

# TRAGEDY AS TRIUMPH



*At 5:30 on the afternoon of May 22, 1933, a tornado swept through Liberal. The Jess Buchanan home was but one of many houses and businesses devastated by the deadly storm. The scene here and those on the following pages were taken by Liberal resident James Harvey Riney in the tornado's aftermath.*

*by Pamela Riney-Kehrberg*

## Liberal, Kansas, and Its 1933 Tornado

On May 22, 1933, a disaster was brewing in the Kansas sky. What began as high winds, a dust storm, and hail, turned deadly. At 5:30 that afternoon a tornado swept through Liberal, Kansas, destroying much of what lay in its path. In a matter of minutes the tornado killed four people, injured more than fifty others, left hundreds homeless, and did more than a million dollars in property damage. Other communities felt the storm as well. One person died near Garden City, Kansas, and eight died in Nebraska as a result of the same weather system. As tornados go, it was not terribly destructive.<sup>1</sup> For Liberal, Kansas, however, this tornado was a major event. It was the town's first, and interviews with old-timers suggest that many believed Liberal was immune to such occurrences. Said W.E. Farmer, who had lived in the area since 1885, "Scientists have always told us that there would never be a tornado west of the 101st meridian . . . and I always believed it."<sup>2</sup>

The scientists and the old-timers could not have been more wrong, and the tornado could not have been more poorly timed. The town was struggling with the impact of a severe drought, the Dust Bowl, and the Great Depression. The storm did damage that would not easily be undone. Nevertheless, in the tradition of the disaster, the community chose to interpret its tragedy as a triumph. It came to represent resourcefulness, sharing, and inner strength at a time when such qualities were desperately needed. According to local interpretation, this was an assault by nature that the citizens had the power to overcome—a very important concept for a community of people two years into a decade of severe drought and dust storms. By convincing themselves that they had the capacity to overcome the tornado's effects, the people of Liberal were able to avoid the paralysis that could have accompanied disaster. They drew strength from their beliefs and used that strength to begin the long and difficult process of rebuilding.

In the spring of 1933 conditions in Liberal and surrounding Seward County were nothing short of grim. A serious drought had begun in 1931, and with it came terribly hot summers and smothering clouds of dust. Economic distress added to the area's problems. Although the Great Depression had been slow to reach the area, by 1933 the economic downturn was in full force. Officials were distributing bits and pieces of federal aid and trying to reassure a wary population that it was a good idea. Although individuals often were reluctant to accept aid, it was without doubt sorely needed. By the spring of 1933 the Red Cross was providing food, shelter, or clothing to hundreds of needy residents. In April alone 218 individuals and families received aid in the form of groceries, apparel, or both.<sup>3</sup>

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1. "Remarkable Progress Shown in Rebuilding Liberal After Tornado Month Ago," *Liberal News*, June 23, 1933; "Injuries Fatal to A.C. Felt," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, May 23, 1933; "Eight Dead in Nebraska," *ibid.* The 1925 tornado and fire that flattened Murphysboro, Illinois, killed 250, and the series of storms in 1932 that ripped across Alabama killed 268; Vickie Frost, "And in the Twinkling of an Eye, Murphysboro Was No More," in *When the Whole World Changed: Voices from Murphysboro, Illinois*, ed. Vickie Frost (Murphysboro, Ill.: Murphysboro Pride Group, 1993), 168–75; James Cornell, *The Great International Disaster Book* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982), 222.

2. "Cyclone Last Fear of Old Timers of Southwest Kans.," *Liberal News*, June 3, 1933.

3. "Assisted 218 Persons," *ibid.*, May 10, 1933.

Residents, however, were doing their best to feel hopeful. Traditionally Republican Seward County had voted for Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 and was eagerly expecting an influx of further government dollars. Farmers, desperate because of the combination of the depression and a serious drought, were anxiously awaiting the first federal crop loans. The federal government earmarked \$45,325 in loan dollars for Seward County, and the first checks began arriving in May.<sup>4</sup> Farmers also were hopeful that the weather was becoming more cooperative. A sprinkling of rain had fallen early in the month, and residents tried to believe that it signaled the beginning of the end of the drought. "Old raincoats have come out of storage and parasols been dusted off and put into service. Splashing around in the rain and mud is a real joy."<sup>5</sup> Local optimism was not, however, to be rewarded.

