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Statement of James B. Stetson

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Statement of James B. Stetson, Esq., Member of the Firm of Holbrook, Merrill & Stetson, President of the California Street Cable Railroad Company.

San Francisco, June 22nd 1906.

Residence: Northwest corner Clay & Van Ness.

As the earthquake and the great fire of San Francisco in April, 1906, were events of such unusual interest, and realizing how faulty is man's memory after time passes, I jotted down, during the happening of the events herein narrated, what I personally observed during those awful days.

On the morning of April 18th, 1906, I was awakened by a very severe shock of earthquake. The shaking was so violent that it nearly threw me out of bed. It threw down a large book-case in my room, breaking the glass front of the book-case; another case fell across the floor. The bric-a-brac was thrown from the mantle and tables, and the floor strewn with broken China and glass. It is said that the shock lasted 28 seconds, but as near as I can estimate the violent part of it was only about 12 seconds.

As soon as the shake was over I got up and went to the window and looked out upon the street. The air was filled with a white dust, which was caused by the falling of St. Luke's stone church, located on the corner diagonally across from my house. I waited for the dust to settle, and I then saw the damage which had been done, not only to the church but to the residence of Claus Spreckels. The chimneys of the Spreckels' mansion were gone, the stone balustrade and carved work wrecked. The roof and the points of the gables, and the ornamental stone-work of the church had fallen. The debris was piled up on the sidewalk and against the sides of the church for a depth of 8 or 10 feet.

About this time my two house-maids, Rachel and Nora, were knocking at my door and inquiring if I were alive. I opened the door and they came in. Both girls were very badly frightened. Nora commenced

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sprinkling Holy water over the room.

I hurriedly dressed and went up to my daughters' on Pacific Avenue. I found her with her children in the street, and very much frightened. Their house was cracked considerably. My daughter had been imprisoned in her room by the binding of the door, and it had to be broken open for her to escape. The chimneys of her house were down, and much valuable glass and china broken.

I returned to my house and found that all my chimneys had been thrown down; one was in the front yard, and was fully 16 feet away from the building.

I then went over to the power house of the California Street Railroad. I saw that the immense smoke-stack had fallen even with the roof, and things were considerably disturbed, but the engines were apparently uninjured. I was told that the water supply was stopped, and I later learned that it was because the earthquake had broken the water-mains.

I then started on foot down town, no cars were running on any lines. I went on California Street over Nob Hill, and as I got in sight of the business part of the city I saw as many as 10 or 12 fires in the lower part thereof. When I arrived at California and Montgomery streets, the lower part of California Street seemed to be all on fire. I went along Sansome Street to Pine and down Pine toward Market. I saw that the store of Holbrook, Merrill & Stetson was all on fire, and when I arrived at Front Street I saw that the Commercial block, the southeast corner of Front and California Streets, was not on fire. My office was on the fifth floor of that building. I started to go toward the building. The fire was then burning fiercely at California and Battery. I went to the entrance at 123 California Street and met the janitor coming out. He told me I could not go upstairs. However, I started to go up slowly. The sparks were coming down into the open area in a shower, but as there was no smoke in the building I was sure that it was not on fire. I got up to my room on

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the fifth floor but was unable to get into my office as the door would not open. I tried the door in the adjoining office of the Western Beet Sugar Company and found it open. From that room I got into mine. I raised my shades and saw that the fire was blazing at Battery Street fully 50 feet high. I looked through the hall and the rooms and saw no smoke and was therefore sure that I was safe for a few minutes. I turned the combination to my safe and opened it. I had a quantity of souvenirs and presents which had been given me in past years. These I gathered up, and soon had my arms full. I saw a fish-basket on top of my closet and I got it down and put all these things into it, I then opened the little iron box in the corner of the safe, and some coin dropped out on the floor. I remembered that I had put four twenty dollar pieces in there the day before. I felt on the floor and picked up two of them, and as I did not find any more I concluded that they must have remained in the safe. I then closed the safe, turned on the combination, took my books and papers in my arms and started down the stairs for the street. The sparks were plentiful in the area when I went up but they were more so when I came down, a perfect fire-storm after the manner of a snow-storm. When I got on to California Street the air was a mass of sparks and smoke. I was afraid, as I had to go against it to get to Front Street, that my papers would take fire in my arms, so I buttoned up my coat to keep the sparks out from my papers, and pulled my hat down over my eyes. In this manner I virtually dove through it up California Street and over Front Street to Pine, where I started from. There I found it clear of smoke and fire. As I passed along with my arms full I saw a typewriter cover on the street and I picked it up. I dropped my load of books and papers into it and carried them in that manner to Front and Market Streets. There was no fire within a block of that corner at that time. This was about 8 o'clock in the morning. I found an empty box in the middle of Market Street and I sat down for a rest. While resting there my friend Will Whittier came along and he helped me with my load. We took it to

