once sold food and supplies were either quake-damaged, burned, or raided. Little was left for those who needed to supplement what they had at home at the time of the disaster.

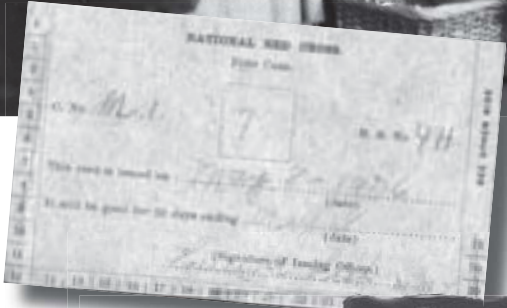
“The stores were all guarded. You couldn’t go in, there was no looting at that time. When the police or the national guard said you could go in, then you cleaned out the store because they were gonna dynamite it or it was gonna burn anyhow. So we accumulated a buggyful of groceries and eats of every kind...We had lanterns...cooking pots, everything else...”

—Walter Harman, March 1980, personal recollection in *1906 Remembered: Firsthand Accounts of the San Francisco Disaster*





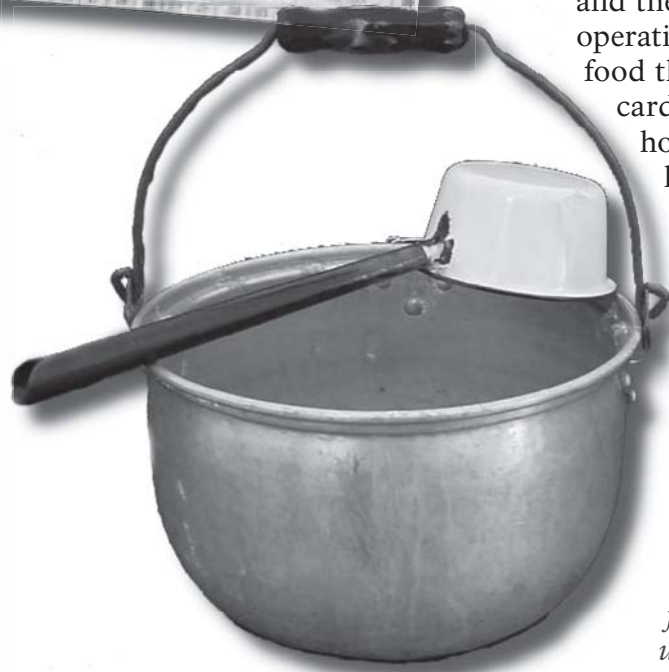
GGNRA Archives, GOGA 35256



The army distributed food from its warehouses and from supplies confiscated from the city's stores. Independent charities and the Red Cross soon joined the army, operating hot meal kitchens and allocating food through breadlines, and later, ration cards. Aid was given both to those left homeless and those still living in their homes.

"In the mornings, the soldiers had great big kettles filled with I don't know how many gallons of coffee. You brought a bucket or a pot or whatever you had, they would give you coffee with a soup ladle. They gave us children milk. All the parks had soup kitchens...You sat down at a big long table, with no cloths, and they would bring you a big bowl of soup, with a glass of milk for the children, coffee for the grown-ups, stew and stuff like that..."

—Walter Devecchi, March 1980, personal recollection in *1906 Remembered: Firsthand Accounts of the San Francisco Disaster*



Orders were issued forbidding all households from lighting interior fires. As a consequence, cooking took place in the streets and camps over open fires, or on rusty stoves that belched smoke out of short sections of pipe. Only candles or lanterns were permitted for light, and they had to be extinguished at 8 p.m. Drinking water was in scarce supply throughout most of the city.

"Water, sometimes even though muddy, was carried around between people in hats and hands, in paper cones and in small bottles until no more was to be had..."

—J. J. Conlon, *Tale of a San Franciscan* (unpublished, undated memoir), Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

"Eventually my brother and I camped in Golden Gate Park, in the children's playground...I was cooking for my brother...For the week after the earthquake, it was nothing uncommon to have aftershocks. I was trying to cook on the grate, and it would fall down and things would spill. It was very difficult to cook...."

—Edna Laurel Calhan, September 1979, personal recollection in *1906 Remembered: Firsthand Accounts of the San Francisco Disaster*

A Stitch of Clothing

Many refugees fled from the flames dressed only in nightgowns or calico slips, poor protection against spring's cold nights and chilly mornings. Others were exceedingly well-attired; the previous Sunday had been Easter and those who had more time to dress escaped in their new outfits.



Photo courtesy Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

"All she had on was her nightgown...people were running up and down the streets stark naked because in getting out of the buildings, the nightgowns were torn completely off of them.

