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THE JULY 1906 EARTHQUAKES IN SOCORRO

BRUCE ASHCROFT

FEW NATURAL occurrences are so feared as earthquakes. Mention of them evokes mental pictures of buildings falling, the ground heaving and tearing, and people running for safety. In 1906 Socorro, a small New Mexico town of about two thousand people, experienced a prolonged series of earth tremors. July was the worst month—two major shocks did widespread damage and hundreds of lighter shocks were felt. Sensational reports of destruction were sent by the Associated Press to newspapers across the United States. The people of Socorro immediately denied the reports and endeavored to suppress the rumors.

The *Albuquerque Morning Journal* reported that “fire, smoke, lava, cinders, flames and brimstone have converted the place into a miniature Hades.”¹ Nearly every residence was said to be cracked or wrecked, and the people were reported fleeing for Albuquerque, El Paso, or Santa Fe without taking any of their possessions.² Sensational accounts appeared throughout the nation. The *Cincinnati Post* reported that, “Provisions are getting scarce and real distress is found among the refugees. Not a house in town is safe to enter and chimneys and walls topple with each recurrent tremor.”³ The *New York Times* added that “Women and children are being taken out of town on box cars.” Also, the people of Socorro were said to be praying in the streets for their lives.⁴ Mayor Holm O. Bursum of Socorro received a letter from San Francisco. The owner of the Grand Central Hotel was

anxious to discover if that building had been damaged.⁵ The earthquake scare delayed a plan to establish a colony of Bohemians in Socorro, an operation originated by Mr. Max Kirchman of Pittsburg.⁶

These sensational reports originated from eyewitness accounts. Elfego Baca, district attorney of Socorro, fled with his family to Albuquerque. He stated that one-half of the people of Socorro were leaving the town on every train. Those who could not escape by rail took wagons. Almost all of the houses were said to be uninhabitable. Baca said that the hardest rain in fifty years was falling in Socorro,⁷ and this added to the general discomfort. Mrs. J. J. Leeson, whose husband was a china and crockery dealer, also sought refuge in Albuquerque. She stated that she had experienced earthquakes in Los Angeles and San Francisco, "but never anything so sickening as these prolonged rockings and jerkings of the earth at Socorro."⁸ Mr. E. M. Fink, a resident of El Paso who was visiting Socorro at the time of the earthquakes, asserted that the women were panic-stricken. He said that the Santa Fe Railroad was sending box cars to Socorro to rescue the people. Mr. Fink was eating at the Winckler Hotel in Socorro when a shock knocked down a wall of the dining room.⁹ Several dispatches sent by citizens of Socorro confirmed the sensational reports.¹⁰

The leading geologist in New Mexico, Professor Fayette A. Jones, did nothing to allay the fears of the people. He predicted that the earthquakes might last several years and could spread over the entire Rio Grande Valley.¹¹

The preliminary reports, read from coast to coast, were filled with destruction. The popular image was that the town was in danger of being completely destroyed, the people panic-stricken and leaving Socorro as quickly as possible. The Court House, School of Mines building, telephone building, and county jail were all said to be seriously, if not irreparably, damaged.

Denials were sent to save the reputation of Socorro. Mayor H. O. Bursum drafted a statement for the Associated Press, in which

he stated that damage was light and that those who had left the city did so to protect women and children.¹² Dr. E. A. Drake, editor of the *Socorro Chieftain*, sent a letter to the *Albuquerque Morning Journal*. He estimated that only \$2,500 to \$3,000 worth of property damage had resulted. Not one building had fallen and less than six were classified as unfit to live in. Only fifty or sixty people had left town.¹³ Attorney John E. Griffith of Socorro prepared a letter for the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. In this he denied that any volcanic manifestation, such as lava, fire or smoke was present. He stated that most of the people who had left were away on prearranged vacations.¹⁴ Mr. T. J. Matthews, superintendent of the telephone lines in Socorro, wrote to the *Albuquerque Morning Journal* denying the sensational reports. He said that most of the damage had been suffered by adobe houses at least fifty years old.¹⁵

The *Santa Fe New Mexican* and the *Socorro Chieftain* published scathing editorials denouncing the exaggerated accounts. The *New Mexican* said:

Unfortunately several of the New Mexico towns are afflicted with too many irresponsible scribblers and men who have more time than money or honesty, which they devote to knocking the town they live in and to assailing and slandering the best citizenship of the Territory.¹⁶

The *New Mexican* specifically attacked the *Cincinnati Post*. Cincinnati was branded as a city "where they drink beer until the cows come home."

