

San Francisco Earthquake
by Arthur H. Groten M.D.

Last weekend, at a small local show, I found a wonderful cover in a pick-through box (Fig. 1). It is dated May 5, 1906 from a merchant in Chicago to Frank Buck, later a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, in Vacaville, CA. Applied to the front is one of the rarest of all U.S. charity labels.



On April 18, 1906, San Francisco was devastated by a massive earthquake. Within 3 weeks the label in question had been produced and was ready for use to promote aid for the victims. "Help San Francisco" was organized by David R. Forgan of the First National Bank in Chicago, who was also Treasurer of the Chicago Commercial Corporation.



I have never seen another cover with this label applied. I had two single copies, one with a very rough roulette separation, like the stamp on the cover, and the other with a nice clean perf. 11.5. (Fig. 2) No doubt, the earlier printings, made in a hurry, were inadequately separable whereas for later printings there was enough time to permit proper perforation of the sheets.

A post card of the Valencia St. Power Station (Fig. 3) and a stereo view card of the destroyed Post Office (Fig. 4) both supply the necessary visual imagery to give one the sense of the extent of the damage to the city and the need for such aid as the Chicago organization was seeking.



A letter sent to Will Gonsiell in Oakland from his mother in Ventura on May 1, 1906, 2 weeks after the quake, talks about her sending him some socks and letting him know that more socks and underwear were on the way. The contents make all the difference to an otherwise mundane-appearing cover. (Fig. 5 & 6) There are covers from San Francisco at this time with special emergency hand stamps indicating "No Stamps Available" and so forth. They are hard to find; I sold mine years ago....big mistake!



rather disreputable looking
 Tuesday noon
 Dear Will:
 Am sending you
 a couple of pair of socks
 by to-day mail - Think I
 can put a couple of suits
 of your old underwear
 in shape so you can then
 get some device out of them
 I will give you emergency
 change anyway - Can send
 you some more socks
 when I send the
 underwear
 I dont understand your
 borrowing a suit of
 clothes from Arthur if
 you saved one suit as
 you said? - Mother

Hope the socks I send put away, as they are

In 1936, during the 30th anniversary year of the earthquake, MGM released San Francisco, starring Clark Gable and Jeanette Macdonald, the classic movie about the earthquake. A promotional stamp, complete with faux cancel, was issued as part of their promotional campaign. (Fig. 7)