

***Father Frank Barnum, S.J., a nephew of the founder of the Barnum and Bailey Circus, was in Montego Bay on Monday, January 14, 1907, when the earthquake struck and was able to reach Kingston the following morning. He wrote these notes "under a tree" two weeks later.***

***The original letter is in the Special Collection of the Georgetown University Library, Washington, D.C.; the text given here is an edited version of the letter.***

***My thanks to Father Gerry McLaughlin, S.J., for making the letter available to us here.***

ON THE **14TH of January 1907** the city of Kingston, Jamaica, was, without the slightest warning, instantaneously reduced to ruins by a most disastrous earthquake.

This dreadful misfortune occurred just when the industries of Jamaica, which had been paralysed by the cessation of sugar culture, had begun to revive under the impetus of the fruit trade, and all were rejoicing that a new era of prosperity had dawned upon this beautiful island.

In an instant, those hopeful conditions were destroyed, and the 60,000 inhabitants of Kingston were reduced to utter desolation. So complete and so universal was the havoc wrought by the shock that in all Kingston not one edifice escaped intact. As the earth heaved and shook on that fatal afternoon, one great united wail of terror rose up from all the panic stricken victims. This awful blood-curdling wail which resounded loud above all the noise and crash of falling walls, it is impossible to describe, it formed the most terrifying feature of the whole catastrophe.

Instantly dense clouds of yellow dust arose which confused and blinded many who were seeking to escape from the various buildings. The frantic shrieks of terror and the agonizing groans of the wounded added to the horror of the scene. Everywhere throughout the business section of the city, fires immediately broke out and the frenzied screams for aid from the hundreds covered with debris as the flames swept towards them will never be forgotten.

The first week of the pioneer Jesuit mission in Jamaica had most successfully closed and all of ours, full of zeal and hopefulness were joyfully looking forward

to still greater success when this dreadful calamity came upon us. At the moment of the shock our Fathers were occupied as follows: the Very Rev. Father Administrator and Fr. O'Donovan of the mission band were at Alpha Cottage, a large establishment conducted by the Sisters of Mercy. Fr. O'Donovan had promised to deliver an address to the Sisters on the subject of Christian education. Fortunately, most of them had already assembled in their community room, which is a large apartment on the ground floor and were just awaiting the coming of the others. Just then the shock came, the various buildings were completely wrecked, everyone there was thrown violently to the ground, and in an instant all were in panic. The Rev. Mother Superior and three sisters were buried under the debris, one of them, Sister Veronica, was unconscious when she was gotten out, her arm was broken and she as well as the others were covered with cuts and bruises.

A heavy beam fell directly across the breast of another Sister, and she was saved only after the greatest difficulty. One pupil was killed outright. Fr. Donovan remained giving all the aid in his power, and Rev. Fr. Collins returned to our residence. In this dark hour, our hearts sympathy is for him. Just as he had succeeded in getting his Vicariate of Jamaica into splendid shape this misfortune comes upon him. The College of St. George - under Fr. Dinand's energetic management was fast assuming a prominent position among the educational institutions of the West Indies.

Fr. Rodock at the time of the shock was visiting his parochial district which included the southeastern portion of the city. He went at once to the Lunatic Asylum, of which he was Chaplain, and found that eight patients had been killed, many more had run away and were wandering around the town. He next went about seeking out the wounded and near midnight he returned to our residence after having anointed fully one hundred victims.

Fr. Dinand was at our college in Winchester Park. All the boys had assembled in his class room and were holding a meeting over some athletic matters. It was a one-story light frame building and it did not collapse. All rushed out at once, and he 1 called the roll, not one was hurt 2 or missing. They all knelt down and

prayed and a few went to confession. Fr. Dinand next proceeded down North Street visiting all the Catholic families on his way. At one residence, he pulled out two persons, both were alive but unconscious. He spent the rest of the evening assisting the wounded.

Fr. Roche was riding back from the college, and at the moment of the shock he and Fr. O'Hare were entering the yard gate. He heard a terrific noise as of a great storm and saw the walls falling and noticed Fr. Golding running down the steps. He started back at once for the college and on the way met Fr. Superior coming from Alpha Cottage. He then turned and set out for the villa of the Franciscan Sisters which is known as Nuns Pen, on the way he found one of our college boys who had been badly injured and he took him to his home. When he reached there he discovered that the house was in ruins, so he carried the boy along with him to Nuns Pen. There he found all the buildings destroyed and the Sisters and children nearly distracted. Most of the community were in their rooms on the second floor, and it was wonderful that they escaped. Several jumped from windows, the Mother and another were buried in the debris. As the staircase was destroyed, many escaped by means of a ladder. The door of the room of one Sister became jammed and could not be opened. When the Sisters had broken through it, she was rescued, but nearly dead from fright as fire had started.

