

# World's Worst Earthquake—15 Years Ago

## How 38,000 of Its 100,000 Victims Died in Flames

By KIMPEI SHEBA  
(Chicago Tribune Press Service.)

**F**IFTEEN years ago on next Thursday, Sept. 1, 1923, the most disastrous earthquake in history rocked the region bordering on Tokyo bay. More than 100,000 persons were killed and 700,000 houses destroyed, leaving 2,000,000 homeless.

Half of Tokyo and practically the whole of Yokohama, the leading commercial port, were reduced to ashes. The Japanese capital burned for three days and two nights.

After shocks continued for three years as the dislocated geological strata slowly settled. One of these, on Sept. 2, 1923, and another on Jan. 15, 1924, were more severe than the San Francisco quake. In all there were more than 1,600 after-shocks—900 in the first five days.

Dawn broke in Tokyo on the day of the quake hot, moist, and still. The humidity was excessive. There had been a slight rainfall after midnight, and the sky was overcast.

The early part of September in Tokyo is still as hot as mid-summer. Although the normal temperature at noon is about 85 degrees, it is often made unbearable by the humidity. Many of the American and other foreign residents were still at the summer resorts in the mountains sixty miles away.

At 7:30 a. m. started the exodus of hundreds of thousands of workers from homes in the suburbs and the residential sections to the business and industrial centers. The sky cleared as the morning advanced and the scorching sun beat down. Electric trains, tram cars, and buses were crowded and stuffy and almost every one opened fans and complained of the heat.

"It seems as if there might be an earthquake," many an inhabitant grumbled. Natives of Tokyo know from experience that sizable earthquakes usually occur on sultry days.

About 11 a. m. thousands of housewives began making fires in tiny charcoal stoves and lighted gas burners with which to prepare the midday meal.

At 11:30 a. m. boys and girls employed in offices, shops, and factories lit gas burners to prepare tea for lunch time. By 11:45 o'clock practically all the cooking stoves and gas burners in Tokyo were burning.

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At two minutes before noon there was a subterranean rumbling from the southeast which in an instant became a terrifying roar. Then the earth shook with a jolt that knocked people off their feet and overturned furniture and stoves.

Buildings rocked violently. Walls trembled and collapsed. Ceilings groaned. People could walk only with difficulty.

There were shouts of "Rush outdoors!" but this admonition was unnecessary, for that was exactly what everybody was trying to do as they stumbled for the nearest exits like drunken persons. Many elderly people had to crawl.

Outside a terrible sight met their eyes. Telephone and telegraph poles were swaying or already had fallen. Trees were uprooted; the injured lay groaning; the screams of women and children could be heard.

The back-and-forth and up-and-down movement—the quakes were both horizontal and vertical—continued for twelve seconds. One after another houses of wood and paper crumpled amidst clouds of dust, burying the shrieking occupants. Fires broke out all over the city and outlying districts.

Sixty seconds after the first shock columns of black smoke were rising from the crown prince's former palace, the Tokyo Imperial university, and several other places where chemical explosions occurred. In a few minutes fires started in a score of other locations, and by nightfall there were 134 blazes.

Ten minutes after the first tremor most of the water mains gave way and the fire fighters had to draw water from wells,

canals, and moats. Many of the fires merged and in a few hours were completely out of control.

All means of communication had been disrupted. Telephone and telegraph lines were dislocated. As the convulsions continued, electricity failed and tram and railway services stopped.

The populace of the whole city was running wildly in every direction in an effort to reach safety. The stampede increased in fury when channels of escape were cut by new blazes. As the afternoon wore on the confusion grew into fearful pandemonium.

From time immemorial the Japanese have been taught that the safest place during an earthquake is a bamboo grove, and



Tokyo crowds watching the progress of the fire in a residential section the day of the quake.

next to that a large open space. The former is regarded secure because of the peculiarly strong ramifications of the roots of the plants, which keep the ground from cracking. The advantage of open spaces, particularly in crowded cities, is apparent.

By the tens of thousands people made their way into the vast open area in front of the imperial palace, in the heart of the city, and into the four large parks at Hibiya, Ueno, Shiba, and Asakusa.

In Honjo and Fukagawa wards, the most densely populated districts in Tokyo, there are no parks, but fortunately the gigantic army clothing depot had only recently been moved and all buildings had been torn down. The cleared ground was destined to become a park. Here was a level open space of twenty acres with not a house, tree, or shrub on it.

