Earthquake Celebrity: The Press, the Fans, and Charles F. Richter

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On March 10, 1933, Long Beach, California was struck by a powerful 6.4 magnitude earthquake, which caused millions of dollars in damage, loss of life, and frightened thousands throughout the Los Angeles area.[1] The press was unprepared to cover an earthquake with such disastrous effects because there had not been an earthquake of this intensity and so destructive in recent history. It was unknown that poorly constructed and designed buildings could kill people when the earth shook.[2] Disastrous earthquakes were a relatively unknown topic to cover in the press in the Los Angeles area since California's last significant quake was in 1925, Santa Barbara, about two hours north of Long Beach. Prior to Santa Barbara, the most destructive quake occurred in 1906 in San Francisco, with the subsequent fire that nearly destroyed the bay area city. Though earthquakes had happened before, a recognizable scientific spokesperson for this type of disaster did not exist. People were left clueless as to why earthquakes happen. While in search of making sense of the

1 California Department of Conservation, "The 1933 Long Beach Earthquake," https://www.conservation.ca.gov/cgs/earthquakes/long-beach (accessed April 6, 2025); USGS Earthquake Hazards Program, "M6.4 March 10, 1933, Long Beach, California Earthquake," February 27, 2023, https://www.usgs.gov/programs/earthquake-hazards/science/m64-march-10-1933-long-beach-california-earthquake (accessed April 20, 2025).
2 Susan Elizabeth Hough, *Richter's Scale: Measure of an Earthquake, Measure of a Man* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 269.

destruction, the press published sensational unscientific information and far-fetched predictions.

In Pasadena, the Carnegie Seismology Laboratory, later incorporated as the Caltech Seismological Laboratory, began operations in 1921, studying earthquakes for over ten years at the time of the Long Beach disaster. The young theoretical physicist and graduate student, Charles Francis Richter, delved into seismology beginning with compiling statistical data from reading and interpreting seismograms (graph outputs of ground shaking activity) and worked alongside the lab's founder and director Harry Wood. By 1931, Richter began working on a ranking scale to quantify earthquake magnitude that assisted seismologists for comparison between shocks.[3] His paper which introduced the new scale using the term "magnitude" over "intensity" to the field of seismology was published in 1935.[4] The 1933 Long Beach earthquake served as a watershed moment that led the physicist turned seismologist to become the spokesperson to inform the press and the public after each earthquake thereafter.

Richter was not yet featured in the press in 1933, but beginning in the 1940s, his name began to appear regularly in the *Los Angeles Times* as the seismic activity spokesman or alongside related research news. Throughout his career, the press called on him for assurance for when the earth's shaking would stop, which he could not give.[5] The seismologist took interviews as opportunities to advise the public of the risks of earthquakes throughout California and beyond. He was the public authority who described earthquake activity, while dispelling earthquake reporting misinformation, and using the measuring scale he created to report the size of the shaking. Both the press and the public eventually associated the bespectacled Richter as the earthquake expert. In California and outside the state, Richter was a trustworthy scientist to the public.

The press created a celebrity by often quoting and referencing Richter after many notable seismic events. By publishing stories, interviews, photos of Richter, and by using the term "Richter scale"

3 Judith Goodstein, "Waves in the Earth: Seismology Comes to Southern California," *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* 14, no. 2 (1984): 202, 217, 222–23.
4 Charles F. Richter, "An Instrumental Earthquake Magnitude Scale," *Bulletin of the Seismological Society of America* 25, no. 1 (January 1935): 1–32.
5 Hough, *Richter's Scale*, 106–7.

to report magnitude, the press depicted Charles Richter as the expert. Because of Richter's celebrity status, the ordinary citizen recognized that the seismologist personified science, and Californians learned to better accept the inevitability of earthquakes. The California lexicon adopted the words magnitude, epicenter, aftershock, and Richter scale. Ordinary citizens acknowledged the seismologist by sending fan mail, seeking insurance advice, requesting autographs and photos, volunteering their own earthquake predictions, or sharing their admiration and respect for his commitment to keeping the public informed.

During Richter's professional life, his role as an expert earthquake communicator and Caltech spokesperson was a public service to counteract the misinformation and sensationalism of the press.[6] He educated the public about the risks of "the big one" without causing heightened anxiety. His written responses to public correspondents are evidence of his honesty and include the assurance he gave to put people at ease. Referring to Charles Richter's incoming and outgoing correspondence with concerned members of the public, fans of all ages, newspaper articles, and interviews, this article posits key moments throughout the professional life of the seismologist. These sources exhibit Richter's rise as a trustworthy earthquake authority and his ascent to celebrity scientist. Richter used his celebrity status to responsibly inform California's inhabitants of earthquake risks and correct misinformation. In doing so, he aided the public's understanding of the Richter scale's ranking and accustomed Californians to anticipate the earth to shake occasionally.

