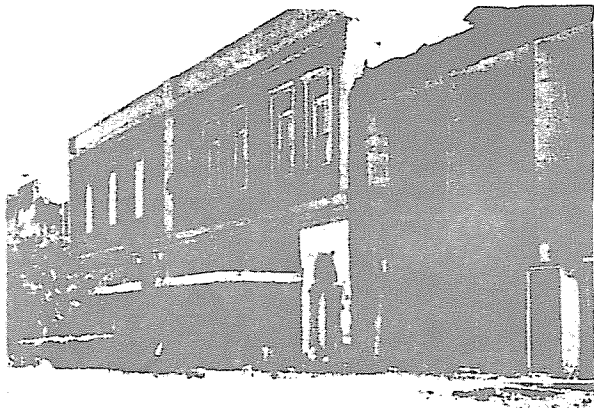


Coalinga - Lessons for Preservation

by Anne L. Watson and Mel Green*

On May 2, 1983, a 6.1 - 6.5 Richter Magnitude earthquake struck the city of Coalinga, California, damaging all of the early twentieth-century buildings of the downtown area. By mid-July the entire downtown had been razed.



Downtown Coalinga soon after the quake.

Bad times are said to be the friend of preservation; disasters are undoubtedly one of its greatest enemies. We cannot afford to lose historic buildings. But how can they continue to seem important during a time of loss and tragedy?

The answer to this question can be found by examining the legal and administrative procedures that have been designed for use in emergency situations. After a major earthquake or other disaster, local governments will declare a local emergency and request the Governor to declare a state of emergency. If the problem is beyond the capabilities of the State (as a major earthquake probably would be), the Governor requests the President to declare a major disaster, thus enabling involvement of federal agencies. In practice, all available aid is rushed to the area to save lives and property, even if a formal declaration of need has not yet been made.

Federal aid generally comes in the form of money -- for temporary housing, food, medical care, and rescue. Later aid may involve demolishing damaged buildings, as it did in Coalinga. Federal money, however, may not be used in violation of the Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and Executive Order 11593, unless necessary for the preservation of human life.

The United States Constitution provides that issues of health and safety are under the jurisdiction of the states. Therefore, evaluation of structural damage is accomplished under local or state agencies' initiative. When historic properties are affected, the State Historic Preservation Officer acts as an advisor to the Governor's Authorized Representative to the Regional Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The SHPO will help the Regional Director to determine that federal aid is used in accordance with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation Procedures for Historic and Cultural Properties.

* ~~REEL~~ 1976

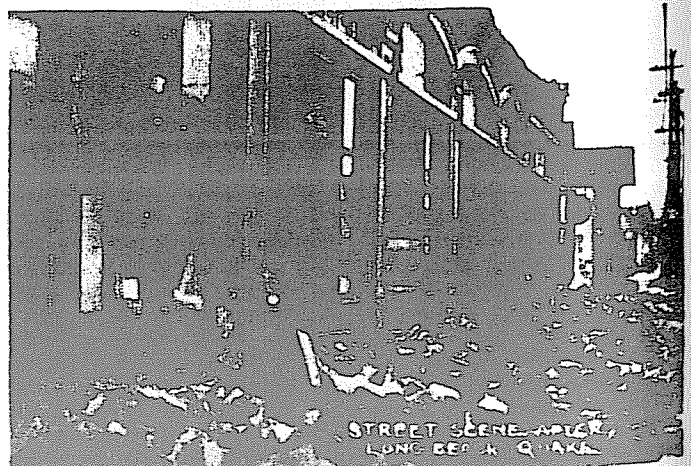
The SHPO, however, is not brought into the decision-making process unless affected structures are listed on state or local landmarks listings or on the National Register of Historic Places; or have been officially designated as eligible for such listing. It is essential, therefore, that local preservation groups strongly urge cities to perform surveys and identify landmarks and districts prior to a disaster. If local, state or National Register eligibility is recorded for structures affected by a disaster, adherence to Advisory Council procedures is automatic except in cases of imminent threat to life.

If possible, vulnerable historic structures should be strengthened. Structural strengthening can and should be performed in accordance with the Secretary of Interior's Standards. Cities can encourage building strengthening through building code administration and enforcement. In vulnerable areas, such as California, preservation groups should make every effort to have important buildings strengthened prior to a disaster, and to lobby their cities for codes and policies that will make such strengthening feasible.

Building owners and local preservation groups should also have their own disaster plans. They should be able to secure their buildings quickly after a disaster. This will probably involve some sort of fencing, since a damaged building may not be securable by locking or boarding up doors and windows. If a building is not secured, it may be construed to be an imminent hazard to the public.

Engineers brought in by the state will probably not be experts in historic preservation. Historic building owners and preservation groups should know, prior to an emergency, the names and credentials of engineers who do specialize in preservation.

In summation, disaster planning is an important part of the preservation process. Only official designation of structures and districts will ensure consideration for historic resources by federal and state agencies. Preparedness on the part of building owners is essential: they should strengthen their buildings if they can, and should be able to secure them quickly to prevent hazards to the public. Finally, they should know engineers who can help them if their building is damaged in a disaster. They must plan for all these items before an emergency happens; afterwards -- as Coalinga proved -- is just too late.



50 years ago Long Beach fared no better. The 1933 Long Beach quake led to the "Field Act" which has led to the demolition of many public buildings.