Within a few short minutes, the tornado severely tested Liberal's hopes for a brighter 1933. Two of the town's five schools suffered damage. City hall had to be condemned. A woman living five miles outside of town found pieces of the hospital scattered about her farmyard. One report suggested that three-quarters of the plate glass in the business district was broken, and that businesses had been damaged to the extent of 40 percent of their value. By one estimate, only half of the businesses were insured.<sup>6</sup>

A local resident, James Harvey Riney, was ready with his camera to capture that afternoon's destruction. He photographed the residents of Liberal as they took stock of the situation. Dozens of people gathered on Kansas Avenue to view the aftermath of the tornado. On Second and Third Streets, the tornado had destroyed or severely damaged large numbers of buildings. Cars sat crushed and mangled on the street. The roof of the armory had collapsed, and dozens of businesses had lost their roofs, windows, and walls. Among the badly damaged businesses

were the Automotive Electric Company, the Hospitable Laundry, Smith and Edwards, the Cheatum Electric Company, Ames Harness Shop, Equity Oil Company, and the oil refinery. The tornado had taken a sizable chunk out of the central business district.

Among the saddest scenes were those in residential areas. The Jess Buchanan home seemed to have exploded, with the roof gone, two outer walls missing, and a third ready to collapse. At Tom Williams's house, the roof was still on but perched precariously on the remaining damaged walls. Sofas, beds, chairs, and other personal possessions lay exposed to the elements. Family members, neighbors, and friends gathered to observe the damage and offer support. In all, the tornado left between four and five hundred people homeless.<sup>7</sup>

These scenes of desolation, however, soon were obscured by a flurry of community action. Almost immediately appeals for aid went out to the surrounding area, and just as quickly the people of the Southern Plains responded. Within twenty-four hours the newspaper offices had fielded offers of aid from cities such as Perryton, Texas; Texhoma and Guymon, Oklahoma; and Hutchinson and Wichita, Kansas. The offers came from mayors, chambers of commerce, and newspapers.<sup>8</sup> Local organizations also were quick to come to the aid of the community. Pastor J.F. Curtis of the First Baptist Church reported to the *Liberal News* that his congregation planned to donate its Sunday offering to the needy and had formed a committee to "solicit among our folks for funds and goods, which would be given to relief work."<sup>9</sup> Money and assistance began to flow toward the storm's victims.

Most of the aid given to those injured and displaced by the tornado was channeled through the American Red Cross, which the mayor and city government designated the official relief agency for the tornado. The Red Cross earmarked five thousand dollars for Liberal but required that the local chapter

4. "Loans on Crops Total \$45,325," *ibid.*, May 4, 1933.

5. "First Real Rain in Months Changes Spirit of People," *ibid.*, May 4, 1933.

6. "Two Schools Damaged," *ibid.*, May 29, 1933; "Scattered Five Miles Out," *ibid.*; "City Hall Has Been Condemned," *ibid.*, June 2, 1933; "Property Damage to Million Dollar Mark," *Garden City Daily Telegram*, May 23, 1933.

7. *ibid.*; "Liberal Digs From Under Debris; Lend Help to the Homeless," *ibid.*, May 24, 1933.

8. "City was offered Aid from Many Sources," *Liberal News*, May 24, 1933.

9. "Church Announcements: First Baptist Church," *ibid.*, May 27, 1933.



SECOND STREET

AN ALLEY



THIRD STREET,  
LOOKING WEST

raise one thousand dollars toward the effort.<sup>10</sup> Self-help and community cooperation were required elements of the Red Cross relief program. Within days other towns were sending contributions to Liberal's relief fund. The Hugoton, Kansas, chapter of the Red Cross sent fifty dollars, and the one in Ashland sent

10. "The Red Cross is hereby designated as the Relief Agency due to the present Emergency caused by the tornado. Earl Walker, Mayor," *ibid.*, May 24, 1933; "Proclamation," *ibid.*; "Red Cross Gives \$5,000 Toward Fund," *ibid.*, May 26, 1933.

one hundred dollars. Given the hard times that all of southwestern Kansas was experiencing, these were not insignificant sums. As an editorial commented, "When it is considered that each community has been finding it a real problem to take care of its charity needs in these trying times, this splendid response to the critical condition here following the storm is indeed appreciated."<sup>11</sup>

11. "Contributions From 2 Towns," *ibid.*, May 26, 1933.