Earthquake!

Seismologist Charles F. Richter is an overlooked prominent figure in California's earthquake history. While some historians mention his significance, often in reference to the Richter scale, few works exist on his influence on citizens of California and elsewhere. This article frames Richter's notoriety as the cause for the public awareness of the earth's seismicity and adds a social and cultural angle to California's earthquake history. California's temblor history is a budding topic of interest that has focused mostly on science over the

6 Goodstein, "Waves in the Earth," 229.

social phenomena. In recent literature, a popular topic of interest is the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Overall, the histories of disasters are also sparse. Historian Joanna Dyl theorizes that the absence of natural disaster histories is due to "the widespread tendency to ignore or downplay the risks they pose" to people and that the San Francisco disaster is the exception.[7] The San Francisco event caused massive destruction which then sparked a devastating fire and killed thousands. It is easier to ignore risks disasters pose than to cover past topics that may reveal existing risks.

Earthquakes are natural hazards that threaten people who live in California and around various parts of the world. An earthquake occurs when two blocks of the earth slip past each other at fault planes due to energy releasing, which creates seismic waves, causing the earth's surface to shake.[8] An earthquake alone does not cause a disaster. Experts, including scientists and historians, define the earth's shaking as having the potential to become a disaster once populations are impacted.[9] People are at risk from violent seismic activity due to the damage caused by the effects of shaking, such as buildings collapsing and falling debris, rarely alone from the shaking.

As residents of California can attest, earthquakes are regular occurrences that differ in intensity and due to unpredictability, can often cause a panic. According to geologist Gary B. Griggs, temperate weather and a beautiful coastline are the rewards for living in a geologically adolescent state.[10] Knowing the risks and planning for the worst is one way to balance living with earthquake hazards. Despite past accounts of the state's destruction, California's reputation as "earthquake country" throughout the United States and the world has not deterred people from moving to the state for the last century and a half.[11]

The science behind earthquakes has grown and evolved over

7 Joanna Dyl, *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco's 1906 Earthquake* (University of Washington Press, 2017), 18.
8 USGS Earthquake Hazards Program, "The Science of Earthquakes," https://www.usgs.gov/programs/earthquake-hazards/science-earthquakes (accessed April 21, 2025).
9 Cynthia A. Kierner, Matthew Mulcahy, and Liz Skilton, *Rethinking American Disaster* (Louisiana State University Press, 2023), 4.
10 Gary B. Griggs, *California's Catastrophes: The Natural Disaster History of the Golden State* (University of California Press, 2024), 10.
11 Griggs, *California's Catastrophes*, 14.

the past centuries in California. Before scientific instruments for measuring existed, knowledge came from the balance between natural knowledge and accounts from earthquake observers. Relying on accounts and recollections are imperfect because they are subjective. As historian Deborah R. Coen argues, language is often proverbial, often comparing shaking to known and more relatable examples, such as it "rocked like a cradle." While Coen's work focuses on citizen scientists of the nineteenth century in Europe who observed temblors, she argues the Richter scale was later created for "seismology's public dimension." The scale provided a local and relative basis for classifying quakes that the public would not "misinterpret."[12] However, as this article will show, the human aspect remained important to provide a trusted spokesperson to communicate earthquake activity with the assistance of the Richter scale. Proverbial accounts are not accurate when people share subjective information to describe seismic activity.

Disasters and earthquakes cause many alarming and nerve-racking emotions for the masses. Historian Matthew Mulcahy argues "disasters play an important role in shaping the mental and physical worlds," and when disasters strike, people want to make sense of why something happened. People often turn to "religious and intellectual frameworks to make sense of disasters."[13] This explains why people read the newspaper or why they seek experts for answers to the unknown. Today, we can check the local news and social media to quickly learn what just happened after having felt a jolt and shaking.

Considering the prevalence of seismic activity in California, there should be more emphasis on the state's history of earthquakes. Historian Judith Goodstein argues that seismology as a science had a slow start because the earth's shaking was associated mostly with California or rather, a "California problem." Scientists had to prove that they were of worldwide interest.[14] Many scientific achievements occurred in the early twentieth century, and it is notable to learn that the origins of seismology's growth began in Pasadena, California with

12 Deborah R. Coen, *The Earthquake Observers: Disaster Science from Lisbon to Richter* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 15–16, 263–64.
13 Matthew Mulcahy, "A New World of Disaster: Hazards, Environments, and Experience in Colonial British America," in *Rethinking American Disaster*, 11.
14 Goodstein, "Waves in the Earth," 202.

