Long Beach 1933 — Coalinga 1983
But With a Difference

by James E. Amrhein¹, S.E. & Juan A. Giron²

[EEER 1973]

At 4:45 p.m. Monday, May 2, 1983, an earthquake which registered 6.5 on the Richter scale struck the rural oil and farming community of Coalinga, California (Fig. 1).

The earthquake destroyed the central downtown area and seriously damaged 563 of the 2500 homes in the area. This was a disaster that was unexpected and caused devastation throughout this small farming community. There was a miracle, the miracle was that no deaths occurred. It was reported that approximately 45 people were injured, but only one seriously.

In surveying this devastating earthquake, it came to mind that here was the 1933 earthquake of Long Beach, California, all over again.

The size of the earthquake, 6.5 on the Richter scale, was approximately the same that hit the city of Long Beach in 1933. The devastation, the collapse of buildings, the falling out of unreinforced masonry walls was seen in Long Beach (Fig. 2) as well as in Coalinga.

The old, unreinforced masonry buildings suffered much damage throughout the downtown area called Coalinga Plaza. These buildings were the viable merchandising center for the community. They were constructed in the early 30s and were built of quality masonry for that time. Face brick, bond patterns, fancy and skilled detail were used in the bricklaying for these walls. However, there was no reinforcing; lime mortar was used and the floor systems and roof diaphragms were not adequately secured to the walls.

The general downtown area suffered major devastation from 4th Street to 7th Street and from Forest Avenue to Durian Avenue. This was the area that was well secured by police and highway patrol (Fig. 3).

Fig. 1. The epicenter of the earthquake was approximately five miles northeast of the city of Coalinga.

¹Executive Director, Masonry Institute of America
²Staff Engineer, Masonry Institute of America

Fig. 2. Damage to unreinforced masonry buildings in the March 10, 1933, earthquake of Long Beach.

Fig. 3. Map of downtown central area of Coalinga.
Coalinga. Other buildings were evaluated and, depending on their conditions, were ruled safe or not. This provided merchants with opportunities to maintain their business or carry on limited business if the buildings could not be entered by the public at that time.

Underground water pipes and gas lines were damaged. The National Guard set up distribution points to supply fresh drinking water. Gas lines were secured throughout the area and people were notified to turn off the gas lines in their homes due to potential leaking of gas in ruptured lines.

Old Masonry Buildings Toppled
The similarity between the 1933 Long Beach earthquake and the Coalinga earthquake of 1983 is the severe damage to the old, unreinforced masonry buildings. These multi-wythe brick structures constructed with lime mortar and no reinforcing and only government anchor ties to the roof or floor system suffered damage from the parapets collapsing, wythes of the masonry walls peeling off, arches over windows collapsing, and intersecting corners failing.

Much of the damage to unreinforced masonry buildings was in the Coalinga Plaza, which is the central shopping business district. Other unreinforced masonry buildings that suffered damage were along Forest Avenue: businesses such as a Mexican food restaurant, Poe’s Automotive Parts and Garage, and the Youth Center (Fig. 6).

Close inspection of connection details indicated that government anchors, approximately 1” diameter bars going from a joint through the brick walls with a plate on the end, were installed approximately every four to six feet. These government anchors maintained some integrity between the roof system and the wall system.

The State Theater building, an old, unreinforced masonry building constructed in the early 30s, suffered damage to parapets and corners. This was due to major diaphragm movement and distortion. While investigating the earthquake, Caltrans knocked down the high scenery loft and then the front of the building.

Contrast — Old and New
In Coalinga Plaza there was a dress shop in an old, unreinforced masonry store on the west side of the street.
Modern Masonry Performs

One of the lessons that was learned from this earthquake is that buildings constructed in accordance with the techniques of present-day design and construction are performing. Modern masonry structures, reinforced and well tied together, withstand the rigorous of this serious earthquake. It was reported that the ground acceleration was approximately 0.55 g and that there were three significant undulating uniform earthquake waves.

The West Hills College of reinforced grouted brick masonry (Fig. 15) was a prime example of first-rate masonry performance. These grouted brick buildings subjected to the same ground acceleration and seismic velocities as other buildings in the area had no damage. There was cracking around the ceilings at the wall lines, and that was all. The performance of reinforced, grouted brick masonry demonstrated well its capacity of resisting earthquakes.

Chimneys and Fireplaces

One of the distressing features of this earthquake was the performance of the unreinforced, unanchored chimneys. These chimneys broke off at the roof line, they fell through the fireboxes, or they peeled away from the buildings themselves (Fig. 16). When the chimney was well anchored and reinforced, it did perform.

