

Reader Publishing Group

Let There Be Books

A Good Day at the Epicenter

By Larry LaRue

If you're a writer, you're a story teller, whether the stories are your own, those you're assigned to produce, or the stories of others waiting to be told.

What you write doesn't matter – finding the story always begins the process.

On the afternoon of Oct. 17 1989, I was in San Francisco's Candlestick Park for the Bay Area World Series. My story that day was to be about baseball.

By mid-evening, I was covering an earthquake that devastated the Bay area, postponed the World Series, and put me back on the news side of the Tacoma News Tribune – which had hired me to write about baseball.

Sitting in the auxiliary press box at Candlestick Park, I was behind a huge plate glass window when the 6.9 quake began. Everyone felt it rumble through the old stadium, but a capacity crowd of northern Californians voiced a challenge to Mother Nature. That crowd stood and cheered, hoisting empty fists and cups of beer, leather baseball gloves and \$10 felt pennants. This was the World Series – San Francisco Giants vs. Oakland Athletics – and no temblor was going to spoil it.

What none of us in the ball park knew at that moment was that people were losing their businesses, their homes, even their lives to the earthquake. Candlestick Park was among the safest places to be at that instant.

One Midwest writer, who had never been in an earthquake before, packed up, walked to his rental car and drove away before the game was officially canceled. When the World Series resumed – 10 days later – he did not come back. Neither did dozens of other sportswriters.

For me, an opportunity presented itself, and after filing a story that explained major league baseball's dilemma – how to play a World Series in either of two cities devastated by an earthquake – I called my sports editor.

Pete Wevurski was a fine newspaper man – creative, and an editor who trusted his writers. It was clear that covering the quake itself was better done through the wire services.

What Pete and I decided was that I would stay in the area, find and write human stories about the aftermath. There would be no assignments from the office. What the paper wanted was for me to file stories that the wire services wouldn't be looking for.

For a writer who chafed at too much "guidance," it was the perfect job. The stories would be whatever I could find, on my own, in a region suddenly full of them.

From my hotel on the Oakland side of the bay the next morning, I read all the papers I could find. The one that struck me was what had happened on the Nimitz freeway, a two-level stretch which had collapsed, killing 42 people.

There were already stories of paramedics and doctors rushing to the scene to help those hurt and trapped in their nearly flattened vehicles. I drove to the freeway, parked and began walking down the adjoining streets.

Police had taped off the freeway, and ladders of all kinds were still in place, with cops and others up on the ruined freeway and on the ground, preventing anyone from getting too close.

My father had been a policeman for 30 years, and I'd always liked cops, found them willing to tell you what they could. I talked to two, three, then four of them, searching for something unique.

When I found my story, he was sitting on the curb with a half-dozen other homeless men, holding a bottle of beer in a paper bag. It wasn't yet 10 a.m.

I'd noticed the men and thought I might talk to them, but first was talking to the officer across the street. We were talking about heroism, and what it must have been like being a first responder on the freeway above us.

"We had to cut people out of their cars," the cop said. "You want to talk about heroes, talk to the guy over there in the army jacket. He went up yesterday."

I turned and looked at the man with the faded green jacket and the paper-bagged beer.

"He climbed up over there," the cop said, pointing behind him. There was a wooden ladder, and you could see where the cement buckled."

I walked over and introduced myself. The guy was a Vietnam vet, now in his 40's, who owned nothing more than what he was wearing. He spent most nights in a nearby shelter, picked up a monthly government check and had been hanging out near a convenience store two blocks away when the quake hit.

"There were sirens everywhere, ambulances and Highway Patrol cars on the on ramps that couldn't drive any farther," he said. "A bunch of us came over to see what was going on."

He pointed at the freeway, where the cars crushed by the collapse were now three or four feet tall.

"The upper level collapsed down, and you could tell it was going to be bad up there. A couple of guys from that auto repair shop came over with a ladder. It was a little short, but we were thinking anyone trying to get off the freeway was going to need help coming down," he said.

