‘Saving San Francisco’ probes relief and recovery after the 1906 disaster

New interpretation of San Francisco earthquake unearths social and political fault lines

(STANFORD, Calif.) As a firefighter in San Francisco, Andrea Rees Davies learned to climb 100-foot ladders and to rescue swimmers from treacherous surf. The job threw her into people’s private lives, bringing her face-to-face with the emotional impact of those crises.

In the recently released “Saving San Francisco: Relief and Recovery after the 1906 Disaster” (Temple University Press 2012,) Davies uses her unique background as a former firefighter with a PhD in history to unearth the political underpinnings and social response to this first national relief effort. Examining original material from the period, Davies questions long-held beliefs that the 1906 earthquake brought out altruism and erased social differences as it wiped out the city.

The quake that struck San Francisco on April 18, 1906 leveled buildings and ripped open gas lines for a terrorizing 65 seconds. Then came the fires. For three days, firefighters and residents fought raging flames that ultimately killed thousands of people and devoured more than 500 blocks of businesses and homes.

“At first glance, the calamity appeared to affect all segments of the population equally because it transformed all of the city’s survivors — the wealthy and the poor, the Chinese and native born — into refugees,” Davies writes in “Saving San Francisco.” She goes on to explain that the egalitarianism of disaster relief existed mostly as a myth.

Looking further into the earthquake relief effort, Davies scoured historic letters, census data, newspaper accounts and she dug up new historic evidence to show how the disaster acted as a “social accelerator” that privileged existing social groups and pushed ahead political agendas. For example, a relief housing system ranked refugees by class status and provided housing in multiple tiers: property-owning candidates went to nicer temporary housing and received grant money for new homes and those at the social and
racial margins were sent to refugee camps. In this sense, Davies argues, relief became the nexus for political power.

Davies sets the stage for her book showing how the earthquake hit each San Francisco neighborhood. She shows that social inequality started with the earthquake itself. Poor and working-class San Franciscans were more likely to live on landfill and see their homes crumble. As the fire ravaged the city, the San Francisco mayor diverted precious water resources to save the mansions on Nob Hill while Chinatown was left to burn. Davies then explores how, through disaster relief, political groups rushed into the disaster zone with the hopes of influencing the recovery and rebuilding the city. She lifts the veil on dozens of disaster relief camps sprinkled throughout the city to explore how relief policies impacted refugees.

However, relief also offered opportunities for marginalized groups like Chinese Americans and poor and working-class refugees to find public voice. After city and military officials forced Chinese residents to evacuate a destroyed Chinatown, Chinese Americans were expected to enter segregated Chinese relief camps. Chinatown leaders wouldn't have it. Refusing such racially-based policies, they created their own relief effort for supporting refugees and rebuild Chinatown. Indeed, Davies shows how refugees organized protests and how Chinatown business leaders and middle-class white women mobilized resources for the less privileged. However, even with these efforts, the political and financial elite shaped relief and reconstruction to ultimately cement social differences in San Francisco.

For Barbara Berglund, “Saving San Francisco” will be “the” book on the 1906 earthquake for years to come. “Davies uses the 1906 disaster as a lens through which to ask hard questions about the social and political life of San Francisco,” said Berglund, the author of “Making San Francisco American: Cultural Frontiers in the Urban West, 1846-1906.” “She successfully weaves together the intricate stories of ordinary people’s struggles and daily lives with high politics, urban history, and analyses of race, class, and gender.”

San Francisco State University History Professor Emeritus William Issel says “Saving San Francisco” is the first social and political history of the recovery efforts after the 1906 calamity. “This is a convincing revisionist account that shows how the recovery process was shaped by existing gender, class and racial fault lines in San Francisco society,” Issel says.

By the numbers:
* A 7.8 magnitude earthquake started at 5:12 a.m. on April 18, 1906
* The quake lasted 65 seconds
* 98 percent of the critical structures in the most populated 521 blocks lay in ruins
* 250,000 residents fled San Francisco, while 100,000 remained in the city
* In 1906, three of four San Franciscans had parents born outside of the United States. More than a third of residents were foreign born.
* 575 firefighters were on duty the day of the earthquake
* The earthquake and fires killed thousands of people and demolished more than 500 blocks of businesses and homes
* Following the disaster, about 40,000 residents lived in refugee camps scattered in 26 locations throughout the city
Andrea Rees Davies, Ph.D. Stanford, is Director of Programs and Research at Stanford’s Clayman Institute for Gender Research. A former firefighter, Davies graduated magna cum laude from Harvard/Radcliff Colleges and is author of numerous research studies at the Clayman Institute. Davies' new book, “Saving San Francisco,” released in November 2011, is published by Temple University Press.

The Clayman Institute for Gender Research at Stanford University was founded in 1974 and is one of the nation's most distinguished research organizations devoted to the study of gender. The Clayman Institute creates knowledge and seeks to implement change that promotes gender equality at Stanford, nationally and internationally.