Editors of the *Liberal News* exhorted readers to swallow their impatience with the relief effort's slow progress and give generously. "Maybe the Red Cross will not do everything as you would have it done, but just get your shoulder to the wheel and push. Forget your criticism and comment and help. . . . Without your assistance little can be accomplished."<sup>12</sup> These words fell upon receptive ears. Businesses, clubs, and individuals from the community and across the region gave amounts ranging from a few cents to a hundred dollars, all dutifully noted by the *Liberal News*. By June 3 the total was \$1,269.93, and the town had exceeded the local donation quota set by the national Red Cross. Additionally, the area's representatives in Congress pushed for the extension of federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation loans into areas damaged by tornadoes, just as they had for areas in California that had experienced earthquakes.<sup>13</sup> Eventually Congress approved aid dollars for Liberal.

This spirit of charity and giving, however, was reserved for the Liberal community. Liberal's disaster was *not* to be anyone else's bonanza. The work created by the tornado was not to be given to the unemployed of Guymon or Peryton or even Garden City, but only to the unemployed of Liberal and Seward County. Within two days of the tornado, Mayor Earl Walker was encouraging his constituents to use this opportunity to aid their own. In a front-page message to the people he stated, "If anyone needs the work it is our own home people, and I earnestly request that it be given to them." An editorial on the same topic, also on the front page, followed: "anything that can be handled by Liberal men should be retained for them. They have lived here and suffered and need every bit of work they can get."<sup>14</sup>

On the basis of the community's increased needs, the *Liberal News* also asked the population to harden

its heart against the impoverished transients making their way through town. "Daily this gang of tramps or public moochers is increasing, and city authorities feel that we have our hands full caring for the needs of distressed cyclone victims without caring for public panhandlers." The proper response, as suggested by the city, was "that when moochers appear at your back door that you advise them there is nothing for them, and that you call the police department, which will soon have such men on the road or in the city bastille [*sic*] until such time as they want to vacate the city."<sup>15</sup> This seemingly hardhearted advice, however, was hardly confined to Liberal in the aftermath of its disaster. It was common to many depression and drought-stricken communities burdened with too many of the poor and too few resources. Newspapers, chambers of commerce, and city councils regularly asked their people to spend their money at home, to employ only "home men," and to provide charity only to individuals they knew. Hard times tended to foster an "us versus them" mentality and to discourage blind generosity.<sup>16</sup> While the people of Liberal accepted donations from many neighboring communities, the city was not prepared to extend the small and dubious benefits of its tornado to nonresidents.

In the days after the tornado, relief work and fund raising occupied a large number of Liberal residents, allowing the community to begin the process of recovery. Just as important to this return to normality was the community's rhetorical response to the disaster. Recovery required a mental commitment as well as a commitment of time and resources. Residents immediately began to try to make sense of what they had endured and would continue to endure throughout the rebuilding process. One of the most immediate responses to the tornado was for people to begin telling their tales. For weeks after the storm the *Liberal News* featured column after column of personal accounts under the titles of "Sidelights of

12. "The Helper Needs Help," *ibid.*

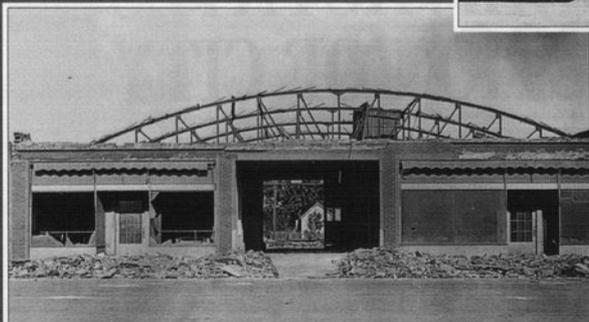
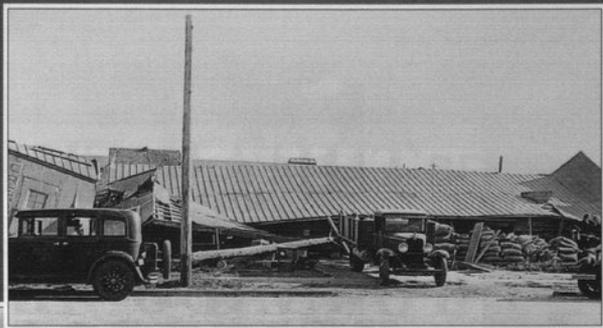
13. "Many Give to Relief Fund," *ibid.*, June 3, 1933; "National and State Officials Soliciting for Stricken Areas," *ibid.*, May 26, 1933.