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the door of the Union Trust Company but they would not allow me to come in. I went upstairs and found Mr. Deering and, in his company, we went down to the deposit company and put my package into the vault between the outer and inner doors. Twenty-two days afterward I received it in the same condition as I left it there on the memorable 18 th [sic] of April.

I next went up to Third Street. The fire was raging strongly at the corner of Third and Mission. My son Harry came along in his automobile and I got in with him. He told me that he was going out to the Mechanics Pavilion, where, he said, he could do some work for the temporary hospital established there. When we reached the Pavilion we were told that there were 200 wounded people inside. They asked us to go to drug-stores and hardware stores and get hot water bags and oil and alcohol stoves and surgeons' appliances. We took with us Miss Sarah Fry, an ex-Salvation Army woman. She was so energetic and enthusiastic in her work that when we arrived at a drugstore under the St. Nicholas Hotel she jumped out of the automobile, and finding the door of the drug-store closed and locked, she seized a chair and raising it above her head smashed the glass doors in, and helped herself to hot water bags, bandages and anything which could be useful in an emergency hospital. I continued in this work with my son Harry for a couple of hours.

At 11 o'clock in the morning I found myself in the Pacific-Union Club, with a cup of coffee and a sandwich before me. In a few minutes I left the club and went down town again. The fire was raging below Sansome Street, and halfway between First and Second streets. I walked down to Bush Street between Sansome and Montgomery, and there met Mr. Samuel G. Murphy of the First National Bank. We discussed the probability of the fire reaching the First National

Bank building. I then went along Montgomery to California Street, and found the fire approaching Montgomery Street. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon I was at the Crocker-Woolworth bank, watching the fire fighting its way into the Palace Hotel, on the Mission Street side.

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At 3-30 o'clock the Palace was well on fire. I then walked home. All the streets leading to Lafayette Square and the Presidio were filled with people dragging trunks and valises along with them, trying to find a place of safety. They generally landed at the Presidio. As night came on the fire made it as light as day, and I could read, without other light, in any part of my house.

At 8 o'clock in the evening I again went down town to see the situation. I went to Grant Avenue, through Post Street, then to Sutter and down Sutter to Montgomery. The fire was then burning the eastern half of the Occidental Hotel, the Postal Telegraph Company's office and other buildings adjoining. The Lick House and the Masonic Temple were not on fire then. I next went to Pine and Dupont, and from that point could see that the Hall of Justice and all the buildings in that vicinity were on fire. I came back to my house at about 9-30 in the evening. In my house at the time were Mr. Wilcox and his mother, Mrs. Longstreet, Doctor and Mrs. Whitney, Mrs. Hicks and daughter, and my daughter Sallie and her children. They were all very much excited. I felt tired and told the folks I was going to bed. They all protested and said I should not go to bed. I told them that I was going to bed. They begged and pleaded with me not to take my clothes off, as they wanted me to be ready to leave at a moment's notice. I slept until 2-30 a.m., Thursday morning, the 19th. I then got up and again went down town to see what the situation was. I went to California Street, then to Hyde, then to Pine. From Pine and Leaven worth I could see that the fire was at that hour burning along O'Farrell, from Jones to Mason, and on the East side of Mason Street. The St. Francis was on fire. I went from Pine and Mason to California and Mason, and from there I could see that Old St. Marys [sic] and Grace Cathedrals were on fire. To the North, Chinatown was also on fire. I returned home by way of California Street and Van Ness Avenue. Both streets were thronged with men, women and children. Some were carrying bundles, packages and baby-carriages, but the usual method was to