Nobody said anything. They helped each other by giving them something to cover them up..."

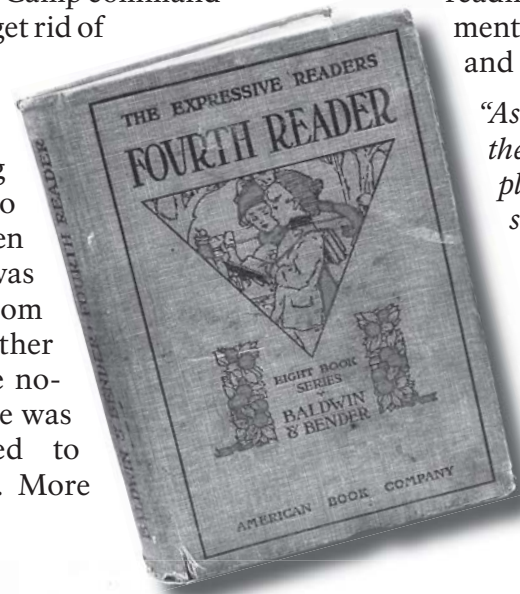
—Walter Harman, March 1980, personal recollection in *1906 Remembered: Firsthand Accounts of the San Francisco Disaster*



While the fire was spreading, the army passed out blankets and quantities of shoes, shirts, ponchos, and other clothing from its stores in the Presidio, and later, distributed clothing donations arriving from outside the city. Distribution of clothing was also undertaken by independent groups of volunteers, who collected and gave out what could be found in the city itself.

Order in the Camps

The army ran 21 of the city's 26 official camps, which became known by the rather misleading title of "permanent camps." General Greely laid down three rules for camp occupants: decency, order, and cleanliness. Camp commanders tried to get rid of the disorderly element without causing hardships to others. When a person was removed from a camp, all other camps were notified and he was not allowed to enter them. More



than half of the 500 ejections were for "drunkenness and disorderly conduct."

A little more than half of the camp populations were employed. About 39 percent of those sheltered in camps were men, of which 34 percent were employed; about 31 percent of camp residents were women and about 12 percent of them had jobs; and 30 percent of camp residents were children with 8 percent of them working.

Camps had community latrines and wash and bathhouses with hot and cold running water. Temporary social halls were built and used by camp residents as meeting places for kindergartens, day nurseries, reading rooms, sewing classes, improvement clubs, religious meetings, lectures, and concerts.

"As most of the schools were destroyed, the City obtained large tents that were placed in the parks that were not destroyed and we had to go to schools in them. When the teacher was not looking, we would crawl out the bottom. The teacher would call the police and they would chase us. If we were caught we would get a good licking by the Teacher..."

—Andy Ahern, circa 1968, personal recollection, San Francisco Public Library



National Archives

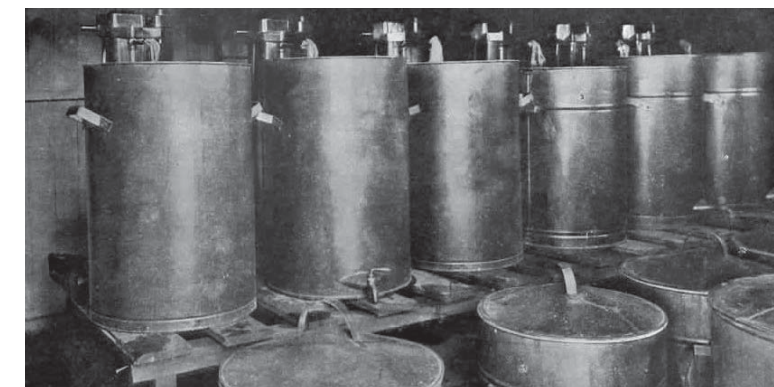
Safeguarding Health

The need for sanitation was immediately recognized, and latrines were quickly built in the camps and elsewhere in the city, and a large force of plumbers repaired leaks in sewers to prevent contamination of the water supply. Citizens were ordered to boil all drinking water.

"Finding toilets was a problem. Across from McLaren lodge they had put a big toilet up, a long one. It had a long plank in there with places to sit. You could have eight or ten in there at once...I just got seated nicely and there was a knock on the door...An Army officer walked in...He was inspecting, looking down the seat and writing something in his notes...Finally, he went out. I never did see what he looked like, but I lost all interest in that particular toilet..."