Caltech scientists. Richter is in part responsible for the California university's earthquake association. Aside from scientific achievements, California is famous for having celebrities.

Richter's celebrity scientist status is significant to California's earthquake history. His position as a famous scientist was promoted by his regular appearances in the media. The media focuses on individuals over ideas. Celebrity scientists have power among the public because they represent abstract ideas, such as earthquakes with Richter. This allows the public to make sense of the unknown.[15] It is not necessary to understand the science behind temblors but a spokesperson reporting and giving pertinent information related to risks and safety was sufficient to assure Californians. Scholar Sharon Marcus adds, "one can become a celebrity without media attention, but media coverage alone does not a celebrity make." The public decides who becomes a celebrity.[16] With the assistance of the press, the public considered Richter as a celebrity.

United States Geological Survey (USGS) seismologist Susan Hough wrote the most comprehensive work on Richters life and impact on earthquake science. In the biography, Hough credits Richter's role in building the seismology program at Caltech and his development of the magnitude scale. She also dives deep into his personal life by analyzing his relationships, interest in nudism, and diagnosing him with Asperger's Syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder. While her work gives a human side to the scientist, aside from an unverified autism diagnosis, Hough did not recognize his celebrity impact on expanding the public's knowledge of seismic activity. She attributes his "minor celebrity" to Southern California only after the 1971 San Fernando seismic coverage.[17] Evidence suggests that his celebrity grew much earlier in his career and his name and the scale with his name were well-known to the public many years prior to the 1971 disaster.

Charles Richter's impact on accustoming the public to earthquakes has not previously been analyzed by scholars. There are many folders of correspondence of fan mail collected throughout Richter's life as a celebrity scientist in Caltech's Archives. These papers pre-

15 Declan Fahy, *The New Celebrity Scientists: Out of the Lab and into the Limelight* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 6.
16 Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 2–3.
17 Hough, *Richter's Scale*, 164, 212–40, 252.

serve the opinions and fears of fans, admirers, and detractors that illustrate the scientific and personal contributions the seismologist disseminated to the world. This article only begins to uncover the potential Richter's papers can contribute to California's history with earthquakes. There are also numerous news articles, interviews, television and radio appearances that exist, which are further evidence that Richter was the personification of the magnitude scale and the earth's shaking.

Stop the Presses! –The Richter Scale

The 1933 Long Beach earthquake caught the southland off-guard, and the press reported the alarming news of destruction alongside improbable musings of earthquake prediction. On March 11, the day after the quake, the front-page headline of the *Los Angeles Times* read, "Scores Perish in Southland Quake," and reported Depression era topics including President Roosevelt ordering banks to reopen and his plan for balancing the budget, sanitation workers mobilizing in Los Angeles County, and two articles on the violent shaking wreaking havoc in Southern California. The *LA Times* described the destruction by detailing the tabulation of the dead and injured and the estimated financial damage caused by the temblor.[18] The newspaper also captured fear, panic, and despair among local residents with reports of numerous people fainting and workers jumping out of buildings during the earth's shaking. The continuation of the front-page article on the following page mentions the Carnegie Seismology Laboratory in a short, buried paragraph. The lab provided an official statement describing the quake as one of the severest felt on the lab's instruments "in a long time." The article also reported the occurrence of "after shocks" [*sic*] after the initial quake. This was the only mention of earthquake science and a brief comment from unnamed experts. Page two of this edition devotes the reporting mostly to the destruction caused by the shaking and captures more the horrific moments experienced by Los Angeles residents.

