

# A Nightmare That Came True

The sun was still beating down through a thick layer of hot, moist air when NSP employees began winding their way home from work on the afternoon of July 15. Weather reports indicated the possibility of thundershowers but that same forecast had been made for the past several days without producing a drop of rain. It would be just another hot evening—a good time for a cookout, a ball game, light yardwork, a refreshing swim.

But as the evening faded into darkness, it began to look as though the weather forecasters had called this one right. Dense clouds crept from the western horizon and spread ominously across the sky. As lightning flashed increasingly more often the National Weather Service began issuing severe storm warnings. Reports were trickling in about storms in Minnesota but few people were really worried.

Then, in the long hour between 9:00 and 10:00 p.m., order was transformed into chaos in west central Wisconsin. The Big Wind had struck its fatal blow.

As the rain and wind subsided, stunned residents began cautiously emerging from their homes to survey the damage. What they found was unimaginable. The wind, which registered 112 mph at the Eau Claire County Airport before tearing apart the measuring device, had destroyed scores of homes and hundreds of barns. But the tangled maze of devastated trees and powerlines was simply staggering.

NSP Indianhead and Central Division employees quickly realized what was in store for them. Leaving their homes, they threaded their way through tree-clogged streets and roads heading for service centers and what was to become an exhausting marathon of work.



During the early morning hours it was obvious that much damage had been done, but daylight revealed the true extent. Eau Claire, Chippewa, Dunn and Pierce counties had been hardest hit by what the weather service called a "downburst," a rare storm producing violent straight-line winds. Damage estimates surpassed \$160 million and Federal Disaster Aid was sought and promised. Thousands of trees were snapped off or uprooted and thousands of people were without electricity.

NSP crews quickly assessed the system damage: four major trans-

mission lines were out of service; twelve 69 kV lines were down; at least 50 substations were out; many feeders were lost; distribution lines were a mess.

Blackouts afflicted virtually all of Eau Claire, Menomonie, Elmwood, Spring Valley and Altoona. More than half of all customers in the Chippewa Falls area were out of service. Outages affected customers in most communities served by NSP from Prescott north to Glenwood City, east to Abbotsford, south to Neillsville and across to Maiden Rock.

Perhaps the most unbelievable devastation was the toppling of more than 60 huge double-pole 345 kV transmission line structures between Menomonie and Elk Mound. Restoring just that line alone will take months at a cost in excess of \$2 million.

After the assessment of damage, it became obvious that additional help would be needed. By Wednesday, that help was arriving in the form of contracted tree trimmers, Southern Division line crews, contracted line crews, linemen from other utilities, and many volunteers from other NSP departments.