14. "Use Home Labor Requests Mayor," *ibid.*, May 25, 1933; "Give it to Local Help," *ibid.*

15. "Stop Feeding Them," *ibid.*, June 15, 1933.

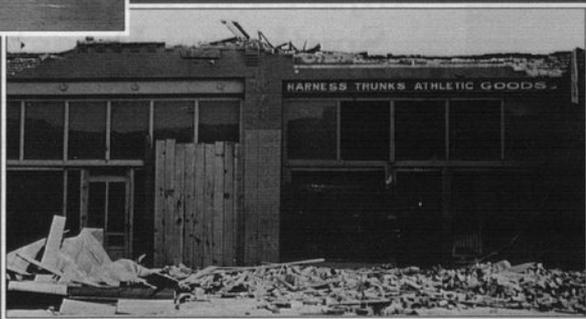
16. Pamela Riney-Kehrbeg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 80–85.

## THE ARMORY



## AUTOMOTIVE ELECTRIC COMPANY

## AMES HARNESSES SHOP



the Tornado," "Tornado Tales," and "This and That." The edition published on May 23 gave many of those touched by the storm the opportunity to tell where they had been and what they had been doing when the storm struck. Visitors from Kansas City were in their room at the Hotel Warren when "a peculiar incident happened. . . suddenly a two by four came in the window and whizzed across their laps, but fortunately neithe[r] was touched." A Friends minister was sitting in his living room with a young relative

when they "looked up and saw the top of their house float off in the distance. The small boy was sitting near the Reverend Bond and the two found the roof of the house in the Larrabee yard late that evening. No other part of the house was disturbed." A child enjoyed a ride on the gale force winds. "The small daughter of the truck driver for Niles Bakery had quite an experience last night when she was picked up by the wind and carried nearly 50 yards. The little girl asked her father 'why he didn't take a ride in the

# THE LIBERAL NEWS

VOLUME 48

LIBERAL, SEWARD COUNTY, KANSAS, TUESDAY, MAY 23, 1933

NUMBER 27

## TORNADO DEVASTATES LARGE SECTION OF CITY VALUATION DAMAGE NEAR MILLION

### Four Killed - Scores Injured in Largest Southwest Disaster

#### THE DEAD

**MARIE BROSEMAN**, age 24,  
1811 North Kansas avenue, em-  
ployee of Roles Farm Supply  
company.  
**GEORGE ROSENDALE**, age  
43, second hand furniture dealer.  
**YEAH HERBERT**, age 21,  
715 North Fremont avenue,  
plate glass paragonist.  
**MISS LOTTIE VOOGT**, age 16,  
North Oklahoma avenue, wid-  
ow.

#### THE INJURED

**E. Paul Amos**, Standard Oil  
Co. employe; **C. Leo Moore**,  
Standard Oil Co. employe, both  
of Liberal, and **Ralph Murphy**,  
Wichita, representatives of the  
Doid Packing company, severely  
but not critically burned  
about face, hands and back in  
explosion at Standard Oil.  
**Owan Dweedy**, Equity Oil Co.,  
leg injury.  
**Tom J. Williams**, head injury.

#### DO NOT BURN TRASH

The Liberal Fire Department asks that the people of Liberal cooperate with them and refrain from burning any trash any place in the city until further notice from the fire department.

#### ASSISTANCE FROM GOVERNOR

Mayor Earl Walker received a telegram this morning from Governor Alf M. Landon at Topeka saying he was ready and willing to assist the people of Liberal in any way. The telegram reads as follows:

"His Honor the Mayor,  
"Liberal, Kansas.

"I stand ready to assist in any way possible in your distress. Please call upon me if there is anything I can do.

