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Wednesday, August 3, 2016 Vol. 07 - Issue 31 LOCAL NEWS, LOCAL PEOPLE. OUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER.



10 years after the tornado

It has been 10 years since a tornado tore through the small village of Combermere. Despite the devastation that occurred, injuries were minor and there were no fatalities. The *Gazette* looks back on the stories that came out of this terrible storm, and lessons learned for the future. **For full story see pages 15 to 19.**

Photo submitted by MV Township

Close call for Lake Clear kayaker

CHRISTINE HUDDER
Managing Editor

LAKE CLEAR – Things could have gone a lot differently had officers with the Killaloe OPP not intervened.

According to a police report, on July 28, at around 12:25 p.m., officers were on a marine patrol on Lake Clear in Bonnechere Valley Township when they conducted a routine compliance check on a kayaker.

Officers noticed that the kayak operator did not possess the required safety equipment. The unidentified man was charged for operating a human powered pleasure craft without a

floatation device, contrary to the Canada Shipping Act, Small Vessel regulations.

Officers followed the man back to shore to ensure he would not be left as a continued safety risk without the necessary equipment.

Police report that part way to shore, the kayak suddenly started taking on water, and the male called for help from the officers. The man had to be taken into the police boat, and his disabled kayak towed to shore.

“His \$240 fine ended up being a far less significant price than he might have otherwise paid,” officers said.

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CORNER MBERMERE

10 Years After The Storm



COMBERMERE

10 Years After The Storm

Surviving the storm

CHRISTINE HUDDER
Managing Editor

COMBERMERE – It was a day like any other in Combermere; the sun was shining, the water was warm and spirits were high.

In the late afternoon of August 2, 2006, local cottagers Fina and Nick Van Roon did what anyone would have done on that blistering hot day – they went for some ice cream with their daughter and granddaughter.

They decided to take the boat out for a spin from their trailer at Opeongo Trails Resort to the general store.

Soon after, the family was enjoying their sweet treat when they noticed some dark clouds forming in the sky.

“The sky was getting darker and darker,” Fina said. “So we hurried back.”

By the time they arrived back to the trailer, the power was already out, so they enjoyed a game of cards by flashlight on their daughter’s deck.

Nick said the noise that came after still haunts him to this day.

“Every time you hear a train, it reminds you,” Nick said. “It sounded like a train coming through.”

The weather quickly turned worse and the rain became heavy. The lightning and thunder was coming at the same time and the winds were getting stronger and stronger. A window in the trailer smashed, shattering on Van Roon’s son-in-law who sleeping at the time.

They rushed inside the trailer, all except Nick, who had lost his glasses and hat.

“He was hanging on for dear life to the awning pipes,” Fina recalled.

Once they managed to get Nick inside, a hundred-year old pine tree came crashing down on the opposite end of the trailer.

“We didn’t know what to do, stay in or go out,” Fina wrote in her journal entry the next day. “We went out on the deck and it was all over and we saw a different world.”

What they saw could only be described as a warzone. Trees that stood the test of time had snapped like matchsticks, descending on the campground below and piercing through nearby trailers and vehicles.

The rain was still hammering down, along with lightning and thunder, as campers called for one another.

They had no idea that a level F-2 tornado had struck the campground.

At the same time that the tornado was ripping through Opeongo Trails Resort, owners Bob and Germaine Parcher were doing their best to protect their four children in their home, which doubled as the campground’s office.

As Bob was ushering the family into the basement, a huge tree came crashing down into the living room of their new home.

They don’t remember much of the storm as it happened so quickly, but the aftermath will forever remain etched in their minds.

“The day of [the storm] was extremely scary,” Germaine said. “More of our thoughts [were] focused [on] after it stopped.”

They went outside when the storm calmed down and saw all of the trees, which were scattered everywhere, amongst wild debris.

“We were expecting the worst,” she explained.

While Opeongo Trails Resort was one of the hardest hit areas in Combermere, similar terrifying stories could be found in all corners of the village.

The Madonna House is home to a community of Catholic men, women and priests. Paulette Curran penned an article in the Madonna House publication *Restoration*, recalling her community’s experience.

Curran and many others did not know at the time that a tornado ripped through the region. That is, until they took a trip the following morning to a cabin, now a chapel, in the woods where Madonna House

founder Catherine Dougherty once lived. Around the main chapel are poustinias, small cabins where people can pray or fast alone.

“There, we found the first of the near misses,” Curran wrote. “Very close to the cabin, lying parallel to it in a yard filled with fallen trees and branches, were two tall uprooted poplars. The soft tip of a third, which had fallen perpendicular to the cabin, was resting harmlessly against the building. Had it fallen closer, the hard trunk would probably have smashed the roof.”

