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Ninety years since the nation's deadliest natural disaster

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Today marks 90 years since New Zealand's deadliest natural disaster.



Hamilton Logan, 96, says he still remembers the Hawke's Bay quake vividly. Photo: RNZ/ Tom Kitchin

The Hawke's Bay earthquake on 3 February, 1931 killed 256 people, turning Napier and Hastings to rubble.

The cities were built back stronger, but the memories still linger.

Hamilton Logan was just six years old when the quake struck at 10.47am.

He was in the storeroom of his family farm in Kereru, west of Hastings.

The now 96-year-old still remembered the moment vividly.

"I was sneaking one of my favourite biscuits because it was morning tea time and all of a sudden I heard this rumbling noise, rather like a train coming into the station," he told RNZ.

"Then the ground started to slowly move and then it got faster and faster until it reached a crescendo and there was a huge jolt."

He says that jolt caused all the damage, destroying buildings and water supplies.

His grandparents lived in Napier, and his family had no way to find out if they were alive.

But Logan said a worker offered to ride a motorbike into Napier to find them.

"How he got into Napier I do not know because the road was full of cracks and bits were fallen away, bridges were destroyed. The road on both sides of where we were living was blocked by slips, but he got back in the very early hours of the next day, the next morning, having found them and was able to tell my father that they were safe."



The old Post Office building on the corner of Queen and Russell Streets, Hastings. Photo: SUPPLIED/ Hastings District Council

Another witness speaking to RNZ in a [1981 Spectrum documentary](#) described the quake noise as just "bang, clatter, smash, crack, creak".

She said she watched the destruction from Napier's old nursing home, not nervous or frightened, but fascinated.

"I remember seeing my cup and saucer just fly across the room, smash against the plaster wall, then I saw that corner of the room collapse. Then I saw the dressing table just come over and that wall go."



Buildings ruined by the 1931 earthquake, Napier. Ref: 1/2-048342-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/23196173 Photo: Alexander Turnbull Library

Local historian Michael Fowler said the tales of that day were heard through the generations.

"The stories of what happened to families on the earthquake is passed down and everybody could probably tell you a story about that."

But he believed there was not enough done after the disaster to prevent deaths in another quake, despite architects lobbying the government.

"There were architects that were concerned in the 1960s about the unreinforced masonry buildings such as the ones in Christchurch that were still there in terms of would be susceptible to an earthquake, a sizeable one, if it happened."

The Christchurch earthquake followed 80 years later, killing 185 people.

Commemorations will be held for the Hawke's Bay earthquake in both Napier and Hastings this morning.