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Small Okla. town suffers one tragedy after another

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FILE In this Aug. 16, 2010 file photo, an investigator walks out of the scene of a deadly house fire in Weleetka, Okla. Six people died in the fire. People in this small town once considered their community immune from the violence and misfortune of larger cities, but Weleetka has suffered one tragedy after another in the past few years leading some residents to believe their town of barely 900 is virtually cursed. (Sue Ogrocki, File, Associated Press)

WELEETKA, Okla. — People in this small town once considered their community immune from the violence and misfortune of larger cities. Far from urban troubles, they enjoyed a seemingly safe landscape of green dotted with church steeples and laced with miles of back-country roads.

But Weleetka has suffered one tragedy after another: the unsolved murder of two little girls; a house fire that killed six people; the death of a beloved youth minister in an oil tank explosion; and a fire that tore

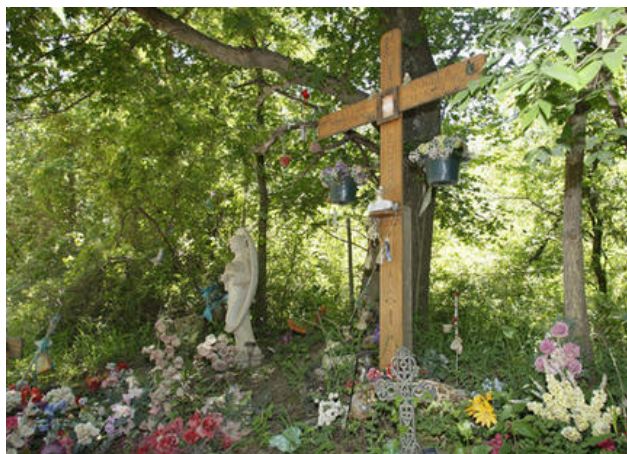
wiping out the popular café and three other businesses — all in less than three years.

Some residents have come to believe their town of barely 900 is virtually cursed.

"It's heartbreaking to think we've come to big-city life," said librarian Debbie Wallace, who grew up playing in the beauty parlor her mother used to run on the main drag — one of the buildings that burned down in the 2009 fire.

The adversity has prompted some families to move to neighboring towns. Others want to go, too, but can't afford to live anywhere else. Young people stay only a short while, fleeing after high school for college or jobs in Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

Rows of empty houses with overgrown lawns are common, and homes are difficult to sell.



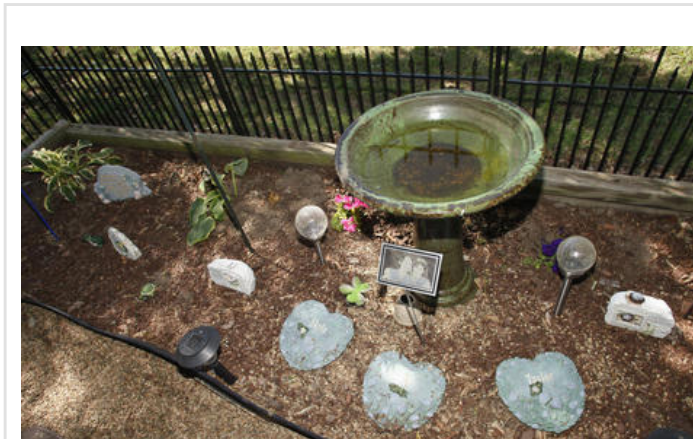
A memorial at the site where the bodies of Taylor Placker and Skylar Whitaker

"The sales are slower in Weleetka," said Carl Alls, an area real estate broker. "A lot of terrible things have happened there."

were found in 2008 is pictured in Weleetka, Okla., Monday, May 16, 2011. People in this small town once considered their community immune from the violence and misfortune of larger cities, but Weleetka has suffered one tragedy after another in the past few years leading some residents to believe their town of barely 900 is virtually cursed. (Sue Ogrocki, Associated Press)

What the downtown fire didn't destroy was wrecked by the recession, and many shops along Main Street have long since closed. When the K&G Roundup Café burned to the ground, so went one of the city's major sources of revenue.

Today, the town 70 miles south of Tulsa is a shell of its former self, and some locals doubt whether Weleetka will ever thrive again.



A photograph of slain students Taylor Placker and Skyla Whitaker is pictured in the memorial garden at Graham School in Weleetka, Okla. Monday, May 16, 2011. People in this small town once considered their community immune from the violence and misfortune of larger cities, but Weleetka has suffered one tragedy after another in the past few years leading some residents to believe their town of barely 900 is virtually cursed. (Sue Ogrocki, Associated Press)

"Have you been here lately?" asked longtime resident Geneva Smith. "Do you see anything worth being proud of?"

