

REMEMBERING MIDWAY TRAILER COURT

THE INITIAL BLOW

■ Residents recall that horrible day; one survivor taken to local morgue

By JULIE CROTHERS
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GOSHEN — Richard Gresso was as good as dead. His attempt to outrun the lethal tornado barreling toward him had failed and he was left clinging to a tree. “The tree came out of the ground, roots and all, and I slid off of it and turned around and slid into a stop sign that was embedded into the asphalt,” Gresso said. “And that’s the last thing I



remember.” He later learned two police officers had picked him up near the intersection of Ind. 15 and U.S. 20 after finding his motorcycle running nearby and had thrown his body in the trunk of a police car.

“They took me out to the morgue out at Goshen hospital and stuff and had me, I guess, laying in the hallways someplace,” Gresso said. “They just assumed I was dead.”

Today, 50 years after twin tornadoes destroyed his home and left him to die, Gresso’s memories of April 11, 1965 are as vivid as ever.

Midway Trailer Court, then located on U.S. 33 between Goshen and Dunlap, was among the areas that suffered the heaviest destruction as a series of large tornadoes ripped through Elkhart County.

Perhaps the most iconic image of the Palm Sunday tornadoes was taken just near 6:18 p.m. as twin twisters shredded the Midway Trailer Court and then crossed U.S. 33 and continued on to tear through the Jefferson Place Subdivision north of Goshen.

Reports would later state that at least 10 residents of Midway Mobile Trailer Court were killed and dozens more were injured as the F4 tornado wreaked havoc on the area.

The National Weather Service reported the tornado may have been an F5 — the most severe type of storm identified on the Fujita Tornado Damage Scale — with winds upward of 260 mph.

The path of the tornado stretched for 21.6 miles, according to the National Weather Service.

In the days following, newspaper reports detailed the death of many victims, including six who died in one trailer. They had been visiting family to celebrate a birthday party.

It took emergency personnel and volunteers several days to comb through the 91 trailers in the park in search of the injured and dead, according to news reports. About 18 trailers received little to no damage.

The Gresso family

Gresso was 18 years old and living with his parents in the



THIS VIEW looking east toward U.S. 33 was taken April 13, 1965 and shows the devastation at the Midway Trailer Court following the Palm Sunday tornadoes two days earlier. Ten people were killed at the trailer court.



GOSHEN NEWS FILE PHOTO

Midway Mobile Home Park. His father, Richard Gresso Sr., operated the truck stop at the intersection of Ind. 15 and U.S. 20, north of Goshen.

On the afternoon of April 11, Gresso had just picked up his girlfriend in the family’s 1956 Cadillac for a date at the movies. They planned to stop by the trailer park to pick up his mom’s 1964 Nova.

“Before we ever got all the way there, we had seen all kinds of debris all over the place, stuff hanging up in the trees, and we couldn’t figure out what was going on because I didn’t know anything about the tornado,” Gresso said.

As Gresso drove into the park, he was stopped by Leonard Spigutz, the owner of the trailer park.

Behind him, Gresso spotted his family’s trailer upside down with his mother inside.

“I broke the windows out so I could get in to get her out,” he said.

After sending his mom, Lillian (Brown) Gresso, to Elkhart hospital in an ambulance, Gresso jumped back in the Cadillac and drove toward his father’s truck stop.

But by the time he got there, Gresso’s father had already heard about the tornado and hitched a ride with a customer back to Goshen, he said. His brother, Mike, took the Cadillac and drove through what was then Jefferson Place, flattening

AN INDIANA STATE POLICE officer sifts through the debris at Midway Trailer Court soon after an F4 twin tornado barreled into the community on April 11, 1965. Ten people were killed at the trailer court.

all four tires as he attempted to return to town.

“Since I didn’t have the car to go on, I had just bought a motorcycle about a month earlier... so I thought maybe I could get on the motorcycle and outrun it,” Gresso said. “But I turned around and started and got no farther than across the intersection and the wind got so strong because the tornado was so wide it just looked like a rain cloud hanging down on the ground. I just couldn’t keep the motorcycle up so I laid it down and grabbed hold of a tree.”

The Wheeler family

Mike Wheeler and his wife, Carolyn, had moved into the Midway Trailer Court with their infant son, Dennis, in late December 1964.

On April 11, Mike and his brother had arrived back to the trailer park from the New Paris Speedway, slightly late for a 6 p.m. dinner scheduled at Carolyn’s sister’s house.

“She got mad and said ‘we’re not going. We’re going to stay home,’” Mike said. “I said ‘no, you made the arrangements. We’re going to go.’”

And it’s a good thing he insisted, he added.

“We left there maybe 20 minutes to a half hour before it hit,” Mike said.

They’d just arrived to dinner when someone came on the television and said Midway Trailer Court had been hit.

The aftermath

Five days later, Gresso awoke in a hospital bed.

The stop sign had split his head open and nearly severed his leg.

His head had swollen to twice the normal size and his body had been sandblasted by debris.

A cut across his neck nearly sliced his jugular vein and the injuries to his head had busted out a piece of his skull, leaving part of his brain exposed.

