

The blessings of devastation

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MULHALL - For residents, mention of May 3, 1999 brings back memories of a day many of them lost everything to Mother Nature's fury.



Following the devastation of twin funnels that roared through the quiet community, an indomitable spirit to survive rose from the rubble.

Today, the little town is scarred but still kicking and there's not much evidence left of that fateful day. That day, two tornadoes literally rocked Mulhall's foundation, destroying homes and businesses, throwing trees and power lines to the ground and toppling a 100-foot tower that was the town's sole water source.

According to the National Weather Service, the first tornado, which destroyed most of the town, was rated an F4 on the Fujita Scale of Tornado Intensity. The scale rates tornadoes on estimated wind speeds with an F0 being the smallest with winds less than 72 mph and the largest an F5 with winds between 261 and 318 mph. The F4 carries winds between 207 and 260 mph. Approximately 90 minutes later, another twister followed a parallel path. The second tornado was rated an F3 with winds ranging between 158 and 206 mph.

After a lot of hard work, sweat and tears and the generosity of many organizations and people from neighboring towns, Mulhall rebuilt. Homes and churches were repaired or reconstructed, a new elementary school was built to replace the one that had been demolished and a new water system was installed.

It's so expensive to change out a water system," said John Pangburn, who was Mulhall's mayor during the tornado and the time that followed. "We not only got the new water tower, we also got to change out everything else from the tank all the way to each customer's house, including new meters.

"In many small towns, their water systems degrade and get worse and worse over the years, because they can't afford to change out the system. Our old water tower was destroyed by the tornadoes and we were able to get a whole new water system. This is something that would have taken the town years, if ever, to accomplish. It's unbelievable the blessings that can be found in the damage caused that day, but this a good example.

"Besides the new water system, we were also blessed with a nice new school, fire department and community building. All of this has helped us come a long way as far as upgrading the town."

Mulhall is working on streets and ditches, the final casualty of the tornadoes.

"Most of our goals have been realized," Pangburn said. "All we have left right now are the roads and ditches. We have some major chug holes that we're fixing, which mostly resulted from all those big trucks coming in and out while we were repairing and rebuilding. Plus, the streets will be sealed over and they will eventually be better than they were before the tornado."

Now that the town is almost recovered from its natural disaster problems, it seems a new

problem is rearing its head.

"I say this as a private citizen, since I am no longer mayor and haven't been since 2001 when Jack McAnally took over, but Mulhall doesn't have enough revenue coming in to pay its bills," Pangburn said. "After all that hard work to put it back together again, the town will still be on its way out if they don't fix that."

"There are very few businesses in town to bring in any tax revenue. Originally, we had a decent little store but it was destroyed during the tornado and it was one of the few things that was not rebuilt. Someone has now started a new store, but it's not yet up to par and may not be for several years. The only other thing we have is the co-op."

Besides the potential money problems, Pangburn feels residents should pull together more.

"I would like to see the citizens pull together and not take what they've got for granted," he said. "We were blessed with all the help we received. Our town has new buildings that we may have never been able to get had it not been for the tornadoes, so there was some good that came from that horrible event. I think the citizens really need to appreciate this gift. If they all work together they can achieve great things for the better of everyone in the community."

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