

# Man at His Best

by Robin Lampson

**T**he willingness of people to help others who are suddenly overwhelmed by a great emergency or disaster is one of the more pleasing characteristics of human beings.

The most amazing instance of this which I can remember occurred right after the great earthquake of April 18, 1906, and the terrible fire in San Francisco that followed. The story I tell here is something I witnessed myself, and I have never come across anything other than the merest generalities about it in books or magazine articles I have read about that holocaust—although the newspapers no doubt reported details of it at the time.

I was a youngster just two-and-a-half months past the age of six that April morning, and nearing the completion of the first grade of grammar school. I woke to find my small bed dancing around the room, with my father holding on to the footboard. I cried out, “What are you pushing my bed around for, Pa?” I didn’t realize that he was holding on to my bed so as to stay on his feet during the earthquake!

This was not in San Francisco, but in the small town of Geyserville, in upper Sonoma County, 75 miles north of the metropolis. The temblor did a great deal of damage in that area also, razing many buildings in Santa Rosa and Healdsburg, and leaving hardly a chimney standing in our small town.

Before my father let go of my bed we heard the sound of bricks falling on the roof. “There go the chimneys!” Dad commented forlornly.

It wasn’t long before we learned we had lost

the brick chimneys of both our kitchen range and living-room stove, and that most of our windows were broken. In addition, my mother lost more than half of her dishes, and she was further saddened because quite a number of cans and glass jars of home-canned fruit and vegetables had been shaken off of shelves and ruined.

My father—the town blacksmith—had to set up a camp stove in the backyard so my mother could cook breakfast. Fortunately, his smithy was at the very north end of the small business section of Geyserville, and his shop and our home and barn, chicken-house, windmill and water tank were all on a four-or-five acre “lot” that was pretty much like a small farm. We had a couple of cows, a few pigs, 40 or 50 chickens, an acre or so of various grapes, a dozen or more different kinds of fruit trees, several varieties of berry vines, and a vegetable garden that made excellent use of every remaining square foot of available ground.

That April morning ushered in a clear, warm spring day as well as an earthquake for us—and the quake did not disturb the flow of food from our cows and chickens and garden. After breakfast, I hurried downtown with a couple of my older brothers to see what had happened to the dozen or so business places of the village.

Nearly all the front windows of the stores were shattered, and all the glass lay in splinters on the sidewalks. But the real thrill came when we reached the town’s lone candy store and soda fountain. The owner, named Elmer Nordyke, stood in the doorway sadly surveying the wreckage.

*Reprinted with permission, Pacific Historian, Fall 1975.*

Inside, the candy showcases were all overturned, and candy was strewn all over the floor, and also out on the sidewalk from the display behind the now completely shattered plate-glass front window. "Help yourselves, kids," said Mr. Nordyke, smiling rather sadly. (I hardly need add that no second invitation was necessary.)

Since the daily newspapers immediately stopped coming through from San Francisco, and long distance telephone service was still in its infancy, the wildest of rumors began circulating. But freight and passenger trains were still running in both directions on the Northwestern Pacific Railroad and the telegraph lines were still open—though in those days in that area the telegraph offices were all in railway stations. But the news which the wires brought to us from Sausalito, across the bay from San Francisco, was only of catastrophe so often told that there is no need for me to repeat it here.

## A Desperate Need

A day or so later word began coming through by telegraph that food was desperately needed for the hungry, homeless tens of thousands of quake and fire victims in San Francisco. Then one morning, the daily northbound freight train from Sausalito shunted an empty boxcar onto a siding at the Geyserville depot.

The local depot agent of the Northwestern Pacific lost no time in spreading the appeal which he had received by telegraph. The railroad was leaving one or more empty boxcars at each of its stations along the entire route—and appealed to the people of each community to fill these cars with any food they could spare for San Francisco. The railroad, of course, was contributing the transportation.

The word got around very fast, and the appeal was nothing less than electrifying. Every farmer who came into town heard about it—and took pains to inform his neighbors on the way back home, and neighbors were asked to inform their neighbors farther on. The rural mail carrier, with his horse and buggy, stopping at every roadside mailbox, was also highly effective in spreading the message.