The anchored masonry veneer did not perform too well because of the way it was secured. The corrugated tile (Fig. 17) did not anchor the masonry veneer, which pulled away from the wall. Anchored veneer was damaged throughout the area, as shown in Blair’s Iron Works on Forest Avenue. At the Blair

Fig. 10. Next to the Security Pacific Bank is McMahon’s Furniture store of modern reinforced concrete masonry; no damage.

Fig. 11. State Market — reinforced masonry; no damage.

Fig. 12. Thrifty Drug Store — T-bar ceiling with panels displaced and fallen out.

Fig. 13. Department of Motor Vehicles — No damage to the concrete masonry building.

Fig. 14. Police headquarters — the reinforced concrete masonry survived without damage.

Fig. 15. West Hills College reinforced grouted brick masonry. This school building was used as the Red Cross headquarters during the disaster. This building performed very well.

Fig. 16. Unreinforced brick masonry peeled away from the house; no ties.

Fig. 17. Corrugated metal tiles did not hold the stone veneer in place.
Iron Works, a heavy machine hacksaw topped over and a 10,000 pound lathe was displaced 8" on the floor. Also, a rack full of heavy iron parts fell over.

**Tanks**

Fig. 18. Fuel tanks moved approximately eight inches.

There were two tank frames with three tanks in each. Luckily, they were empty and therefore did not suffer a compression elephant foot failure around the base or collapse due to weight of contents. However, all tanks at each location displaced approximately 8" (Fig. 18) and broke some of the piping attached to them.

An elevated water tank behind the fire station also suffered distress. Approximately three cross-bracing rods were broken and the rest were very slack. It was a benefit that the tank itself was empty and thus was not subjected to as much stress as would be if it were full. The column bases also slid approximately a half-inch under each leg of the elevated tank.

**Trailers**

The Fairview Mobile Home Park on Thompson Street suffered much damage. The trailers were up on small sheet metal pedestals and these pedestals collapsed or turned over and the trailers dropped approximately 18 inches (Fig. 19).

Fig. 19. Approximately 50% of the trailers were displaced off their light steel piers and collapsed.

**Homes**

There were many warning signs posted on residential homes. These homes were built in the 1920s and 1930s and were supported off the foundation on 4" x 4" cripples about 12" high. The ground motion caused the buildings to rock back and forth and collapse just like dominoes. The cripples gave way and the buildings all were displaced. In-plane horizontal shear forces. Buildings that are well reinforced horizontally performed very well while those that did not have horizontal reinforcing were subjected to damage.

We have also seen that veneer anchorages must be improved. Corrugated metal ties do not hold the masonry. Adequate anchorage to the supporting wall is required. Adhered veneer performed well as it is light and, with adequate adhesion, did not cause any problems.

One thing that is continually stressed is connections. Adequate connections between the roof diaphragm, the floors, and the walls are important. Where connections are weak, diaphragms give way and walls fail. Tying diaphragms to walls not only gives integrity and continuity to a building, but it also keeps the building from being distorted and being damaged.

**P.G.&E. Power Station**

Fig. 20. Home collapsed in the earthquake. (Fig. 20). In addition, many water pipes and gas lines to the homes were broken or disrupted. These homes suffered chimney damage as well as displacement and falling away from the porches.

There were several very old concrete block houses with heavy concrete block. These suffered severe damage. Luckily, no one was killed, and the houses had to be torn down later.

**Fig. 21. P.G.&E. Substation & Warehouse — unreinforced concrete masonry power station showing diagonal cracks of in-plane failure.**

On the outskirts of town at Merced and Jayne Avenue, the P.G.&E. Substation & Warehouse was located. This old, small unreinforced masonry building was significantly damaged (Fig. 21). In-plane forces were acting, causing high diagonal tension stresses on the unreinforced wall. The significant ground acceleration imposed high loads upon this building.

**Lessons We Have Learned**

We have progressed a long way from the construction of the 1920s and the 1930s of unreinforced masonry buildings and should not be too critical, for they have performed well for over 50 years. Even now with the damage that they suffered, no one was killed. The buildings will be taken down and replaced with modern masonry, which proved to perform very well.

As we evaluate these buildings, it is evident that reinforcing steel is required to both resist the forces for overturning and out-of-plane bending and also for connecting anchorages.

Reprinted from *Masonry Design West*, July-August 1983