Fires started in Honjo almost immediately after the first violent quake, and as people rushed out of their homes in search of places of safety, many naturally

made their way to this ground. Refugees who had hand carts took along as much of their belongings as possible. Others carried their valuables wrapped in sheets and blankets.

By 2 p. m. the clothing depot was a congestion of humans and hand carts piled high with cotton-stuffed bedding, kimono, cooking utensils, and food.

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Fires to the southwest, spreading rapidly in the direction of the compound, drove many more citizens to seek safety there. By 3 p. m. 35,000 terrified refugees packed the open space. There was hardly room to move, for the ground was cluttered with bundles of every description, yet more thousands, driven by new flames to the east and terrified by the now almost constant shaking of the earth, pressed into the grounds.

By 4 p. m. the flames from the south had approached dangerously close to the safety area. The blaze to the east merged with smaller fires which had

started to the north, and the flames leaped hundreds of feet into the air.

As nightfall approached, the fire from the south, unchecked and uncontrolled, and that to the

then from the north and east. The cordon of fire bore down upon the oasis of refuge from all sides.

Thirty-eight thousand men, women, and children stood helpless. The heat became unbearable. The whole area was literally becoming an immense incinerator. Frantic cries for help and frenzied prayers came from the refugees.

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Fire had now reached the buildings immediately around the depot, and the high columns of flame gyrated, leaving a void in the center directly over the vacant lot. The gyrations became a violent encircling movement of the air which gained momentum until it reached cyclonic proportions.

Fanned by this furious whirlwind, the roaring pillars of fire twisted around and around the twenty-acre compound, sweeping down at times and blowing white-hot iron roofing and burning embers upon the screaming multitude.

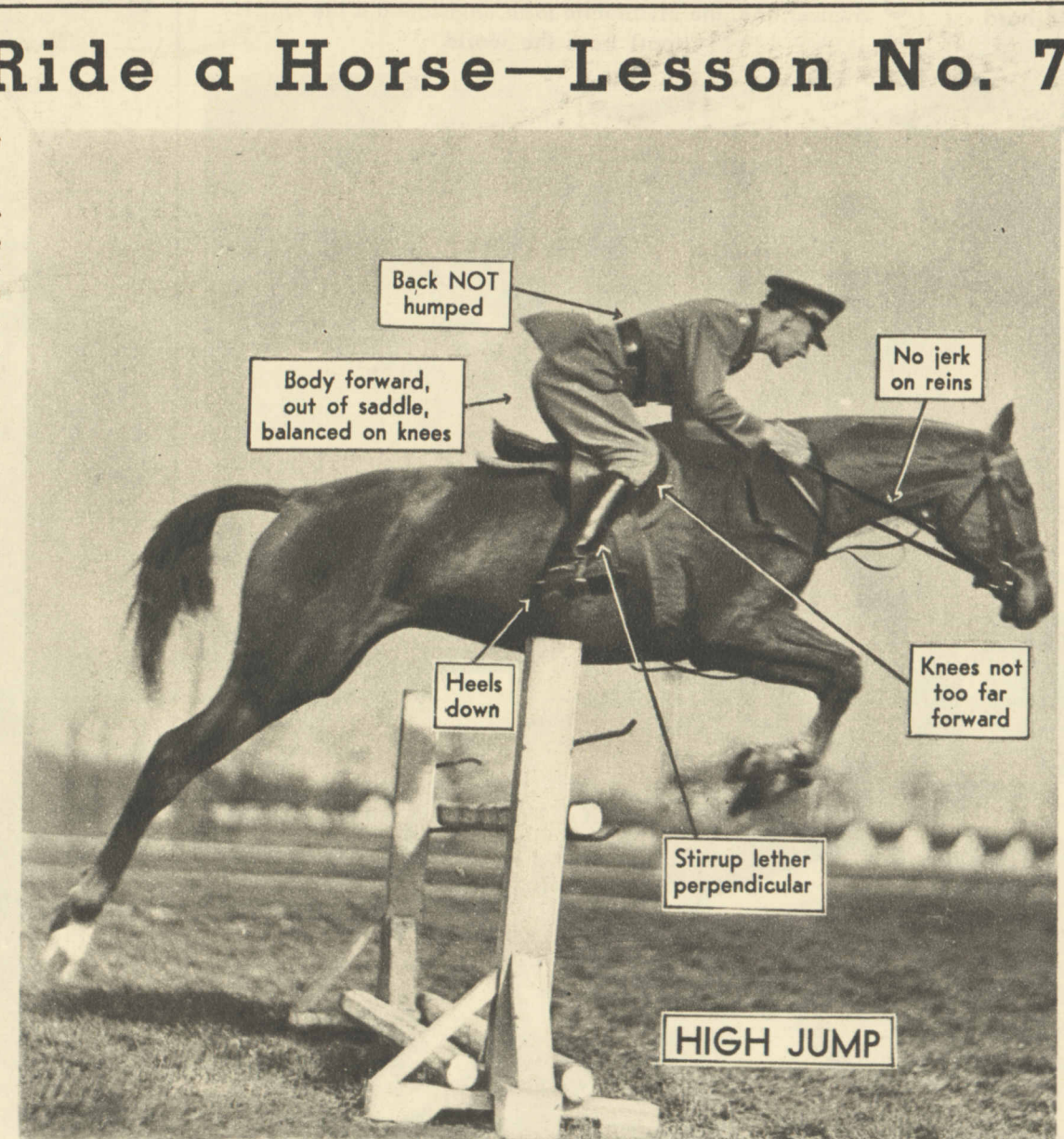
The vast accumulation of goods on the ground, much of it inflammable, began to burn. Men and women lay on the earth with their young beneath them to protect them from the intense heat. Being roasted alive, many of the refugees became raving maniacs. As the fire consumed



