Room Four: Surviving a City in Ruins

Refugee Camps

When San Francisco started to burn, San Franciscans fled to all parts of the Bay Area and beyond. In many areas, refugees were greeted with fear and apprehension. For example, San Mateo County requested shipments of arms and ammunitions for keeping order among its refugees. The largest number of refugees, though, ended up in Oakland where they lived in vacant lots and on the north side of Lake Merritt at a place called Adams Point. Not all camps were sponsored by cities, there were many private ones such as the Piedmont Skating Rink Camp, the John D. Rockefeller Camp, and the Spanish War Veterans Camp. In San Francisco, the refugees were provided homes primarily to preserve a labor force for reconstructing the city. To this end, the housing committee attempted to move all the homeless into regulated camps, but they were only marginally successful in this effort. Only two months after the disaster, only 18,000 of San Francisco's 43,000 homeless were in the military camps, the remainder being dispersed throughout the city. Official camps were located in Golden Gate Park, the Presidio, Fort Mason, Harbor View (Marina District), and the city's squares and parks, as seen in this silent film of a camp at Jefferson Square. Camp housing consisted of wooden platforms, small shacks called earthquake cottages, two-story tenements, and barracks. It only took eight days to erect the first barracks, which provided lodging for 1,200 people. Although they provided shelter, the barracks were often draughty and suffered from being placed in low-lying areas where pools of water developed. Despite their low quality of living, the camps were in use for a little over two years, with the last camp closing on June 30, 1908.

Life in the official camps was run by the military. Military order is clearly evident in the regular spacing and clean surroundings of the refugee tents. Those who chose not to live in the camps lived a much harsher existence, scraping together whatever materials they could find to provide a roof for themselves.