Sensationalist reporting appeared alongside the facts. Front and center of page two reads, "Letter Sent to 'Times' Forecasts Quake." Below the headline, the *LA Times* includes a photostatic

18 "Scores Perish in Southland Quake," *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1933, 1.

copy of a handwritten letter mailed to the newspaper, which is described by the paper as "predicting disaster." The letter signed by Phillip Haag or Hoag was dated one week prior to the earth's shaking. Some of the included predictions from the list read, "Hell will breakout [*sic*] between March 7th and 13th," and "Los Angeles will be shaken by a great earth quake [*sic*] on one of three days– March 19, 20, or 21st."[19] The inclusion of this letter alongside the reported destruction and other news gave credence to this crank letter, which did not predict anything. Readers of the *LA Times* may have viewed this letter as a far-reaching coincidence or may have been alarmed to learn that earthquakes could in fact be predicted. The newspaper offered no other context to the letter aside from the title and letter's reproduction. This event's coverage is an example of irresponsible news reporting that motivated Richter to eventually accept the importance of open communication with the press. He spoke to reporters on the phone when the lab's director was unavailable.[20]

Two years after the Long Beach disaster, Richter published the monumental paper, "An Instrumental Earthquake Magnitude Scale," which explained the new scale he had developed to quantify magnitude, and with time, increased his scientific standing and assured expertise. As early as 1943, the *LA Times* quoted Richter, as a scientific expert, in a story about the possibility of earthquake prediction. The focus of the article was a study by a Texas University professor, A.E. Lockenwitz, who hoped to foretell earthquakes by measuring tidal movements. The unnamed journalist used the word *opinion* several times to recount Richter's insistence that earthquake prediction could not be determined, but not in reference to Lockenwitz's claims. The journalist's bias is inadvertently present with his repeated use of *opinion* when referring to Richter, favoring the possibility of prediction. However, the *LA Times* regarded the scientist capable of professionally commenting on this study. Despite supporting the possibility of forecasting, the *Times* included Richter's honest and disparaging opinion on prediction adding, there were no progressive results to aid preparedness, "despite the amateurs who

19 "Letter Sent to 'Times' Forecasts Quake," *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1933, 2.
20 Charles Francis Richter, interview by Ann Scheid, February 15–September 1, 1978, Caltech Archives Oral History Project, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA, 60.

bob up every so often claiming they can predict the event."[21] Richter's bluntness and confidence demonstrated his authority on the matter.

News reporting changed once the magnitude scale's purpose and numerical ranking was public knowledge. An early mention of the scale appeared in the *LA Times* in 1946, thirteen years after the scale's addition to the seismology field. The more often the magnitude scale was referenced in print, the less journalists had to define the scale. Journalist William S. Barton interviewed Richter the day after an earthquake which occurred near the Kern River, located in Central California. In this brief article Richter mentions the "magnitude scale," and gives background about a newly discovered fault line.[22] The short article did not have much new information to report but included a photo of Richter (figure 1). The photo captured Richter's strong profile, dark styled hair, and glasses, giving the readers a face to a name to associate the well-dressed, bespectacled man with earthquakes. The photo's inclusion in the story did not add evidential value to the new fault, the scale, or to the group of "delighted" Caltech student scientists who Barton described as planning a camping trip near the recent shaking to observe aftershocks, as depicted in the article. The photo provided a familiar face for California newspaper readers to depend on, adding to his growth in celebrity.

Richter's celebrity status increased once the press used "Richter scale" to regularly refer to the magnitude scale. According to his *New York Times* obituary, he never referred to the scale with his name, but rather as "the scale," "magnitude scale," or "that confounded scale."[23] The exact origin of the use of the "Richter scale" has not been determined in this study or elsewhere, but it first appeared in the *LA Times* in 1952. The city of Tehachapi, over 100 miles north of Los Angeles, was struck with a powerful quake measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale. Beno Gutenberg, Caltech seismology director and mentor to Richter, was the expert scientist consultant for this article and shared pertinent information. The article focuses on the destruction near the epicenter and how surrounding cities felt the shaking.

21 "Forecasting of Quakes Remote, Says Scientist," *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1943.
22 William S. Barton, "Long Quiet Fault Might Have Slipped," *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 1946, 3.
23 John Noble Wilford, "Charles Richter, Quake Expert, Dies," *New York Times*, October 1, 1985, 7.

Gutenberg briefly described the quake as "rolling" and the scale is referred to as Richter scale. The scientist's expertise was sparse in this article and either Gutenberg did not give much of a statement or the press was less interested in his authority. It is unclear whether Gutenberg used the term Richter scale or the newspaper took liberty to use "Richter" instead of magnitude scale. Despite this brief statement, even a story without a Richter statement included the use of his name as a proxy for his absence from the newspaper that day.

By 1970, Richter was retired from his official capacity as Caltech professor but remained active as an earthquake spokesman. On February 9, 1971, the Los Angeles area was struck again with a massive 6.6 magnitude earthquake, with thirty-three reported dead, over one thousand injured, and forty-eight missing after a hospital collapsed in Sylmar, reported immediately after the powerful temblor.[24] The seismic event was dubbed the worst quake since the 1933 Long Beach disaster, but this time there was a documented comparable disastrous event. In this article, Caltech geophysicist, Clarence Allen refers to the quake as the worst in Southern California since the 1952 Tehachapi temblor.