"Alf M. Landon,  
"Governor."

Claiming four lives, injuring scores, leaving more 700 people homeless and doing an estimated million dollar property damage, the first tornado in the history of Liberal left a path of death and destruction through the city yesterday afternoon, bringing the first major disaster in this section of the Southwest.

Vogt's home was blown to bits and she was found by searchers lying about a half block north of where the houses had stood, between 7 and 7:30 p. m. She was taken to Episcopal hospital but lived but a short time. Her son is in Episcopal hospital and is among the most seriously injured of the victims being cared for here.

when found, under four feet of debris. For a number of years before entering business for himself Mr. Herbert was employed at the Beckwith & Fisset hardware and was widely known. The body is at the McFall Mortuary. Funeral services will be held at the Christian church Wednesday afternoon at 2 o'clock.

for theatre.  
Second Street—Roles Farm Supply Co., Smith & Edwards, Chaston Super Service, Southwestern Hardware, Gen. Rosendale's Second Hand Store, Peoples Black Building, two brick buildings formerly occupied by Ideal Food Co., Plaza theatre.  
Third Street—Central Grocery



# A NEW LIBERAL IS HERE -- A BETTER \* City to again Lead the Southwest to \* a Greater Era of Confidence & \* **PROSPERITY** \* \* \* \* \*

Much has already been accomplished, little as it is, to help re-build and re-establish Liberal. While the big total of work to be done has hardly been scratched, nevertheless out of the wreckage and ruin of the storm is already coming a better order of things. Many homes have been made habitable, many sufferers have been aided, many plate glass windows have been repaired. Work is going forward and in a few weeks or months at the longest Liberal will again present a good and renewed front to the world. Out of the ruin and discouragement of the past will rise a bigger and better city if we all do our part. That is why you should do your share of everything, particularly if you suffered nothing from the storm, by giving as liberally as possible to the Red Cross. As we of Liberal assist in bearing the burden, so will the National Red Cross correspondingly come to our aid, for "Heaven helps him who helps himself."

One of the finest aids in rebuilding Liberal will be the continued cheerful assistance of those who have suffered most. The uncomplaining spirit who bears his burden as best he can, who refuses to grumble and complain and make trouble—he is the oasis in the desert of despair—the welcome rain after the long, dry spell. It's so much easier for the Red Cross to aid and help the world knows in our reconstruction work—the National Red Cross. It will straighten matters out. Give it your whole-hearted support—not advice or criticism! It's help that's needed now! Come on with your full share of it! Cooperation always works wonders and that's all that's asked now.

**WE CAN HELP LIBERAL BY HELPING OURSELVES IF YOU HAVEN'T CONTRIBUTED \$10.00 TO THE RED CROSS, GIVE WHAT YOU CAN, AND GIVE IT NOW.**

This message of faith and hope in the rebuilding of a greater Liberal is sponsored by the following firms and individuals

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 HENR. POOD STORES

The Liberal News, May 27, 1933, sports this "militant maiden." With the motto "I WILL" emblazoned across her breastplate, the maiden symbolizes the spirit of Liberal, an unconquered spirit that, in the face of tragedy, will build a bigger and better Liberal.

wind.' The small girl was unharmed."<sup>17</sup> Once the danger of imminent demise had passed, the newspaper interviewed six of those who had been injured by the storm, ranging from ten-year-old LaVerne Vogt to eighty-nine-year-old Maggie Bailey. All seemed to agree with Mrs. Bailey when she said, "We're all mighty lucky, that's all."<sup>18</sup>

This need to tell stories after a traumatic event, and particularly a natural disaster, appears to be nearly universal. For every major natural disaster afflicting the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there seems to be a book chronicling the experiences of those caught in its path. On May 27, 1896, an extremely destructive and deadly tornado swept through St. Louis and East St. Louis killing 137 in St. Louis and 118 in East St. Louis. A mere nine days later a volume entitled *The Great Cyclone* appeared, purporting to be "a full history of the most terrifying and destructive tornado in the history of the world." In those few days its authors had gathered enough stories about and reflections upon the tornado to fill 416 pages. Additionally, the book provided more than one hundred illustrations.<sup>19</sup> On April 18, 1906, an earthquake and fire destroyed the larger part of San Francisco. Part of the reflective process following the disaster was the publication of *The Complete Story of the San Francisco Horror by the Survivors and Rescuers*. This book not only gave a blow-by-blow account of the earthquake but also attempted to put the event into a larger historical context by describing other natural disasters, such as the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, the Charleston earthquake, and the Galveston hurricane and flood. Samuel Fallows, San Francisco's bishop and author of the introduction, urged the book's readers not to despair: "The city shall rise again. And with it, shall the other cities that have suf-

