Room Four: Surviving a City in Ruins

Fleeing the Fire

In the path of a relentless fire, there was only one thing victims could do: flee. The flames did not discriminate by race, gender, or class. For a short while, all San Franciscans were reduced to the basic instinct to survive, a far cry from an urban society that had been so deeply divided. People tried to escape the destruction with as many of their worldly goods as they could transport. If they were lucky, they had cars or wagons — but those were oftentimes commandeered into emergency service by police officers or militia. The majority had to carry their belongings, or drag them. Market Street, where this photograph was taken, was filled with the sound of heavy trunks rasping against the pavement.

While the ferry was still operating, some sought refuge in East Bay cities like Berkeley and Oakland. But over 40,000 victims remained in San Francisco and made their way to refugee camps that were springing up all over the city. Life as they had known it was over. During the difficult days, weeks, and months following the disaster, San Francisco would have to work hard to recapture the gay and indefatigable reputation it had previously enjoyed. The city’s renaissance depended on its citizens. Their own rehabilitation began in the refugee camps.