

Editor one of first to Madison quake

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It was nearly 21 years ago, at 11:37 p.m., Aug. 17, 1959, to be precise, that a huge mountain trembled at the head of Madison River Canyon. This jolt and a series of lesser ones which followed for many hours left havoc in the wake that will always be remembered, at least by this writer who was with the initial ground party to reach the earthquake-damaged area.

It is one of the major disasters that has ever taken place in The Post-Register circulation area, likely topped only by the disastrous Teton Dam disaster and flood on June 5, 1976, which caused far more damage but where less lives were lost.

The Post-Register staff, some on vacation as was this writer who was managing editor at the time, answered the call to give coverage that was ranked by most newsmen as the most comprehensive and accurate in the nation.

Post-Register newsmen worked around the clock, just as they did in the Teton flood, to bring the many stories, pictures and accounts of the tragic disaster. The Post-Register and staff received special commendation from The Associated Press for its coverage and cooperation in informing the entire wire service network about the earthquake.

It will be remembered graphically because the Madison River Canyon Earthquake area is now a famed spot.

The entire area of 37,000 acres has been set aside by the U.S. Forest Service to preserve for public enjoyment and retrospect to study the many natural phenomena resulting from the huge slide. The memorial plaque atop the huge slide was formally dedicated a year later. A visitors' center and other improvements for tourists has since been added.

This writer well remembers the night and the ones subsequent, from the personal experience as a member of that initial ground unit to enter the stricken area, to see pretty Madison River blocked by the huge earthen slide.

It was an awe-inspiring sight, dramatic and tragic, that one shake of the mountain

could cause so much destruction in such a short time.

The earthquake caused a huge mountain slide of some 80 million tons, which caused the river to form what is now known as Quake Lake.

It was in the middle of the summer season and many campers were parked in the camping ground at the foot of the mountain. Many were buried under the side of rocks and ground, likely not even knowing what hit them.

A count which was not known definitely until a month later, shows 19 bodies were buried under the mountain, while nine others were killed by falling rocks or drowning.

Making up the first ground party besides the writer were Dr. Joe Hatch, who came along with this medical bag; Idaho Falls Chief of Police John Putman; Idaho Falls Police Capt. Forrest G. Perrin; Idaho Falls Police Lt. Stanley Ward; Idaho Falls Police Sgt. Bud Hathaway; Idaho Falls Patrolmen Wayde Scott and Hyrun Whittaker; Bonneville Sheriff A.E. Heslop and Bonneville Civil Defense Director Lewis C. Ross.

These officers were given emergency police powers in the area since it was cut off from the Montana law enforcement officers.

The first ground party plunged into the narrow canyon the day of the earthquake, first traveling by two four-wheeled vehicles to Hebgen Dam. We then tramped by foot over the steep hillsides along the right canyon wall for some three or four miles to see how the huge slide of rocks, trees and dirt had blocked the canyon.

At that time, the lake was slowly rising, covering some vehicles that had been trapped. Other vehicles had driven up the steep hillsides in a desperate but futile effort to escape the slowly rising but relentless waters.

Most of the highway leading north of West Yellowstone to Hebgen Lake was badly broken, and the vehicles needed to travel carefully to reach Hebgen Dam.

A fissure measuring about seven or eight feet ran along the right side of the mountain where it dropped beneath Hebgen Lake, just

as a plate being tipped when full of water. The dropped portion of ground inundated a number of summer cabins, warves and other facilities located along the bank. Many have since been removed. On the other side of the reservoir, cabins once at lakeside were left far from the shores. Even as the party was trudging along the hillside, several aftermath tremors sent boulders cascading down the mountainside, some coming close to members of the ground party.

One land fissure opened up some two feet before some of the party members' eyes as a so-called minor tremor rattled the ravaged canyon.

Some members of the party turned back, but others, including this writer, continued forward.

Our ground party struggled to a high knoll some half mile above the mammoth landslide. From that vantage point we viewed

the destruction. Here exclusive photos were taken from the ground to be later published in The Post-Register.

There was some wry humor in the ground party search. As members climbed over Hebgen Dam, a local radio station announced Hebgen Dam was washing away. Actually, Hebgen Dam was tilted slightly but there was no major damage.

Another radio broadcast announced frantically that Old Faithful geyser would never the same again. The old lady, however, is still spouting away as usual. But several park geyser and mud pots were affected, some made more active and others made dormant.

It caused little or no damage in Idaho Falls or East Idaho but it was felt. The Post-Register synchronized clocks stopped at 11:37.30 which testifies to the exact time. It was felt as far away as Spokane.

Quake scene