fered from the earth's commotion rise again into newness of life."<sup>20</sup> Similar volumes appeared after the Johnstown flood, the Galveston hurricane, the Chicago fire, and the 1966 tornado that plowed a path of destruction through the middle of Topeka, Kansas (but by that point, the tone was more scientific than sensational).<sup>21</sup> Had Liberal's disaster been larger, the town might have had its own book. But being a small town with a small tornado, its residents told their stories and came to grips with their storm via the local newspaper, the *Liberal News*.

Sprinkled in among the more serious stories of near misses and worse were humorous reflections on the day's events. Humor, like tale-telling, gave the community's residents an opportunity to rationalize and come to terms with the destruction around them. The day after the tornado the following comments appeared: "Many people insist it was Kong who was responsible for the tornado. They say the giant ape broke loose from the show here late Monday afternoon and crumbled the buildings as he walked through the heart of the business district." The King Kong explanation seemed to make as much sense as any other, in the immediate aftermath of the city's first tornado. The storm was reduced to manageable size through comparisons to more familiar tempests. "One of the unemployed men of Guymon decided to come to Liberal to assist the workers in cleaning up the streets and buildings but on second thought he remarked: 'No, I don't believe I'll go. I've had enough cleaning up after a tornado. I've been married ten years.'" Others saw an embarrassment of riches in the mess before them. "One man says he has been looking for work for several months and yesterday

17. "Sidelights of the Tornado," *Liberal News*, May 23, 1933.

18. "Six of the People At the Hospital Tell How They Received Their Injuries," *ibid.*, May 25, 1933.

19. Julian Curzon, *The Great Cyclone at St. Louis and East St. Louis*, May 27, 1896 (1896; reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997).

20. Hubert D. Russell, ed., *The Complete Story of the San Francisco Horror by the Survivors and Rescuers* (N.P.: Hubert D. Russell, 1906), 28.

21. For example, see Willis Fletcher Johnson, *History of the Johnstown Flood With Full Accounts Also of the Destruction on the Susquehanna and Juniata Rivers, and the Bald Eagle Creek* (Philadelphia: Edgewood Publishing Co., 1889); Paul Lester, *The Great Galveston Disaster: Containing a Full and Thrilling Account of the Most Appalling Calamity of Modern Times Including Vivid Descriptions of the Hurricane* (Philadelphia: Globe Bible Publishing Co., 1900); *The Ruined City; or the Horrors of Chicago* (New York: Ornum and Co., 1874); James B. Taylor, Louis A. Zurcher, and William H. Key, *Tornado: A Community Responds to Disaster* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970).



BILL BLACK'S CAR

BOGGS OFFICE



CHEATUM  
ELECTRIC  
COMPANY

had four different jobs offered to him within 30 minutes. He has asked three of the men who asked him to work to postpone the jobs for him." There could be no great loss without some small gain.<sup>22</sup>

22. "This and That," *Liberal News*, May 24, 1933. By way of comparison, Russell, *The Complete Story of the San Francisco Horror by the Survivors and Rescuers*, 246, found a small gain, or silver lining, in the destruction of Chinatown, "An Oriental Hell within An American City."

An equally common response was to cast the disaster in heroic terms. Across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries even the graphic responses to disasters seem similar. In 1921 Chicago commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of its great fire by issuing an official poster sporting the likeness of a "militant maiden who represented the spirit of Chicago."