It is certainly astounding that any newspaper man, even if in Cincinnati, should allow it [such stories] to appear . . . There is one serious side to this balderdash and that is that there are many people who are ignorant enough to believe [it].¹⁷

Nine out of ten words in the news story were labeled "absolute fabrications and downright untruths."¹⁸

The *Chieftain* stated that:

Although Socorro, like every other community, is blessed with some talented liars, the *Chieftain* does not believe that any of them have exercised their talent to the extent of saying that the court house was in ruins, that 25,000 of the inhabitants of the city were driven from their homes and suffering for food, and that the Santa Fe Railway company was hauling the sufferers away in box cars.

If any of Socorro's local talent have been indulging in picturesque fabrications of that sort, the *Chieftain* would be glad to know who they are that it might bestow upon them a merited immortality.¹⁹

One specific aspect of the sensationalism was severely attacked—the report concerning the rain. The *Albuquerque Morning Journal* opined that “it will probably not dare to rain in Socorro for another fifty years.”²⁰

News writers from across the state were invited to Socorro. This allowed them to review the damage at first hand. After a correspondent had surveyed Socorro the *Silver City Enterprise* published an article saying that little damage had been done.²¹ The *Albuquerque Citizen* sent the Associated Press a vigorous denial.²² The *Albuquerque Morning Journal* ran a humorous apology to Socorro.

We brand . . . first and foremostly the Associated Press . . . as a cheerful liar and oursilves as an easy mark . . . We air highly indignant at oursilf fer almost printin' a news story . . . an' if we catch oursilf doin' it agin we'll discharge oursilf . . . We do brand oursilf as a most murtherous prevaricator . . . and desprit fakir.

We air fairly surprised at our own recklessness . . . And we brand oursilf as a raskil . . . we hereby boot oursilf half way round the block fer publishin' a wild, foolish and slanderous fabrication from El Paso. . . .

In conclusion the Avenin' Citizen wud hereby brand itself an' all its correspondents, the Associated Press, the tilly graph editor, the Gas Pipe editor and the religious editor . . . as well as all the printhers and the printhers' devil . . . as confirmed fakirs. We brand oursilf as lurid an' sensational . . . an' the Lord knows we'd give our eye teeth if we only cud be.²³

There were several reasons why the editorial controversy was so excited. The most important was that the people of the United States were earthquake-conscious in 1906. Prior to the July activity in Socorro, there had been earthquakes throughout the United States. Illinois, Utah, Pennsylvania, and Ohio had been struck. Volcanic activity was reported in Wyoming, South Dakota, and Washington. The San Francisco earthquake, perhaps the most famous natural disaster in American history, occurred in April 1906.²⁴ People expected the shocks in Socorro to do comparable damage.

The main reason for vigorous denial of the exaggerations was economic. The town was at a critical point in its history. In the 1880's and 1890's the population had swollen to nearly five thousand inhabitants. Socorro had become a rich mining town. Then, in 1898, the smelters closed and people started to leave the city.²⁵ By 1900 the official population had declined to 1,512.²⁶ Adverse publicity of this kind, in the opinion of the town leaders, could have been fatal to its future in New Mexico.²⁷

In July 1906 two severe earthquake shocks did cause widespread damage in Socorro, but actual property loss was estimated at less than \$3,000; no one was seriously injured, and no one was killed. Perhaps fifty people sought refuge in other towns. The townspeople were highly indignant about the nationally published reports that the town was nearly devastated and the people fleeing for their lives. Although very little damage was actually done to its reputation, the slur on the town's honor probably aroused more excitement than any destruction by earthquake.

NOTES

1. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, July 21, 1906.
2. *Ibid.*, July 19, 1906.
3. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 26, 1906.
4. *The New York Times*, July 19, 1906.
5. Holm O. Bursum Papers, University of New Mexico Library, Albuquerque.
6. *Socorro Chieftain*, July 28, 1906.
7. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, July 18, 1906.
8. *Ibid.*, July 19, 1906.
9. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 19, 1906.
10. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, July 17, 19, and others.
11. *The New York Times*, July 20, 1906.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, July 20, 1906.
14. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 20, 1906.
15. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, July 20, 1906.
16. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 23, 1906.
17. *Ibid.*, July 26, 1906.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Socorro Chieftain*, Aug. 4, 1906.
20. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, July 21, 1906.
21. *Silver City Enterprise*, July 27, 1906.
22. *Socorro Chieftain*, July 28, 1906.
23. *Albuquerque Morning Journal*, July 21, 1906.
24. *The New York Times Index*, July 1905-Dec. 1906 (New York, 1968).
25. Charles L. Nieman, *Spanish Times and Boom Times* (Socorro, 1972).
26. Nathan Jaffa, *Report of the Secretary of the Territory 1909-1910 and Legislative Manual 1911* (Santa Fe, 1911).
27. *Socorro Chieftain*, July 28, 1906.