

1906 - 2006

Rebuilding: Then and Now

On April 18, 1906, San Francisco suffered one of the most massive natural disasters that have ever struck a major US city. Over 28,000 homes were destroyed and 4.7 square miles burned in a raging fire storm that followed that morning's giant earthquake. Thousands of people were injured or killed. The accompanying loss of electricity, transportation and sewage facilities was a severe blow to San Francisco and the entire Bay Area.



Graphic from *The San Francisco Sunday Call* 7/22/1906

One thing that survived the earthquake and fire was San Francisco's vibrant trade union movement. In many cases, craftsmen who had buried their tools for safekeeping retrieved them and quickly went to work to rebuild the city. Unions from throughout the US supplied additional tools so other local workers could begin the reconstruction process.

Musician's Union President Eugene Schmitz had been elected mayor of San Francisco in 1901 on the Union Labor Party ticket. Immediately after the fire he set up a committee to deal with the multitude of problems created by the crisis and to oversee the reconstruction of the city.

Many of the town's leading citizens sat on the committee, including Patrick Henry McCarthy, the president of the powerful San Francisco Building Trades Council. Largely because of his role in helping with the rebuilding project,

McCarthy was elected mayor himself in 1909. The city's plumbers contributed many unpaid hours trying to repair some of the town's water works. By April 21, 1906, the cable car line on Fillmore Street and the San Francisco Post Office had reopened. The main task that remained, however, was resurrecting the city itself.

Yet in the amazingly short span of three years most of San Francisco was rebuilt through the skills and ingenuity of over 35,000 unionized construction workers who came from the city itself, other regions of the US, and as far away as the United Kingdom.

The pictures in this collection of the craftsmen who were responsible for the reconstruction between 1906 and 1909 were taken by an anonymous photographer whose work has been collected in the Schmid-Allmond Album. He or she succeeded in capturing extraordinary images of the workers as they labored long and hard during the rebuilding effort. This collection is supplemented with images from the San Francisco History Center/Public Library.

Today, skilled craftsmen and craftswomen of all ages and backgrounds are at work in the Bay Area's many ongoing construction projects. The contemporary images of Joe Blum illustrates the present work.