

‘It’s gone’

Avery County residents salvage what remains

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MINNEAPOLIS

Bob Tatum stared over the Toe River bridge and pointed out the pieces of his house, smashed to splinters and wedged in the rocks below. There’s his wife’s jewelry box, red and round.

There’s the solid walnut mantle piece, cut by his father-in-law.

There’s a cushion from his paddle boat, hanging from a tree.

“I might start crying,” said Tatum, 74. “I’m raw. I don’t know what day it is. You wake up in the middle of the night and you think, ‘I don’t have a house.’ Your heart’s pounding and you start to jump out of your skin.”

Before Hurricane Helene washed his entire house downriver and drowned both of his horses, Tatum woke his wife to say, “Edwina, we need to get out of here.”

“We grabbed our dogs and a little cash,” he said Wednesday. “Not thinking we weren’t going to come back in a day or two. We’ve been through hurricanes before. I was in Vietnam. This is worse.”

The not-quite-a-town of Minneapolis took some of Helene’s worst, to the point everyone around can rattle off the names of half a dozen friends now homeless, and more than a few know a police officer who’s pulled a body from the mud and debris.

DOGTOWN RESIDENTS ALONE WITHOUT POWER AFTER HELENE

Though named Minneapolis, the tiny hamlet in Avery County with a population of 185 near the Tennessee border more often goes by its nickname: Dogtown.

“At one time, there were more dogs than people,” said Randy Pittman, a longtime local. “They called it Dogtown.”

When the storm hit, neighbors fretted about Beulah Young, better-known as “Bootsy,” who is 96.

She lives a quarter-mile upriver, with her son Champ Robert, wheelchair-bound since a motorcycle wreck his senior year of high school in 1977.

Now the mudslides blocked the steep mountain road to her house, leaving the two of them alone without power or water for three days.

“We had to hike in there with the mud up to our knees,” said Larry Jones, her son-in-law. “I carried 30 pounds of water in a backpack. My wife had her legs all torn-up from rocks in her boots. They’re infected. We just got some antibiotic.”

The rescuers found the Young’s barn swept away, and the yard replaced by river rocks.

“Do you think she said ‘Glad to see you?’” asked Della Wright, laughing at the memory. “She said, ‘Don’t come in here with that mud on your shoes!’”

On Wednesday, “Bootsy” left her house for the first time since Friday, riding in Jones’ pickup to collect her mail.

Neighbors busy shoveling mud out



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Minneapolis resident Bob Tatum had lived 46 years in his riverfront house before flooding from Hurricane Helene washed it away. He found remnants from his house wedged underneath a bridge about a quarter of a mile away.



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Beulah “Bootsy” Young, 96, waited three days to be rescued from her riverfront home along the North Toe River following severe flooding from Hurricane Helene.

of their basements, crowded around her. Just last summer, the 96-year-old Dogtown native was grand marshal of the Independence Day parade.

“We just prayed that God would let our house be there,” said “Bootsy.” “The Good Lord just left my house.”

‘I HURT FOR SPRUCE PINE. I HURT FOR ASHEVILLE.’

Back on the bridge, Tatum continued his survey. Since the storm, he has been unable to return to the spot he shared a house with Edwina, their maltipoo named Puppy and their border collie, Hitch.

“That’s where I go to church right there,” he said pointing to Minneapolis Baptist, where walls leaned at 45-degree angles and thick mud coated the ground. “My wife taught school right there.”

He leaned back over the bridge, noticing some of the former walls in the water, and teared up while struggling to remember the words to a Psalm.

He isn’t able to get blood pressure medicine.

He hasn’t been able to find orthopedic shoes.

Everything he had sat in the river below.

“I know all these people,” said Tatum, a retired Avery County school administrator. “I hurt for Spruce Pine. I hurt for Asheville. It’s not just us.

“You realize you went from having a beautiful home, a beautiful place. Retired. Feeding the fish. Feeding the horses. Petting the horses. Now you know it’s gone.”

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It took neighbors three days to access the riverfront home of Champ Young, pictured on Oct. 2.



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A person walks by debris wedged near a North Toe River bridge in Minneapolis on Oct. 2.