Except no one came down. No one could – most of those on the freeway were trapped in cars that had been crushed down around them.

"You climbed up there," I asked him.

He nodded, rubbed at his beard.

"I thought maybe I could help," he said.

The guy hadn't been a medic in the service, but he had seen plenty of action and more than his share of battlefields, he said. Blood didn't bother him. Fear of the freeway collapsing further didn't bother him.

The thought of victims without help did. He climbed up, he said, and did what he could.

"I talked to people I couldn't get out, told them help was coming," he said. "A couple of us pulled off a door and got a woman out, stayed with her until the cops got to us.

"We tied a few tourniquets, wiped blood out of the eyes of a few folks. There wasn't much more we could do without equipment, but we tried to keep people calm."

We talked for 30 minutes, and I got more detail in his matter-of-fact delivery. What he'd done was just what he felt he had to do. Just before we finished, a question occurred to me.

"You don't own a car, right?"

"No."

"Had you ever been on that freeway before yesterday?"

"No," he said.

I had my lead, my human interest story. A homeless vet who'd never driven the 880 freeway found a way to climb up to it once it had collapsed, trying to help people who didn't know he existed.

It was nearly lunch time. My deadline was early evening. I bought lunch for both of us at a Spaghetti Factory, where he got a couple of glasses of ice cold beer and a huge plate of pasta.

When we finished, I gave him \$20 and thanked him for his story. I dropped him off near where I'd found him, never saw him again. For a few years, each time I came to Oakland to cover a baseball game, I'd drive the area.

I don't know where he went, how his life unfolded afterward. I wish I did. All I could do was write about his courage, his natural heroism.

The next morning, one of the local papers had a map – newspapers love maps – showing the epicenter of the quake had been along a hill north of San Jose. There was a road that appeared to run right by the big black star on the map.

I drove up that road, and the occasional homes I saw along it weren't just damaged, some of them were piles of rubble. The scale of the map had indicated the epicenter was about three miles up the road.

When the odometer of my rental car hit three miles, I pulled over at a mailbox at the base of a long driveway, got out and walked up the hill. There was a family of four – mom, dad, teenaged son and daughter – picking through the devastation of their home.

To one side, they'd begun a pile of treasures found. Photos, Things from the kids rooms, anything that wasn't in pieces.

I talked to the couple, who'd lived there for more than 15 years. Previous quakes had shaken the house, once even put a crack in their driveway.

“Never anything like this,” the man said. “We’ve been up and down the road, talking to neighbors. None of us has a home today, but everyone we know got out alive. I don’t think anyone was even seriously hurt. That’s a miracle.”

The woman talked about the numbness that came with walking through the ruins of a home she’d decorated and run for so long. She talked about new priorities.

“All the small things that we thought were so important yesterday aren’t quite as pressing today,” she said. “You find some small thing in one piece, it makes you ridiculously happy.”

“I look at our family, we’re all alive and unhurt, and the house doesn’t bother me quite as much. We can rebuild a house.”

I told them I thought their address was the epicenter of the earthquake that had so shaken the Bay area. We were talking about that when a tentative ‘meow’ came from the rubble of their home.

And there emerged a dusty, clearly displeased gray-striped cat.

The daughter rushed to him, picked him up and began petting the dust off. The mother joined her, and soon they were all crying.

“We thought he was gone for sure,” the father told me. “He was the only one of us at home and we’d given up hope.”

He wiped away a tear.

“I’d say this is a good day here at the epicenter,” he said.

Sometimes, when you listen and get lucky, a lead writes itself. The stories do, too, if you stay out their way.

For most of 10 days that October, I found stories like that and wrote them, trying to stay out of the way. When the World Series resumed, I went back to writing about baseball.

Oakland swept San Francisco in four games. I can’t recall a single moment from those games.

Storyteller Larry LaRue has told a lot stories over the last three decades. You can read 100 of the best about the bests of baseball in his new book, Major League Encounters. Get your copy at: www.readerpublishing.com.

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