She stood in her winged helmet overlooking the ruins of the old city, Chicago's official motto "I

Will" emblazoned in capital letters across her breastplate, her long and lithe right arm pointing over the bustling modern skyline to an even better tomorrow.<sup>23</sup>

Four days after the tornado, this maiden's sister appeared in Liberal's newspaper. With the pioneer past behind her, represented by the log cabin and covered wagon, and the future before her, represented by the streets of a resurrected city, she strode forward, also sporting a winged helmet and inscribed breastplate. Not surprisingly, that inscription, like Chicago's motto, read "I WILL."<sup>24</sup>

An even earlier two-page spread, minus the "militant maiden," called upon the mythic past and promised a bright future. "The same spirit which conquered the wildness of the southwest prairies of ages past and built homes and business houses where once the owl hooted and the coyote dug his den, will show the world what can be done in the rebuilding of a bigger and better Liberal." It also cautioned readers against self-pity. "If you think you have hard luck at times you should visit the stricken residential section of northeast Liberal and witness how those people are making the best of a serious situation." Said a local businessman, "Those who have suffered are bearing up well and showing the fine stuff of which real citizens are made. Liberal might well be proud of the way they are handling their individual problems and aid could not be given a finer lot of souls on earth."<sup>25</sup>

An essayist for the *Topeka Daily Capital* evoked the same spirit and asked his readers to look to history for similar examples of fortitude. "Liberal, after suffering for months from unprecedented dust storms that fairly lifted the soil, culminating in a devastating tornado that laid low a great part of the town, is going at rebuilding with undaunted spirit." The writer claimed for Liberal the same strength and audacity as

demonstrated by other communities facing similar natural disasters. "Liberal's people are showing the spirit characteristic of all communities, earthquake stricken cities of California, cities wrecked by conflagrations like San Francisco or Chicago, communities devastated by floods or by plagues, towns and villages and countrysides wiped out by the lava rivers of volcanoes." He credited the citizens' strength to the human desire to build, maintain, and protect a home. "The sense of home and the deepest instinct of all, of survival, will rebuild Liberal."<sup>26</sup>

A month after the storm, a writer for the *Liberal News* wrote a congratulatory story, applauding the heroism of local citizens and the remarkable progress made in repairing the tornado's damage. "Every loyal citizen" had given his or her best, volunteering aid in the storm's immediate aftermath, as had local service organizations, from the Boy Scouts and the American Legion to the Red Cross. Employees of the *News* had driven all the way to Guymon, Oklahoma, to publish the paper. The hard work had paid off; a month after the tornado "we see almost a new city." Buildings had been repaired, homes had been rebuilt, and men who had been out of work for months had found employment in the process. What might have been a defeat had been made a victory through the guidance of the town's leading citizens, "men always striving for the betterment of this town."<sup>27</sup>

This is not to say that the writer was stretching the truth. Indeed, the citizens of Liberal had pitched in to rebuild their city. The Boy Scouts had been out in force doing what they could to help their neighbors. Donations had made their way to Liberal, and residents had used those dollars to begin the process of rebuilding. They took advantage of the possibilities within the disaster. Some, in fact, had made a small profit from the events of May 22. Photographs of the day's events were in demand and available for

23. Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 274.

24. "A New Liberal Is Here," *Liberal News*, May 27, 1933.

25. "Let Us Rebuild With Great Hope," *ibid.*, May 25, 1933.

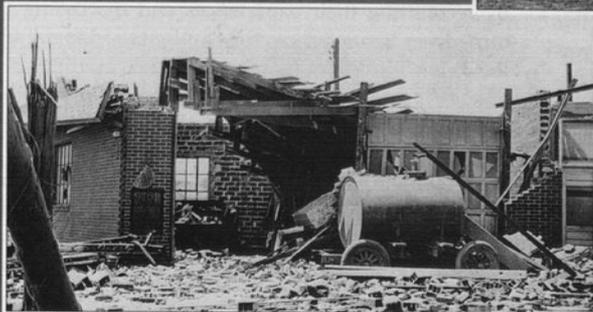
26. "The Spirit of Liberal," from the *Topeka Daily Capital*, reprinted in *ibid.*, June 3, 1933.

27. "Remarkable Progress," *Liberal News*, June 23, 1933.

