

Twister

A remembrance

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Tornado photo courtesy of Gary Lane of Memory Lane Studios



Cars, instead of people, sat in the front rows of Van Wert Cinemas No. 1 theater after a tornado ripped into the building on November 10, 2002.

Tornado taught tough lessons

By DAVE MOSIER

Independent Editor

Sunday, November 10, 2002, was not your typical November day. It started out sunny, with temperatures rising into the 70s by midday – the kind of day in northwest Ohio that often ends violently, as far as weather is concerned. That's what happened then as the weather took a turn for the worse, as warm and cold air



A tattered flag waves proudly over a Vision Park devastated by the storm.

that weather systems coming into the area could spawn severe weather – maybe even a tornado outbreak.

"They first thought that any tornadoes would occur south of the Ohio River," McCoy said, "with only thunderstorm watches for this area."

That changed later on Sunday, and McCoy said he began to get concerned when he got a warning



Debris from the storm came to rest in this tree.

systems collided, producing a mile-wide F-4 tornado that killed two people, injured 19 and did millions of dollars in damage in the county.

Van Wert County Emergency Management Director Rick McCoy was well aware of the possibility of a dangerous storm, since he had received a warning two days earlier from the National Weather Service



This house was severely damaged by the F-4 tornado.

later that systems with the potential of forming tornadoes were spotted in northeastern Indiana.

"When I realized that Adams County (Indiana) was in trouble, I sent out spotters," McCoy said, noting that Willshire firefighters were the first to sight the tornado as it came across the state line from the Monroe, Ind., area.

In fact, the southwest Van Wert County village was lucky not to become the storm's first Ohio statistic, McCoy said. "The storm lifted before it got to the village," the EMA director said, but later touched down again near Wren-Landeck Road. And though Willshire was spared, the crossroads community of Roselm on the northeast edge of the county was nearly wiped off the map by the powerful storm.

The size and makeup of the tornado also had those who saw it thinking it was several separate tornadoes, McCoy added, resulting in some confusion as to whether there was one or a number of tornadoes in the county.

"Because there can be multiple vortices (funnels) in a large tornado, people thought there was more than one tornado," he said. One was plenty that day, as far as Van Wert County was concerned.

Lots of people were out that day enjoying the nice weather. Rehearsals were underway for Handel's *Messiah* at First United Methodist Church and a number of people decided to take in a movie at the Van Wert Cinemas (*The Santa Clause 2* had opened earlier that week and had drawn a nice crowd, including a large number of children).

The storm was still several miles away from the city then, but was beginning to cause significant damage in rural areas. Residents along Zook Road were the first to bear the brunt of the storm, with several houses destroyed and one area resident, Alfred Germann, killed.

The tornado then hit the Liberty-Union Road area hard, doing heavy damage in that area, and carrying off Mary Germann's home, leaving just the foundation and her debris-filled basement.

It was poised to hit Van Wert near Vancrest Health Care Center when it jogged to the north, sealing the fate of young Nick Mollenkopf. The 18-year-old was driving west on Lincoln Highway when the storm smashed his vehicle and fatally injured him in the process.

But McCoy had also been busy during this time, using the 26-minute notice he received from the National Weather Service to set off tornado sirens and otherwise do his best to get the warning out that bad weather was on its way.

The NOAA radio at the cinemas was blaring out the news and assistant manager Scott Shaffer heeded the warning, working to get the 50 or so people still in the theater to a place of safety. It didn't come any too soon.

With patrons and staff hunkered down near the restrooms in the center of the five-screen theater, the tornado slammed into the building, heavily damaging screens 1 and 2 and doing less severe damage to the rest of the facility.

The storm then took out Straightline Body & Paint on John

Brown Road and then smashed the Van Wert County Engineering Department's year-old maintenance building and headed for Vision Industrial Park.

Hardest hit in Vision Park was KAM Manufacturing, whose building was flattened by the storm. However, several other companies, including Dedicated Fleet Logistics, National Door & Trim, Teem Wholesale, and Elmco Engineering, were also heavily damaged. Braun Industries had serious roof damage, but was up and running hours after the storm hit.