Figure 1: Portrait of Charles F. Richter from article, "Long Quiet Fault May Have Slipped," March 16, 1946. *Los Angeles Times.*

Richter's celebrity endured even after other expert seismologists came into the limelight. While Allen gave a brief science perspective to the press, Richter was later mentioned in more detail and with minimal introduction in newspapers. After Allen's scientific statement, which only compared the recent shaking to previous great temblors in California, the *LA Times* followed, "Among those awakened by the temblor was Dr. Charles Richter, who devised the Richter Scale used in measuring the intensity of earthquakes." Richter was includ-

24 "Death Toll 33 in Massive Earthquake," *Los Angeles Times*, February 10, 1971, B1.

ed at the end of the front-page story to serve as the familiar expert. As an expert, the readers preferred to read the name they already knew, trusted, and was associated to the scale. Overall, Richter was not a big fan of the press because of their tendency to seize and twist misinformation, but he learned to "deal with them" and he rarely declined to comment or interview.[25] The press depended on Richter to help them fully report earthquake news. This is evidenced by the numerous newspaper articles where he is featured or quoted.[26] Richter's regular appearances in earthquake news familiarized him among the public, and the readers of the *LA Times* appreciated the scientist's way of accurately sharing known information. Citizens associated Richter with information on earthquakes, but not all the news was welcomed.

"Please Stop Telling Us About Quakes"

Richter regularly used his scientific and public standing to educate and vocalize earthquake risks. In his personal papers collection, there are many letters from concerned citizens, admirers, and fans who took their time to write to the well-known scientist. Some questioned him of the possibility of prediction, while others offered to share their abilities to predict quakes with the scientist. While he did not respond to everyone, due to lack of interest or time as a working scientist and professor, he kept the letters as evidence that his work made a difference or as a reminder to continue his mission to spread the reality of the unpredictability of earthquakes.[27] Because of his duty as a scientist and spokesperson, every interview or letter was an opportunity to educate.

In 1963, Alhambra resident Eva Brown typed a letter to Richter to voice her fears about earthquakes and asked Richter to "please stop telling us about quakes," after reading an *LA Times* article, which featured Richter discussing the inevitability of a major quake. She shared her terrifying memories of the 1933 Long Beach quake, which occurred too close to Alhambra and explained that her family fled San

25 Richter interview with Scheid, 60.

26 Due to optical character recognition (OCR) errors, the exact number of mentions of Richter or the Richter scale have not yet been quantified.

27 Charles F. Richter Papers, General Correspondence series, boxes 24–34, Caltech Archives and Special Collections.

Francisco after the 1906 disaster to escape earthquakes. She understood that the earth's shaking cannot be predicted and, in kind, asked Richter to no longer discuss that California was due for a large quake since he cannot say for certain when.[28] While Brown was scared and upset over the possibility of earthquakes, she felt empowered to write because she was convinced that others agreed with her. "I bet I am not the only one who has written to you as I am doing," she added as a postscript. She also recognized Richter had authority over how earthquakes are discussed in the press. Her angry and emotional letter compelled Richter to respond.

Richter sent a respectful and eloquently typed response to Brown to leverage his professional position. The seismologist apologized for taking too much time to write back, responding over two weeks later, but not for his work discussing earthquake risks in the press. He respected her opinions, and he commended her for expressing her fearful feelings to him "so clearly and frankly."[29] Alhambra is very near Pasadena, which suggests he felt inclined to respond because she was a local member of the community, possibly around the same age, and a longtime California resident who recognized his authority. In his two-page letter response, Richter detailed why he "cannot stop telling [*sic*] about earthquakes." He asserted that scientists cannot stop talking to the press and when asked about quakes, it is a duty not to deny the existence of risk. He named the press responsible for sensationalizing predictions that caused fear among the public and he assured Brown that scientists were not "publicity hungry." He used the word "unscrupulous" to describe those who attempt to report predictions, which would erroneously be attributed to scientists. He also positioned himself as a peer of Brown to communicate that earthquakes are common in southern California, their shared environment. In the letter's final paragraph, Richter informed Brown that he would send a copy of his letter with her letter to "several offices where I think it may do some good." This last appeal to Brown demonstrated her importance and contribution to modernizing schools and replacing or retrofitting old and tall buildings.

