

Excerpt from:

The Centennial History of Lubbock: Hub City of the Plains

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Pages 125-129

The modern era began with the tornado in 1970. The huge storm caught Lubbock and its citizens by surprise. The day, May 11, had been warm and humid, and there was little indication of a major weather event. But, early that Monday evening, winds picked up, clouds moved in, and a bit of rain fell. About dusk, some accounts note, a twister struck near Sixty-sixth Street and University Avenue, leaving, before it dissipated, plenty of property damage. There may have been one or two other twisters involved. But, then, later, about 9:40 p.m., most reports suggest, a powerful, swirling tempest with very high winds, hail, and heavy rainfall dropped out of the dark, night sky near Nineteenth Street and University Avenue.

This giant tornado cut a wide swath. As it roared and spun and circled its way through the city with winds that may have reached well over two hundred miles per hour, it moved toward and into the down-town area. Then, suddenly, it turned to the north to smash with massive destructiveness through the neighborhood north of Tenth Street and the Guadalupe community beyond Fourth Street. If in fact it was a single twister, it continued toward the north along the Amarillo highway, and before dissipating about ten o'clock, it had leveled homes in the Country Club addition and shattered businesses along north Highway 87.

Personal injuries and loss of life were high. Twenty-six people died in the tornado, or tornadoes, and nearly eighteen hundred people—255 of them seriously—suffered wounds of various kinds. The hospitals filled with scores of injured folks.

Damage to buildings, apartment houses, homes, and storage facilities was widespread. Such destruction extended, for instance, along Fourth Street from Indiana Avenue eastward nearly to Mackenzie Park. Downtown, such structures as the stately Great Plains Life tower, the old Pioneer Hotel, and the beautiful First National Bank-Pioneer Gas Building sustained heavy physical losses. Just west of them, along both sides of Broadway east of Avenue O, the tornado leveled many homes. The storm also buckled the tall light standards at Jones Stadium on the Tech campus.

Destruction was heavy. The storm damaged some ten thousand homes, completely destroying eleven hundred of them, many in the Guadalupe neighborhood—predominately Mexican American citizens—north of Fourth Street. In an instant, the tornado left eighteen hundred people homeless. Ten thousand automobiles sustained damage, and perhaps five hundred businesses suffered wreckage, with some, such as the Fields & Company showroom on Fourth Street, obliterated. Some churches, such as First Cumberland Presbyterian Church, were leveled. Property loss, if Mike Cox is correct,

totaled \$840 million, making the F5-category storm one of the costliest tornadoes in American history.

The tornado was devastatingly disruptive. Lives were lost, homes destroyed, businesses closed, and jobs gone. Household goods and personal possessions disappeared. The storm scattered such small pets as cats, dogs, and birds. It cut utilities, including water supplies, and it created havoc with traffic flow and communication systems—twenty-five thousand telephones lost service. It toppled power lines and spread debris across streets, including main thoroughfares. Some underpasses filled with water, blocking access to portions of the city.

Through it all, however, Lubbock's citizens did not panic. Even as ambulances carried away injured and wounded people, Mayor James H. Granberry, in office only three weeks, announced a state of emergency and about 10:00 p.m. called upon the people of Lubbock to provide immediate assistance for those in need of relief. Many answered his call, and residents of the barrio heroically rescued entrapped persons and assisted their neighbors through the long night.

Moreover, a disaster plan, first developed in 1960 and revised regularly, was in place. William A. Payne, who headed the Emergency Operations Plan, as it was called, set up a control center in the basement of City Hall, and it became the focal point of relief operations. "Within two hours after the storm," writes James C. Burke, "adequate resources for coping with the disaster were at the control of [emergency operations] staff" Relief centers opened; KFYO, the emergency radio station, broadcasted instructions; and police and National Guard troops patrolled the hardest hit areas. Miraculously, KFYO was also able to maintain an open phone line to the rest of the state and helped to keep the nation informed of the tragedy.

Nonetheless, shortly after daylight on May 12, local officials, including Mayor Granberry and City Manager Bill Blackwell, realized that the destruction and devastation were huge. The National Guard was immediately called out to help prevent looting, but more than local help was needed to deal with the monumental calamity. Accordingly, after President of the United States Richard M. Nixon on May 13 declared Lubbock a disaster area, city leaders began applying for and receiving federal relief funds for projects of all kinds, and in August city voters passed a \$13.6 million Disaster Recovery Bond Package. The bond money in turn attracted, writes Roger Schaefer, "nearly \$37 million in state and federal funds . . . to aid [the city] in its reconstruction."

Changes followed. Citizens, mainly Mexican Americans, whose homes in the Guadalupe area had been destroyed, dispersed to other sections of the city, especially to the Jackson, Arnett Benson, and Mackenzie Terrace neighborhoods. A large number of empty homes existed in the latter subdivision, for in the mid-1960s, Anglo citizens in a classic case of "white flight" had abandoned the northeast Lubbock community. They left after it became apparent that the high school - Estacado, which opened in 1967 - under construction nearby would enroll a large number of African American students.

The old neighborhood north of Tenth and south of Fourth Street became an urban renewal project. Using bond package funds and federal monies, city leaders turned the former residential area into an entertainment, convention, and business center. Large motels went up along Avenue O, for example, and the city built the huge Memorial Civic Center Complex with its large parking lots and its grassy areas that could be used in a number of ways.

There were other changes. Disaster Recovery Bond monies also funded a new central library (the George and Helen Mahon Library) located north of downtown, a series of parks and lakes in Yellowhouse Canyon through the city, and several smaller projects. The federal government's Small Business Administration provided large sums of money for rebuilding damaged firms, and insurance payments brought millions of dollars to the city's reconstruction efforts. In addition, Texas Tech University, led by retired professor of history William Curry Holden, used debris from the destroyed homes and businesses near downtown to build a series of berms at its outdoor museum—what became the National Ranching Heritage Center.

And, as Roger Schaefer has noted, local political leaders changed their attitudes about federal aid for the city." In the three years prior to the tornado," Schaefer writes, "Lubbock had participated in only five federal programs totaling a meager \$2.5 million." Consequently, the "massive infusion of federal money into" the local economy "represented a...distinct break with the past." In addition to the emergency disaster relief funds, which were large indeed, Lubbock between 1972 and 1984 "received between 20 and 25 million dollars in federal revenue sharing funds."

Clearly, the 1970 tornado represents a turning point in Lubbock history. The influx of federal and state money, the revitalization of the area just north of downtown, and the dispersal of minority citizens through the city represent important and permanent transformations. Citywide reconstruction activities and a new community spirit of cooperation, however temporary the latter may have been, also reflected the shift.