

1971 SYLMAR/SAN FERNANDO EARTHQUAKE

COPH OHP\_125



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California State University, Fullerton

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## **Descriptive Summary**

### **Title**

1971 Sylmar / San Fernando Earthquake [COPH OHP\_125]

### **Date**

Spring 1971

### **Creator**

George Molsbarger

### **Extent**

Six (6) oral histories

### **Collateral:**

None

### **Repository**

Center for Oral and Public History  
California State University, Fullerton

### **Project Abstract**

This project was conceived by a CSUF student, perhaps as a project or a class. Although no collateral is provided, a sheet of paper indicates feedback on one of George Molsbarger's interviews, from either a mentor or professor. The six narrators recall personal memories of the earthquake that occurred on the morning of February 9, 1971, and measured a 6.6 on the Richter Scale. The quake's epicenter was located five miles north of the San Fernando Valley, near the Newhall and Sylmar areas. It caused severe damage that included collapsed highways, shattered homes and office buildings, and compromised public infrastructure. It displaced hundreds of residents and took the lives of sixty-four people.

One of the most severe cases resulted at the Veterans Hospital of San Fernando and nearby Olive View Hospital, in which stairwells detached from the foundations, several buildings containing patients collapsed into rubble, and parking structures crushed emergency vehicles. (Two narrators were employed at the Veterans Hospital and recall such stories). All six narrators share personal memories corresponding to their professions and activities of that day. Specifically, the moment the quake hit, the immediate damage, the series of aftershocks, the pervasive trauma and fear, as well as their opinions on future preparedness.

**OH 587**

**Narrator:** SMITH, JOHN S.  
SMITH, JOSEPHINE E.  
SMITH, RUTH E. (daughter)  
**Interviewer:** Molsbarger, George  
**Date:** 3/24/1971  
**Location:** Long Beach, California  
**Project:** 1971 Sylmar/San Fernando Earthquake  
**Status:** transcribed verbatim; 12 pp  
**Format:** Digital  
**Collateral:** None

**Abstract**

An oral history with John S. and Josephine E. Smith, and their daughter Ruth Smith. This interview was conducted for the California Earthquake Project of 1971, a project created by George Molsbarger, in which he gathered different perspectives from this event. Topics include Mr. and Mrs. Smith's personal backgrounds; the lack of damage to their Long Beach home during the quake of 1971; recollections of the morning of the earthquake; personal observations of surrounding damage; the unpredictability of earthquakes, compared to other natural disasters; Ruth Smith's personal background; her memories of the morning of the earthquake; and finally, how the earthquake does not scare her out of living in California.

**OH 651**

**Narrator:** WYNN WEBER  
**Interviewer:** Molsbarger, George  
**Date:** 5/7/1971  
**Location:** Newhall, California  
**Topic:** 1971 Sylmar/San Fernando Earthquake  
**Status:** transcribed verbatim & edited; 24 pp  
**Format:** Digital  
**Collateral:** None

**Abstract**

An oral history with Wynn D. Weber, a housewife, and resident of Newhall, California. This interview was conducted for the California Earthquake Project of 1971, a project created by George Molsbarger, in which he gathered different perspectives regarding this event. Topics include Weber's personal background as a California native; description of her Newhall neighborhood; her recollections of the day the earthquake hit and her survey of the local damage; the distress of aftershocks; the overall sense of calm despite the tragedy; her personal anxiety and fears; her newfound awareness and preparedness regarding earthquakes; sensitivity groups that helped her with post-traumatic stress; returning back to normal; her feelings on earthquakes in general; how earthquakes will not scare her out of California; and finally, her observations of continued unpreparedness of those around her.

**OH 652**

**Narrator:** BEN C. POLLEY  
**Interviewer:** Molsbarger, George  
**Date:** 5/4/1971  
**Location:** The Midnight Mission in Los Angeles, California  
**Topic:** 1971 Sylmar/San Fernando Earthquake  
**Status:** transcribed verbatim & edited; 15 pp  
**Format:** Digital  
**Collateral:** None

**Abstract**

An oral history with Ben C. Polley, an employee at the Midnight Mission, a shelter and drug treatment center for the homeless population of Los Angeles. This interview was conducted for the California Earthquake Project of 1971, a project created by George Molsbarger, in which he gathered different perspectives on this event. Topics include the services of Midnight Mission; operating out of their makeshift facility due to the earthquake; Polley's recollections of the morning of the quake, while he was at the Mission; subsequent damage to the Mission and the injuries (and one death); evacuation of the building and relocation of occupants; the aftermath in the days that followed the quake; the local population's fear of another earthquake and the aftershocks and how much of the transient population left the area; and finally, how Polley has personally coped with the aftermath of the earthquake.