—Edna Laurel Calhan, September 1979, personal recollection in *1906 Remembered: Firsthand Accounts of the San Francisco Disaster*

As a result of the army's efficiency during the first few weeks, there was no serious outbreak of disease, though there was fear that cases of smallpox and typhoid might become epidemic. The greatest danger was from flies and the use of water from polluted wells and other unusual sources of supply. Contaminated water spread typhoid through the camps, and rats carried bubonic plague. As soon as possible, sterilizers were installed and camp water was tested weekly.



National Park Service 9



GGNRA, Park Archives, GOGA 35256



Making the Best of It

Once relief supplies arrived, many refugees acclimated themselves to living in the park, “picnicking” every day, as some of the children described it. For awhile, the novelty of cooking on curbside stoves, sharing with neighbors and friends, and meeting the challenge of making a meal from the odds and ends of ingredients dispensed from relief stations was bearable. The experience led one enterprising individual to assemble *The Refugees’ Cookbook*, filled with recipes and helpful hints: “To rid a tent or home of flies, put a tablespoon of cayenne pepper in a pan and let it burn over a fire, then open the doors or windows and the flies will soon all disappear.”

—*The Refugees’ Cookbook*, 1906

Contact with the Outside

Immediately following the quake and fire, most refugees—who had no means of getting to or communicating with the world outside of San Francisco—felt isolated. But within just two days, the intrepid Postal Service was ready to resume mail delivery.

“The news spread rapidly...that the Post Office would handle everything, stamped or unstamped, as long as it had an address to which it could be sent. When I went...to collect the mail from the camps, the wonderful mass of communications that poured into the automobile was a study in the sudden misery that had overtaken the city. Bits of cardboard, cuffs, pieces of wrapping paper, bits of newspapers with an address on the margin, pages of books and sticks of wood all served as a means to let somebody in the outside world know that friends were alive and in need among the ruins...”

—William F. Burke, “The Great Fire of 1906,” *The Argonaut*, published May 1, 1926 through August 20, 1927

Challenging Life

While refugee life was sometimes filled with uplifting moments and camaraderie, it was certainly not the wonderful “living in the out-of-doors” experience that so many official reports and newspaper and magazine accounts described. It rained during most of April and May 1906, and the refugees were regularly drenched.

“It was sort of pathetic in the park. The peacocks were roaming all around, and when the ambulance made a noise, the peacocks would scream and you never new [sic] if it was somebody screaming in an ambulance or whether it was a peacock. It was kind of unnerving...”

—Edna Laurel Calhan, September 1979, personal recollection in *1906 Remembered: Firsthand Accounts of the San Francisco Disaster*

“It was an awful sight in the little park that I was in. Lots of babies was born. It was too much excitement and they came ahead of time...”

—Halvor H. Berg, May 10, 1906, personal letter, San Francisco Public Library

“The discomforts of living, in spite of adequate relief, are very great. Wind and fog—for the weather has been unusually cold for a month, dust unspeakable, cooking out of doors in camps and streets, lack of water for toilet appliances, the incessant boiling of water and milk for fear of fever, absence of light and means of transportation for some time—in short, the total uprooting of all the ordinary habits of life, is bearing more and more heavily on the women and children...”

—Mary Roberts Smith, “Relief Work in Its Social Bearings,” *Charities and the Commons*, June 2, 1906

Lost and Found

The sometimes light-hearted mood was tempered by the sounds of soldiers going from tent to tent calling out names of the missing, reminding everyone of the tragedy of the disaster. Notices of missing and found children were placed in the classified-ad sections of the local newspapers.

· WILL SOMEONE OF 1206 MARKET ST., SAN FRANCISCO, INFORM ME OF THE SAFETY OF MY CHILDREN. MRS. ALICE MCINNIS AND WILLIAM MCINNIS. DIRECT CARE I.O.O.F. HALL, OAKLAND.

· FOUND—ITALIAN BOY, LOUIS MONTE PORPOLINI, 5 YEARS OLD, FROM LOMBARD ST., NORTH BEACH DISTRICT. COMMUNICATE WITH FRUITVALE RELIEF COMMITTEE.

· WANTED—INFORMATION REGARDING CHILDREN OF DR. RAMON CORRAL, VICE PRESIDENT OF MEXICO. THEY LIVED WITH MISS PETRONILA VALASCO, 1214 217A MASON ST. NOTIFY F. E. MONTEVERDE, JR., CARE UNION SAVINGS BANK, OAKLAND.

—San Francisco Examiner, April 24, 1906

Not only were individuals reunited with loved ones, but many were also joined together matrimonially. The number of marriage licenses issued during April and May 1906 far exceeded the numbers for any preceding two-month period in the history of the city.

The tents that provided shelter in the days immediately after the quake were gradually replaced by small wooden cottages. By June 1908, the final cottage camp closed as refugees transitioned into the next stages of their lives. ☞