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**1906 San Francisco Earthquake
Copy of Letter
Written by Josephine (Fearon) Baxter
to her Parents in Omaha, Nebraska
Covering Period Tuesday Apr. 17 to Monday Apr. 23**

Viewpoint 1300 Block — 9th Ave.

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San Francisco, Calif.

April 23rd. 1906

My Dearest Ones:

Will try and write you a description of the past week, although I do not feel much like doing so. Will make this letter do for all, until we can write later.

Today is Sunday and things are quieting down a great deal and we are beginning to get over the excitement and feel more like our own selves. Well, starting with Tuesday, the day before the Earthquake, I hired my jap to wash and go over and scrub in our new flat, but Mrs. Butler invited us — that is Mrs. McFarlane, Mrs. Lickly, Ella and me to go down for luncheon that afternoon towards five o'clock. We left and went up town to help Mrs. McFarlane pick out her new Easter Bonnet and luckily, Ella and I made her wear it home and send her old one, which she will never see again. Everything was so nice downtown and the day was perfectly beautiful. That night, Ella (Fearon, her sister) went to a Fraternity Dance with Dr. Cree and she said when she came home it was perfect, not a cloud was to be seen, nor was it windy. Just a little before five, Baby woke and I gave her a bottle and she started off to sleep when that awful shock came at 5:15 (A.M.). At first I was dazed — then my first thought was for Baby and I tried my best to get her from the crib, but every shake would pull her from me and throw her against the side of the crib. All the time I was thinking of Ella and wondering how she was and wish I could get to her. Finally, I got Baby and Clifford (Baxter, husband) was trying to make me get out and away, as every shake it seemed as if the house would be torn away. I can never describe or forget that horrible minute. It seemed an eternity; I thought we were doomed; every shake we were gone. Oh. I hope I shall never feel another like it, I could not speak. It just stunned me.

Finally, Ella came running in and wanted to know what happened — the noise was terrible, things falling all around. Clifford then got me out with Baby, so we all ran down stairs. We did not go outside, as everything was quiet, but people were all out in their night attire — women screaming — so we began to calm down

a little. Clifford went up and dressed. When he came down, Ella went up and dressed and she brought my clothes down and dressed me. Then, some more slight shocks came and everyone started out in the street and such a lot of terrified people you never saw in your life.

We went over to Dr. McFarlane's, as we knew they must have suffered a great loss. You ought to have seen their new drug store; scarcely a bottle remained on the shelf. You could hardly step in a dry spot on their floor, broken glass everywhere. Their living rooms are a sight — all the plaster fell off from the walls. I don't think there is a square foot of plaster left on the walls in one place. I never saw such looking rooms and they had them fixed up so comfortably. It was a wonder the children did not get hurt.

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The next thing we thought of was `phoning Butlers, but could not as the `phones were out of order. Then came the report of fire and off went the fire engines as hard as they could go. We could see the heavy smoke in the East; it covered up the sun. The report went out then that the town was on fire.

We then went home to cook breakfast and Mrs. McFarlane came too, as their gas stove went to pieces. I also wanted to see what damage was done in our house. Such a sight as met our eyes. We looked bad enough, getting ready to move, and the Earthquake completed the sight. Ella told us how the vases and bric-a-brac and things from the mantle had come down about her head and how she had to cover her head with the bedclothes to protect herself. Also, how she was terrified at seeing the piano starting across the room towards her.

All my bric-a-brac is gone, except the one hand-painted vase Brigie McAdle gave me. Wasn't I delighted to see that unharmed, but you should see all my pretty dishes. The beautiful chocolate set Clifford gave me is all gone and so many, many of my nice things are in pieces, but more are saved than I dreamed could be. All my cut glass dishes, except my sherbet cups, are alright. I have all my beautiful saucers and seven of the cups left. The broken things are too numerous to mention, but I do not care as long as we are saved. And, then we fared so much better than most the people. In the bedroom the chiffonier, dresser and everything was out of place. The globes were all smashed — it was a wonder they did not fall on Baby. You ought to have seen the kitchen and pantry. My Jap had not come and I had the clothes in the boiler for him. The water was all over the floor. In the pantry, so many things were on the floor, but not so many were broken.