**OH 1118**

**Narrator:** Michelstein, Sonya "Sunnie" (b. 1944)  
**Interviewer:** George Molsbarger  
**Date:** May 11, 1971  
**Location:** Narrator's home in Newhall, California  
**Language:** English  
**Project:** 1971 Sylmar/ San Fernando Earthquake  
**Format(s):** Open reel; digital  
**Transcript:** Verbatim & edited; 26 pp  
**Collateral:** None

**Abstract:**

An oral history with Sonya "Sunnie" Michelstein, a relative newcomer to California. The narrator had moved from New York with her husband and two small children less than one year before the earthquake. Before moving she had been very afraid of the possibility of an earthquake that would cause her to lose her children and even contacted Charles Richter for advice. They selected the Newhall area to live because it was away from the ocean and did not have a high density population. She describes her family's actions the morning of the quake, their desire to get outside their home and stay in their automobile, the damage suffered from broken bottles and other containers, the continued fear during the aftershocks. Because of the research into earthquakes that they did prior to coming to California, she and her husband felt better prepared than did most of her neighbors to know what to do, like turn off the gas. Notes that some of the neighbors were so frightened that they left the state, either for a time or for good. She was disappointed that few people offered her any assistance, yet everyone wanted to know how much damage her household had suffered; in response to this, she feels she has become less like her materialistic neighbors and finds it easier to extend help to others.

**OH 1119**

**Narrator:** DR. SOLOMON NETZER  
**Interviewer:** Molsbarger, George  
**Date:** 5/12/1971  
**Location:** San Fernando Veterans Hospital  
**Topic:** 1971 Sylmar/San Fernando Earthquake  
**Status:** transcribed verbatim & edited; 21 pp  
**Format:** Digital  
**Collateral:** None

**Abstract**

An oral history with Dr. Solomon Netzer, a doctor (pulmonary specialist & Chief of Medical Services) at the San Fernando Veterans Hospital. This interview was conducted for the California Earthquake Project of 1971, a project created by George Molsbarger, in which he gathered

different perspectives regarding this event. Topics include Netzer's professional background; his recollections of the day of the quake; his observations of the severe damage at the VA Hospital, which included collapsed buildings and stairwells; evacuation and transfer of 500 patients within the hospital; his interaction with first-responders; the fatalities within collapsed buildings; triage at the scene; the presence of news media; his professional transfer to Sepulveda Veterans Hospital; his thoughts on future earthquake preparedness; and finally, the indescribable sounds of the earthquake.

**OH 1120**

**Narrator:** JOSEPH TURNER (b. 1916)  
**Interviewer:** Molsbarger, George  
**Date:** 5/18/1971  
**Location:** Sepulveda Veterans Hospital  
**Topic:** 1971 Sylmar/San Fernando Earthquake  
**Status:** transcribed verbatim & edited; 20 pp  
**Format:** Digital  
**Collateral:** None

**Abstract**

An oral history with Joseph Turner, resident of West Los Angeles, current Assistant to the Chief of Staff at the Sepulveda Veterans Hospital, and former employee of the San Fernando Veterans Hospital at the time of the 1971 earthquake. This interview was conducted for the California Earthquake Project of 1971, a project created by George Molsbarger, in which he gathered different perspectives related to this event. Topics include Turner's professional background; his memories of the day of the quake; survey of the damage as he arrived to the San Fernando Veterans Hospital; evacuation of the hospital patients; the presence of first-responders and news media; the hospital's preparedness plan; aftershocks; his evaluation of how staff handled the quake; patients' trauma from the quake; witnessing survivors and dead bodies pulled from the rubble; reassignment of hospital staff; future preparedness; how he compares earthquakes to other natural disasters; and finally, damage to the neighboring areas of the San Fernando Veterans Hospital.