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drag a trunk. This made a very harsh, scraping noise on the sidewalk. I overtook a man dragging a trunk, with a valise on the top of it, which kept frequently falling off. As I approached him I took the valise in my hand, and with the other hand took hold of the rope and helped him drag the heavy trunk. As we were strangers I am sure he at first took me for a thief who intended to steal the valise. I at once entered into conversation with him, and from his actions later on I think he changed his mind about me because when I left him a few blocks farther on he was very hearty in his thanks. When I arrived at Sacramento and Van Ness Avenue I saw a woman tugging at a trunk which had caught on the car-track. I helped her release it and dragged it over to the edge of the sidewalk for her. I advised her that, from the speed with which the fire was travelling, it could not reach that particular spot for more than five hours, and suggested to her that she was perfectly safe there and that she should rest herself before going along any farther. She would not take my advice, however, but insisted that she must travel on as fast as she could.

The throng of moving people began early Wednesday morning and continued until the afternoon of Thursday. Early Thursday morning Mr. Wilcox, with his mother and sister, and Mrs. Hicks and daughter left our house and went across the bay to Oakland, where they got a train for Los Angeles. Doctor and Mrs. Whitney went to a friend's house. Early in the morning I went over to the California Street car house and had a talk with our Superintendent, Mr. Harris. He said that he had run out some cars; that the water was shut off and was very low in the boilers, but it was not safe to get up steam, and he was unable to get horses to haul away the cars. So nothing could be done but await the result, which was that every car in the house, and in the street—some of them eight blocks away—were all burned. Not one was saved. I then came back to my house. The wind was light and from the Northwest. At 9 a.m., I got my son's automobile and sent my personal clothing, silverware, bedding etc., to a friend's house, and at

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10-30 I had rugs and some other things ready and sent them to the Presidio. Matters about this time began to be rather wild. Van Ness Avenue was filled with people, each one loaded with bundles and dragging valises or trunks. We concluded that it was best for Sallie and the children to leave the city, so my son took them in his automobile to Burlingame.

At 11-30 a.m., I could see from my window the blazes on Jones Street, at Clay, and southerly as far as Sutter and

Leavenworth. I think the Pleasanton was on fire at about this time. At 12 m. [sic], the flames were continuous from Clay, on Jones, to California. At 1-30 it had not quite reached Hyde and Clay, but appeared to be burning at Bush and Larkin, and Larkin and Sutter, and Polk and Sutter. At 2-30 it was approaching Van Ness, at Hyde and Washington, and reaching south as far as Sutter and Van Ness. I was in my front room watching with my field-glass, and house after house took fire along the line of blaze, as I have just described. As it approached Van Ness Avenue it did not burn north of Washington Street.

At 3 o'clock the soldiers drove the people north on Van Ness Avenue and west up to Franklin Street, saying that they were going to dynamite the East side of Van Ness. From my window I watched the movements of the fire-fighters and dynamiters. They first set fire to every house on the East side of Van Ness Avenue, between Washington and Bush, and by 3-30 nearly every house was on fire. Their method was about as follows: A soldier, with a vessel something resembling the form of a fruit-dish, containing some inflammable stuff, would climb to the second floor, enter the house, go to the front window, open it, pull down the shade and curtain, and set fire to the contents of his dish, and in a short time the shades and the curtain would be in a blaze. When the fire started slowly they would, in order to give it a draught, throw bricks and stones up to the windows to break the glass. From four to 4-30 St. Luke's Church, the Presbyterian Church, and all the houses from Bush to Washington Streets, were on

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fire. At about this time they began dynamiting. This was called "back firing", and as the line of fire was at Polk Street, the idea was to meet the flames and not allow them to cross Van Ness Avenue. The explosions of dynamite were felt fearfully in my house; each explosion within two blocks of my house would jar and shake the house violently and break the windows, and at the same time set off the burglar-alarm. As the windows would break it tore the shades and curtains, covered the floor with glass, and cracked the walls. After it was over I found that it had demolished in my house twelve plate and 54 crystal sheets, each measuring about 30 × 50 inches.

