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Independence Tube rises from tornado's ashes

Just one year after its Decatur, Ala., facility was virtually obliterated by a tornado, Independence Tube was fully operational with the help of local companies and state officials determined to keep the company in the state.

An Alabama metals producer that was destroyed by a tornado in April 2011 was back up and running within a year of the devastating storm.

Independence Tube Corp.'s Decatur, Ala., facility was ground zero for a powerful tornado that struck April 27, 2011. That afternoon, 55 tornadoes skipped across northern Alabama, part of a deadly storm system that spawned 358 tornadoes and caused 348 deaths over four days. The Decatur plant, which began producing squares, rectangles and rounds in 2006 and completed a 125,000-square-foot expansion in 2010, was leveled; the 435,000-square-foot mill was a total loss.

"My first thought was, 'Thank God nobody was hurt,'" said Independence Tube president Rick Werner, who at the time was in Orlando, Fla. He got in his car and

drove all night to Alabama. "We looked at it the first time that next morning. There was just shock and awe at the amount of devastation."

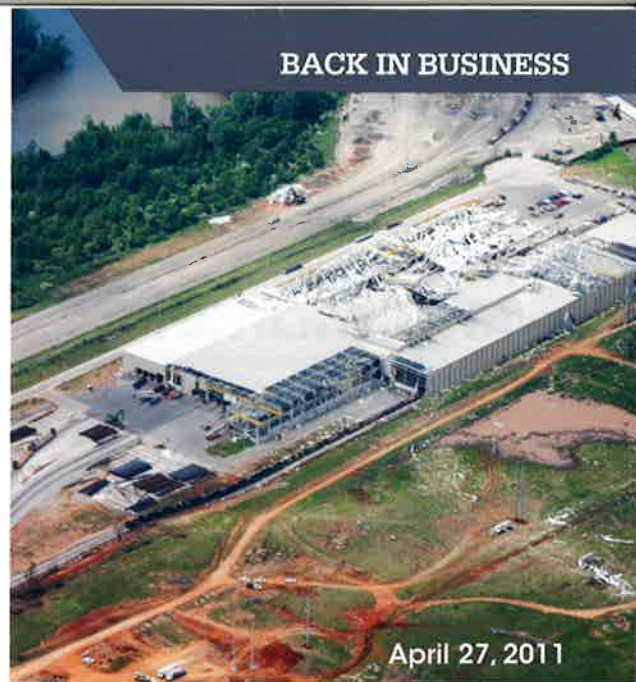
About 25 employees and two truck drivers were in the building when the tornado, packing winds of more than 200 mph, hit just after 4 p.m. Employees had been following the track of the storm, and all but one truck driver managed to find shelter in cement-block rooms in the interior of the mill building. That driver, who was preparing to accept a load of tubing, rode out the storm in the cab of his truck.

Meteorologists later determined that the storm that hit Independence Tube had cut a swath 1¼ miles wide and more than 100 miles long.

Other metal producers also sustained damage that day. Birmingham Bronze & Metals Co. lost its 20,000-square-foot



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PHOTOS: Independence Tube Corp.

warehouse and 2,000-square-foot office to the storm, and American Cast Iron Pipe Co. in Birmingham suffered property damage. Producers across the region were without power for weeks after the storm system devastated power provider Tennessee Valley Authority's backbone high-voltage transmission system in Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee.

In the eerie silence following the tornado, employees from steelmaker Nucor Corp.'s mill next door rushed over to help Independence Tube employees dig out from the destroyed plant. High-voltage transmission wires were down all over the property, and Nucor workers cleared a path so employees could escape. "Nucor had people on site within minutes," Werner said. "They were just incredibly helpful."

At the same time Werner was driving to Decatur, engineers from Independence Tube's Chicago and Marseilles, Ill., facilities also were on the road to Alabama. They met Werner to survey the damage and determine a plan of action.

The task ahead seemed immense. Approximately 385,000 square feet of the facility—about 88 percent—had to be replaced. Much of the mill was metal, wood and plastic rubble, the building's outside panels were shredded, five overhead cranes had been destroyed, eight additional cranes were damaged, several 12.75-inch by 60-foot pilings weighing 2,000 pounds apiece had been picked up and hurled up to 300 feet from the outdoor storage yard and, incredibly, a rail spur serving the facility was moved four feet from its original location.