Trees were broken, snapped and uprooted everywhere.

An outhouse had been literally sliced into two pieces by a fallen tree.

“A graphic image of what would have happened to anything else in that strip,” Curran noted. “Some of those venerable pines – those behind the chapel – were bent or snapped in two or had fallen. But none had touched the chapel.”

Curran said it was amazing how little damage the Madonna House suffered, apart from a slightly damaged shed and the ruined outhouse.

Opeongo Trails Resort was not as fortunate.

In fact, most of the trailers and buildings were damaged in some way or another. When Carolyn Cannon, Bob and Germaine’s daughter, arrived at the campsite the next day, she was stunned. Trailers were flung from one end of a campsite to the other, trees crisscrossed driveways making it impossible to get through with a vehicle.

The most miraculous part of it all was that no one was killed and injuries were minor. Despite that, Cannon knew the



Nick and Fina Van Roon were cottaging at their trailer at Opeongo Trails Resort when the tornado hit. The resort was one of the hardest hit campgrounds by the F-2 tornado. *Photos Christine Hudder*

next few weeks, months and years ahead would be difficult for her parents, who spent 15 years building the business into what it was.

“Everyone had a home to go to,” Carolyn said. “They might have lost a trailer or a car, but my parents lost their house, their business - this was their life.”

Firefighters and other volunteers spent the next few weeks clearing up the property.

“We were probably in a state of shock and not good at making decisions,” Germaine said. “People with expertise in certain areas just took charge and got the job done.”

Although many clients returned over the next few years, Carolyn admitted that the business did lose some loyal guests because of the storm.

“A lot of people lost trailers and had no insurance,” she said.

“So they just didn’t come back.”

However, Germaine is grateful for those that stayed and those that took their time to help the local campground 10 years ago.

“We still realize our business would not exist if not the generosity of our community,” Germaine explained.

This past Civic long weekend, Opeongo Trails Resort celebrated its 25th anniversary.

It’s a special anniversary for the Van Roons, as they have been cottaging at Opeongo Trails Resort since its first year.

They spend their time between their hometown of Grimbsy, ON, Florida and Combermere. After surviving the tornado, the Van Roons decided to replace their trailer and keep coming back to the Combermere resort.

“We like the area,” Fina shrugged.

“[But] we will never forget,” Nick said. “Never.”

It was a miracle that no one died in our camp, after surveying the damage the next day.

An excerpt from Fina Van Roon’s journal after the storm. Fina was staying at the Opeongo Trails Resort when the tornado hit.

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**WE ARE SO PROUD OF THE COMMUNITY
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OF THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE HERE.**

*On the 10th Anniversary of the Tornado,
we stop to give thanks for our family, friends and neighbours
who continue to care for each other.*

COMBERMERE

10 Years After The Storm

Responding to the storm

CHRISTINE HUDDER
Managing Editor

COMBERMERE - "It was wild; I've never seen anything like it in my life."

Corwin Quade was one of the first volunteer firefighters who arrived on scene after a level F-2 tornado ripped through the small community of Combermere.

Combermere's fire station could not immediately respond because firefighters couldn't get the trucks out of their garage. The fire chief at the time, Andrew Peplinski, called for mutual aid from neighbouring townships, including Brudenell-Lyndoch-Raglan.

On August 2, 2006, Quade was the fire captain of the Quadeville fire hall and rushed down County Road 515 towards Combermere to help.

"When we first pulled up, the first thing I saw was the Home Hardware roof on the highway, blocking all of the lanes except the shoulder," Quade said. "The lights were flashing and it was foggy and misty."

Peplinski was busy directing traffic around the hazard and designating jobs to firefighters that showed up. Quade said

although Peplinski was a new fire chief at the time, he kept cool under pressure.

"To be as calm as he was, to have that thrown into his lap...he did an excellent job," Quade said.

Soon after, help came in from as far as Killaloe-Hagarty-Richards, Whitewater Region and Bonnechere Valley Township.

"Every fire department worked as if they were one unit," Quade said.

Firefighters broke off into platoons to check areas for anyone who needed immediate help.

For the first two hours of searching, Quade recalls the dispatcher warning firefighters about looming threats of more tornadoes. Super cells remained overhead and firefighters were told not to roam too far from their trucks.

As they made their way to Ohio Road and Opeongo Trails Resort, where severe damage took place, Quade feared the worst.

"You assumed someone was dead because they called in for heavy hydraulics to every township around," Quade said. "You were fortunate not to find anybody because there were trailers stacked on trailers, there were cars on top of cars; there was stuff floating in the lake



Crews help clean up the Combermere Methodist Cemetery. Photo MV Township

we could see."

