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Remembering the devastating 1977 Tug River flood



This photo shows the Kermit Town Hall as floodwaters rose during the 1977 flood. (Photo/Kermit Library)

If you lived through it, you will never forget

BY KYLE LOVERN

The devastating and horrendous Tug Fork River flood of 1977 forever changed the Tug Valley area. The natural disaster overwhelmed residents who lived along the watershed in southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, including Mingo, Pike and Martin counties.

Torrential rains fell from April 2-5 that spring, causing the streams to rise and create historic flooding.

Record floods levels occurred on the Tug and Levisa Forks of the Big Sandy River.

When the totals came in for the damage caused by the flood, it totaled more than \$200 million. (This would be much higher by today's economy and standards). More than 2,000 people were left homeless. Following the harsh winter of 1976, the destruction of the flood of 1977 would wipe out dozens of businesses and homes across the region.

Houses were washed off their foundations and sent floating down the river. Bridges were wiped out, and cars were floated away or covered with inches of thick brown and black mud.

Communities like Matewan, Williamson, Nolan, Kermit, Warfield and Lovely were changed forever.

Anyone that lived through the flood has stories they could share. If there was a building along the river it was inundated by the muddy water.

Infrastructure was destroyed and many went without electricity, natural gas, telephone service and clean drinking water for days.

The National Guard was activated and even the U.S. Army was sent in to help with recovery and to hand out supplies.

I can remember being at the Williamson Fieldhouse watching a youth league basketball tournament when I heard the road on US 52 at Goodman, just north of Williamson, was already blocked. The Tug River was rising and coming up quickly. A friend and I left and went through East Williamson and still had to go through some water at the mouth of Peter Street. I knew we could go through Chattaroy and bypass the road at Goodman. (This was long before US 119 was built and completed).



Kermit Volunteer Fire Department during the '77 flood. The bridge to Martin County can be seen in the back. (Photo/Kermit Library)

I was living at Nolan at the time and wanted to get home. I knew it would be a bad flood, but never dreamed it would get as bad as it did.

After we got a couple of miles past East Williamson, my car stalled out. I had gotten water in the distributor cap of the old Chevy Nova I was driving then. I was only 20 years old and still immature.

Luckily the late Wallace Baisden, a deputy sheriff, drove up and helped us get it started back. He had a flashlight and a dry rag and I think I had a screwdriver.

The rain kept coming down. I remember barely getting by the mouth of Chattaroy, where the water would soon come up to block the road there and at Dans Branch along US 52 before getting home to Nolan.

My dad was really glad to see me and we even talked about going fishing in a couple of days up at Laurel Lake. Needless to say we had no inkling of how bad it was going to get. We had seen other floods before and things were back to normal in a week or so.

I went on to bed and when my dad awakened me the next morning and told me to look out of our picture window over toward the main street of Nolan by the

river, I saw the water rushing down the street and it was still coming up. It had never been that high before!



Downtown Kermit was inundated with muddy water from the Tug River flood in April 1977. (Photo/Kermit Library)

I ventured across the railroad tracks and helped some people escape the rising water. One picture that has forever been branded into my mind is carrying out two little toddlers, one under each arm while wading in water. I took them to safety and where it was dry at my house.

But the water kept coming up and eventually came across the railroad tracks, US 52 and to the mouth of the hollow where I lived. The muddy water got into our basement, but luckily the house was built up on sandstone and it did not get into our home. We were considered lucky because so many lost everything, including their houses and belongings. I did have to move the car or it would have gotten covered where we parked it on our dirt driveway.

Entire wood-frame houses floated off their foundations, hit the Nolan Toll Bridge and splintered. What was left of them hit the railroad bridge a couple of 100 yards away. The banks were littered with boards and other debris that eventually had to be cleaned up by construction crews.

Our entire valley was devastated and nearly wiped out. It would take weeks, months and really years to get back to some normalcy.

The aftermath was like something you would see in a movie. It was indeed a nightmare. The area was blessed that no one lost their life. We're used to floods in the area but nothing quite like this one. Those who didn't get out before the water rose were rescued by boats or people wading into the cold water, dodging debris, to get them to safety.

The Appalachian resiliency and camaraderie shone through with neighbors helping neighbors. Eventually the government came in with assistance. The infrastructure was built back. The homes were bulldozed over and hauled away. Many were replaced by trailers. For weeks, people stayed in temporary campers and HUD mobile home parks built on any available flat land.

The April 5, 1977, Tug River flood will never be forgotten. We have had more floods since then but not as bad as that disaster. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said it was a "100 Year Flood" and statistically only would happen in a century.

Then 1984 came along and we had another flood. Not quite at a depth of 1977, but it was still terrible.

Eventually some flood protection came to the valley. Houses were raised out of the flood plain, some were bought out and torn down, and flood walls were built at Williamson, South Williamson and Matewan.

Hopefully we will never see another flood like we did in the spring of 1977. It would be horrible for our region to go through such devastation like that again.

We have the bad memories and hopefully that is all we will have to endure. The flood left both emotional and physical scars. It was a terrible natural disaster that if you lived through, you will never forget it.

(Kyle Lovern is a longtime journalist in the Tug Valley. He is now a retired freelance writer and columnist for the Mountain Citizen.)