Smith said she's ashamed to admit it, but when she goes out of town, she tells people she lives between Henryetta and Okemah — two small towns near Weleetka.

Janis Anglin, former manager of the floral shop that burned down in the fire, described what remained of her

business as a pile of dirt. She remembers a time when travelers used to get off the nearby interstate to explore the quaint downtown and take in a hearty meal at the café.

"Now it's like there is nothing," Anglin said. "There's nothing here to say this was a place."

Those who have stayed in town continue to search for a larger meaning to make sense of the calamities.

"I'm telling you, the devil brought devastation to this town," warned the Rev. John Overton, pastor at Christ's Community Church, which, like most of the parishes around here, averages a congregation of 75 or 80 on a decent Sunday. "The devil has a foothold here, and it's our job to run him out."

Kelli Rector, a cashier at the Med-Econ drug store on Main Street, which proudly displays a copy of the Ten Commandments in the storefront window, knows several families that have left seeking a fresh start and better opportunities.

"There's no jobs down here," Rector said.

Also gone is the security and comfort that townspeople cherished.

Frightened schoolchildren only recently started sleeping alone in their own beds again; residents write down the tag numbers of cars that don't look like they belong; grandparents rock on front-porch swings with pistols in their laps, watching over grandchildren in the yard.

The tragedy that set the town's string of misfortunes into motion was the brutal slaying of two young girls in 2008.

Like they had countless times before, 11-year-old Skyla Whitaker and her 13-year-old girlfriend, Taylor Placker, went for a walk one June afternoon down an unpaved road less than a half-mile from Taylor's home. Their destination: Bad Creek Bridge, where they planned to wade through waist-high weeds to the river bank to collect shells and pebbles.

Skyla was the bubbly one, who took to wearing chunky high heels to school and tried out for basketball and cheerleading. She adopted stray cats — Gracie, Roxie and C.J. were some of the names she gave them — and the animals seemed to follow her everywhere. She wanted to be a veterinarian.

Taylor was the curious one, who could take apart and reassemble a carburetor in short order and had a habit of rescuing turtles crawling along roadways because she thought they didn't have enough to eat. She wanted to be a forensic scientist.

The girls were heading home when they were gunned down by one or more assailants who shot them a total of 13 times. Their bodies were discovered in a ditch by Peter Placker, Taylor's grandfather who raised the girl.

For days after the crime, state investigators canvassed the area, and theories abounded in the months that followed: Did the girls stumble on a methamphetamine deal? Were they the victims of a random thrill killing? Did they somehow meet a predator online? Did an out-of-town visitor murder the girls and then hop onto nearby Interstate 40 and disappear?

In the neighboring town of Henryetta, where Peter Placker and his family moved after the murders, locals still come to the auto-repair shop where he works as a mechanic to offer tips on who might have committed the crime. They still motion for him to roll down his window at traffic lights to tell him they support him.

Bikers see the decal on the back of his red pickup, "In Loving Memory of Taylor Placker and Skyla Whitaker," and give him a thumbs-up or a peace sign.

"I don't have a life anymore," Placker said on a recent morning outside the shop. "Every time I go out there, I still see two little girls laying in that ditch."

The ordeal has also tested Placker's faith.

"I believed in God" before the murders, he said. "But how can you believe in him when he let something like this happen to two innocent girls?"

With the town still reeling, more catastrophes followed, one by one: the fire in 2009 that burned a part of downtown to the ground; 21-year-old Zach Pangle, who was part of Pastor Overton's youth-outreach program, dying in an oil tank explosion in April 2010; the house fire that killed six people months later.

Even though some residents are separated by miles of wooded terrain, the town is close-knit. Many



Debbie Wallace, library media specialist and teacher at Graham School, adjusts a wind chime in the memorial garden at Graham School in Weleetka, Okla. Monday, May 16, 2011. People in this small town once considered their community immune from the violence and misfortune of larger cities, but Weleetka has suffered one tragedy after another in the past few years leading some residents to believe their town of barely 900 is virtually cursed. (Sue Ogrocki, Associated Press)

people recall the excruciating details of each tragedy because they were neighbors or kin or classmates of the victims.

The series of events "really gave this town a stigma," Smith said.

The fear and sadness is reflected in a certain emptiness that settles over the town. On Main Street, where locals once congregated on hot summer nights, "there's nobody hanging out," Overton said.

"I'm not going to lie to you. There's people out here that worry about letting their children out."

Rector was born in Weleetka and says the town is now a shadow of the one she knew growing up.

"In the last few years, we've gotten a black eye," she said. "It's changed so much and not for the best."

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