

ALARUMS AND DIVERSIONS: DISASTERS AT CAL

AT AN EARLY MEETING, the Editorial Board of the just-created *Chronicle* agreed that “alarums and diversions” would be the subtitle of our Disasters issue. Months later the question of the subtitle’s source came up and Shakespeare and Thurber were offered as authors. We never went further.

Beginning to talk about the disaster theme with colleagues on campus, and friends off, we received from the former, “oh, you mean the budget,” and from the latter, “oh, you mean those new buildings.”

But why “disasters,” and particularly in our first issue? Partly, of course, because earthquakes, fires, epidemics, and floods produce attractive prose and good material for illustrations. The immediate reactions of the participants or witnesses of momentous happenings are cinematic material. Our first inspiration for a “disaster” issue was the discovery of the unpublished account of September of 1923. An eminent physics professor, Raymond Birge, after successfully saving his house above campus from what he thought was a small grass fire, turned around to find all north Berkeley in flames. And this is true too of people who wrote fifty years after the event like Lucy Sprague Mitchell, or of fictional witnesses like Ish in George Stewart’s *Earth Abides*, or the professor in Jack London’s *The Scarlet Plague*.

Stories of these events are told here. Where possible we have tried to gather unpublished information and personal accounts and photographs for an original contribution to the historical record. However, we have also reprinted previously published accounts and stories, including official University announcements, newspaper headlines, and contemporary photos and illustrations, now fallen into obscurity. Our aim is to make the past, in this case, Berkeley’s brushes with natural disasters, not only vivid, but comprehensible to our own time.

We make no claim to be complete in our survey. Additional natural disasters probably still lurk in the imperfectly chronicled history of the University: the fire of 1905 only came to light when a researcher looking into the accounts of the 1906 earthquake stumbled across the account we republish here. Remember, too, that lesser extremes of nature have visited the campus—windstorm, drought, infestation (our Monterey pines and eucalyptus are both threatened with incurable pests or maladies), and periodic record-breaking heat waves or freezes.

Very little, perhaps, to write home about. But today, as the rain clouds pile up, Strawberry Creek can spill over. As the rains let up we should remember that sixteen major wild fires have burned up and down the East Bay hills since 1905. As the administration creates task forces to make seismic repairs, the Hayward fault sits silently below us. Jack London’s and George Stewart’s scenarios are fiction, but the influenza epidemic of 1918 was real and many medical researchers now wait uneasily for the appearance of unknown infections that could strike with cinematic suddenness. Disaster history provides entertainment but practical lessons as well—and not only in the University’s classrooms.

The Editorial Board