The town or community of Geyserville, with about forty homes around the small business

section, in 1906 couldn't have had a total population of more than 400 if one included all the farms within a radius of four or five miles. Yet, within a couple of hours, men, women and children began coming to that boxcar with baskets and packages and armloads of food.

They brought loaves of homemade bread, mason jars of home-canned fruits and vegetables, sacks of potatoes, bags of dry beans, rice and sugar, and jars of fresh milk and newly churned butter. As the day wore on, people from the town and nearby farms began bringing in cooked chickens and roasts of beef, veal, pork, and lamb.

This is all the more remarkable when you bear in mind that there was not only no radio or television in those days, but also the telephone and automobile had not yet arrived in our small community. There were a few—very few—bicycles around, but otherwise everyone traveled either by horse or on "shanks' mare." Yet the appeal kept on spreading fast—for neighbor told neighbor.

Ours was a large family, with nine children, and each year my mother "put up" several hundred quarts of tomatoes, green beans, peas, apricots, cherries, peaches, pears and berries—in one and two-quart mason jars or in tin cans sealed on top with wax. In addition that amazing woman filled scores of glasses and jars of all sizes and shapes with jellies and jams. (In addition to the fruits and vegetables which we grew on our place, my father received various other produce, such as potatoes and pumpkins, squash and melons, raisins and dried prunes and other fruits, also turkeys and sides of veal, pork, and lamb, in exchange for horse-shoeing and other blacksmith work for farmers.)

Now in April, 1906, my parents decided to split the remainder of our winter supply of "canned" fruits and vegetables with the hungry people of San Francisco. But what my parents gave was only typical of the donation of practically every household in the community. And the storekeepers of the town also contributed from their shelves and storerooms. In addition, volunteer workers came to the boxcar and helped to pack the food in boxes, cartons, and crates; and a couple of carpenters, working with boards and nails donated by the local lum-



*Refugees eating on Franklin Street, near Fulton Street, after the San Francisco earthquake, 1906.*

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beryard and hardware store, shored up the load inside the car so that the food would ride safely to Sausalito, where it would be ferried to San Francisco.

Before dark the first day the boxcar was nearly full, sealed by the station agent, and ready to roll. And that night the southbound freight train carried the car to its destination.

The next morning the northbound freight left another empty car on the siding—and the amazing spontaneous process of filling it began all over again. And from what I remember hearing at the time, the same sort of response was happening at all the other stations along the railroad.

The day of the earthquake my father immediately made temporary repairs to our kitchen chimney, using stove-pipe instead of brick, so that my mother could use our old-fashioned kitchen range. There was no “little old bake-shop” in the town, so housewives did all their own baking. That evening my mother did what many other housewives in the town were doing:

she made up several large washpans full of fragrantly yeasty bread dough, which she “set to rise” overnight.

The next morning before dawn my father lit a good fire in the range, and soon my mother had two large bread pans, each with six large loaves, baking and filling the kitchen with their mouth-watering aroma. When these loaves came out of the oven, my mother laid them out to cool under clean white flour sacks made into dish towels—and immediately put another batch of 12 loaves into the oven.

That afternoon she wrapped each panful of six attached loaves in clean newspaper (wrapping paper was not plentiful in 1906) and tied it up with string from packages that had come from the stores. Then two of my older brothers, aged 8 and 10, and I felt quite proud when we were allowed to carry the packages down to the depot to be loaded into the boxcar.

(I see I have forgotten to mention that the town’s small two-room schoolhouse—with two teachers for the 75 or 80 pupils in the eight

grades—was also damaged that April Wednesday morning by the earthquake, and carpenters and glaziers were called in to make repairs. So classes did not resume until the following Monday, and this extra school holiday only added zest to the excitement of us youngsters who were watching the relief food go into the boxcars.)

By this time the food emergency in San Francisco was pretty well known to all the people of the Russian River Valley—as well as to most of the rest of the civilized world. Some of the San Francisco newspapers, which had many subscribers in the Sonoma County, were now being printed in Oakland and were coming through by way of Vallejo and Sonoma; and the Santa Rosa dailies were also bringing in reports of the extent of the holocaust.