At 4-45 I was ordered out of my house by the soldiers, not in a quiet manner, but with an order that there was no mistaking its terms and meaning. It was about like this: "Get out of this house." I replied, "But this is my house and I have a right to stay here if I choose." The response was "Get out damned quick and make no talk about it either." So, by a soldier with a bayonet on his gun, I was marched up Clay Street to Gough Street, amid flames, smoke and explosions. I stayed at Gough Street awhile, looking down upon my house and expecting every minute to see the flames coming out of it. I watched from Gough Street with much anxiety, and made up my mind that I would see if I could not get back into my house. The heat was so intense that it had driven the guards away from Van Ness Avenue. As I saw noone [sic] down in that vicinity I quietly slipped down on the North side of Washington Street to Franklin. As noone [sic] was around there I continued on to Washington and Van Ness, and putting up my coat-collar, and protecting the side of my face with my hat, I ran along Van Ness Avenue to my front door and quickly got into my house again at 5-40, having been absent just 55 minutes. As I had reluctantly ascended Clay Street in charge of a soldier, I held back long enough to see the Presbyterian Church on Van Ness Avenue fall. When I returned again Mr. Merrill's house, at Washington and Van Ness Avenue, had been dynamited, the two churches, the Bradbury houses, and the Gunn house at Franklin and Gough, had shared the same fate.

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On getting into my house again, I observed that the Neustadter house, at the corner of Sacramento and Van Ness, was half consumed, but it had not set on fire the Spreckels residence, and as at this time Mr. Merrill's house, which had been dynamited the second time, was so demolished, I felt that I could consider my house had passed the critical time, and I hoped that the burning of Mr. Merrill's house would not endanger the west side of Van Ness. But a new danger here made itself manifest. The range of blocks from the North side of Washington to the South side of Jackson were on fire from Hyde Street and coming toward Van Ness, with the possibility of crossing; also Spreckels stable on Sacramento Street. The back of the Neustadter residence was now on fire. This would ordinarily set fire to the three Gorovan cottages, two other two-story houses, and the dynamited house of Mr. Gunn, all fronting on Clay Street. So I watched, going from my front-window to observe Washington and Jackson Streets, and then to my back-window to see the threatened danger from Clay Street. The Wenban residence at the corner of Jackson and Van Ness was well on fire at 6-15, and at 6-55 it fell in. The Clay Street danger began at about 7-30 p.m. At 8-15 the whole frontage, as here described, was blazing, and at its full height. My windows were so hot that I could not put my hand upon them. I opened the window and felt of the wood-work, which was equally hot. I had a bucket of water at the front and rear rooms, with an improvised swab, ready to put out any small fire which would be within my reach. I watched the situation for an hour, and as the flames died down a little I had hope, and at 10 p.M. [sic], I felt satisfied

that it would not cross Van Ness Avenue, and neither would it cross Clay Street. At this time I ventured out, and saw a small flame, about as large as my two hands, just starting on the tower of Mrs. Swabacher's house, which is next to mine on Clay Street. Very few people were around. I saw James Walton, of the 38th Coast Artillery, C. C. Jones, of 2176 Fulton Street, and David Miller Ferguson, of Oakland. I said to them, "I will give any man \$10 who will go up and

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put that fire out. They took a can of water into the house, climbed the stairs, opened the window, and in a few minutes had the fire out. Two of the men would accept nothing; the soldier the next day accepted \$10. Had Mrs. Swabacher's house gone everything in the block would have gone, the fire would have crossed to the North, up Pacific, Broadway and Vallejo, and very probably over to Fillmore Street, when very little would have been left of the residence portion of the city.

Now again another danger came: another tier of blocks had taken fire, the blocks from Leavenworth to Van Ness, between Jackson and Pacific. This was about 10-15 p.m. At 11-15 it had got to Van Ness Avenue. The Bothine house was fully on fire and was entirely consumed. The fire, however, did not cross to the West side of Van Ness. During all the day and evening the wind was steady and from the Northwest; it was not a very strong wind, and it helped protect the West side of Van Ness.