The Jap would not come so, as I had my clothes soaking and Baby needed her clothing, Clifford and I pitched in and did them. Everyone thought we were crazy to go on washing as though nothing had happened. It was luck, as we have not been able to since. The gas was turned off and all electric lights. It was really laughable to see us. While one worked in the house, the others stayed out doors with the Baby and when a shock was felt, out we would fly, almost breaking our necks getting downstairs.

Weren't we glad you folks were not here — almost the first thing we said when we came to our senses was how glad we are the folks are in the East; don't we wish we were. No place like dear old Omaha. If papa knows a good thing, he would never want to leave that place. It was an act of Providence you went back, as you would have lost everything.

As time wore on, we could see volumes of smoke covering the sky. Along about 10:00 o'clock, Dr. Cree came and weren't we glad to see his smiling face. He told us the whole town was on fire and his boarding house was going too; that he had saved a little clothing, that was all. Came out to see how we stood the shock, then he and Clifford went over to Dr. McFarlane's store and pitched in and helped them clear up their place, so they could resume business. My, how they worked.

In the afternoon we all, including Baby went up on the hill near the College to watch the fire. It seemed to us as we were up there, that the whole city was doomed. A fierce wind was blowing from the west, so we knew we were safe for a few days, at any rate. That night, the houses were lighted by candles and the reflection of the flames.

Then Mrs. Blair and her two grandchildren came out that evening. Said they were threatened by the fire, so we put them over in the new flat. Dr. Cree stayed with us. The night was spent in terror of another earthquake and of the fire.

The next morning the reports were worse, and people were passing our house in all sorts of rigs and every face was terror stricken. No fires were allowed and, in fact, no one did a thing but sit around in the street wondering what was going to happen next and what was to be the end of it all. Every report was worse than the other. At about noon, Clifford and Dr. Cree made up their minds to try and send telegrams to all of you people who belong to us, so you would know we were safe. We had heard that the Ferries were running and if one could get down there, they could go across. So, they determined to try it and relieve your minds. I can tell you we were worried about them. About five o'clock, Clifford came back almost dead, carrying a large sack of provisions, for he thought we would need them. He said we had no idea of what he had gone through and what he had seen. He thought we were all doomed and our refuge would be the sand hills. When he had gone down near the fire, he was told if he wanted to go on to Oakland, he could not return, so Dr. Cree — God bless that dear fellow — went on through that terrible heat and burning portion of the city, risking his life to deliver messages to all our dear ones. Clifford was needed by us, so he turned back. We were so anxious while he was gone and what a relief to see him. All that night, we were wild for the sky looked far worse and reports were terrible. Besides, the people in every conceivable rig and outfit streamed by our house all day and night, camping every where. None slept — such a tired looking people. Many had walked out all the way from town, for the safest place in the city was this part, north and south of the Park (Golden Gate Park).

When morning came, we heard that the fire was under control. All of the Mission, Market, South of Market, out VanNess [sic] Avenue, Knob Hill to the Water front all gone. We have heard nothing from the Butlers, but feel thay [sic] are safe as the trains were running out towards the south, as they are near the station. Must have gone to Palo Alto. That place, too, is badly demolished, especially the Stanfor [sic] Buildings.

As I said, the fire was reported under control — it relieved us for a time, but we heard later such was not the case, only in the Mission and in the central portion around Nob Hill, Van Ness and the northern part of the city, and if the wind should spring up, things would look bad again.

That day, Friday, we decided to move across the street so some of the poor unfortunates could have a shelter. Clifford got a couple of his friends and they helped him move all our things that morning — my how we worked. Every thing was put in any place, no order. We are a big family. McFarlanes eat with us, the Blairs also and Dr. Cree. So you see we have a large crowd and we just live; do not try to have any kind of order.

That afternoon, Dr. Cree returned. He had gone to Gov. Pardee for a pass to return and obtained it. Had walked from the ferry out here with a heavy suit case which contained bread and meat for he did not want us to starve. They were afraid of famine. We were all glad to see him back, as we did not know whether we would ever see him again. The three, Clifford, Dr. McFarlane and Cree are nearly worked to death. Cree is in the drug store and takes hold

as if he always had been there. Clifford and Dr. McF., look after the sick and dead. Talk about good — they will get their reward if ever any men did. They are doing so much good and helping so many suffering souls and dear Mrs. McFarlane, she is an angel, and if she doesn't earn her reward, no one ever will. She has worked every minute. I don't see how she stands it. We made badges of the Red Cross for all of them and they are deserving of them as anyone could be, all of them, the four are beloved by all. No one knows the good they have done and no noe [sic] but God in heaven will.