After days of searching and checking on people, everyone was accounted for. Other than some bruises, scratches and a few broken bones, injuries were minor.

The firefighters continued working alongside countless chainsaw operators and loggers to help remove logs blocking the path.

"Everybody set aside their differences on whether they were making money, volunteering or otherwise; we were here to help," Madawaska Valley CAO/Clerk Craig Kelley explained. "Our firemen were typically going out and helping remove brush, deliver bottles of water to people who were stranded that had no potable water – doing anything they were asked. Everyone worked for 48 to 72 hours straight."

Quade, who is now the fire chief for Madawaska Valley Township, said he will never forget the day that the sky turned black.

Although it was a shock to see such devastations, he said the firefighters were trained well.

"Every person that came in was like a machine," Quade said.

The Combermere tornado was one of the worst disasters to hit the community. While firefighters responded in droves, so too did the hundreds of volunteers who descended on the community to help in whatever way possible.

Men and women spent days clearing roads from debris, and hauling out logs. Many of the logs were unusable, as the tornado managed to twist them so badly,

they could only be used for chipboard or firewood.

"The senses were overwhelmed with the smell of pine," Kelley recalled.

Volunteers took over at the Combermere Community Centre, making meals for the residents who were without power or running water.

Even a Mennonite disaster group from Guelph went door to door to help those displaced.

With so many people coming and going from the small community, there were safety issues, especially on the water.

People from all over the region brought their boats to get a firsthand look at the devastation or to offer their help. The only problem was that the waterway was littered with debris. Cabin roofs had been torn off and thrown into the water, as well as chunks of trees and other man-made litter.

"We eventually had to bring in a diving company in Combermere in the bay just to make sure we got all the hazards out of the water," Kelley explained. "There were boats everywhere – it was quite the spectacle for visitors and locals alike."

Without the dedicated help of first responders and volunteers, clean up would have been near impossible for the small village that relies on limited resources.

One thing's for certain; the same tornado that levelled trees and changed the landscape of Combermere forever was the same storm that brought so many people together to rebuild a stronger community.



An aerial view of the devastation. Photo on display at the Mission House Museum



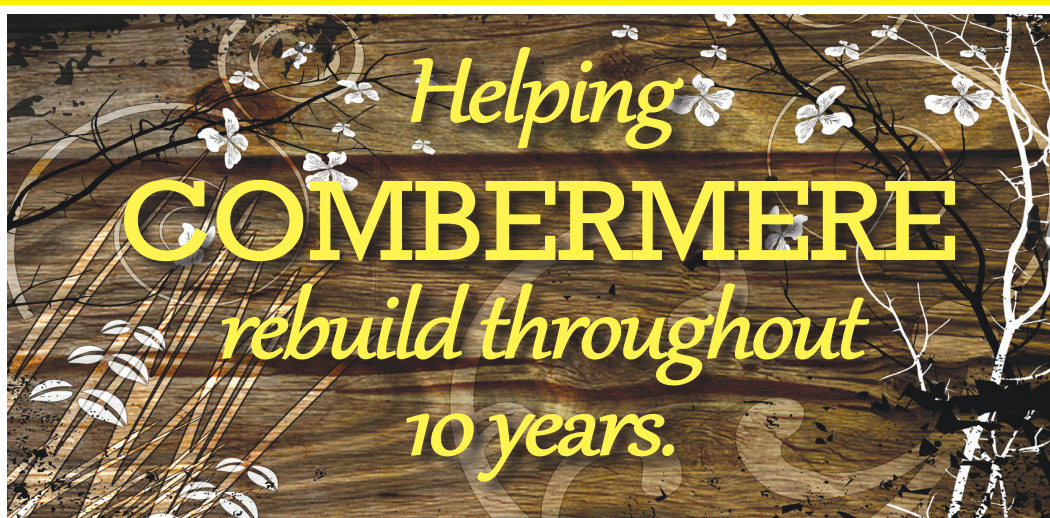
Crews picking up the pieces after Home Hardware's roof was ripped from the building and thrown onto the highway. Photo Kent Waddington Photography

The most welcome sound was the chainsaws coming down Ohio Rd

An excerpt from Fina Van Roon's journal after the storm. Fina was staying at the Opeongo Trails Resort when the tornado hit.

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COMBERMERE

10 Years After The Storm



Lessons from the storm

CHRISTINE HUDDER
Managing Editor

COMBERMERE - In 2006, the Township of Madawaska Valley had planned for a number of emergency scenarios – a dam busting, a truck containing hazardous material flipping over – but not a tornado.