When the tornado hit, the owners of two of the affected businesses, Jim and Joyce Boyd, owners of Van Wert Cinemas, and Tom and Kelly Anderson, owners of Straightline, were thinking about food. The Boyds were at Jim's mother's residence on Westchester Court while the Andersons were at home. Both had their dinner plans changed by the storm. Both couples were in the dark about what had happened to their businesses for some time. The Andersons were literally in the dark, since their power and telephone service were both out. The Boyds, who had started to dinner, were driven back to Jim's mom's house by the heavy rain that followed the tornado.

Both couples eventually found out their businesses had been nearly destroyed.

"That wasn't a very pleasant evening," Kelly Anderson said, adding that she and her husband pretty much lost their appetites after seeing their stricken business.

The Boyds were pleased no one was hurt at the theater, but that was



Volunteers spread out to find debris scattered over the county by the F-4 tornado that devastated portions of the county the the northwest side of Van Wert. Jan Dunlap/Van Wert independent

Storm images



Above, a semi trailer belonging to local contractor Alexander & Bebout was thrown on top of the roof of the Cooper Farms Cooked Meats plant north of Van Wert. Bottom left -- Steel girders stick up from the county engineer's facility on Grill Road. Bottom right -- This house in Roselm was heavily damaged by the November 2002 tornado. Photos by Jan Dunlap and Dave Mosier for the [Van Wert independent](#)



about the only good news of the day. "My whole world turned upside down in the space of 30 seconds," Jim Boyd said.

The two businesses eventually came back, but couldn't have been more different in the way they did it. Fortunately for the Andersons, they had adequate insurance coverage to rebuild. That was crucial, because no one was standing in line to give them money. "If we hadn't had insurance coverage we wouldn't have been able to rebuild," Kelly Anderson said, adding that, unlike some other businesses, Straightline was unable to qualify for a state grant to rebuild. "I feel the state dropped the ball there," she said.

Insurance agent Randy Myers of Leland Smith Insurance came out personally to walk the Andersons through the claims process and contractor Wortman Brothers quickly ordered a new building for them "on our word," Kelly Anderson said. "We had a lot of people stepping up and helping us."

With plenty of customer support as well – half of customers scheduled to bring vehicles in said they'd wait until Straightline was operational again – the company was up and running in four months and hasn't looked back since.

Contrast that to the Boyds' story. Jim Boyd admits he didn't have good insurance coverage and that increased the time the cinemas needed to come back from their catastrophic loss. The lack of adequate insurance forced the couple into a long, drawn-out process to receive a Small Business Administration loan. In the meantime, the damage to the cinemas was increasing since the Boyds couldn't afford to secure the building from exposure to inclement weather.

With assistance from contractor Alexander & Bebout, though, the cinemas had two of the smaller screens up and running two years almost to the day after the tornado hit – November 12, 2004 – and the third small theater up a week later. It took about three more months to get screen 2 – one of the original big screens – back up and running, and Boyd said a downturn in the theater industry postponed the final screen's



This debris-strewn basement is all that remains of rural Van Wert resident Mary Germann's home after an F-4 tornado went through the county on November 10, 2002. Dave Mosier/*Van Wert independent*

reopening until November of 2005. "We could have opened No. 1 just after No. 2, but the product just wasn't there," he said.

Today, both businesses are fully operational, as are most of the other companies whose buildings were damaged in the storm. But for one business, Cooper Farms Cooked Meats, the clouds that accompanied the 2002 tornado had a big silver lining. "One of the worst things that could happen turned out to be one of the best things for Cooper," said accounting manager Terry Johnson. Johnson said the disaster allowed Cooper to demolish its less-than-adequate structure and build a new state-of-the-art processing plant. The credit, he said goes to company owners Jim, Gary and Dianne Cooper.

"The owners were there from Day 1, guiding the process and giving us leadership," Johnson noted. In eight months, with the help of their contractors, Cooper Farms had a processing plant that is the envy of its competitors. "It's amazing what it's done for us," Johnson said of the new facility.