Richter held power as an earthquake expert and people like

28 Eva Brown to Charles Richter, May 16, 1963, Charles F. Richter Papers, Caltech Archives and Special Collections, box 25, folder 2.
29 Charles Richter to Eva Brown, June 6, 1963, Richter Papers, box 25, folder 2.

Eva Brown are evidence that his work was powerful and shaped public opinion. The ability to enhance public understanding and to influence public life gave the scientist "power within science" and power in the public realm.[30] Brown wrote to Richter once more to thank him for his response. Her tone was opposite to her previous letter. Instead, she was gracious and empathetic to Richter's challenging work as "a top authority on [the] subject," especially dealing with misrepresentation in the press. She thanked him for explaining "all angles," but admitted she was still terrified at the thought of a major earthquake.[31] While Richter could not respond to all letters from concerned citizens, the time and effort given for his response to Brown demonstrates how serious he took his position as an earthquake authority. Whether he used Brown's exact letter to advocate for building modernization or not, the idea that the opinion of an ordinary citizen could assist in preventing disaster was an effective tool to get the public on his side.

"The Last Letter I Wrote Was to Rudolph Valentino"

Fan letters arrived for the celebrity seismologist at both Caltech and at his home. As Marcus describes, fans sent mail to admire, appreciate, and honor celebrities. Fans wrote and shared their thoughts and praise to foster proximity to the star. While unable to respond to everyone, Richter drafted responses to the fans he felt compelled to do so. This confirms that his dedication to speaking to the public on earthquakes was to inform and not for personal benefit. His position led to his popularity, and he received letters of all kinds, including from women and children. Also associated with notoriety status is mail from detractors, or nonfan mail. Nonfan mail is categorized in this article as an unfavorable written attempt to seek attention from the celebrity. Marcus argues that extreme fans want to make friends or lovers of the star or to the contrary threaten their safety.[32] The fan and nonfan mail represent his recognition, fame, and a reach beyond California to a global audience.

Though Richter was not typical Hollywood personage, such as a film actor or crooner, he garnered a fanbase of women. Evidence

30 Fahy, *New Celebrity Scientists*, 3.
31 Brown to Richter, June 13, 1963, Richter Papers, box 25, folder 2.
32 Marcus, *Drama of Celebrity*, 95-96.

of Richter's celebrity status appears in a letter from a self-described "devoted fan" who voiced her infatuation with the scientist. Marion Beardsley began the letter, "Darling Charles," and commented on his "corny jokes" told during his radio show appearance with host, comedian, and ventriloquist, Edgar Bergen.[33] The letter is undated, but most likely written in 1956, after the Bergen program featuring Richter broadcasted. She flirtatiously continued, "You have a very, very nice voice and even if I did not know you, I would probably have written this (though the last fan letter I wrote was to Rudolph Valentino at the age of twelve) to tell you that I am completely and eternally and irrevocably your devoted fan."[34]

It is not known how or if he responded to this letter or how he reacted after receiving this correspondence completely unrelated to his earthquake work, and so personal in nature. Beardsley lived in Pasadena, and while he reached a larger audience by appearing on the radio broadcast, this fan might *know* him, as she stated, through his appearances in the local press or as a Pasadena neighbor. The fan added she previously wrote one fan letter to the very famous silent movie star from the 1910s-1920s, Rudolph Valentino. After Valentino's untimely death in 1926, there were reports of "crazed female fans" who died by suicide after learning the news, which affirms the extreme fanaticism associated with the actor.[35] Naming Valentino was intended as a compliment which positioned Richter as more than a trusted scientist to Beardsley. Though merely speculation, Richter's fame came from his association to earthquake science, and Beardsley presumably learned something while fawning over the seismologist.

Richter also received mail that showed friendly gestures of general appreciation. A child of age nine from San Francisco named Francis L. sent a handwritten letter to the scientist asking to be friends. He began his note saying that he hated his own name because children bullied him for bearing the name Francis and added a drawn sad face. He added, "My teacher told me about you…She said you made an invention that predicts earthquakes."[36] Francis's teacher named Richter as a known "Francis" to help the bullied child relate and con-

33 *The New Edgar Bergen Hour*, episode 717, February 19, 1956, radio broadcast.
34 Marion D. Beardsley to Richter, n.d., Richter Papers, box 26, folder 2.
35 Marcus, *Drama of Celebrity*, 173.
36 Francis L. to Richter, March 20, 1983, Richter Papers, box 26, folder 1.

nect with someone famous. This letter also demonstrates that children learned about earthquakes as early as elementary school. While Francis did not quite understand the Richter scale or that prediction was not possible, he wanted to connect with someone famous and relatable. Richter could inspire the child towards science, and perhaps the teacher considered this by suggesting Richter as a possible pen pal. There is no evidence that Richter wrote back to Francis. Richter was eighty-two when he received this letter. Despite the uncertainty, this letter is further confirmation that Richter's scientific fame was far-reaching and lasted well into his last years of life.