Ella and I feel selfish when we look at them working. Everyone is so good. This is a time which shows what people are. The only fires allowed are those made in the streets. All over you can see the people doing their cooking out in the street, on stoves brought out for the purpose, or upon stoves made of bricks. Now with us, we cannot cook out of doors, as the men folks are all busy and also the women folks. So we do a little on my alcohol stove and upon an old oil stove we found in the house. Our neighbors are very kind and do a great deal of cooking for us, so we are faring fine.

I do not think there is danger of starvation, as there is so much coming in. You ought to see the lines in the street waiting their chance to buy bread and also get food, milk, and vegetables, which is given free. It takes a good deal of food to feed our crowd. Reminds us of home, so anything, provisions, etc., you may be sure we are in on them. We have with us some old friends of Clifford's [sic] from Independence, California, who were burned out, so you see we have a big crowd. We merely exist these days, cook and eat. We feed one crowd, then chase them and feed another.

I went over to church yesterday. I had to leave my letter and am trying my best to: finish today. I wonder if I will. We had mass outside, owing to the unsafe condition of the church. A great deal of plaster is shaken off. All the statues were thrown down, some utterly gone, others badly broken. I never attended a more impressive service and Father McClugh gave the grandest sermon I ever listened to. There was the biggest crowd, Catholics and non-Catholics. Our church is fine compared to others. St. Ignatius is a thing of the past, entirely gone. Several of the fine churches are gone. St. Mary's Cathedral is saved, but I have not heard how badly it was damaged. They say it is almost a miracle that it is saved, as the fire was all around it, but the Priests worked very hard and made a brave fight to save it, which they did. Just think, the White House, Emporium, Hales, Shreves, Nathan Dormans, Palace Hotel, St. Francis, The Fairmont; well in fact, the entire town is gone. I can't realize it myself, as I have not seen it and kind of hate to as they say it looks terrible. The boys have not gotten over talking about the sights they saw the day they were going down.

Out here, several were hurt by things falling on them, but we have heard of no one being killed, but downtown so many were burned or killed by falling houses. They said the sights they saw were heartbreaking. Children trying to find their parents, people all about dying. They are using the Park down in the center of the town to bury the dead. Everybody who came out of town would tell us that we did not know how thankful we should be to have escaped as we did and to be spared the terrible sights. Clifford acted as funeral director the other day. There is free transportation to any part of the State for the destitute.

Ella had a chance to see a little of the town yesterday. Dr. had to go on an errand and Ella went. She said she saw cracks in the ground nearly a foot

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wide. In some parts of the town the car tracks in some places are torn apart and in others are hooped up in the air several feet. The ground in many places has sunken many feet, as many as eight and ten and in others has raised. Right near Gainsfords, the sidewalk is raised about a foot (that is next to Josies* home). The cars are running on a few of the car lines, which were either not damaged or which have since been fixed (no fares). They have started cleaning up the debris and any man who cannot show a Dr. card or a paper certifying what he is about on some errand for a Dr., is taken by the soldiers and put to work cleaning up the streets. We are under Martial Law and if a man does not obey, he is shot. They also see that no lights are lit at night and if they see one, you are told to put it out. If not obeyed, they are shot. Doctors, too, were allowed to take anyone's buggy and horse. If a doctor requested one and he was not granted the request, a soldier with a bayonet would see that he got it in a second.

