



## *This was Nevada Series*

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### **Carson City's Big Quake of 1887**

At 2:45 in the morning, June 3, 1887, a rolling, thundering earthquake spread across western Nevada. Although probably centered somewhere south of Carson City, it was felt in Genoa, Washoe Valley, Steamboat Springs, and on north, but it caused the most damage at the capital and stirred the most people from their beds. The community of Hawthorne alone escaped the tremor, sufficient reason, according to the residents, to move the county seat from Aurora to that place.

Within two minutes of the big shake, the streets of Carson City were filled with citizens in every stage of dress and undress, all bordering on hysteria and each with his or her own tale to tell. Most of the stories concerned cracked plaster, lamps shattered on floors, spilled pans of milk, and fallen pictures, and many merchants reported damage to fragile wares. Later estimates of total damage in the capital ranged from 1,000 to 5,000 dollars, but the scene of the moment was what Carsonites later remembered. Horses panicked, neighing, and screaming in terror and kicking their stalls, and the cows bellowed for half an hour afterwards. The chickens kept up an incessant squalling and the town's dogs bayed dismally.

In the Capital building, all clocks with pendulums swinging east and west stopped at 2:45pm while those with pendulums vibrating north and south were not disturbed. In other places in town, however, the result was exactly the opposite. Oliver Roberts, the night watchman in the building, supposed that burglars were trying to break in the doors, and he spent a few minutes roaming up and down the halls flourishing a big six-shooter. Daughtery, the garner, also panicked, rushing about the grounds in his nightshirt carrying an axe to fight off any intruders.

Over at the Ormsby House, a sleeping cowhand was thrown from his bed. Thinking that h had been attacked in some manner, he grabbed his revolver and leveled it in the direction of the door to his room. A large mirror on the door reflected his figure in the dim moonlight and he took the reflection to be another man who had the drop on him. In a panic, he dropped his gun and fled out the door into the streets wearing only his long johns.

Out near Cradlebaugh's Bridge south of town, a fissure some fifty feet long opened in the earth and mud and hot water spouted for half an hour without abating. Reports later came in from the reservation at Pyramid Lake relating the fact that the quake was the most severe of any in memory. Out at the prison, Warden McCullough reported that the hot springs at that place raised six inches and the additional flow of water was white with soda and Sulphur. Some artesian wells in Carson City stopped flowing, but others increased their flow.

The hot springs at Shaw's resort stopped flowing entirely and a similar report came from Steamboat Springs to the north in Washoe County. The proprietor of Shwa's had been having some trouble with his flow before, but he put on a few of drillers and soon struck a new underground pool. There had been

some slight interruption at Steamboat, but it was only momentary. Subsequent stories of the closing of the resort were all untrue, being spread mainly by editors who received no advertising from the resort.

State Treasurer George Tuflly found his safe interior a terrible sight when he examined it later in the day, currency spread everywhere, and all mixed up with other documents and papers. The men of the Warren Engine Company found no fire hazards from the quake when they inspected, but those who lived through the ordeal feared that it portended the end of the world. Those who knew of earthquakes, and such sought to ease their minds by explaining that such upsets were no more serious than cramps or colic in the human body. Carson's churches were packed the next Sunday and editor Sam Davis noted that many former backsliders had suddenly developed an interest in religion. Thinking this over, he quipped that "*There ought to be a Quaker Church established here.*"

A few more aftershocks on Sunday night further alarmed some Carsonites, but the big quake's chief significance was the conversation it provided for some weeks thereafter and the spice it added to an otherwise dull summer season.

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