So it was that the farmers and their wives, even from the most distant farms in that section of the valley, brought in their contributions—more sacks of potatoes and dried fruits, plus hundreds of quarts of “canned” fruits and vegetables. Dressed and roasted chickens were hauled in by the dozens. Pigs, calves, and lambs were slaughtered and dressed—and added to the store in the boxcar. Ed Cook, my father’s close friend who ran Geyserville’s butcher shop (we didn’t call it a meat market in those days), donated a quarter of beef or a dressed hog each day.

This went on for many days, with a new boxcar arriving empty in the morning and going south filled again at night. Just how long this continued I do not recall exactly, but I believe it was more than a week, probably 10 or 12 days—until word came that large shipments, even whole trainloads, of donated relief food and supplies from other states clear to the

East Coast were beginning to arrive in San Francisco. Please remember that I was only six years old when all of this happened—and it never occurred to me to jot down any of it until over 60 years later. In fact, I feel that time has, if anything, only blurred my memory of what a remarkable and wonderful phenomenon my childish eyes were permitted to witness!

None of the people of our small community were rich. Some of them owned their farms or homes, but most of them lived “lives of quiet desperation,” and never knowing what it was like to be without worry over bills and debts, rent and mortgages. (Our family was one of the latter.) All these people had to work, and work hard and constantly, to earn a living—and expected to do so to the end of their days. Yet practically every family unhesitatingly shared what it had with the disaster victims of San Francisco.

From 1906 to the present time I have never heard this story told, nor come across anything about it in print. It is most likely that other railroads and also shipping lines carried out programs of gathering and transporting food and supplies for the hungry and homeless in San Francisco. Likewise, I doubt very much if any community in California, or in neighboring states too for that matter, failed to send help in some form—money, food, clothing, bedding, etc.

But I saw with my own eyes what happened in one small farming community, and I knew that something similarly wonderful was happening in many neighboring communities. And I now realize that when I was very, very young—too young to be aware of it at the time—I was fortunate enough to have a good look at *man at his best*. □

# Libertarian Sympathies: Heart and Mind

by Joseph S. Fulda

**T**wo questions invariably asked of me by those unacquainted with libertarian thought and surprised at many of the arguments and observations I put forth are “Why are you so committed a libertarian?” and “What are some of the difficulties with the philosophy—where is it somewhat strained?”

This essay, then, is my attempt to answer these questions about the attractions and difficulties with the philosophy so many of us have embraced.

Libertarianism appeals to both heart and mind. For many of us, especially the young, libertarianism arises as a natural consequence of a free-spirited personality: yearning to enjoy life, with as few encumbrances as possible, and to answer to no one but ourselves and (for some of us) God.

For many of us, also, libertarianism arises from deep-seated philosophical convictions about the nature and dignity of man and the way the world works. These convictions are variations on three themes.

The first is the spiritual case for liberty: that men are naturally born with free will and that it is, therefore, both their right and their duty—their unique destiny—to use this God-given capacity to choose among alternatives, for good or for bad, for happiness or for unhappiness—provided, of course, that in so doing they in no way remove others’ free will.

The second is the moral case for liberty: that

the use of force, except in self-defense—individual or collective—is simply wrong. This understanding of the inviolable nature of the rights of man arises directly from a conception of his dignity.

The third is the empirical case for liberty: that a free society promises the greatest good of the greatest number, that freedom truly works. Unlike the spiritual and moral premises, which to many are self-evident, the way the marketplace works to our benefit is often subtle. It is, for example, not obvious that the benefits of productive advances are greatest for the poor,<sup>1</sup> that distribution-of-income figures do *not* show a permanent underclass in capitalist society,<sup>2</sup> that we benefit most from the liberty of *others* and in ways we can barely imagine,<sup>3</sup> that government programs are *necessarily* wasteful,<sup>4</sup> that the market is *self-regulating* if given the chance,<sup>5</sup> and that the beneficiaries of state action are so often visible and well-organized, while those who lose as a result of state action are either not visible or are so diffuse a group as to make it difficult and unprofitable to organize.<sup>6</sup>

Because of these and other subtleties, it is usually necessary for those who espouse the freedom philosophy to make a separate, empirical case against each existing or proposed government program or regulation. This can be not only exasperating, but also particularly difficult for functions government assumed long ago, because it is hard to know just how the market—coordinating the spontaneous responses of many millions of people—would today handle

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