

The Great Kanto Earthquake

and Freemasonry's Charity

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The Great Kanto Earthquake (Kanto Dai-Shinsai) that occurred two minutes before noon on September 1, 1923, has been described as the worst natural calamity in history, particularly when considering the subsequent destructive aftershocks, tidal waves, landslides, explosions and fires. Over 140,000 people died. The cities of Tokyo and Yokohama were devastated, with seven square miles of Tokyo burned and half of Yokohama destroyed. Soon after the disaster, numerous relief measures of essential emergency materials and extensive monetary contributions were forthcoming from domestic and international sources, symbolizing the innate magnanimity and benevolence of people to react to suffering humanity.

The small Masonic community resident in Japan also responded. Shortly after the earthquake, the following notice appeared in the Kobe City's local English language newspapers: ALL FREE MASONS are requested to meet at the Corinthian Hall, 48 Nakayamate-dori, 2 Chome, on Saturday next (15th instant) at 5 pm, for purpose of discussing what steps, if any, shall be taken in the matter of assisting in the distress caused by the late disaster, Sixty-nine Masons attended this meeting, representing the five English and two Scottish Lodges in Japan, and various overseas Lodges. The Right Worshipful District Grand Master of the District Grand Lodge of Japan (English Constitution), Brother George H. Whymark, chaired the meeting. He related the recent devastation of Tokyo and Yokohama, and from information received, stated that most of the Lodges and Chapters there had lost their regalia owing to the complete destruction of the Yokohama Masonic Hall (built around 1867, reputed to be the first all-stone building of modern design to be constructed in Japan and had successfully withstood the 1870 earthquake), that the Yokohama Lodges were particularly unfortunate, since most of their funds were invested in Masonic Hall, Limited, and that many Masons had had their houses and possessions destroyed and had badly suffered. He intimated that those Lodges could use the Corinthian Hall for their meetings free of charge, the Kobe Lodges would lend them regalia, and proposed two propositions which were unanimously carried by those present: "That a list be circulated among all Free Masons to form a nucleus of funds," and "That all subscriptions,

including any that may be received from Grand Lodges, Lodges or Brethren abroad, should be devoted to the assistance and relief of distress among Free Masons, their families and for the relief of Lodges which have suffered." Brother S.G. Stanford then proposed that "Cables be sent to the Grand Lodge of England and Scotland requesting their assistance" which was approved. Brother E.H. Hunt offered to pay for the cost of the two cables. Five Brethren were named to form a General Committee, with Brothers P.H. Jones of Albion in the Far East Lodge No. 1401, E.C. as Secretary and G.H. Stacy of Lodge Hiogo and Osaka No. 498, S.C. as Treasurer, and were instructed to compile, with the assistance of Lodge Masters and Secretaries, a list of all deceased, missing and distressed Brothers and their families, including those who required assistance so prompt relief could be given.

Shortly thereafter the "Masonic Earthquake Relief Fund" was established, and confirmation was received that the European and American communities in Tokyo and Yokohama had indeed suffered greatly, several Masons had died, and their homes, possessions and businesses were destroyed. Many families either desired to return to their homelands or required immediate assistance in moving to Kobe and purchasing winter clothing. Numerous Masons required aid in reorganizing their business or short-term assistance until stocks could arrive from their suppliers in foreign countries. Donations of 181,767.02 Yen were received by the Fund from all sources, of which over ninety percent were from English Masons. The Fund dispersed assistance on either a one-time basis or monthly installments as individual needs dictated. Amounts such as 200 or 500 Yen were common donations, with 6,000 Yen being provided to a dentist to reestablish his office. Although these donations seem to be very modest in the light of present day inflation, consider that the exchange rate at that time was approximately two Yen to one U.S. Dollar.

Heartfelt letters from recipients of the Fund expressed the following appreciative comments: "Thank you most sincerely for the wonderful kindness shown me by Brother Masons ... I cannot express in words the sympathy and generosity shown ... I thank you with tears of gratitude for the timely help for a needy and unfortunate Brother ... I beg to express my grateful thanks to kindness accorded me by the Masonic Fraternity."

The Fund, aware that several Masons in Japan were United States citizens, communicated with the Grand Lodges of California, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Washington requesting donations. The Grand Lodge of California immediately responded with a donation of \$1,000.00, stating, "We place no restrictions whatever upon the use of this money, trusting entirely to your good judgment as to how it should be expended." (This was in addition to their previous donation of \$2,500.00 to the American Red Cross). Other United States Grand Lodges wrote, relating they had donated to other sources such as the Masonic Service Association or the American Red Cross. Subsequent funds from the United Grand Lodge of England were responsible for rebuilding the new Yokohama Masonic Hall.

At this time it is impossible to identify all of the numerous Masonic donations to the relief of earthquake victims in Japan, especially individual contributions; however, communication with United States Grand Lodges regarding their participation revealed that at least twenty-five Grand Lodges did indeed contribute. Nine days after the earthquake, Brother Andrew L. Randell, the Executive Secretary of the Masonic Service Association, sent a letter to all Grand Masters in the United States stating that one of the purposes of the M.S.A. was "... to function for the Fraternity throughout the nation as a representative relief organization in time of great national or international calamity or disaster." He then described the recent disaster in Japan and that he had communicated with responsible agencies and individuals to identify a charity that American Freemasonry could assume. He then stated previous donations to agencies such as the Red Cross (which conducted an extensive nationwide campaign) would provide temporary relief in matters of food, clothing and shelter, but that a project of a worthwhile permanent nature would be a monument to the benevolence of Masonry. His plan was to rebuild the American School in Japan, located in Tokyo, which had suffered extensive damage, (This school had been built by Illustrious Brother E.W. Fraser, 33 ø, Deputy for the Scottish Rite (A.A.S.R.,S.J.) in Japan at a personal cost of \$60,000.00) and proposed that if every Mason in the United States would donate a minimum of five cents each through their Grand Lodge, that approximately \$140,000.00 could be raised to rehabilitate and expand this educational edifice which would serve mankind for years to come. There was an immediate response. The Grand Lodge of Michigan wired \$5,000.00, the Grand Lodge of New Jersey telephoned their pledge of \$3,500.00, and numerous other Grand Lodges either appropriated or pledged their five cents per member. The A. & A.S.R., S.J. appropriated \$5,000.00 to the M.S.A. school project in addition to \$10,000.00 for other relief work. Although the M.S.A. did not reach their targeted goal, the contributions were significant, the American School in Japan was able to rebuild and survive, and today is a modern educational institution located in the western suburbs of Tokyo.

As Masons we are admonished by the immutable lessons of charity for the unfortunate and the requirement of assisting a distressed worthy Brother, his widow and orphans. From the foregoing, it is evident that those Masons of sixty years ago clearly took their lessons of Brotherly Love and Relief to heart, and were attentive to the sufferers of the Great Kanto Earthquake.

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