

Farmers rebuild in tornado's wake

Bruckharts count themselves among the lucky

BY MARGIE FUSCO
Staff Correspondents

WATSONTOWN — When the May 31 tornadoes took their barn and part of their house, it was the second disaster to befall the Bruckharts in less than a year.

Glenn was working hours away in Lancaster that night. Ruth was home with sons Lamar, then 13, Loren, 11, and Linwood, 6. Daughter Lisa, 16, was out with friends.

Ruth recalls the lightning as she put her younger sons to bed upstairs in the hundred-year-old farmhouse. The flashes were everywhere, like a fireworks display. Then came the rain, and with it the winds.

One gust blew the front door open. Ruth and Lamar struggled in vain to close it, and as the hail pelted in, Ruth realized it was no ordinary storm. She ran upstairs and brought the boys from bed to the front foyer.

Seconds later they saw the ancient trees in the front yard lifting up. One crashed through the front gable, driving through two layers of brick as if it were paper. Ruth remembers seeing bricks and a beam fall into her daughter's bedroom at the head of the stairs. The wind sheared through the roof opening and the rear gable wall collapsed as well, leaving only the steeply pitched roof.

"Someone said there was one gust that lasted about 45 seconds, then maybe 15 seconds of silence, and another gust," Ruth says. "I don't remember that. All I remember is that it seemed to go on for hours."

When the winds died at last, the boys ran to a window. "Hol-ee," Lamar exclaimed, "The barn's gone." There was nothing left of the hundred-year-old structure but the silo.

A neighbor was there in a few minutes to make sure they were all

right. Ruth didn't realize the amount of damage to her home until morning, but she knew immediately they weren't alone. "We could hear sirens and see lights," she says. "We knew we weren't the only ones hit."

Downed trees blocked the road and power lines made the going dangerous. By the time the neighbor persuaded Ruth to bring the boys to his house, they could hear a borough work crew trying to clear the debris from the highway.

Ruth remembers hearing their radios crackle messages, "Send help...We have a girl missing...We need more help." That's when she knew she was among the lucky ones.

Some days earlier, she hadn't felt so lucky. She and Glenn had moved north from Lancaster County eight years ago to find good farming land. They located 110 acres with a fine old barn and house. But they also found high interest rates, high costs, and the squeeze between low market prices and uncooperative weather.

On July 13, 1984 they were forced to disperse their dairy herd in a sale. "That was a black day for us," Ruth says. "We're still trying to recover from it."

Glenn went to work in Lancaster because there were few jobs to be had locally. Ruth eventually found a job, just two months before the tornadoes hit, at a local college.

Ruth was touched that the college paid her for the two weeks she took off work after the tornadoes. They also took up a collection at work and presented the money to her. She was touched as well by the support that came from members of her church and from others in the community.

The morning after the disaster, Ruth returned to her home around 6:30. Not long afterward, about 75 members of her Mennonite church appeared on the property, eager to

help her clean up.

They worked all that day and the next, Sunday, despite their religious commitment to rest on the Sabbath. "I guess they were doing what had to be done," Ruth recalls. By Sunday evening they had the house enclosed again.

The barn had to wait longer. It was added to a list kept by the Disaster Service, with working farms getting priority. Finally on Labor Day weekend, the Bruckharts' barn was raised. Ruth recalls that for a while, the vacant space was a painful reminder of the farm they'd lost twice.

Now the barn is up. Glenn has a new job in Williamsport, a few miles away, and he's holding tight to the hope that the stately family will be able to go back to farming one day.

With the house nearly completed and the barn up, the disaster sometimes seems distant. But Ruth notes that the stately trees are gone from the front yard, and now the wind whips around the house as never before.

During a recent morning of high winds, Ruth was in the house alone. The wind blew in the plastic that covered the sashless second-floor windows.

Ruth found herself in terror, reliving that night. Near hysteria, she called the housing contractor,



The Bruckharts pose on their front porch. Rear from left, are Lisa, 16, Ruth, and Lamar, 14. In front is Linwood.

who came immediately and put plywood over the window spaces.

"You think you're over it until something like that happens," she says. "Then you realize it's going to take a while."

Today a brace of oak saplings have been set into holes in the front yard. They look puny against the single old tree that stands in the eastern corner. Time, Ruth knows, is needed for the wounds to heal.