Earthquake memorial temple erected on the square where 38,000 refugees were killed by fire. Picture taken during annual memorial service.

northeast merged into one vast sea of flames.

The wind, accelerated by the vacuum caused by the flames which burned around a void space, increased in velocity. Its course shifted momentarily, now blowing strongest from the south, now from the west, and



## How to Ride a Horse—Lesson No. 7

By CAPT. M. M. CORPENING  
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**H**IGH, treacherous, or show jumping should be undertaken only by experienced riders. The rider is far forward, out of the saddle. The seat is less secure than in hunting or ordinary jumping, but the weight is so shifted as to enable the horse to take the difficult hurdles with less interference. Note how body is balanced on the knees, with no jerk at all on reins. Stirrups should be shortened when jumps are above three feet six—the higher the jump the shorter the stirrup. This process produces difficulty for the inexperienced in keeping body in proper position as shown in the picture. Roughly speaking, the body's center of gravity should be approximately in a vertical plane passing just in the rear of the knee joints. Following are common faults found in unskilled riders when stirrups are shortened:

1. The knees are too high and pushed too far to the front. As a result the buttocks slide too far forward. In some very bad cases the knees rest at the front ends of the saddle skirts or beyond them.

2. The heels are high, resulting from the faulty positions of the buttocks and knees.

3. The stirrup leathers are not perpendicular.

4. The loin and back are humped.

All these faults make the seat weak and insecure. They result from failure to keep the heels driven far down, the

calves close against the horse, the knees held in against the saddle skirts, the back and loin muscles contracted sufficiently

to keep the back straight and the loin concave. Any one of the faults entails the others.

(THE END.)



The scene that greeted visitors to a northeastern section of Tokyo following the earthquake and fire of 1923. The statue in the foreground is a naval memorial. (Photos from Kimpei Sheba.)

immediately after the disaster. "Were you in Honjo ward at that time?" I inquired.

Mr. Shindo looked surprised. "Every inch of land in Honjo and Fukagawa wards was burned," he said. "If I had been in Honjo ward that day I would not be here now."

"I was one of the first to reach the depot," he went on. "It was the morning of Sept. 3, and the fire had burned itself out, although the whole area was still smoldering."

"At first I could hardly believe my eyes. There were nothing but bodies for as far as I could see. On closer examination I was amazed to find the clothing of many of the dead almost untouched by fire. The bodies were not in one solid mass, but lay in waves, sometimes as many as five deep. Then there would be a few feet of open space and then another wave of bodies."

"Perhaps the victims rushed in one direction as the tongues of flame swept upon them and fell one on the other. I am convinced a fourth of the victims died from suffocation. The few who escaped dug themselves under the masses of bodies and remained until the fire burned itself out."

Mr. Shindo was assigned to supervise the disposal of the bodies. "It took us two weeks to cremate the 38,000 bodies. We counted the dead as we burned them," he added. "Tears came to our eyes as we saw how mothers and fathers sacrificed themselves in a vain effort to save their children."

The holocaust at Honjo is in many ways without precedent in history. It probably was the first time there ever was a cyclone of fire. Never have so many persons been burned alive together within the confines of so small an area.

Yet it was only a small part of the great calamity which visited Japan that day.

## THE GIRL NOBODY WANTED TO KNOW

[Especially in the Summertime]