At 12 o'clock midnight I saw smoke coming out of the chimney of the Spreckels mansion. I immediately went out and spoke to a fireman, and he said that he had been into the house and that it was full of smoke and on fire. At one o'clock the house was on fire in the upper rooms. At 1-30 it was blazing out of the upper windows, and in a short time afterwards was wholly on fire. The fire caught the house from the rear by the blaze from the Gorovan cottages. I feel quite sure that if anyone had been on guard inside with a bucket of water the fire could have been put out. When the house was well on fire I knew that, it being iron-frame, hollow-tile partitions, and stone outside walls, there would be no danger to my house, and as I was very tired I told the man Ferguson that I would go into my house and take a nap. He asked me what room I was going to sleep in and he promised that if they were about to dynamite my house, or any other danger threatened, he would knock on my window and give me notice in time to get out. I went in and laid myself on a lounge in the library and slept until 5 a.m. When I awoke and looked out I saw flames pouring

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from every window of the Spreckels mansion. At 10 a.m. the house was thoroughly burned out. The general appearance of the house from a distance was the same as formerly, the walls and roof remaining the same as they were before [sic] the fire.

Friday morning, April 20, I went over to the California Street Engine House, at Hyde and California Streets, and found it in ruins. Beams, pipes, iron columns, tie-rods, car-trucks, brick, mortar, ashes and debris of every description filled the place. It was hot. I looked into the engine-room and it was certainly a sad sight to me, for I had something to do with it from its earliest existence. The form of everything was there, but rods, cranks, beams and pipe were bent and burned, but whether beyond hope of restoration I could not tell. Noone [sic] was there, or on the street, and I came away with uncertain feelings. I had hope, but whether the loss would be total or partial I could not say.

Judging from the smoke I knew that three large fires were burning at North Beach in the direction of the Union Street engine house. I afterwards walked down into the business part of the city. The streets, in many places, were filled with debris. Along Kearny and Montgomery streets [sic] the debris was piled in the [sic] middle of the street, to a depth of 4 or 5 feet, and a much greater depth on the sidewalk.

The water supply in my residence was gone; the same with the gas and electric light. The only light we could use was candle-light and that only until 9 p.m. The city authorities issued an order that no fires could be built in any house until the chimneys were rebuilt and inspected by an officer. The water we used was brought by my son Harry in a wash-boiler in his automobile. He got it some where out near the Park. The people generally cooked on improvised kitchens made in the street. Our door-bell was rung several evenings, and we were ordered to "put out that light."

About noon on the 20th the blocks between Pacific and Filbert were on fire, and the fire was again threatening Van Ness Avenue, but several engines were pumping salt water from Black Point, and this stream of water saved the West side of Van Ness Avenue.

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The front of my house was very much blistered and blackened by the intense heat; the paint melted in a peculiar way, and over two of the windows it hung like drapery.

On May 3rd we were able to buy food. Up to that time we obtained what we needed from the Relief Committee; we were given canned meats, potatoes, coffee, crackers, etc. Bread we were able to buy after a few days. During the afternoon of the 18th, and until 3 o'clock p.m. of the 19th, the scraping sound of dragging trunks on the sidewalks was continual. All sorts of methods for conveying valuables were resorted to, such as chairs on castors, baby-carriages, wheel-barrows etc., but the trunk-dragging was the most common. It was also almost impossible to get a wagon of any kind. The object of the people was to get to the vacant lots at North Beach, and to the Presidio grounds.

The feeding of 300,000 people suddenly made destitute is a matter of great difficulty, but it has been done. Since the fire it has rained two days and nights, one night quite hard, but the health of the people has been remarkably good.

We got water in the house on the 1st of May.

We got gas in the house on the 5th of June.

We got electric light in the house on the 7th of June.

We cooked on the street until the 8th of May.

During the day of Wednesday, April 18th., I saw some of the damage that had been done by the earthquake. The loss to the California Street Cable Railroad was the damage to the upper portion of the chimney. The only damage to the Pacific Union Club building was the falling of some plastering. The Call Building gave no evidence of damage on the outside. The Commercial Block, in which my office was located, did not show any damage. But the great loss, the great calamity, was by the fire.

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