

Fierce storm rocks North Wilkesboro

Said to be the worst since Hugo

By JERRY LANKFORD

Record Editor

Vernell Rhoades was working next to a window at the front of her store on Saturday afternoon when she first heard the harsh roar of strong winds. "There was a big bolt of lightning and the sound of thunder," Rhoades said. "There was a big pop, like a gunshot, and all of a sudden the front (of the store) came down on the sidewalk." Rhoades, the owner and manager of Rhoades Book Store on Ninth Street in Downtown North Wilkesboro, said the storm and subsequent damage came fast. She said she wasn't sure if lightning or wind caused the damage to the green façade of her store.



The facade of Rhoades Book Store on Ninth Street was partially torn off during the storm.

But, she said, "God sure was looking out for me." The big plate glass windows facing the sidewalk vibrated from the wind, Rhoades said, adding that rains fell so heavily the walkway was barely visible. A lone customer, who had been in the store, left moments before the storm hit and Rhoades was there alone. Having moved away from the windows after the initial damage, Rhoades said she looked outside and up C Street and watched as two trees were toppled over. "It was scary," she said. The storm, which emergency workers are calling the worst in more than a decade, seems to have mostly been contained to inside North Wilkesboro town limits. North Wilkesboro Fire Chief Niki Hamby said the wind damage is the worst he has seen in the town since Hurricane Hugo hit in 1989. "The wind was almost as fierce as it was then,"

Hamby said. The storm hit between 2:30 p.m. and 3 p.m. Saturday.

Hamby and other members of the North Wilkesboro Fire Department patrolled streets. They found downed trees in Finley Park, on Elizabeth Street, Trogdon Street, J Street, Hinshaw Street and E Street. David Lovette, North Wilkesboro's public utilities director, said five town employees are expected to be working the rest of the week to clean the downed trees and debris. "As far as how much dollar damage we have, it's not really clear yet," Lovette said Tuesday morning. North Wilkesboro Town Manager Hank Perkins told *The Record*, "I know the damage is widespread," but said no official report had been compiled as of Tuesday. Perkins added that power at the town's water treatment plant was out for more than an hour on Saturday. An emergency generator, however, prevented any disruption in service, he said. Mike Emlaw, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's office in Blacksburg, Va., hadn't heard about the storm until *The Record* contacted him on Tuesday morning. Emlaw estimated wind speeds of the storm at between 60 to 70 mph. after being given a description of the damage. Hamby and Lovette believe the storm was either a straight-line wind gust or a downburst of wind. Emlaw said there is nothing to indicate the damage was done by a funnel cloud.

Wilkes Emergency Management Director Suzanne Hamby agreed. "None of the trees were twisted off, they were just laid over," she said. Some of the most notable damage occurred on E Street near the North Wilkesboro Presbyterian Church. There, a large oak tree fell across the top of a Toyota van. Carla

Pinkerton, the owner of the van, said she wasn't aware of how much damage had been done until Sunday morning. Pinkerton said she had been bike shopping in Chapel Hill and had arrived home late Saturday night. "I saw that there was a bunch of branches on it (the van) but I really wasn't sure what had happened," Pinkerton said.

Around 6:30 a.m. Sunday, Pinkerton said she walked across the street and saw the roof of the van had been crushed.

The downed tree also caused disruption in phone service. Regardless of the damage to the vehicle, Pinkerton says she is grateful things weren't worse. "I'm just glad my kids weren't in it," she said. "I'm just glad for a lot of things."