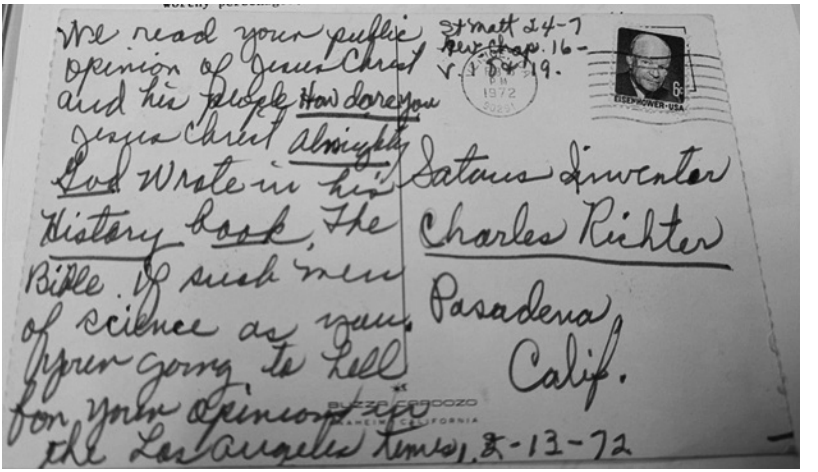


Figure 2: Postcard sent to "Satans Inventor, Charles Richter," February 13, 1972. (Caltech Archives and Special Collections).

With celebrity and fame, comes drama from various types of people. For attention, fans disguise themselves as detractors and are "trenchantly critic[al]."[37] Richter received a postcard (figure 2) addressed to "Satan's Inventor, Charles Richter." The postcard was not signed by an individual, but the word "we" is used several times to denote more than one individual shared the writing credit. The postcard contained numbered bible verses next to the postage stamp, denoting a Christian devotee. The postcard reads, "We read your public opinion of Jesus Christ and his people. How dare you. Jesus Christ Almighty God wrote in his history book the bible of such men of science as you. Your [*sic*] go-

37 Marcus, *Drama of Celebrity*, 94–96.

ing to hell for your opinion in the Los Angeles Times, 2-13-72."[38]

This threatening and critical postcard was written for shock value. The unnamed individual referenced an *LA Times* article and claimed Richter spoke disparagingly of Jesus Christ. Researchers have found no evidence of anti-Christian rhetoric by Richter. An extreme fan sent this postcard to attract the attention of the celebrity scientist.[39] Though this postcard is peculiar, it is further evidence to Richter's celebrity status. Fans are "content to limit their desires for proximity to their favorite stars to words."[40] Unlike Beardsley, this fan did not want to self-identify to the scientist.

The presumed article in question by the anonymous postcard sender was published February 13, 1972 by Digby Diehl. *Los Angeles Times* columnist and later celebrity biographer, Diehl interviewed Richter in a question-and-answer format, in the column fittingly known as "Q&A." Q&A was a weekly column that featured interviews with famous names including singing duo Sonny and Cher and author Ray Bradbury.[41] The interview was published approximately one year after the 1971 San Fernando earthquake.[42] At the time, the San Fernando quake, which measured 6.6 on the Richter scale, was the biggest disaster in the Los Angeles area. The interview was a reminiscence of that earthquake, and it returned Richter to the limelight. The interview's format gave Richter the opportunity to share his perspective in the first person, with little to no journalistic rewording or summarizing.

Diehl began the column introducing the interviewee, Richter, whom he described as "best known for devising the instrumental earthquake magnitude which bears his name." The interview was well researched regarding Richter's experience and knowledge, which highlighted Richter as the earthquake expert. Diehl declared that the name Richter is "synonymous with earthquakes," further demonstrating the name recognition associated with the seismologist and the famous ranking scale. Diehl asserted the "wry-wit[ted]" interview with Richter served as a reminder to the readers that earthquakes are regular occurrences throughout the globe. While such phrasing may

38 Anonymous postcard to Richter, February 13, 1972, Richter Papers, box 25, folder 2.
39 Marcus, *Drama of Celebrity*, 94–95.
40 Marcus, *Drama of Celebrity*, 119.
41 Neil Genzlinger, "Digby Diehl, Collaborator on Memoirs of the Famous, Dies at 76," *New York Times*, October 1, 2017.
42 Digby Diehl, "Q&A Charles F. Richter," *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1972.

cause alarm for individuals who fear the earth's shaking, it was a good reminder that readers of the *LA Times* should not forget the existing constant threat.

