



WPTF-TV operations director Chuck Britt uses a telephone repairman's telephone to talk with his Raleigh office. He is standing amid the rubble that was the 2,000-foot WPTF-TV tower and the transmitter building.

Ice causes 2 TV towers to collapse

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Staff writer

Two Raleigh TV transmission towers broke apart and crashed to the ground Sunday morning when tons of shifting ice fell from supporting guy wires, causing the towers to sway violently and collapse.

The towers for WPTF-TV, channel 23, and WRAL-TV, channel 5, in Raleigh are in a rural area near Auburn off U.S. 70, south of Raleigh. Both stations went off the air immediately, but returned later in the day with makeshift operations. There were no injuries, but the stations suffered millions of dollars in damage.

Contractors at the scene said that thick ice had coated the towers and supporting wires during the weekend winter storm. In Sunday morning's sunshine, however, the ice began melting and shifting. The guy wires sagged, placing increased tension on the towers, which broke apart and fell in sections.

Stations on cable

As of Sunday night, WPTF-TV and WRAL-TV were being shown on their normal channels on most cable systems. WRAL was being broadcast over channel 40, pre-empting programs from WKFT-TV of Fayetteville, but WPTF was not available to viewers without cable. The television listings on page 6D in today's News and Observer were printed before any arrangements were made to restore over-the-air service.

"They just started doing the watusi and then they came down," said Billy Williams of Panama City, Fla., one of several contractors working in the area.

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when the towers fell.

The 1,965-foot WPTF tower fell at 8:36 a.m. and crashed onto and demolished a concrete block building housing the station's transmitter.

The 2,000-foot WRAL tower collapsed at 9:20 a.m., damaging the WRAL transmitter building and destroying a utility building. The WRAL-FM radio station also was knocked off the air, but was expected to be back in operation early today.

A third tower, operated by WTVD-TV, channel 11, in the same area also was covered with thick ice Sunday morning, but remained standing. There was no interruption in WTVD's signal.

James G. King Jr., of Marietta, Ga., the contractor who operates Tower King Inc., said ice began forming on the towers Friday when the storm moved into the Triangle. When ice on the guy wires supporting the towers began to melt Sunday, it slid down the first thick cables. The weight of the ice caused the wires to sag and bent the towers. When the ice dropped off the cables, he said, the towers swayed violently and snapped.

"It was just like snapping a bow string," Mr. King said. "That's exactly how they both came down in my opinion."

Mr. King said the ice added as much as 40,000 pounds to the towers. Some of the ice was 9 inches thick from the center of the cable and some chunks weighed 600 pounds.

He said he had been in the tower erection business for 30 years and had never seen a tower come down in that way. "It gave me a sick feeling," he said.

Chuck Britt, WPTF operations director, said the TV station's 60-foot antenna apparently "nose-dived" from the top of the tower into frozen ground. The rest of the tower fell in sections, spreading miles of tangled cable, wire, steel conduits and debris over the tower site. Two hours after the tower fell, steam still rose from the icy trench dug by the debris as it crashed.

Ray Easterling, the WRAL-TV transmitter operator on duty Sunday morning, said a caretaker who lives near the transmitter called to warn him when the WPTF tower fell.

Mr. Easterling said he left the transmitter building at the foot of the tower and watched from a distance minutes later as the tower collapsed. "We heard this big noise, the ice slid down the guy wires and then the tower snapped," he said. "It probably took 20 to 30 seconds for it to fall."



WRAL and WPTF resumed operations on cable TV channels in the Triangle early Sunday afternoon using trucks equipped with satellite dishes to replace dishes on the fallen towers. Officials at the two stations said they expected programming to be back on regular cable channels by this morning in other areas.

Robert B. Butler, executive vice president of Durham Life Broadcasting Inc. and WPTF-TV general manager, said about half of the station's viewers have cable television. But reaching viewers without cable service will take longer. Within four weeks, WPTF will temporarily reactivate a tower in Apex it had abandoned when the Auburn tower was built, he said. Replacing the Auburn tower will cost about \$7 million.

Officials at WYED-TV, which offers the Home Shopping Network on channel 17 from a tower near Clayton, were negotiating with WPTF to broadcast the Raleigh station's signal. "We are looking into it," said WYED general manager Robert J. Peretic. "We want to help."