Work had to be found for the nearly 70 employees. Fortunately, most of the tooling equipment, although waterlogged from the driving rain that accompanied the tornado, was salvageable. "We started rebuilding the next day," said John Tassone, Independence Tube's marketing manager.

Reconstruction of the Decatur mill began within 18 hours of the tornado. Werner and engineers supervised the transfer of about 8,000 bundles of finished tube that had been stored under a roof that was no longer there. Independence Tube leased warehouse space at nearby Wolverine Tube Inc., which had not been damaged. A number of Independence Tube's employees spent the next several months at the Wolverine Tube facility, cleaning those 8,000 bundles by hand.

In the first days following the tornado, Werner and Independence Tube had two

critical decisions to make: how to dispose of the tons of rubble on the site, and whether to rebuild in Decatur.

The problem of how to dispose of debris was solved quickly. Nucor told Werner that it would recycle all of the metal scrap in the company's melt shop.

Independence Tube was quickly wooed by other southeastern states that offered incentives to move the facility. Independence Tube had built the Decatur facility in 2006 with the assistance of a 10-year Alabama state tax abatement, and Alabama had offered additional tax abatements when Independence Tube expanded the facility in 2009-10. The tax abatements offered sales and use tax savings during construction, but officials were ambivalent about extending the incentives for a reconstruction effort.

The Alabama legislative session was winding down in the days following the devastating tornadoes, but state Sen. Arthur Orr pushed through legislation to extend the state's property tax abatement for

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two years for companies that were rebuilding after the storms. The Alabama legislature passed Orr's bill and sent it to Gov. Robert J. Bentley, who promptly signed it.

With the tax abatement legislation in place, Independence Tube signed a contract with Fite Building Co. of Decatur, which had built the facility only five years earlier. Independence Tube called the rebuilding effort "the Phoenix Project" after the mythical bird and its ability to arise from the ashes.

Contractors and subcontractors swarmed over the Decatur site and began the nearly yearlong process of rebuilding an entirely new facility. During construction, they used 1,350 tons of steel to rebuild 385,000 square feet of warehouse space. Contractors also replaced 482,000 square feet of roofing and 167,400 square feet of siding.

Independence Tube took pride in the fact that no one was laid off, Werner said. During the 11 months the plant was being rebuilt, Independence Tube sent teams of Decatur employees to work in the company's facilities in Chicago and Marseilles.

The company paid for hotel rooms for the Alabama employees and paid for them to return to Decatur every two weeks. By the time the Decatur mill was up and running, more than 40 of the facility's 75 workers had spent time in Illinois.

Werner said that moving the Alabama employees to the company's Illinois plants accomplished two objectives: Independence Tube was able to retain quality, veteran employees by offering them work up north, and the company was able to fill orders from Decatur at its two Illinois facilities.

"All but two of the sizes that Decatur made were made by our other plants," Tassone said. "We purchased additional tooling for Marseilles in June 2011 that allowed us to make those two sizes. There really wasn't much of a hiccup in customer service."

The Marseilles facility was producing round sizes previously made only in Decatur just eight weeks after the tornado, and Independence Tube was able to fulfill 99 percent of its orders while the Decatur plant was being rebuilt.

By fall 2011, rebuilding was in full swing. More than 34 local contractors were involved in the project, and more than 300 people were employed on the job site. By the time it was finished, some 168,000 contractor man-hours had been used to rebuild the plant, with resources coming from six different countries. The actual structure was completed on Nov. 30, 2011, and the roof was completed about three weeks later. The contractors erected three 90-foot free spans to allow for easy transfer of material to outside storage.

Independence Tube used the opportunity to tweak the product line at the Decatur plant. During the 2009-10 expansion, the company had increased production to offer 14-inch (outside diameter) rounds. The 2011 rebuilding allowed the company to add production of 16-inch rounds.

On April 27, 2012, Independence Tube marked the one-year anniversary of the tornado with a gala open house at the rebuilt Alabama facility. Bentley and Orr joined nearly 300 employees, contractors and state and local officials to dedicate the new building, which was already in full production.

Werner called the rebuilding a team effort. "Everybody pulled together," he said. "We are thankful for so many things."

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