## HOSPITABLE LAUNDRY



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purchase. An ad in the local paper read: "Tornado pictures, all sizes, all kinds. Turtle's Studio." The newspaper itself got into the act, commenting, "In the News window this afternoon is a mighty fine panoramic view of the devastated part of Liberal, as taken by the Turtle Electric Studio. The firm has these pictures for sale if you desire one."<sup>28</sup> The owners of a movie theater damaged by the storm claimed

progress had come from the storm. "A new sign, much prettier than the large one destroyed by the tornado, is to be installed." Other firms discovered that the tornado had been good for business. "Lumber houses and most every other business house had exceptionally large business crowds for days to follow." The disaster also generated tourism: "People who came to Liberal to see what had actually happened, shopped in the local stores and left money in Liberal to help the ones who had been temporarily

28. Advertisement, *ibid.*, May 26, 1933; *ibid.*, May 27, 1933.

crippled."<sup>29</sup> This, however, was a very small silver lining relative to the size of the problems the community would encounter as it rebuilt.

People had responded to the crisis and done what they could to right the wrong visited upon their city at the hands of nature. Unfortunately, they could not completely and immediately right that wrong. Although many asserted that the community was coming back, and better than ever, Liberal actually recovered quite slowly from the damage inflicted on May 22, 1933. Even though it is impossible to separate the effects of the tornado from accompanying problems of the drought, Dust Bowl, and Great Depression, it is clear that the tornado complicated what already was a difficult situation. Liberal began the Great Depression with a population of 5,294; it ended the decade with a population of 4,410, a 17 percent reduction. Seward County as a whole lost 19 percent of its population.<sup>30</sup> At the decade's end the Red Cross was still assisting between two and three hundred individuals every month.<sup>31</sup> Full recovery would not come until the end of the drought, the beginning of World War II, and the decision to build an air base at Liberal.

It is likely that somewhere deep in their hearts, the residents of Liberal knew that their tornado was not the triumph they claimed it to be. It is also just as likely that in 1933, in the middle of what were already overwhelming economic and environmental challenges, they could not admit that to themselves. In their response to the experience of the tornado, the residents of Liberal were trying to make sense of their relationship with capricious nature. Droughts, dust storms, and tornadoes were nothing new, but during the 1930s those phenomena were plaguing the community in extraordinary ways. The residents' interpretation of a tragedy as triumph and opportunity allowed them to make sense of what seemed like an otherwise senseless occurrence.

29. *Ibid.*, June 8, 1933.

30. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population*, vol. 3, pt. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1932), 885; *ibid.*, *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940: Population*, vol. 2, pt. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1943), 131.

31. *Southwest Daily Times* (Liberal), November 8, 1940.

Carl Smith, in his book *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief*, explained this phenomenon:

The central intellectual drama in the consideration of the nature of disorder is the struggle of the imagination to explain what is inexplicable, troubling, or threatening. The imagining of disorder . . . involves the attempt to find the best ways in which to absorb those things that challenge the sense of what is right and normal. The best way is the one that helps master experience by finding a way to think and talk about it.<sup>32</sup>

By recounting their experiences and discussing the tornado in heroic terms, the residents of Liberal had the opportunity to remake disorder in their own image—or at least in an image they could understand. Despite destruction on a large scale, the vast majority had survived to tell its stories. Most people had emerged physically unscathed. The event could now become a part of their mythic past, a past that included many struggles with inhospitable nature. Again the residents had mastered a potentially damaging encounter and would live to fight another day.

As the essayist for the *Topeka Daily Capital* explained, people persist in living in areas prone to earthquake, flood, tornado, and other unpleasant visitations of nature, in spite of their fears.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, few places on earth are exempt from such phenomena. To continue to call those places home and to survive those calamities when they happen, people must believe that they are bigger and more enduring than those forces of nature. Right or wrong (and often humans are wrong in these matters), they must believe that in a contest of human will against inhuman might, the humans will prevail and indeed prosper. The residents of Liberal chose to believe that they were bigger than a tornado and able, in spite of the times, to recover fully and even profit from its destructive powers. In the same way they faced the Dust Bowl, constantly reassuring themselves of their strength and resilience in the face of potential desolation. They were stronger than the storms and would

32. Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief*, 6–7.

33. "The Spirit of Liberal."



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find a way to overcome them.<sup>34</sup> In the experience of their first tornado, the residents of Liberal won a small rhetorical and spiritual victory against the

forces of nature threatening their homes. In spite of the hazards of life on the Southern Plains, they fully believed that they would endure environmental tragedy and perhaps even be strengthened by it.

34. See Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, 129–39.

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