
Guide to the Anonymous Letter [Ida to Laura]

Collection number: MS 3620

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Scope and Content

This four-page typed copy of a letter written to "Laura" by "Ida" from San Francisco was begun on April 24, 1906 and continued on May 2, 1906. It gives an eyewitness account of the earthquake and its aftermath.

April 24, 1906. Ida opens by saying that she has been trying to write for several days but has been too emotionally drained to do so. She assumes some news of San Francisco's earthquake has reached Laura already.

The earthquake hit at 5:13 a.m. on Wednesday morning, April 18, and woke Ida abruptly with its jerky, then rolling motion. All the items on shelves, piano, etc. fell to the floor, including dishes in the pantry, yet very few were broken. Ida and "Annie" and "Arthur" went back to bed after assessing the damage, but got up and dressed fifteen minutes later and went out to Van Ness Avenue, some 200 to 300 feet from their house, to see what was happening. Van Ness was thronged with people from hotels and houses, some wrapped in blankets and carrying their clothes, which they donned in the street. Most brick buildings were damaged. The chimneys of the Baltimore Hotel had fallen through the roof of a house killing a young man. Many other chimneys were down, causing gaping holes in roofs. Telegraph poles were flattened. Bricks and debris covered the sidewalks.

Ida says they soon noticed the fires coming from downtown, so headed in that direction. From Market Street at Sixth Street, they could see that everything from the Bay to Sixth Street was in flames south of Mission Street. North of Market, the flames were moving west from the Bay. Ida and her companions decided to go check on "the office on Sansome Street". They found the office building within one block of the fire on both sides. Arthur and Ida went up to the office through the mangled building, broke the window in the office door, and Ida entered through it to remove books and cash from the safe. These items they put into the larger "Safe Deposit Vaults" at California and Montgomery Streets, at the invitation of a "Mr. Dean". They watched the flames licking at their office building, then moved on to watch the Call, the Emporium, and Hale's buildings all go up in flames. As they moved towards their home, Ida and her companions saw people thronging the streets. The homeless were already filling plazas and parks, ready to move on as the fire spread. The Mechanic's Pavilion had been made into a temporary hospital, but as the flames approached, patients were moved elsewhere. Ida reports the rumor that some patients were simply chloroformed there and abandoned to the fire.

The fire reached Golden Gate Avenue and Laguna Street, just five blocks south of Ida, Annie, and Arthur's flat. As they saw the flames nearing, they packed up what they could, using a sofa with wheels as a cart. They moved a block at a time as the flames spread. They headed down Octavia Street to Jefferson Park, but found it already overcrowded. The next day, Arthur returned to the house for more items, and they hired a wagon for \$6 which took them and their chattels to the Panhandle. Fire lines prevented Arthur from making another visit to their house to remove goods, so instead he visited "Josie" and helped "carry Jack up the hills". Back in the Panhandle, the three watched a stream of wagons hauling household belongings westward. The heat and the light of the fire made them think they'd have to move to the beach next. They slept under umbrellas to protect them from the ash that fell constantly. Ambulances took injured people to Park Emergency Hospital. It was not until midnight Thursday that sentries called out the news that the fire had been contained.

On Friday Ida and the others learned that the fire had been contained at 20th and Mission Streets so that Josie's house had been spared, and at Van Ness Avenue so that their house was safe also. They loaded the wagon and headed home.

Once there, the trio found themselves virtual prisoners in the house from dusk to dawn. Soldiers acting as sentries shot anyone venturing forth or showing a light. Building a fire indoors was also grounds for being shot. Ida reports they had six stoves in their street, and got to know their neighbors very well, as they exchanged earthquake tales. Alameda, Oakland and Berkeley were offering haven to homeless people. Food was distributed by Relief Stations which provided daily rations for each person showing a special slip which was then stamped to prevent multiple visits to the stations.

May 2, 1906. Ida continues her post-earthquake account. By this time, she is at work again for Sierra Lumber Company whose offices have temporarily relocated to 476 13th Street in Oakland. She is living quite close by with George Chappel's family at 766 14th Street. She reports on improved conditions since her April 24 writing. Homeless are housed in tents; lights are allowed until 11 p.m.; and the Relief Stations are still providing food. She wonders how people will cope once the stations shut down. Cash will be required, and that is in short supply. Her company was unable to meet its complete payroll, though she herself did get her salary. She says Sierra Lumber Company will move back to San Francisco as soon as possible. The large vault in which she stashed the company's cash and books had not yet been opened because it "is still very warm".

Ida reports that "Jim" and "Norah" were burned out and are living with Josie. She remarks that "Horace" will have have to "do some rough work" and stop relying on her and Annie. She says Sierra Lumber Company is paying \$200 for the five rooms they are renting in Oakland, but they are subleasing two of the rooms for \$90. She reports that "Mr. Stadtfeld", "Mr. Dean" and "Mr. Van Bokkelen" all lost their homes and are living in Berkeley. Oakland and Alameda are booming. A few chimneys fell in Alameda, but there was no serious damage there.

Ida closes by saying that she is beginning to recover from the trauma of the earthquake and fire. May 1 was the first day she had felt like eating.