For County Engineer Kyle Wendel, there was the double task of rebuilding facilities while also

cleaning up the huge mess left behind by the tornado. First, though, he just had to get over the shock of the destruction the storm left behind. "When I saw it, I just couldn't believe it," Wendel said. "My word, it was just unbelievable."

Fortunately for Wendel, the Van Wert ODOT garage had just moved to its new facility on Van Wert-Decatur Road and there old garage was sitting empty on Sibley Street.

Wendel moved his usable equipment to the facility and immediately began the monumental task of clearing huge amounts of debris from country roads. First, though, power crews had to come through and repair downed power lines. "The brush was intertwined with power lines and we didn't know what was live and wasn't," the county engineer said.

Wendel had to laugh at himself for being concerned about one downed stop sign while driving in shortly after the storm occurred. "That was the tip of the iceberg," he said, noting that debris was "piled high as Mount Everest" on some county roadways. Even after the roads were cleared, it wasn't until the summer of 2003 that the greatest part of the storm debris was cleared away.

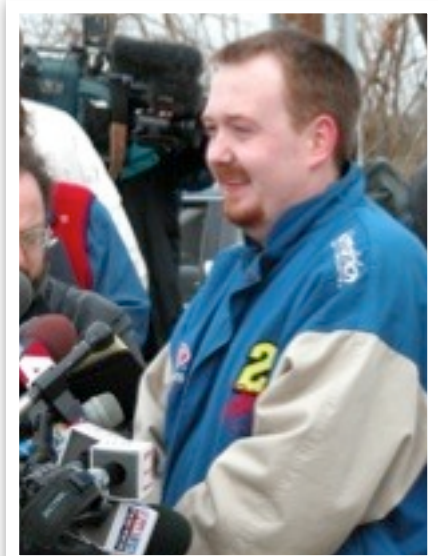


Photo captions: Top left -- Workmen clear debris and repair utilities in Vision Park; top right -- Van Wert Cinemas assistant manager Scott Shaffer speaks to reporters in the days following the tornado; middle left -- A child's doll is part of the debris outside a residence on Grill Road; middle center -- Residents of Starr Commonwealth triumphantly hold up a dirty American flag found among the debris; middle right -- A downed cable tower lies where it fell; bottom -- the Van Wert County Engineering Department's maintenance facility lies in ruins, along with several damaged pieces of heavy equipment. Photos by Jan Dunlap and Dave Mosier for the [Van Wert independent](#)

Meanwhile, local businesses and individuals learned important lessons from the storm. McCoy said he feels one of the most important is learning the value of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) radios he has worked to place in local businesses, schools and government offices. The radios are particularly effective, McCoy said, when storms hit at night, such as the one recently

in Lake City, Fla. Another important lesson, he noted, is that tornadoes don't just come in the spring anymore. The prevalence of fall tornadoes, McCoy said, has something to do with the changes in climate patterns that have occurred over the past decade, but he admitted no one yet knows exactly how those changes have affected tornadoes and other storm systems.

But with Van Wert County currently having the highest prevalence of tornadoes of all Ohio counties, McCoy said it's important to keep on top of warnings and watches each spring and fall. "We just can't look at the spring season for tornadoes anymore," the county EMA director said. "We really need to be watching from Labor Day to Thanksgiving as well."



Above -- The ruins of National Door & Trim and Dedicated Fleet Logistics in Vision Park as seen from the air. Below -- The ticket booth is the only thing left of Ridgeway Drive-In. Theater owners Jim and Joyce Boyd also lost their house, which was beside the theaters. Jan Dunlap/[Van Wert independent](#)





Above -- Clean-up efforts continue in the Grill Road area while AEP linemen work to repair the myriad lines downed in the storm. Below -- Van Wert County EMA Director Rick McCoy speaks during a news conference held after the storm while a number of state officials, including Lt. Gov. Maureen O'Connor (in red vest), Ohio EMA Director Dale Strickler and then-state representative Jim Hoops. Photos by Jan Dunlap and Dave Mosier for the [Van Wert independent](#)

