Mohawk's maintenance shop was completely wiped out, its contents, including heavy machinery, scattered around the area by the indescribable violence of tornadic winds.

Tornado!

It took less than three minutes for three deadly funnels to wreak havoc on a Connecticut area in July. But the real story is just beginning: the gutsy response of Mohawk Mountain; the warm response of a caring industry.

by David Rowan

Photos by Rick Carter

At 4:30 on the afternoon of July 10, Don (25) and his brother Brad (21) were doing some riggin gon Lift No. 2 preparing to change a bullwheel bearing. They are the sons of Steve Hedden, general manager of Mohawk Mountain Ski Area, a 42-year-old ski area in Cornwall, northwestern Connecticut.

The guys remarked on the darkening sky and impending storm, and Don said he was going to go down to the store to get a pack of cigarettes before the storm hit. He had recently taken up smoking — "Maybe a pack a month," comments his father. "Mostly to keep the bugs away."

Brad told him to go ahead; that he would keep going and get everything ready to go first thing in the morning.

"No, c'mon with me," Dan said. "We'll talk to the guys up at the gas station for a few minutes. Then we'll come back."

Early that morning, just prior to sunrise, a low pressure system was located over southeastern Ontario, and a cold front extended across Lake Huron and northern Michigan and across Lake Michigan to central Wisconsin. Storms were running southeastward at about 30 mph. Strong jet streams at 5,000 and 20,000 feet flowed southeastward from Michigan, across New York State and into western New England.

The scenario started to evolve: an active warm front, strong low- and high-level jets with directional shear, very warm, moist air feeding into the northeast and a cold front approaching from the northwest and accelerating — the
Channing Murdock (left) from neighboring Butternut Ski Area and Steve Hedden, Mohawk's general manager, can smile the day after even amidst the devastation. Shearing of trees at uniform height is typical of the sudden, explosive tornado impacts.

Mohawk's base lodge sustained damage that would be considered major, except when compared to the total devastation of other buildings at the area.

Several of the area's 20-ton counterweights lurched skyward as a result of trees falling across the lines. All five lifts sustained damage; one terminal was hard hit.

primary ingredients for severe weather. The only ingredient missing was heating of the lower levels, which de-stabilizes the atmosphere; and that was almost a sure bet. Temperatures in the mid-80s to low-90s were everywhere.

The surface low continued to deepen. As the line of thunderstorms proceeded southeast into the more unstable air mass, the storms quickly strengthened. At approximately 3:15, a severe thunderstorm watch was issued that included all of Block Island and Connecticut. It was at this point that the western half of the line of storms was moving into the most unstable air it could encounter. Now all the elements necessary to produce severe thunderstorms and tornadoes were present. And the elements fell into place at precisely the right time of day to get the maximum intensity.

A super cell entered Connecticut just before 4 pm at Salisbury, causing little damage. Shortly after 4:30, a tornado, initially rated 2 on the Fujita scale, but probably to be upgraded to a 4 (5 is highest) descended on the small community of Cornwall. From the signature of the damage pattern it probably consisted of two or three separate vortices.

The tornado then proceeded some 44 miles along a straight line at about 37 mph, setting down for brief, horrifying visits on Bantam, Watertown (where the storm's only fatality occurred) and on to Hamden, a low-income suburb of New Haven, where enormous property damage was done to churches, schools, and houses.

The clock in the maintenance shop where Dan and Brad had been working stopped at 4:37. In less than three minutes, roofs were ripped off, buildings blown away and trees — especially trees — were snapped like matchsticks.

Hundreds, some as big as four feet in diameter, fell on the liftlines. Hedden counted over 60 on one line alone. The cables became giant catapults: cross-arms snapped, chairs were dashed to the ground, towers twisted and 20-ton counterweights bobbed like ornaments on a Christmas tree.

The ski shop was demolished, its contents "re-distributed" far and wide. "There wasn't anything wiped out that wasn't of value," Hedden commented, "but there was a patrol building that I would dearly love to have been blown away, and it wasn't touched!"

Don and Brad did go to the corner store for cigarettes, and a providential trip it was. The maintenance shop where they had been working minutes before was reduced to rubble.

"There was no way those boys could
have survived if they had stayed where they were,” says their father. “Each had a pickup there in the garage, and those were trashed. Just the stuff flying around in there would have done it. There was an electric chain hoist that runs on a jib crane, and parts of that we found down here in front of the lodge. Everything was flying around!”

Steve Hedden had gone home — five miles away normally, but with the trees down, more like 15. He is a town selectman, and he set off to see what damage there was from what he saw at that time as “a thunderstorm with some winds.” Don and Brad met up with their father, all of them still unaware of what had hit the area just down the road.

“We’d better go back and close the doors on the shop. We left them open,” said Don.

One of those doors was wrapped around a tree halfway up the mountain.

“There was nothing left,” said Hedden quietly.

For Mohawk Mountain’s president, Carol Lugar, the area has been a major part of her life from earliest childhood. Her father, the legendary Walt Schoenknecht, was the area’s founder. Her house is on the edge of the area, and she had been at home when the tornado hit.

“It was very dark; you couldn’t see a thing. I knew trees were down — in fact, my house was hit. After the storm passed, I was able to climb through the downed trees and clamber down the bank to get a view of the area. Only then did I begin to grasp what had happened.”

And the next day’s bright sun indelibly etched the details of the destruction on all who surveyed it. It was awesome. It was numbing.

Phones were out, of course, but first news reports were suggesting the scope of the damage. Channing Murdock, of Butternut Ski Area, and Rick Carter, of Ski Sundown — neighbors, competitors, friends — made their way to Mohawk and met up with the stunned Steve Hedden and Carol Lugar. It was all really too much to absorb.

The lifts, especially, were Hedden’s handiwork and pride. He is, himself, something of a legend among his peers, as a sort of one-man lift designer, builder, fabricator, welder. In truth, all five lifts were Hedden hybrids: a Hall/Hedden and the rest Carlevaro/Heddens. One that incorporates his own terminal design and construction is more a Hedden/Hedden than anything else.

The destruction was cruel.

By the next day the insurance team, headed by Bo Adams from Kendall, together with engineer Frank Neeld, was on the scene, and the mood shifted. Carol was even able to quip that “Snowmass might have its Big Burn, but now we have a slope we can call the ‘Big Blow.’ ”

With the new mood came the decision to go for an on-schedule opening. The trees would be cleared, the untold lift damage repaired, buildings rebuilt. There was insurance — not nearly enough, of course, but then who covers lifts against this sort of wipe-out? Maybe against one getting fire-dam-

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