Diehl asked Richter questions that were similarly asked by members of the public, such as about the future "great earthquake," which Richter proclaimed with reason, would eventually strike the Los Angeles area. He also asked Richter about the credence of astrological or religious predictions of earthquakes, to which Richter responded in a slightly mocking manner to the question, "No, why should we? I think this is one of the things that distresses me about the level of popular intelligence in America. An ordinarily well-informed and educated person will give his attention to frightening statements and predictions which emanate from people who are obviously not entirely sane!" This statement may have offended believers of astrological or religious predictions, but if the public considered Richter the authority, they may have felt at ease at his knocking down nonscientific information so bluntly.

Diehl asked questions that the readers related to such as, was there value or necessity to purchasing earthquake insurance. Richter admitted he did not hold an insurance policy for his home because of high deductibles. He added that if a "great earthquake," capable of major destruction were to strike, compensation would be available from government sources due to disaster declaration. Richter's response was honest and logical, and readers likely appreciated his professional opinion. Adding that many homeowners do not carry earthquake insurance was a relatable response in Los Angeles. Insurance brokers may have been alarmed by such an open admission.

Diehl later published a book in 1974, *Supertalk*, which featured the Richter interview and placed the scientist alongside other celebrities and notable figures. The columnist interviewed many well-known or important individuals during his time at the *LA Times* in the "Q & A" column and included twenty-three of his favorites in the book, such as authors Henry Miller, Ted "Dr. Seuss" Geisel, singer Joan Baez, author television producer Norman Lear, and *Playboy*'s Hugh Hefner.[43] Biographer Hough mentioned Richter's inclusion in *Supertalk* as anecdotal to what she referred to as his "minor celebrity"

43 Digby Diehl, *Supertalk* (Doubleday, 1974), 137–45.

stint after serving as spokesperson for the San Fernando earthquake, and added Diehl included him alongside "more conventional media stars."[44] As a physicist turned seismologist, Richter was not the conventional star. His dedication as the public earthquake authority made him a well-known celebrity for more than half his life.

Conclusion

As a scientific spokesperson, Charles Richter helped shape how the public understood seismic events.The press once focused on the possibility of earthquake prediction but shifted their coverage to include the scientist, his scale, magnitude, and later preparedness. The Richter scale helped the public understand how scientists quantified earthquake magnitude and to anecdotally compare an earthquake's intensity in casual conversation and informal settings. The celebrity scientist used his position in science to speak on earthquakes, and his name became synonymous with them. During his last years of life, Richter worked as a consultant providing seismic evaluations on structures.[45]

In California, schools regularly conduct earthquake drills throughout the year, during which students learn to drop, cover, and hold on under their desks. In 2008, the state of California began *The Great California Shake Out,* a statewide drill designed to prepare the public for a large earthquake.[46] Richter's direct impact has slowly faded from the public since Richter's scale is no longer the standard for magnitude measurement. Scientists continue to refine the measurement, and they no longer refer to one scale. Current magnitude scales are an extension of Richter's original logarithmic scale.[47] While nerves are still riled, Californians know how to react when earthquakes strike and are relatively used to the occasional jolts.

This article is only begins to look at Richter's direct impact on helping Californians to accept the inevitability of the big one.

44 Hough*, Richter's Scale*, 252.
45 "Charles F. Richter Dies; Earthquake Scale Pioneer," *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1985.
46 Statewide California Earthquake Center (SCEC), "The Great California ShakeOut," 2025, https://www.shakeout.org/california/ (accessed May 11, 2025).
47 USGS, "Moment Magnitude, Richter Scale—What Are the Different Magnitude Scales, and Why Are There So Many?" https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/moment-magnitude-richter-scale-what-are-different-magnitude-scales-and-why-are-there-so-many (accessed May 10, 2025).

There are still many boxes of Richter's correspondence to explore and volumes of newspapers to read that will add more dimension to position Richter as a celebrity scientist. California's history is incomplete without Richter's contribution to making seismology a relatively well-known field of study. Charles Richter may not have the same enduring legacy as other celebrity scientists like Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, and Stephen Hawking. However, during his lifetime, Richter was the earthquake celebrity.