Foresmans start the year with new hope

BY MARGIE FUSCO
Staff Correspondent

WATSONTOWN — Bob Foresman, Jr., made a New Year's resolution: No more bad luck in 1986.

He has reasons to be hopeful now. His herd is up to 120 cows and heifers. He has a new house, a new barn, a new garage and two new storage buildings.

But a collapsed corn crib in front of the barn and twisted siding and heaps of splintered wood out back are solemn reminders that things were not as bright seven months ago, when tornadoes destroyed the family home, barn, and out-buildings.

The Foresmans, with plenty of help from visiting work crews, have rebuilt. Their "new" farm is located on a knoll about two-tenths mile east of the original farmhouse. The knoll, which contained several buildings, was stripped by the tornadoes, but the Foresmans preferred to build on the higher ground since the original buildings were in the path of river flooding.

Looking west now, they can see the remains of the old farmhouse and the barn. Eventually the Foresmans plan to clear the area and install a shed and bunker feeder for heifers.

Bob Foresman, Sr., and his wife, Eleanor, have moved into a house in nearby Dewart, a move they'd considered in the past but felt hastened to make after the disaster. Bob Jr., and his wife occupy the new house on the farm property.

"We're still very lucky," Eleanor points out. They lost 30 head of cattle to the tornadoes, but of their pregnant cows fewer than half-dozen lost their calves. Their milk production levels have remained surprisingly even despite the disaster and subsequent moves and feed changes.

Their problems since the tornado have been mostly small, Eleanor says. The most bothersome ones have been with insurance companies. "Most folks don't think to take a lot of pictures or make notes in the first few days after a disaster," she says.



Bob Foresman, Sr. pauses for a moment in the heifer area of the new barn.

When one insurance company refused to believe the damage had been severe, she presented the adjustor with a copy of a "Lancaster Farming" article on their farm. "The next day he was ready to settle up," she reports.

After the difficulties with the insurance companies, Bob Sr., is wistful about returning to the days when people depended on each

other instead of insurance. "I admire the Amish and how they stick together to help each other out," he says. "The rest of us should take a lesson from them."

That admiration has been heightened by what he's seen in the past seven months. Although the Foresmans didn't get to know

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Neighbors rush to help

The Bruckharts, the Foresmans, and 160 other families in the upper Susquehanna Valley would like to say thanks.

Only a few hours after tornadoes struck the corner where Lycoming, Union and Northumberland Counties meet at the Susquehanna's West Branch, help was on the way.

Aladean Weaver of Watsonstown was one of many local people who hurried to help. The morning after the disaster, June 1, 1985, she was working in the temporary kitchen set up in a firehouse by the American Red Cross.

"We were waiting for food donations from local restaurants, when all of a sudden cars began pulling up," she recalls. Women got out of the cars and came into the firehouse, each one carrying something.

In those early hours there were gifts of food brought by the Amish and Mennonite women of nearby Mifflinburg, including 25 pounds of home-churned butter, gallons of strawberries and corn, enough to provide meals for the workers and for families in need during the disaster.

In subsequent days, groups began to pour into the area. Not only did they contribute to the meals the Red Cross prepared and served during the clean-up. They also came to work. Groups came from Lancaster and Lebanon and even as far away as Ohio. And they kept coming until the work has done in November.

Many came through the Mennonite Disaster Relieve Service and worked in cooperation with the Northumberland County Farmers Association. They brought hay, moved grain, and found shelter and feed for livestock for the approximately 80 farm families hit by the disaster. They also brought their skill to clear land and rebuild houses, barns and other buildings for anyone who'd lost property or sustained damage.

I Ray Zimmerman of the Eastern District Mennonite Disaster Service, who coordinated the effort, notes that many of them took time off from their jobs without pay or used their vacation time or left their farms in someone else's hands to come help strangers. As he resumed his own contracting business in November, Zimmerman admitted that he hadn't kept specific records on the number of workers who came.

"I just know there were always enough people to do what was needed," he says. Red Cross records show that more than 8,000 meals were served to the work crews from June 1 until mid-August, when the majority of the work was done.

"There's no way we could know them all," says Bob Foresman, Jr. "There were so many people, especially during the first weeks. But we're grateful to every one of them."

Homestead
Notes