

Memories of great flood remain 45 years later

• By NANCY PEYTON npeyton@hdmediallc.com

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This photo from the Kentucky side of the Tug River shows the Federal Building in Williamson, which houses the U.S. Post Office on 2nd Avenue, under deep flood waters.

HD Media file photo

WILLIAMSON — The Great Flood of 1977 proved to be one of the most devastating in Williamson's history, as heavy rains caused the Tug Fork River to rise to historic

https://www.williamsondailynews.com/news/memories-of-great-flood-remain-45-years-later/article_682a6578-5ad4-5de8-9133-81f8ecdfc92c.html

levels and destroy many homes and business that were under 30 to 50 feet of water in some parts of the city.

Brad Davis, who is from Williamson, said he was just 5 years old when the flood waters inundated the city over April 2-5, 1977, but he remembers it vividly.

"I was very young when that happened," Davis said. "I do still remember a great deal of it simply I think because everyone's world got turned upside down in that."

No one was killed locally in the flood, but it left behind devastation and a lasting impact on the community, as well as other West Virginia towns along the Tug Fork including Welch, Fort Gay, Matewan, Tacker and Lobata. Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia were also hit with flooding and reported 22 deaths, according to a report by the U.S. Geological Survey and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"I remember when the water did recede, just the devastation that was left," Davis said. "Just the landscape of mud everywhere. Mud covered everything. I remember a lot of the flooded-out houses that had to be condemned. They came around and sprayed red X's on homes that were condemned. That stands out in my memory."

According to historic records, the total damages to the city of Williamson in 1977 exceeded \$200 million.

Davis said his family's home was one of the few that was left untouched by the flood waters, and he remembers people packing in for shelter.

"We had a lot of folks, probably right around 20 folks, who stayed with us during and after the flood," Davis said. "There were strangers, folks that we just did not know, who drove up and parked in front of our house just to get away from the flood zone, and my mom invited them into the house to stay with us. I remember all of the people being in our house."

The community was again hit by flooding just seven years later in 1984. While it was not as severe as the great flood, it still was daunting for a community still working to recover.

"There were some that left," Davis said. "I think after '77, a lot of folks chose to stay and try to rebuild. But the '84 flood, I think, caused a lot of people to give up and stop after that. I think '77 really was devastating; '84 was not nearly as devastating of a flood, but I do think it devastated a lot of hopes for people."

Years later, the Army Corp of Engineers worked with homeowners to raise houses on tall block foundations so that they would be safer should the Tug Fork River flood the city once again. The Corp of Engineers also worked to build a flood wall, which was completed in 1991.

Remnants of the flood can still be seen in photographs hung inside most local businesses today and the markings on some buildings in town.

HD Media reporter Nancy Peyton primarily covers news in Mingo County.