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## On a solid foundation

### Pain lingers after Cross Plains fire, but town's future looks bright

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"We were so busy in January and February that it all seems like a dream," Cross Plains Mayor Ray Purvis says of the cleanup, which cost \$169,000. The city is still waiting for reimbursement from FEMA.

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CROSS PLAINS -- The volunteer fire chief in this town, a man who doubles as the undertaker, understood his town's vigilance.

"Paranoia, actually," he said.

This community of 1,000 people smelled like a trash fire for weeks after a grass fire nearly swallowed the whole city in flames and smoke and ash after Christmas. They had buried two longtime residents, and close to a fifth of the town was homeless.

Since then, people have called in fires that turned out to be taillights in the distance. They called Bob Harrell, the fire chief, to complain about people barbecuing outside or ranchers welding.

But over time, Cross Plains, smelling and looking like a devastating fire had never happened, began to resume the life of a normal West Texas town, worrying about the drought and talking cattle prices and marveling at the price of real estate.

"Oh, it's lifted a whole lot," Harrell said one afternoon last week, his boots propped up on his desk at the funeral home. "But it's not gone. They see smoke, they holler. They hear a siren, they want to know what's going on."

What is not normal about Cross Plains now is that it is in the middle of a mini-building boom, some of it thanks to waves of volunteer laborers who spent their summer mission trip in Callahan County. More than 20 houses around town are under construction, including a few speculative houses.

In fact, the progress of the town has some people saying the unthinkable from six months ago: The town is, in many ways, better off.

"If we hadn't lost two people, I'd say it for sure," said Mayor Ray Purvis, who owns a barbershop on Main Street.

Debbie Gosnell, the city administrator, has reason to disagree. Her childhood home, where a brother and sister lived, went up in flames. So did two of her nephews' houses.

Memories of the fire still bring tears to her eyes.

"As much as I hate to say it, Cross Plains has changed for the better," she said. "There were some old houses that needed to be gone, and we needed new housing in the worst way. And it has brought a closeness to this community that was there before, but it's stronger now."

### **Getting back on its feet**

At lunchtime on Dec. 27, authorities suspect someone tossed a cigarette out a window on Texas 36, which links the town to Abilene and Comanche.

The state was parched because it had been a dry autumn and winter. There was almost no humidity that week. And the wind was blowing 30 mph. The conditions were perfect for a fire, and this one moved quickly -- right into town.

Close to 30 fire departments fought the blaze and couldn't gain the upper hand for 12 hours. By that time, two women were dead and 116 houses were destroyed, the most destructive fire of a record-setting fire season across the state.

But the heart of the town -- the commercial section of downtown, the schools and the home of *Conan the Barbarian* creator Robert E. Howard -- survived.

The town began the cleanup almost immediately, taking 15,960 cubic yards of debris to the landfill in the next few weeks. The city, having cashed in a number of certificates of deposit to pay for the \$169,000 cost of cleanup, is still waiting for reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"We were so busy in January and February that it all seems like a dream," Purvis said. "I don't remember a whole lot of anything."

The town was still smoldering when offers of help began pouring in -- from all over Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, from New York and Connecticut and Missouri.

The generosity is sometimes viewed with wonder in Cross Plains.

The townspeople of Winters -- population 2,700 -- sent \$16,000. A church in Oplin with about 25 members sent \$5,000. The Dodge Jones Foundation in Abilene sent \$250,000. All told, more than \$1 million was sent to the victims' fund, the volunteer fire department and the churches.

"We didn't sit back and wait for help; but at the same time, if it hadn't been for all the compassion and love shown us, this town would have had a hard time," said Sam Fleming, who fought to save his house until two state troopers dragged him away.

By February, a committee was formed to split up the donations and to pair up volunteers with Cross Plains residents who needed work done.

The homeowners each received \$8,500 from that fund, and the farmers and ranchers received a few thousand dollars for agricultural losses, which helped greatly for those who had no insurance or not enough of it, officials said.

### **'We are so thankful'**

***For months, church groups have driven into Cross Plains to help build houses for those deemed most in need. They've built 10 so far, using volunteers for labor and donations to buy materials.***

***They stayed on the floor of the First Baptist Church gym, camped at Lake Brownwood State Park or pulled RVs into a park.***

***"Just about every one of them has been fed from our kitchen," said Ronnie White, pastor of First Baptist Church and a member of the committee.***

***Randy and Vickie Walker are witnesses to the army of church volunteers. They watched members of the Weatherford North Side Baptist Church build them a house in less than two months.***

***"It's unbelievable, actually," Randy Walker said one afternoon, taking a break from mowing his pasture on the outskirts of town.***

***The Walkers' farmhouse was built in the 1920s. It went up in flames that December afternoon, as did his pickup and 250 round bales of hay. All that they could save were some rifles and Vickie's sterling silverware, a family heirloom.***

***Their insurance paid off the note, but they would be starting fresh with a loan to build again. Given Randy Walker's multiple sclerosis and his inability to work, the committee felt that he was a good match for a church looking to help.***

***"They're a wonderful couple and so appreciative," said Jean Donald, who was among the 75 church members who built the house, as was her husband, Jim. "These people had every right to be angry, depressed, totally upset with the way their lives were going. But we saw absolutely no sign of that. You didn't know they had a care in the world.***

***"It made a big difference in our lives, too, meeting them."***

***The Walkers expect to move into their new home soon. At that point, they'll move out of the 12-by-30 beauty shop they've been living in for the last few months.***

***"We don't deserve this as much as I'm sure other people do," Vickie Walker said, standing in the shade of her carport. "But it was so nice, and we are so thankful."***

### ***New fire season looms***

First United Methodist Church, one of the largest congregations in town, with a 120-year history, has drawn up plans for a new and larger building with more classrooms and a half-court gym. They hope to start work in the late summer.

Since the fire, the Methodists have held combined services in a Presbyterian church closer to downtown, a 1920s-era building that has gotten an infusion of much-needed repairs and new and younger blood in the pews.

The pastor, Jim Senkel, and his wife are also getting a new parsonage, which burned up, too, meaning the church history stored at both locations didn't survive.

He's gotten a few sermons out of the fire, most recently when a church member of Trinity United Methodist Church in Gulfport, Miss., drove to Cross Plains to deliver a communion set. She'd already come once to bring donations from her congregation, which is still recovering from Hurricane Katrina.

"We had been a blessing to them because we gave them somebody to look to and help so they wouldn't focus on themselves," Senkel said. "That's what we're all called to do."

For Harrell, the fire chief, it's busy again with yet another fire season. He helped fight a fire in Rising Star last weekend. Occasionally he has to respond to fires in slacks and a white shirt if the call comes when he's at the funeral home.

The department bought a new brush truck with a 500-gallon water tank with donations this year, replacing the 1969 truck they had. It's a nice addition to the department.

But Harrell personally fights fires a bit differently now, hanging back a little farther than he used to. His lungs haven't quite recovered from the smoke inhalation of that December day when he was trying to save his city.

"I'll have it forever, I guess," he said.

MAP: Cross Plains. STAR-TELEGRAM

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