While he was unconscious, Gresso had mumbled something that caught his brother’s attention as he walked through the hall of the hospital looking at bodies to see if his brother was among them.

“(Mike) realized I was awake so they got me into a hospital room and from what I understand they brought in a priest and gave me my last rights because they figured I was going to die anyways,” Gresso said.

Two weeks later, he was released from the hospital, but the debris that riddled his body continued to work its way out of his body for the next several years.

“Between my face, my neck and hands and arms, I was still picking stuff out years later where it was just a little piece of a splinter, a rock and stuff,” he said.

Sifting through debris

The Wheelers later returned to the trailer park to sift through the debris from homes scattered across the area.

“We went out and picked through the rubble to see if we could find anything. I think that’s when we found our marriage license,” Carolyn said. “That’s all we found.”

It’s hard to believe that it’s been 50 years, Carolyn said.

“It seems like it was just yesterday. I remember everything about it — how it looked out there, I still remember all of that stuff,” Mike said. “It was something else.”

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LeRoy Lambright
GUEST COLUMNIST

The Good Lord was with us that day

What for the most part was a typical spring day clocked out in a frightening whirlwind for this family of five and our six house guests on April 11, 1965 — recorded as the most tragic day in the history of Elkhart County and the surrounding region.

Gathered in a single-wide mobile home at Midway Trailer Court between Goshen and Dunlap, we’ve been thanking our “lucky stars” that we escaped a virtual home wipe-out with nothing more than a few broken ribs, bumps and bruises. Totally amazing when you consider that 16 of our nearby neighbors (10 in Midway) were killed as the powerful twister roared through the court.

Fifty years later while looking at pictures, it still appears that our home was situated just enough to one side from the heart of the main path, that our lives were saved from severe harm.

My wife Georgia and I purchased the mobile home just three months prior and moved in with three children ages 5, 4 and 2. High school friends Frank and Judy (Miller) Fought of Topeka came to visit that afternoon with their four youngsters.

Strange weather feel

It was a rather balmy afternoon as Frank and I were hitting golf balls at a former driving range just up the road along U.S. 33. We talked about how the weather had a strange feel to it. This was in the days before tornado warnings as we know of them today.

Soon after, when we joined our families in the tiny home, we again commented that the weather seems so strange and wondered if this could be a prelude to a tornado. Within seconds, Georgia looked out a window to the southeast and said, “Here comes one.”

Growing up in Oklahoma where tornado winds often howl, she said “Quick open some windows.” Nobody took the time to ask why. Quickly one window on the west side and one on the east were at least cracked a bit. The reason learned later is that open windows lower the compression. A second key to this survival, we believe, is that the day before all storm windows were removed and placed under the home.

My first thought at this frantic moment was that here we are all bunched together and that we should be spread out a bit if we do get hit. So the reaction was to grab the nearest youngster (Doug Fought), go outside to lie on the ground next to a small tree, about 3 inches of trunk. Once landing on the ground, I thought “This is dumb. If the home next to us tips over on its side, Doug and I will be crushed.”

There was no time to scatter. The storm, sounding like two jet airplanes taking off a few feet above our heads, had arrived. When I looked up, the next-door home was gone, apparently picked up and blown over our heads and over the few pieces left of our home.

All of us OK

Miraculously, the nine people who had huddled inside our home, did some flying, but were dumped onto the ground as the sides of the home were blown away and the floor was swiped from underneath them.

A new future is in the works for Midway site

By JULIE CROTHERS
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GOSHEN — Although their homes were destroyed and possessions swept away in the Palm Sunday tornadoes, some former residents later returned to the Midway Trailer Court in search of housing.

Carolyn Wheeler and her husband, Mike, were among them.

The Wheelers lost everything except their marriage license in the tornado and Carolyn said she hoped never to step foot in the trailer park again.

“I was petrified,” she said. “But we had to (move back) because there was nothing else. All the apartments were full, all the houses were full.”

A little more than a week after the tornado, the owners of the trailer park, Arthur and Leonard Spigutz, arranged for the debris to be pushed away or burned and the sites were prepared for new trailers, according to news reports.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

IN THIS GOOGLE EARTH IMAGE, the area that was once Midway Mobile Trailer Court can be seen, including the C.R. 17 bridge that was constructed nearly 40 years after the tornadoes tore through the area on April 11, 1965.

Spigutz also built an underground safety space for people who lived in trailers, Carolyn Wheeler said.

“We had to go in there a few times afterwards,” she said.

The space continued to be

used as a trailer court for nearly 40 years until the county government began purchasing vacated lots for a future bridge project.

In late 2003, the final lots were purchased and construction on the C.R. 17 bridge began, accord-

ing to Elkhart County Administrator Tom Byers. That project was completed in mid-2005.

In 2007, the remaining land was purchased by Ancon Construction and the company began the process of developing the area.

The first phase of the new development is a two-story 5,530-square-foot dental center for Aegis Dental, Ancon Construction architect Matt VanSoest said in an email.

The remaining approximately two acres of land is slated for future development of one or two additional buildings, VanSoest said.

The new community development is called “Pointe 33.”

“The barren site up to now was a stark reminder of the events,” VanSoest said. “We are excited to bring some unique modern architecture to the site and create a new community on the site.”

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