“No one actually thought of [them],” Madawaska Valley CAO Craig Kelley said. “It never happened here.”

In fact, the township had undergone several desktop scenarios following the 1998 ice storm that swept the Valley, leaving many without power.

On August 2, 2006, many had left yet another emergency management meeting that evening, only to hear news that a tornado had struck Combermere. Kelley, who was the township’s economic development officer at the time, was not part of the meeting. He was spending time at the family cottage on Kamaniskeg Lake when the tornado arrived.

“I remember the roar of the train ripping through,” Kelley said, referring to the sound the level F-2 tornado tearing through the community.

The power was out, the phone lines were down and it was difficult to get a signal from Combermere’s one cell phone tower at the time.

“We started to receive phone calls from staff members saying that you have to come in we have had an emergency,” Kelley remembers.

It was around 9 p.m. that he received the call, and he rushed to the municipal office in Barry’s Bay.

“No one knew what the nature of the disaster was at that point,” Kelley said.

When word got out of the extent of damage and that fire departments from as far away as White Water Region were responding, Mayor John Hildebrandt called a state of emergency.

“It loosens the rules,” Kelley explained. “It allows volunteer coverage for liability. It starts the ball rolling for any costs incurred if we ever went to the government under the Ontario Disaster Relief Assistance Program. It allows your bylaws to be held in abeyance. If we needed to make a purchase or a service – like call in a bulldozer – we wouldn’t have to go through our procurement policies.”

An evacuation centre was established at the Combermere Community Centre. Hundreds of volunteers descended into the village to bring hot meals, drinking water, port-a-potties for the evacuation centre and other necessities. Many other volunteers with chainsaws spent days clearing out roads and removing trees from vehicles and trailers.

Kelley said the evacuation centre served its purpose, but did not have necessities like accessible washrooms to make it a prime location for all residents.

However, this year, the township is putting the final touches on its renovation of the Combermere Community Centre. It will be equipped with accessible washrooms.

“To be better equipped for emergency purposes than it was,” Kelley explained.

While homes were damaged and vehicles were ruined, no one perished.

Fire Chief Corwin Quade said the fire departments involved grew from the experience that day.

“A lot of the guys are more experienced because they have seen something like that,” he said. “They will know how to react. Their emotions won’t kick in as quickly.”

There’s also an emergency management plan in place now to help deal with possible tornados in the future.

“Before we didn’t have one,” Quade explained.

Kelley admitted that looking back, a tabletop exercise could have improved some reaction time by the township, but nothing could ever entirely prepare the township for such a disaster.

“The sensitivities for knowing how to deal with disasters take on a whole new aspect once you have been through it,” he said. “It’s like anything – if you haven’t lived through it, you can just make-believe. But until you have to work through it, you have to realize that if this happens, we have to rely on people with ATVs and chainsaws.”

Kelley said a list has to be prepared, either mentally or on paper, outlining who the

foresters are in town, who has bulldozers, trucks and other vital pieces of equipment.

As for communications, social media wasn’t as prevalent as it is today. With only one cell tower in Combermere, it was difficult to communicate with staff.

“We were barely able to get signals,” he said. “It was so busy. It swamped that cell tower because no one had a phone for weeks.”

In the communications role, Kelley had to juggle getting the message out to residents and national media as well, who descended on the small village to capture dramatic images of the damage.

“The press just swamped this area immediately,” Kelley said. “We had to deal with that issue.”

Today, social media has changed and evolved so much that it is an incredibly useful tool in communicating important messages. Kelley acknowledged it would have been useful during the storm, but acknowledged the one cell tower in Combermere at the time would not have supported so much cell phone usage.

While the township has grown and learned from the terrifying experience, the fire chief is hoping the 10-year anniversary serves as an important reminder that anything can happen.

Quade encourages residents to have an up-to-date 72-hour emergency kit, equipped with a working flashlight, battery-powered radio and 72 hours worth of food, water and supplies (like important medication or necessities for family members).

If another tornado or other natural disaster strikes, it would likely take 72 hours at the earliest to regain power, Quade noted.

Kelley agreed.

“Be prepared because we may not be there,” Kelley said. “We will try as best as we can, but you can’t depend on local government because we may be wiped out. Our services might be wiped out. It could be the fact that our machines cannot get out there or otherwise.”

Should another tornado happen in the area, Chief Quade reminds residents that they should avoid hiding in vehicles if possible. He recommends a basement away from any windows. Most of the injuries from the 2006 storm were related to flying glass and debris.

“Go somewhere with no windows and shut your doors,” Quade said.

