Historical Seismograms of the Manila Observatory

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The Manila Observatory was established in 1865, during the Spanish regime, originally for weather observations. It began as a private institution run by the Spanish Jesuits and supported by donations from merchants and businessmen. Twenty years later the King of Spain raised it to the status of Royal Meteorological Observatory, thus making it a government institution. When the Americans took over the rule from the Spaniards in 1899, they saw the need and advantage of keeping the unification of the Manila Observatory and the Philippine Weather Bureau. This was maintained until the Japanese invasion in 1941. For the next ten years the Manila Observatory was non-existent, while the Philippine Weather Bureau was revived around 1945, independently of the Jesuits. In 1952, the observatory was revived by the Jesuits, once more as a private institution, not in Manila (even though the name was retained) but in Baguio, 260 kilometers north of Manila. In 1962, the Manila Observatory moved from Baguio to Quezon City which is now part of Metropolitan Manila.

Oddly enough, the only extant historical seismograms of the observatory (i.e. originals and not just copies) are those of the period from 1952 to 1962 when the observatory was not in Manila but in Baguio. These seismograms of Baguio pre-date its establishment as a WWSSN station in 1962.

Other historical seismograms that were lost or destroyed during World War II included those that dated back to 1877 when regular uninterrupted seismographic recordings began (intermittent seismographic records started as early as 1866). These included records from the Vicentini, the Gray-Milne, and the Cecchi seismographs. Maso (1895) showed some pictures of these instruments. Also lost during the Second World War were the records from provincial stations such as those of the Cotabato station in Mindanao and the Ambuklao station in Luzon.

Besides the above-mentioned original historical seismograms of BAG, there are copies of seismograms of historical earthquakes contained in articles and earthquake reports in the Manila Observatory archives. Repetti (1946) gives a fairly complete catalogue (with accounts and descriptions) of earthquakes from 1589-1899. Another very probable source of information on historical earthquakes in the Philippines is the archives of Seville, Spain.

Table 1 summarizes all the records (copies of seismograms) of historical earthquakes that have been gathered so far from monographs, articles and reports found in the archives of the Manila Observatory. Table 2 contains descriptions of seismographs whose records are found in Table 1.