WRAL-TV resumed on-air transmissions about 1 p.m. on the Fayetteville-based WKFT-TV, an independent station on channel 40. WRAL officials said they persuaded the station to pre-empt its programming temporarily to broadcast only WRAL advertising and programs, which include national news and other CBS-TV network shows.

Richard B. Armfield, WKFT vice president and general manager, said he agreed to carry WRAL because more viewers would want the national programs, but he said he did not know how long the station would continue carrying WRAL's signal.

Mr. Armfield said his station has offered to mount additional antennae on its tower temporarily to broadcast WKFT, WRAL and WPTF programming, but that installation would take several weeks. Neither station had responded to the offer by Sunday night, he said.

In any case, Mr. Armfield said he expected WRAL to reimburse WKFT for lost revenue.

Mr. Butler said he could not estimate advertising losses to WPTF. "I don't know how our advertisers would respond to it," he said. "Every day we will be

getting more and more of their audience back for them through cable, and we're already back into 60,000 households."

WRAL officials were reluctant to talk about advertising losses, but they said the loss in air time would not have a great impact on revenue. "Undoubtedly we can make that up and there's relatively little advertising at that time [Sunday morning]," said Stephen B. Grissom, vice president of Capitol Broadcasting.

But advertisers will probably want to be compensated for the smaller on-air audiences because they bought commercial time based on the number of viewers the stations expected to deliver, said Carl Venters Jr., chairman of Voyager Communications Inc. Voyager owns WRDU-FM and six other radio stations statewide. Mr. Venters is a former president of WPTF-TV's parent company, Durham Life Broadcasting Inc.

"All the commercials will have to be adjusted to take into account the smaller audience delivered by the cable companies or by channel 40's UHF," he said. "UHF signals just don't go as far as WRAL and WTVD's signals."

Today "they'll negotiate with all the ad agencies," he said. "Some will be generous, others will require total 'make-goods,' which means another spot and time with an audience comparable to the one they were promised."

Fees for commercials range from about \$200 for an off-hours spot to about \$2,500 for prime-time, he said.

J. David Davis, WTVD news director, said the remaining tower was holding its own under the weight of the ice. "We're in pretty good shape," he said. "We're not sure if our tower suffered any damage from the ice falling off or not. Right now it's not even safe to be near it."

James F. Goodman, president of WRAL-TV/Capitol Broadcasting, said station engineers were not sure why this ice storm brought down the Auburn towers. "Obviously, it was an extraordinary amount of ice," Mr. Goodman said. "This had to be beyond the extreme limit — apparently there was something unique about this."

On Saturday night, the Raleigh-Durham area had mostly sleet, while the east had freezing rain, said Larry G. Lee, a National Weather Service meteorologist. While the sleet is more likely to slide off surfaces, the freezing rain would adhere more, Mr. Lee said.

Mr. Lee said he could not determine how the temperatures would have varied from the bottom of the towers, to the top at 2,000 feet. But, he said that based

on readings from stations in Greensboro and Cape Hatteras, the breaking point of freezing temperatures Saturday night was between 3,000 and 3,500 feet, with everything below that being 32 degrees or lower.

Temperatures this morning rose slowly. Readings taken at the Raleigh-Durham International Airport showed 22 degrees at 7 a.m.; 28 degrees at 9 a.m.; 31 degrees at 10 a.m.; and 35 degrees at noon. "That seems to be typical," Mr. Lee said of the temperature change sequence.

The WPTF tower, which is about 150 feet from the transmitter building, was completed in March 1987. It was the scene of tragedy in July when a hot air balloon hit the guy lines on the WPTF tower, killing three people.

The falling WPTF-TV tower also smashed a diesel tank next to the transmitter building, spilling 3,000 gallons of the fuel. Garner firefighters worked to clean up the spill Sunday.

Mr. Easterling said the WRAL tower at Auburn, which was built in 1979, also transmitted the WRAL-FM radio signal and held equipment for at least 100 commercial and government agency radio networks. Two transmitters for Wake County law enforcement agencies were lost in the WRAL tower crash. The agencies were using weaker, secondary channels Sunday.

Mr. Easterling said there was at least \$6 million in equipment and facilities at the WRAL tower and transmitter, but he declined to estimate the damage at the site.

Staff writers Katie Mosher and Robertson Barrett contributed to this report.