People were calling to each other to see if everyone was O.K.

An excerpt from Fina Van Roon’s journal after the storm. Fina was staying at the Opeongo Trails Resort when the tornado hit.

COMBERMERE

10 Years After The Storm

Remembering the storm

CHRISTINE HUDDER
Managing Editor

COMBERMERE – When Combermere residents and visitors awoke on the morning of August 3, 2006, they saw an eerie new landscape.

More than 10,000 trees fell or were damaged as a result of the tornado that tore through the community the night before. Many of these trees were 150-year-old majestic pines that defined the town's landscape and offered much-needed shade to homes and cottages.

Residents describe the devastation as a warzone, with debris scattered as far as the eye could see. The smell of pine overwhelmed the senses, which was amplified by the heat of summer.

Although the historic trees could never be replaced in the community, residents bonded together to repair the damage that was done.

Madawaska Valley Township CAO/Clerk Craig Kelley said the Madawaska Valley Lions Club held a major fundraiser to plant thousands of trees all over Combermere.

"They had a huge campaign," Craig said. "The Lions Club really came through."

Many of those trees can be seen at Opeongo Trails Resort, which suffered some of the worst damage caused by the storm.

To township-owned infrastructure alone, there was more than \$1.5 million in damages.

Since a state of emergency was called, the township

received \$900,000 from the Ontario Disaster Relief Assistance Program (ODRAP). The CAO/Clerk confirmed that of the grant, \$829,600 of that amount was spent and the insurance claim covered some of the damage to the recreation facilities damaged in Combermere.

At the time, there were two streams of ODRAP funding, one was to help reimburse the township, and the other was to help reimburse private property owners for damage.

"But that would have meant a large fundraising effort and the government would match the funds," Craig pointed out. "We weren't able to help out individual households with assistance. We expended a pile of money moving trees, burning brush, re-opening roads. Ohio Road was nearly all re-constructed. The outdoor rink in Combermere and the community centre sustained a ton of damage. The Mayflower Public Beach was entirely rebuilt because of the insurance money and ODRAP money too, because it was wiped out."

Although the community rebuilt over the past 10 years, there are still many stories that came out of the storm that are worth preserving.

One such story occurred when helpers from Etmskie Logging were clearing trees near St. Paul's Anglican Church, built in 1885, on Mill Street.

As they were trying to remove one tree, which had its top ripped off from the tornado, the chainsaw couldn't make his way through the log. With a brand new chain on, the workers couldn't figure out what was causing such resistance in the tree.

Once they managed to get it down, they noticed that there was a horseshoe, sitting in the middle of the 160-year-old pine.

Had the chainsaw operator cut a few inches above or beneath the site, the horseshoe would have never been found. That's the word from Mission House Museum Curator David Kelley. The Combermere museum houses the rare find, along with photos and other stories from the storm.

"It's a winter horseshoe," David noted. "These are longer than a normal summer



Volunteers worked tirelessly to plant thousands of seedlings in the community. Photo MV Township



Jim Haskins, a MV Lions Club member, right, helps plant a tree after the devastation. Photo MV Township



A rare find took place when crews were cutting down trees destroyed by the tornado. This horseshoe, which has been lodged in a tree for around 160 years, can be seen at the Mission House Museum in Combermere. Photo Christine Hudder



Mission House Museum Curator David Kelley and the exhibit recognizing the 2006 Combermere tornado.

shoe. That confirmed that it happened in the winter."

He suspects that the horse simply lost its shoe while hauling logs and a sapling grew through the shoe. Throughout the years, the tree continued to grow, trapping the shoe inside for 160-plus years until the lucky chainsaw operator found it.

To help preserve the find, Lee Valley Tools sent some solution to help the splitting. This has helped considerably, David explained.

It's all part of a permanent exhibit at the Mission House Museum, dedicated to the tornado, on the second level of the building. The museum itself was part of the madness and should have faced more damage, as it was in the tornado's path. With the

exception of a near miss from a tree that fell near the building, the property was unharmed. In the cemetery, eight stones were knocked over and had to be fixed.

As the curator, David can recall many stories from that terrifying day 10 years ago.

"One fellow was driving on the bridge when it happened," David said. "He was moved all the way over to the other side."

He also heard of others in the local campsites escaping certain death by simply moving to one end of a trailer as a tree squashed the other side.

The best story that he likes to tell visitors to the museum is the most important one of all: That an entire community survived a level F-2 tornado, only to come together and rebuild from the ground up.

we went out on the deck and it was all over and we saw a different world.

An excerpt from Fina Van Roon's journal after the storm. Fina was staying at the Opeongo Trails Resort when the tornado hit.