

“Out of Rubble and Ruin”

To look at the Washburn University campus today, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find physical scars left from the 1966 tornado, but for those who lived through it, the emotional scars remain.

It was a sultry summer night the evening of June 8, 1966. Washburn held its spring commencement three days before. There were 200 people on campus that night. A music recital was being held in MacVicar Chapel. Students in a continuing education class were taking a test in Carnegie Hall. A chemistry professor worked in his third floor office in the Stoffer Building.

Shortly after 7 o'clock, the sirens in Topeka sounded. A tornado passed over Burnett's Mound and bore down on the city. The twister was a half a mile wide with estimated winds at 300 miles per hour. After it ravaged southwest Topeka, the tornado headed straight for Washburn University. Those who lived in the married student housing on the south east side of the campus sought shelter in the basements of Stoffer and Whiting Field House. Residents included the wife and daughter of Washburn law student, Bill Kurtis. Kurtis was working for WIBW-TV and was on the air warning Topekans to “take cover”. Those who were attending the recital in MacVicar chapel tried to continue the recital in the basement. The piano in the southwest corner was out of tune, so they went to another room. It saved their lives. The southwest corner caved in when the tornado hit.

The tornado sliced through the heart of the campus, from the southwest corner to the northeast. Every building on campus was damaged and several were completely destroyed including Rice, MacVicar Chapel, Thomas Gymnasium, Boswell, Crane Observatory and two sorority houses. Six hundred trees that had graced the campus were also wiped out. Those trees that remained were left barren and twisted.

Remarkably, no one on campus was killed.

Former Washburn art instructor, Carol Yoho, has vivid memories of that night.

Then 16-year-old Yoho was downtown at the Masonic Lodge. Her choral group was practicing for a state competition. The group was to leave the next day. When the sky turned green and the air became deathly still, the group headed for the basement. The tornado hit the lodge, but because of its sturdy structure, it received minimal damage.

After the storm passed, Yoho headed for home. Her drive home took her to the entrance of the Washburn campus on 17th St. Because of downed trees and limbs, Yoho was unable to turn left or right. All she could do was stare at the rubble that had once been Carnegie Hall and MacVicar Chapel. Yoho saw no one. "It was very quiet," she said.

Finding an alternate route home, Yoho had to count houses to figure out which one was hers. There wasn't enough left of it to be recognizable. Fortunately, she found her family safe.

For years after the tornado, Yoho was haunted by nightmares of the storm, but is now comforted by the memory of how helpful everyone was in the tornado's aftermath. "The community pulled together," Yoho said, "Places were rebuilt. Trees were planted. We survived."

Retired school teacher, Sara Anderson, had just graduated from Topeka High School at the time of the tornado. She was looking forward to her first semester at Washburn the following fall. Anderson and her family lived in the Central Park area, not far from the campus. When the sirens blew, the Andersons took refuge in their basement. It only took seconds for the tornado to pass, but Anderson was overwhelmed by the devastation it left behind. In spite of the destruction around her, Anderson was thankful she and her family were alive.

Knowing life would go on, Anderson never questioned that she would start school in the fall. It was a feeling that was shared by the Washburn faculty and administration. “The tornado caused considerable damage on the Washburn University campus,” Anderson said, “but there was a wonderful resolve to rebuild and continue school as usual.”

Damage to the campus was estimated at \$10 million and 124,000 square feet of classroom space was gone. Then university president, John Henderson, vowed that Washburn would go on and began an aggressive fund-raising campaign to start rebuilding the campus. Clean up began immediately and by late August, over 500,000 tons of debris had been removed from campus.

Summer classes were only a day late in getting started. Classes were held at Topeka West High School and various buildings off campus. Boy Scouts transported books, typewriters and other equipment to be used for the summer session. They also helped take law books to the public library. The law library was exposed to the elements when Carnegie Hall was damaged. Although Carnegie was 80 percent damaged, the alumni wanted to save at least one of the older buildings.

The federal government provided portable trailers to be used as classrooms until campus buildings could be repaired or replaced. Fall classes started on schedule. Anderson said it took some time to get acclimated to the trailers, but life on campus continued. Yoho, who entered Washburn a year after Anderson, said the metal trailers were cramped and hot. Because of the temporary classrooms and on-going construction, Washburn was nicknamed “tornado tech” and “instant university”. The trailers were used until the mid 1970s. By then repairs and additions had provided permanent classroom space.

That Christmas, a Washburn graduate began a drive to replace the missing trees

on campus. The project soon spread across Topeka and beyond. By February of the following year, 230 trees had been given to the university. Evergreens dotting the campus stood as a symbol of new life for Washburn.

At an estimated cost of \$22,000 for wiring and installation, General Electric donated fixtures that would once again bring light to the campus. A quartet of bells that were once housed in the clock tower of Thomas Gymnasium were used to create a bell tower that was constructed in 1971.

In addition to all the repairs, new buildings began to spring up on campus. Yoho attended art class in the basement of Benton Hall before classes were moved into the new art building that was added to the existing Mulvane Art Center. She remembers the first time she saw the inside of the Henderson Learning Resources Center. She could hardly believe she was on the Washburn campus. “It was too new, too modern, too wonderful!” Yoho said.

During the years Yoho lived outside of Topeka, more buildings were added to the campus including the School of Law, Petro Allied Health Center and the Bradbury Thompson Center. More recently, Washburn has seen the completion of the Living Learning Center, updated stadium, KBI lab and renovation of Morgan Hall. Extensive landscaping and student sculptures have added to the beauty of the campus.

As Washburn continues to evolve, both Yoho and Anderson are amazed at how much the campus has changed since 1966. Anderson sees some similarities, but mostly it's a different campus from what it was before. Yoho thinks the campus looks great today. “Washburn has many facilities that were not dreamed of at the time of the 1966 tornado,” she said. And there's more to come. Washburn plans to build a new School of Law building, replacing the one that was built just after the 1966 tornado. Completion of the project is expected in 2018.