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FEATURED

'Like a train coming;' tornado's destruction shakes Salado residents

BY CHRISTIAN BETANCOURT and SHANE MONACO | TELEGRAM STAFF

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First Baptist Cedar Valley Church was shredded by the Cedar Valley tornado, measured on the Enhanced Fujita Scale as an EF3.

Christian Betancourt | Telegram

SALADO – Coby and Shelbi Jackson stood in shock at the site where the First Baptist Cedar Valley Church once stood.

The church was decimated Tuesday night by the Cedar Valley tornado, with the façade left standing while most of the building was shredded into debris by 165-mph winds. It was among the 63 buildings, mostly homes, damaged or destroyed.

"My grandfather is a pastor here," Coby said.

The tornado's roar warned Shelbi of the impending catastrophe when she was with family as the storm hit.

"We could hear like a train was coming," she said. "We looked out, and we couldn't see anything. Then it got really loud, and we went inside with the kids and waited for 20 minutes until everything calmed down outside. It was surreal."

Dangers in the middle of the road prevented the couple from going to their house to check for damage.

"Everything was blocked off," Shelbi Jackson said. "The main problem at that time was that there was a propane tank in the middle of the road, and it was leaking. We had to go the back way to check on our house. Our house was perfectly fine, but our neighbor's, it just gone. It was just our trees that were uprooted."

Since cellphone service in the area can be spotty, Shelbi said it was hard to get in touch with family members who were worried about the couple's safety.

"We would get messages coming, and you could tell that they were worried," she said.

Power lines were downed by the tornado so electricity and internet service are currently not available in the area.

Coby Jackson said the power company told them power would take five days to be restored while the internet would take about a month and a half.

Resident accounts

John Wilson was one of the many homeowners whose home was destroyed by the Salado tornado.

Wilson said he saw the tornado coming and raced with his wife in the car to his mother-in-law's home down the road to get her before it hit. He said the tornado struck while the three were in the house — dropping bricks and rubble on top of them.

Wilson said he only had thoughts about saving his wife and mother-in-law.

"I thought I was fixing to die, people in Jarrell died, but nobody died here," Wilson said. "With walls crashing in on top of you, hell yeah, you are scared you're fixing to die."

While Wilson, his wife, and his mother-in-law were all injured, they were thankful they survived.

"There wasn't no good spot to hide nowhere," he said.

Wilson said his 99-year-old mother-in law has lived through many tough events, and this was just another challenge.

"She has lived through two hip surgeries, two broken arms, colon cancer, her original house burning down, and now this," Wilson said. "Nothing bothered her."

The three family members were discharged from local hospitals at 1:30 a.m. Wednesday, with Wilson's cousin helping them get a motel room in Round Rock.

While the family was able to get some rest, Wilson said it was hard for him to lose the home he designed and built himself more than 40 years ago.

"I couldn't sleep at all last night. I don't know what to start doing," he said. "For 40 years, this is everything I had."

On Wednesday, Wilson was out at his home with family members and friends who were helping him pick through the debris that was once his home.

Lauren Moore, Wilson's grand-niece, helped her grand uncle find various items in the rubble, including his collection of guns and cowboy hats.

"There are about \$10,000 worth of guns right there. That is what we were worried about," Wilson said. "I was afraid it was going to be blown out in the pasture."

Cemetery devastated

The Cedar Valley Cemetery was once a serene sight for motorists traveling down FM 2843 for its pavilion and Cedar trees covering the landscape.

The tornado uprooted large trees and gravestones, leaving family members scrambling to ensure their lost relatives were undisturbed.

"Every hole in the ground was a cedar tree," said Kenneth Wigley, whose relatives are interned at the graveyard. "Everybody in here is my family."

Wiley said the tornado damaged his family's plots.

"That's my two sons right there," he said, pointing at two plots near the cemetery entrance. "The tornado took one of the headstones and left the other."

Wigley said he was not sure who would be responsible for fixing the site where his sons Lance, 19, and Adam, 21, were interred after they were tragically killed in a 2003 traffic accident in Abilene.

"It'll probably have to be us having to take care of it," he said. "If we did have insurance on anything, I don't want to move anything until they come and take a look."

Brenda Cox, who was checking on her relatives at the cemetery, said the burial ground is managed by a board of family members and Grace Baptist Church — which was also devastated by the tornado. She said the cemetery has graves dating back to the 1800s.

"A group came together in the community and established the cemetery," she said. "My great-grandparents are buried here. My grandparents, my dad, and his two brothers are buried here, too.... There might be some community members who were buried here as well, but is mostly just family."

Cox said she showed up at the cemetery Wednesday afternoon since she was blocked from entering the area earlier.

"I was wondering last night how the cemetery did, but it wasn't first priority," she said. "We came this morning, but we were turned away."

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