

Rutherford on the 1906 San Francisco quake

As we listened to National Public Radio's coverage of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake in the weeks preceding the centenary on 18 April, one of us, author of a young-adult biography of Ernest Rutherford,¹ remembered that "the father of nuclear science" spent the summer of 1906 at the University of California, Berkeley, from which he wrote letters commenting on the destruction. We thought readers of PHYSICS TODAY might be interested in the following quotations from Rutherford's correspondence, excerpted from Arthur S. Eve's 1939 biography.²

29 June 1906, to his wife:

There is no sign of the effects of the earthquake in Berkeley. There was a camp of refugees in the University until a fortnight ago but they have all gone. Oakland is filled with people, but a great number are now located in shacks in Frisco itself.

3 July 1906, to his wife:

We first took the electric car to the ferry at Oakland and then to San

Francisco. We passed through the city by car to the Southern Pacific Station right through the burnt part of the city. There was not a single house standing unburnt the whole route, but the streets on either side are covered with masses of fallen brick and twisted iron. Occasionally there is the shell of a building which still remains erect though burnt out. It is a pretty desolate looking spot, and dust is flying everywhere. The car lines are all running and are filled to bulging with people, but there is nothing doing in the burnt part, except here and there a wooden shack has been built for business temporarily. They are awaiting the money from the insurance people before rebuilding. We left by train at 3 and had a very pleasant, though warm, journey through beautiful country to Pacific Grove. . . . We saw the ruins of a number of buildings en route and could just see the shell of the ruined chapel at Leland Stanford University.

10 July 1906, to his mother:

I have passed through Frisco twice and seen the ruins of the fire [after the earthquake]. It is certainly a

most depressing sight. For miles there is nothing but heaps of bricks and tangled ironwork. Wooden buildings are going up everywhere for temporary use.

4 August 1906, to his mother:

[Following a visit to the Lick Observatory,] I also visited the University of Leland Stanford at Palo Alto, and saw the way the earthquake had knocked it about.

Clearly Rutherford's powers of observation were as keen outside the laboratory as inside. His voice should be added to those whose first-person accounts of the great national disaster have been called to the public's attention on the occasion of the centenary.

References

1. N. Pasachoff, *Ernest Rutherford: Father of Nuclear Science*, Enslow Publishers, Berkeley Heights, NJ (2005).
2. A. S. Eve, *Rutherford: Being the Life and Letters of the Rt. Hon. Lord Rutherford, O. M.*, Cambridge U. Press, Cambridge, UK, and Macmillan, New York (1939).

Jay M. Pasachoff

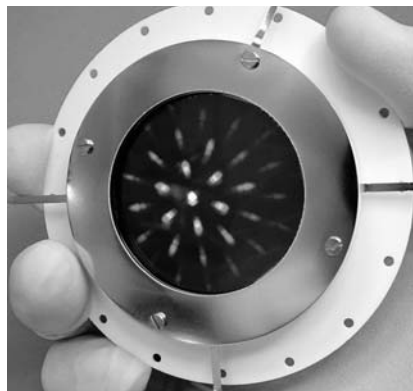
(jay.m.pasachoff@williams.edu)

Naomi Pasachoff

(naomi.pasachoff@williams.edu)

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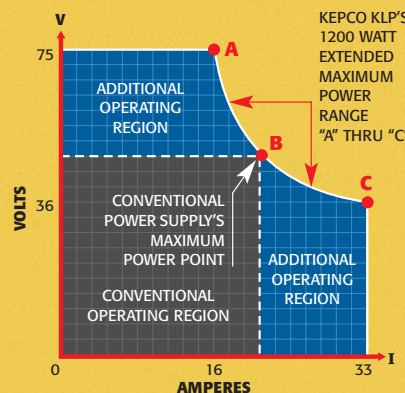
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