The next morning, **Tuesday, January 15**, a temporary altar was erected and Fr. Harpes, as senior, said mass, and the rest went to communion. Fr. Superior said mass for the Sisters. Brother Schaffner took a wheel barrow and started out to try and obtain some provisions for us. Near the Parade he saw that the fine marble statue, which had been erected by the city in memory of Fr. Dupont, S.J., was overthrown. The head was broken off and Brother Schaffner picked it up and set it on the pedestal. During this search for provisions, the brother passed Myrtle Bank Hotel and saw the numerous bodies of those who had perished there when the walls fell in.

All day the Fathers went around helping all whom they could. The heat was intense and the stench of the burnt bodies was overpowering. On Wednesday morning, city constables opened stores to the multitude and the ensuing scramble gave rise to stories of looting. At noon, another sharp shock occurred which renewed all the panic of yesterday. Everyone remained in the streets for none ventured to enter their homes. All the large open places such as the Parade, Race Course and Gardens were thronged with people erecting little shelters.

The Parade, which is a large park in the centre of the city, was thronged with refugees all wrought up to the highest pitch and a large number of wounded were laid around everywhere among the shrubbery. The condition of these poor sufferers was lamentable, but there was no help as the city hospital was already congested. Then it was that some foolish person started another panic by crying out that a tidal wave was coming. Ever since the great shock happened, there have been persistent rumours that the town would be overwhelmed by the sea, and there was a widespread fear of this among all classes. As this rumour gained headway, all the streets leading out of town were thronged by the frantic inhabitants who praying aloud and shrieking in terror rushed pell mell towards the upper portion of the city where they passed the rest of the night singing hymns and howling that judgement day was at hand.

**Wednesday** morning dawned upon the same awful scene, and soon the bright tropical sun dispelled the glare of the conflagration. Some Fathers said mass in the yard and others went to Nuns Pen and Alpha. Crowds came in to attend mass and receive the Sacraments.

The city authorities have placed a cordon of the coloured soldiers of the West India Regiment around the burning district and some little attempt was made to keep public order. The work of getting out the wounded was continued and as the hospital is already crowded, train loads of injured persons were sent to Spanish Town. Today, the dead bodies were cremated just where they were discovered, but the want of disinfectant rendered this work very offensive.

About noon Rev. Father Superior decided that as the mission had lost everything its only hope rests in obtaining aid from abroad. He therefore directed Fr. Golding and Fr. O'Donovan to proceed at once to New York to solicit help. Mr. Williams left at the same time. The party were to embark on the SS Prince Waldemar, a vessel of the Hamburg-American Company which was due to arrive this evening. Before entering the harbour, this steamer unfortunately ran ashore at Plum Point and was wrecked directly astern of the SS. Princess Victoria Louise, a vessel of the same line which ran ashore there only a few weeks ago. Fr. Golding's party sailed the following evening on another of this ill-fated company's vessels.

Ever since the shock, the Fathers have been taking regular turns in attending upon the wounded in the City Hospital, and the Sisters have also lent their aid so that a very great amount of spiritual good has been accomplished. The condition at the hospital has been most deplorable. As the various buildings there were injured, the officials were obliged to hurriedly transport all their regular patients into the grounds. Before they had time enough to accomplish that important work, they found themselves actually besieged by the crowd of injured persons who were brought in, and the result was absolute confusion. Nearly all night, out in the open air, operations were being carried on by the surgeons as best they could, with bystanders holding lights and affording assistance.

In the afternoon, Fr. Mulry arrived from Avocat, where he and Fr. Ryan had been giving a mission. His coming relieved Fr. Superior's anxiety. Now we knew that all of Our Jesuits are safe. Fr. Mulry had to proceed on foot to Buff Bay and it proved to be a very dangerous walk on account of the numerous landslides and the loose boulders along the steep mountain road. Nearly every edifice in Buff Bay was injured. Till now the Fathers have been sleeping on the ground, but today Fr. McGivney obtained a huge canvas and erected a shelter under which the beds were placed.

**Thursday, January 17:** This morning the people again filled our yard where masses were said and confessions heard. Rev. Fr. Superior announced

that hereafter mass for the public will be celebrated on the campus at Winchester Park where a great number of our Catholic families have already erected little shelters

The great event of that day was the arrival of the American War Ships, Missouri and Indiana, under the command of Rear Admiral Davis, USN. At the very first inclination of the disaster these vessels left Guantanamo Harbour with all the surgeons of the fleet and hastened to our assistance. The Chaplain of the Missouri, Rev. Fr. Gleeson, accompanied by a large party of surgeons and some blue jackets came up to our residence to call upon Rev. Fr. Superior.

During this visit a plan was settled upon for organising an emergency hospital at our place known as Winchester Park. The naval men went also to the US Consulate and saved all the archives and official records.

