

1977 FLOODING - WILLIAMSON DAILY NEWS ARTICLE - April 2014

(Copied from a Facebook post)

(Editor's note: This article by former Williamson Daily News Editor Wally Warden was originally published in the May 18, 1977 edition of the paper.)

WILLIAMSON - The rains began Saturday night, but had diminished by daylight Sunday. Then, late on Sunday (April 3), it resumed again, much heavier. It rained all night and on Monday, April 4, it continued to rain, heavily.

And it rained. And rained. And rained.

It rained until the Tug River roared down the streets of Williamson at an unheard of 42.3 feet. It rained until the Levisa Fork poured down Second Avenue and virtually inundated Cline Street in Pikeville, Ky.

It rained until Pond Creek, Big Creek, Turkey Creek, Mate Creek, Road Fork, Wolf Creek and Pigeon Creek all backed up, gushed over their banks and wrought havoc throughout the area. When the rains finally stopped, area residents, looking at ravaged homes and businesses, began searching for a reason for the severe flooding. Surface mining, clear cutting, bad forest fires earlier, lack of foliage in the mountains - were any of these the reason for the disaster?

Phil Zinn, regional hydrologist for the National Weather Service in Charleston, says the reason behind the flooding is not that complicated.

"Even under the best conditions, with this much rainfall, there would have been severe flooding," Zinn told the Daily News.

Zinn pointed out that the 941-square-mile basin drained by the Tug River upstream from Williamson received the heaviest rainfall in recent memory in early April. The Williamson area received roughly 4 1/2 inches between late April 3 and early April 5, but upstream the total was up to three times that much.

The area outside of War and Welch in McDowell County was covered with a 13-inch rainfall, while an amazing 15 1/2 inches fell, mostly in a 24-hour period, in the mountains along the McDowell County, **W.Va.**, and Buchanan County, Va., boundary.

The exact measurements were based on the amount of of water caught by containers left outside during the rain.

"Very simply, it was a case of too much water, too quickly," Zinn said.

Noting the strip mining throughout much of Southern West Virginia, Zinn said, “I have no way of knowing what percentage of the basin is stripped. I don’t think anyone knows exactly.”

“It’s impossible to say how much of a factor surface mining was. Yes, it could have been a factor in an area denuded of vegetation.”

“But regardless, he stressed, “with this much water so quickly, there would have been major flooding. There would have been severe flooding on any river in the state, even under the best conditions.”

