

Most of the Southwest and West Las Vegas areas laid in ruins. The entire area was immediately blocked off preventing looting and allowing the emergency services to complete their mop-up operations. It was the worst disaster ever to hit the Las Vegas Valley.



Story by Ed Brown

A violent, twisting tornado just hit West Las Vegas carrying a destructive path, at some points, as much as 300 yards wide. Brewing from the southwest, the core of its angry snakelike funnel ripped through an area extending from the vicinity of West Oakey and Decatur Blvd., headed northeast-ward toward Cheyenne Avenue and Highland Drive and then veered in a general easterly direction dying near the campus of the Clark County Community College.

Traveling at speeds estimated to be at more than 35 miles an hour, this angry tornado ripped up practically everything in its way leaving nearly 185 dead, approximately 1,300 injured and property damage estimated to be at \$285 million.

Five firehouses were wiped out completely in its path. Homes, shopping centers and hundreds of other structures and trees were uprooted, cars and trucks were tossed around like toys; people and animals were carried for hundreds of feet. One witness described the tornado as a "turbulent, boiling mass of blackness."

It happened at alarming quickness catching an unprepared community totally off-guard. There had never been anything resembling such in the 75 year history of the Las Vegas Valley. Only one hurricane hit this area a number of years ago.

It struck at 3:32 p.m. with winds hitting 250 miles on hour.

There was a quiet stillness the night before with spurts of refreshing, cool breeze skirting the western section of the

city. A huge half moon, illuminating the skies beautifully, stood majestically above the horizon appearing close enough for one to reach out and touch its splendor. It was a beautiful sight.

This morning, the weather reports carried a forecast of "partly cloudy with a chance of showers through Saturday. Sunny and warm Sunday. Southwest winds 30 to 45 miles per hour gradually decreasing to 10 to 20 miles per hour Friday night. Today's high was predicted to be in the upper 90's with a low in the 70's." It was shaping up to be a hot, sticky afternoon.

The tempo of the community, prior to this devastating disaster, was unusually calm. Hundreds of children were preparing to leave for the carnival at "H" and West Owens. Several churches had set up a joint venture for a "family outing" at the carnival sponsored by the North Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce.

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Around 2 p.m., there occurred a six-car collision at St. Louis and Las Vegas Boulevard, South. Two were killed and 12 injured in what was reported as a rear-end

pileup. A number of ambulances, fire equipment and emergency vehicles were on the scene.

Coincidentally, a four-alarm fire pulled equip-

the runway. It occurred during an emergency landing; and at 3:10 p.m. the Henderson police responded to what originally was a family squabble at the

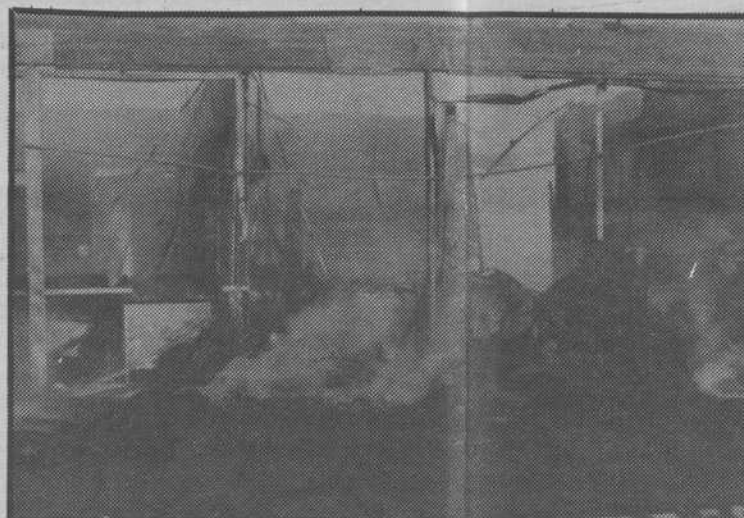
emergency equipment. The emergency equipment for the Las Vegas Valley was drained. Around the same time, warm, moist air was spreading northeastward heading toward the West Las Vegas area. At the same time, cold air suddenly hit from the north and west flowing over the warm, moist air. The cold air sunk, and the warm, moist air rose in patches thus creating a highly ground, dancing and irregular condition in the skipping northeastern area vacated by the warm with destruction force air. A storm of violent proportions was developing. Heavy rains developed.

The National Weather Service had given a flash flood warning through all available means. It was rather uncanny that so many tornadoes were also developing in the eastern and mid-western sections of the

United States. Normally they occur in the spring. Witnesses reported seeing a heavy cloud developing in the direction of Rainbow Blvd. and Spring Mountain Road. A twisting funnel was forming from the mouth of the black clouds, stretching downward, suddenly reaching the ground.

The snakelike funnel moved rapidly on the ground, dancing and skipping northeasternly with destructive force blowing down houses and trees. It was explosive. Heavy rains developed causing extreme flooding conditions. All available emergency equipment was placed into action.

A State of Disaster was declared as conditions developed well beyond the control of the services within the county. Sheriff



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John McCarthy rallied all available manpower from the law enforcement agencies. The fire departments of Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, Henderson, Boulder City, Nellis Air

Force Base and the County were called to action. The Red Cross Disaster

teams and other community emergency units rallied. The tornado center hit hardest in an irregular path from West Bonanza northward toward Carey Avenue leaving thousands homeless. Fires hit hardest in those areas.

Nevada Power, Southwest Gas and Central Telephone swung into action. All area hospitals were filled to capacity. Emergency shelters were set up at Doolittle Center, True Love Missionary Baptist Church and the Pentecostal Temple Church of God in Christ. The

local chapter, NAACP, quickly rallied all available Westside community services rendering aid to the homeless; the ministerial alliance offered their services for those in need; the business community contributed food and clothing; the hotel industry responded.

As is established when a State of Disaster is declared, the Clark County Commissioners took over immediate control of the devastated area; the Governor sent in a team to analyze the situation.

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The above report is a hypothetical situation. It is something that could happen and in any area in the valley. We don't ordinarily think about things like this, but we should. What would you do if such occurred? Would you know how to handle your affairs under such circumstances? Do you know how to reach all of the available emergency forces at our disposal? Fortunately, it did not happen. We did not have a tornado in the Las Vegas Valley. We hope one never hits us.

For the next couple of weeks, the SENTINEL will provide information on fire prevention, and first aid, life support systems and accident preventive measures.