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'26 tornado devastated downtown Rock Hill

A very destructive tornado struck downtown Rock Hill the afternoon of Nov. 26, 1926. It was the day after Thanksgiving, rather late in the season for such a violent storm.

Louise Pettus



NEARBY HISTORY

Johnston, Saluda and Moore streets.

Everything not nailed down was flying in every direction. Trees toppled. Electric and telephone wires were whipped loose and wrapped around flying limbs and parts of roofs. Every automobile parked on downtown streets was severely damaged. Some were moved up onto the sidewalks; others were smashed into each other. Store windows were smashed.

The roof of Lyle Hospital was lifted off, and the whole building flooded. The First Presbyterian Church tower was lifted off and set down on the church lawn.

Every house on Quantz Street in the Aragon Mill village was damaged. The Aragon Mill baseball stands were scattered to the winds. The mill itself lost 35 bales of cotton in a fire started by the storm.

The Industrial Mill was dam-

aged even more. The twister took off the main roof and tore apart the boiler room. Damage was estimated at \$100,000. The smokestack of the city water and light plant toppled onto the roof of the office building. Practically every house and office lost its chimneys, if nothing else.

The south side of the Episcopal rectory was torn off, and part of the roof went with it. The porch of St. John's Methodist Church was lost to the wind.

The Baptist church skylight was broken, and the A.R.P. church lost a memorial window. Bethel Church was completely destroyed.

A just-released penitentiary inmate became a hero by rescuing two small children from the middle of a street.

Joe Crockett, a Southern Railroad employee, was killed when the storm picked up two railroad cars and slammed them against an embankment.

The next day, a swarm of visitors descended on Rock Hill to view the damage. One of the gawking sightseers ran over a 5-year-old boy sitting on a curb. The boy's foot had to be amputated.

With only one life lost, Rock Hill was luckier than many towns. The great storm, which had started in the Ozarks and whipped across five states, claimed 74 lives and injured 200. On each side of the three-block-wide swath, there was little damage. Winthrop College and houses on Oakland Avenue were not touched. Fort Mill reported high winds but no damage. York had neither wind nor rain.

About the time downtown Rock Hill was repaired, another disaster struck. This time it was fire.

On Jan. 31, 1927, four buildings were destroyed, including two drugstores: J.L. Phillips Drug and Rock Hill Drug. Drs. Blackmon, Strait, Massey, Hay, Walker and Stevens all lost their offices, which were on the second floor over the two drugstores.

The London Building was lost. The fire was believed to have started in the Manhattan Cafe. The Friedham Building adjacent to the cafe had a fire wall that saved it. The wall was said to have been red hot.

On March 5, 1927, another fire hit Main Street. This time the A&P store and Western Union were considerably damaged.

The Elks Club and Morris Jewelry were completely burned. It was believed that the whole block would have burned if it had not been spotted by Anna Poe, who was serving a late supper at the Rose-Ann Tea Room to the east of the Denishawn Dancers, who had performed earlier at Winthrop.

On April 25 another fire burned City Wholesale Co. Oil-soaked waste was found there and at R.T. Fewell's lumber yard. Fire Chief T.O. Flowers was convinced that Rock Hill had a "firebug." All fires had occurred on a Friday night. The last fire was on May 12.

The arsonist, if there was one, was never caught.

Louise Pettus is a retired history professor from Winthrop University. Her column appears Saturdays. The preceding column originally appeared Dec. 5, 1986.