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This aerial view shows a Thornton home damaged by the tornado.

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Tornado rampaged Washington Street

By Nissa LaPoint

Staff Writer

Twenty-seven years later, Everett Mason still has some customers come into his Thornton store and ask "Were you here when that tornado hit?"

Fewer and fewer people ask about that frightening day on June 3, 1981, but the worst tornado in the Denver metro area's history made an indelible impression on those who lived through it.

Mason was inside his Thornton Sewing and Vacuum Center store when the twister hit the D&B Center's roof, now the Village Center, at 89th Avenue and Washington Street.

"There was a boom, but it was gone quick," Mason said.

The twister hit at 3 p.m., after a severe thunderstorm dumped rain and large hail in the metro area, at 84th Avenue and Federal Boulevard in Westminster.

It then ascended without causing damage and touched down again at 88th Avenue and Washington Street in Thornton.

Traveling northeast for about three miles, the tornado ripped through homes and businesses, leaving behind a trail of uprooted trees, overturned cars, disconnected power lines and torn rooftops.

The tornado destroyed 25 homes, damaged 239 structures and injured 53 people, according to news reports.

Mason said he was looking out his store's window when shingles started to fly off the roof and he saw the tail of the twister coming toward him.

He ran from the window to the back of the store and "pushed like hell" to close the double doors forced open by the powerful wind.

Then a cinder block flew through the roof and into his store, bringing with it all the water and hail that had collected on the then flat roof.

"Our business was flooded," said co-owner Mason.

Less than a block away, MyrtleAnn Watson was working inside North Valley Bank at Russell Boulevard and Washington Street when the tornado tore off part of the building.

She had moved from the Texas panhandle, part of Tornado Alley, to the area and had worked at the bank for about two months, she said.

She was standing in the lobby when a couple of clerks ran up to her and said that a tornado was coming.

She thought they were just imagining it.

"Y'all don't have tornadoes here," Watson said she told the ladies and then looked outside to see for herself.

"I couldn't see it (because) it was already over us," she said.

> 'Y'all don't have tornadoes here,'
>
> – **MyrtleAnn Watson**, just before North Valley Bank was hit. Watson had just moved to Thornton from a portion of Tornado Alley in Texas

THEN AND NOW: Above, city officials and residents look at the aftermath of tornado that hit Washington Street on June 3, 1981. The Thornton Sewing and Vacuum Center was hit by the tornado and lost part of its roof. Since then the shopping center was reconstructed. At right, The Village Center at 89th Avenue and Washington Street as it stands today. It was restored after the tornado and upgraded again in the early 1990s.

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The employees and customers ran into the basement and heard a loud "boom."

"It was kind of like the air (was) sucked out of the building," Watson said.

The canopy over the drive thru took the most damage, but the bank was open the next day, she said.

"It definitely was very frightening," Watson said.

Across the street at Thornton City Hall, now the Rangeview Library District's Thornton Branch Library at 88th and Washington Street, City Clerk Nancy Vincent and several other city employees were looking out the windows up into the sky.

"When we saw the roof start flying off the Albertson's and debris flying everywhere, we went into the basement," Vincent said.

Almost everyone in the building was downstairs. Some people who waited too long were cut from shattered glass, she said.

After the tornado was gone, Vincent and other employees walked outside to see the aftermath.

The lights flickered, power went out and cars in the parking lot were damaged, she said.

"It was an eerie feeling," Vincent said. "It was the stillness of the air and the color of the sky was just bizarre. There was a yellow-orange to it. It was probably the most unique-looking sky I had ever seen."

Margaret Carpenter, the mayor of Thornton at the time, said Gov. Dick Lamb came the next morning, and they took a helicopter ride over the area to see the damage.

"It just reinforced things I had always heard about tornadoes," Carpenter said.

Numerous reports of looting made the governor declare the city in a state of emergency to obtain help from the Colorado National Guard.

Security was so tight that Watson said military was at every street corner, checking everyone's ID before they were allowed to get to their homes.

The city was shut down and the Salvation Army and American Red Cross arrived to set up first aid centers.

The cleanup took a couple of months but reconstruction took about eight months, Carpenter said.

The tornado was rated an F2, or a tornado that can cause considerable damage and can reach wind speeds of 157 mph.

The Weather Service confirmed five separate tornadoes that hit the Front Range that same day.

Despite the resulting damage, the city united the following Saturday to celebrate its 25th Anniversary during the Thornton Festival Parade over a four-day event.

Many residents sported T-shirts that said, "I survived the Thornton tornado," according to the city.

"At that time the belief was that Colorado does not get tornadoes (in the metro area) in residential areas," Carpenter said. "I don't think we ever expected a tornado to come through town."

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