For instance, Saturday, Clifford and Dr. McFarlane got hold of a buggy and were going on a sick call together. Some man gave them the horse and buggy. This man was not the owner. Just as the two were ready to start, along came the owner in a cart with another man. When he saw his horse standing in front of the drug store,

hitched up to someone's buggy, he came over and demanded the animal (in sassy language) and he started to unhitch. Clifford's Irish (what he got from me, I guess) came up and he got after the fellow and soon a crowd collected. Clifford told the fellow to leave it alone, or he would fix him. Also, that he would take good care of him. The man was unreasonable, probably excited, and even though it was in a good cause, he was mad, but he did not get the horse. Clifford and Dr. drove away and the fellow followed in the cart, but someone went for the soldiers. They came and gave the old man a scare. That evening when Clifford went to return the horse, he had another Dr. with him. In the man's barn were a great crowd of men. Clifford was afraid they were laying for him and as he had nothing to protect himself, they got a couple of soldiers. The owner apologized to him and was nice as pie.

Mr. Butler# came up this evening. This is the first we have heard of them. They are entirely burned out; also her father's, Shepherds place, although they saved some furniture, but Butlers, nothing but the clothes on their back and an extra suit apiece. Weren't we glad to see him. Mr. and Mrs. Shepard are going back, perhaps tonight. Mrs. Butler was going with them, but we have offered them our home, so maybe she will stay.

Ella and I are getting ready to leave as soon as possible. If they will take our place, Clifford has just gone down to see about it. We will take nothing, only what we need, but if Mrs. Butler goes down too, we will pack most of our things and leave them, so if we should want them any time, could have them shipped. We will soon find out and know what to do. Am very anxious to get away, am afraid of sickness. We are trying to persuade Mrs. McFarlane to go with us and stay, at least for a little while, as the change and rest will do her good. They thought at first would sell out as soon as possible and get away, but now there are such good opportunities that he wants to stay, so it is with Dr. Cree and Clifford. So many are leaving though and it will be a long time before San Francisco is built up again.

Am glad to get away, as I am pretty nervous over the event. Every earthquake scares us half to death and as they are very frequent, we are making grand rushes for the street all the time. For days it seemed as if every little jar of even the furniture was a quake. Now we are afraid of looters and burglars.

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I must tell you of the funny thing Ella did this morning. We have a package of Hard-O (H-O), a breakfast food very much like oatmeal. Ella thought it was like Egg-O-See, to be eaten uncooked and made everyone eat a dish of that raw stuff with milk. She didn't eat any herself, so did not know what a mess they were enjoying. I did not eat any as it didn't look good to me, but the others downed theirs. If you want a new dish, eat uncooked Hard-O. Ella and Mrs. McFarlane have gone over to Mrs. Lichties to see how they are. We have heard nothing of them since last Tuesday, unless the earthquake damaged them. I think they are allright [sic], as they were not in the fire district.

Baby was just fine during the earthquake scare, wasn't frightened one bit. It brought in two of her upper teeth, two of the side ones at that, the front on ones will be in very soon. I never saw such a good youngster, she is no trouble at all and is the happiest one of the crowd.

Last night, we had a heavy rain. The poor unfortunates who were not under cover will be lucky to escape pneumonia. They tell us that most of them are provided with shelter of some kind. Rich and poor are camping in the Park and standing in line trying to get food. This has made everyone equal. Money buys very little and all are anxious to get enough to eat. The sanitary conditions are going to the bad and all are afraid of sickness. We boil all water and milk as a precaution. Don't want to take any chances. Just think, a week ago today, no one ever dreamed of this city looking the way it does. They say with the exception of building skeletons, the whole town is flat. I want to see it. The heat Thursday was something terrible, even out here and nearer. Clifford said, one could hardly stand it. That night the wind sounded like the ocean roaring, the birds of the Park screamed all that night too, so it made it worse. The Cliff House, they say, is still standing.

What days of terror we spent in fear of fire and another earthquake, no one only those who have gone through anything of the kind can know. Oh, the relief now, and strange to say, everyone seems so happy and grateful for what we have left. Most all the women waved their Easter Bonnets. What Joy, you would see the women as they came past either walking or riding, carrying their flat boxes.

Well, have tried to tell you a little of what we went through and as it is too much of an effort to write it again and takes too long, will have you send it about to Aunt Susie and Mrs. McFarlane's mother in Da. Mrs. McFarlane is the dearest little woman and has been so good to us. Clifford just got back to say we start for Independence Wednesday. Butlers take our place for the summer. They are delighted and so are we.

I must stop now and work. We are truly thankful to have escaped as we did and are looking forward to hearing from you. Love and kisses to all. Ella will write soon.

Your loving

Jo