All day the Fathers kept up their work of visiting the hospital and their allotted districts, helping the wounded. There seemed to be the greatest confusion among the city authorities and the Governor and no concerted action is being taken, a certain amount of work is going on in getting out the dead from the living, but there is no order or system.

A walk through Kingston now reminds one exactly of a visit to Pompeii, the resemblance is perfect. There is the same vast silent area of narrow deserted streets with blocks of one storied houses all roofless and in ruins and emptied of everything. Deep fissures in the earth extend for hundreds of yards, new springs have burst up, and over on the mountains great landslides have left their devastated trails down the slopes.

On the opposite side of the harbour the town of Port Royal, most of which sunk down into the sea in 1692, suffered once more the same fate. A large portion of the point settled down beneath the water. All the fortifications were injured, including the famous Victoria Battery which was considered to be one of the most powerful British forts in America, and which is now some ten feet below its former level.

**Friday, January 18:** This morning Fr. Harpes obtained some workmen and started to remove the debris over the main altars of the Cathedral. About ten o'clock, 60 sailors from the Missouri came to his assistance and worked all day. They pulled down the dangerous walls and moved the piles of bricks. Owing to their most valuable help, Fr. Harpes was enabled to get at the tabernacle and the blessed Sacrament was recovered.

About 10:00 a.m Fr. McGivney and another Father went down to the Royal Mail Company dock where, according to the plan arranged yesterday, they were to meet the Naval chaplain, Rev. Fr. Gleeson. A steam launch brought them out to the flagship and on going on board they presented their respects to Admiral Davis who received them with the greatest courtesy.

**Saturday, January 19:** Early this morning one of the Fathers went down to the landing to escort the surgeons up to Winchester Park. There [?Then] he drove out to the Military Camp to recover a case of instruments which had been sent there by mistake, one of the American surgeons accompanied him. On their arrival, they were most warmly received by the British surgeon who showed them all over the camp. Some 20 patients had been burnt to death when the hospital building collapsed and the bodies had not all been extricated. As the British Camp were very short of medical supplies, our Admiral sent them a generous amount.

Owing to the general conflagration there is a great want of medicine everywhere. In fact, our improvised hospital at Winchester Park is the only place in town where there is a full supply. Towards noon, Fr. McGivney arrived at the hospital with three carts heavily loaded with provisions which were sent to us from the navy ships by order of Admiral Davis.

As he is obliged by the Governor to leave, he determined that we should not be left in want and hence this most generous donation of flour, rice, sugar, tea, coffee, butter, pork, beef, salmon, beans, milk, etc. which amounted to 2,500 lbs. So through the kind thoughtfulness of our noble-hearted American Admiral our poor patients are secure against all danger of famine.

The Sisters of Mercy from Alpha and the Sisters of St. Francis attended to all the hospital work. Night and day these devoted religious have laboured among the wounded. At one o' clock, according to the order of the Admiral, all the American officers and sailors left Winchester Park returned to their ships. The surgeons worked till the very last moment and they all expressed the deepest regret at being obliged to depart from a scene where their ministrations were so urgently needed. We all felt desolate indeed when the Red Cross flag was furled and the fine fellows marched away. Rev. Fr. Superior had already taken the precaution of sending a telegram to a medical friend of his in Port Antonio, asking him to come and take charge of our Emergency Hospital. This gentleman, Dr. Lescesne, arrived in the evening. He is one of our alumni and devoted to our Fathers. Fr. McGivney started today to Spanish Town to give a mission there. It had already been published and as the change in the arrangements. [?missing words?]

**Sunday, January 20:** Crowds attended mass. About noon, a cablegram from Rome addressed to the Vicar Apostolic arrived. Cardinal Merry del Val in the name of the Pope said, "Holy Father deeply affected over terrible disaster, sends message of sympathy, blessing you and all sufferers."

Colonel Bayley, the Commandant of the British forces, called early at our place, and expressed great satisfaction on finding us all at work He intimated that he was afraid that the Governors' order dismissing the American fleet from Kingston, would have had the effect of stopping what he realized was such an important work. Shortly, after a member of the City Council came and openly expressed the greatest indignation over the Governors' arbitrary action. Every one was of the same opinion and we were the recipients of much sympathy.

**Tuesday, January 22:** At 3:30 again a very violent shock occurred; we have been having shocks daily, but that one proved to be the strongest since the great one and it created a fresh panic. At our hospital, the patients were all much excited and one poor woman dropped dead from fright. These continual shocks

keep up the general nervousness, which is fomented by the wild [?] harangues of a number of prophets who go about foretelling still greater evils yet to come. If these nuisances were arrested and locked up in jail, the town would become more tranquil. A very popular almanac here has a prediction of a great earthquake for the 29th, the editor really came very near it after all. These Jamaicans, however, think that it is still to come and so there is much alarm over it.