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GETTING READY FOR “THE BIG ONE”

by Ken Scharabok, Waverly, TN©

QUESTION:

Some scientists believe there is a possibility of a major earthquake striking which of the following major cities: Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Memphis, St. Louis, New York City, Boston or Charleston?

ANSWER:

All of the above.

While some consider the worst recorded earthquakes in the U.S. occurred in 1811-12 on the New Madrid fault line which runs roughly from the boot heel of Missouri to southern Illinois. The strongest of this series is estimated to have been 8.6, 8.4 and 8.7 on the Richter Scale and were felt as far away as the Eastern Seaboard. Little Rock, Memphis and St. Louis are expected to suffer major damage should an earthquake of this magnitude occur again in this fault area. In addition, today several major gas and oil pipelines run through this area from the Southwest to the Northeast, leading to the possibility of prolonged fuel shortages in the Northeast.

A disastrous earthquake shook Charleston in 1886 and other strong earthquakes were felt in the Boston area in 1755 and along the U.S.-Canadian border. In the 1800s an earthquake under Jamaica Bay badly shook the area now occupied by New York City and, indeed, several fault lines have been documented under the city itself.

Earthquake scientists note there is a difference between plate-edge quakes, such as occur on the West Coast and mid-plate quakes, such as occur in the eastern half of the U.S., due to the structure of the Earth. Earthquakes on the West Coast tend to be localized, such that a major earthquake in Los Angeles may not be felt in San Francisco. Earthquakes in the eastern half of the U.S. tend to be felt and cause damage over a wide region.

In all, over 3,500 earthquakes have been recorded east of the Mississippi River since 1700, with several hundred over 4.0 and 16 over 6.0 on the Richter Scale. Most earthquake scientists believe a major earthquake may occur in the eastern half of the U.S. within the next 50 years.

WHAT TO DO?

- You can start by contacting the nearest office of the American Red Cross. They should have, or be able to obtain for you, two informational pamphlets: *The Family Survival Guide*, 32 pages, which contains tips for surviving all kinds of disasters and *Are You Ready for an Earthquake?*, which is a free, short checklist on how to prepare for an earthquake. Be sure to leave them a nice donation for their work.

- Check with your city or county emergency management office as they may have useful publications.
- Check with your homeowner's insurance agent. Most homeowners policies do not cover either flood or earthquakes, but riders can be added very inexpensively. Riders such as this typically cost less than 50 cents per \$1,000 of coverage.

PREPARATIONS

Preparations need not be terribly expensive or elaborate. For example:

- Several gallons of fresh water per family member can be stored in heavy-duty plastic gallon jugs in an out of the way place. For all but a couple of gallons, an excellent storage site is your freezer. In case of power failure, the frozen water will help the freezer maintain its temperature and the jugs can be pulled out to thaw as needed.
- A case or two of canned food which does not require cooking can be stashed away and replaced on a periodic basis. (One might get tired of Vienna Sausages after a couple of meals, but at least it's food.)
- If you store home canned foods on shelving, the shelving can be bolted to a wall and lips put on the front of the shelves to help prevent jars from falling off.
- A supplemental source of heat which doesn't require electricity to operate, such as a kerosene heater, can be obtained for winter emergencies.
- A method of human waste disposal if no water service is available can be obtained. This could be some type of camping toilet which, when full, can be emptied into a hole in the backyard.

ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES:

Much of the preparations for a major disaster, such as an earthquake, can be used for lesser emergencies.

- A propane or white gas camping stove could be used to heat foods or to purify questionable drinking water if either or both electric and water service is disrupted.
- Stored water would come in handy on mornings in which there is no water pressure.
- Extra canned goods could come in handy when unexpected company arrives.
- One or more tents would provide shelter and privacy if you are unable to live in a home severely damaged by a fire or hurricane until other accommodations can be arranged. If nothing else, they may be a backyard adventure for kids if extra company comes.

- Sleeping bags would provide either warmth if no heat was available or ground insulation if sleeping in a tent became necessary.

Although I was not living here at the time, an ice storm came through central Tennessee in January 1994, which left much of the area without electricity **for up to a week**. Gas stations couldn't operate their registers and most homes were without heat and water service (including not being able to use the bathroom). What would you do in a similar situation?

Consider preparing yourself as if you are going on a two-week camping trip in a remote area as much of the camping equipment would have utility if you are cut off from public utilities.

Suggested reading: *The New Madrid Earthquakes* by James L. Penick, Jr., University of Missouri Press, 1981. Your local library should be able to borrow a copy through inter-library loan.