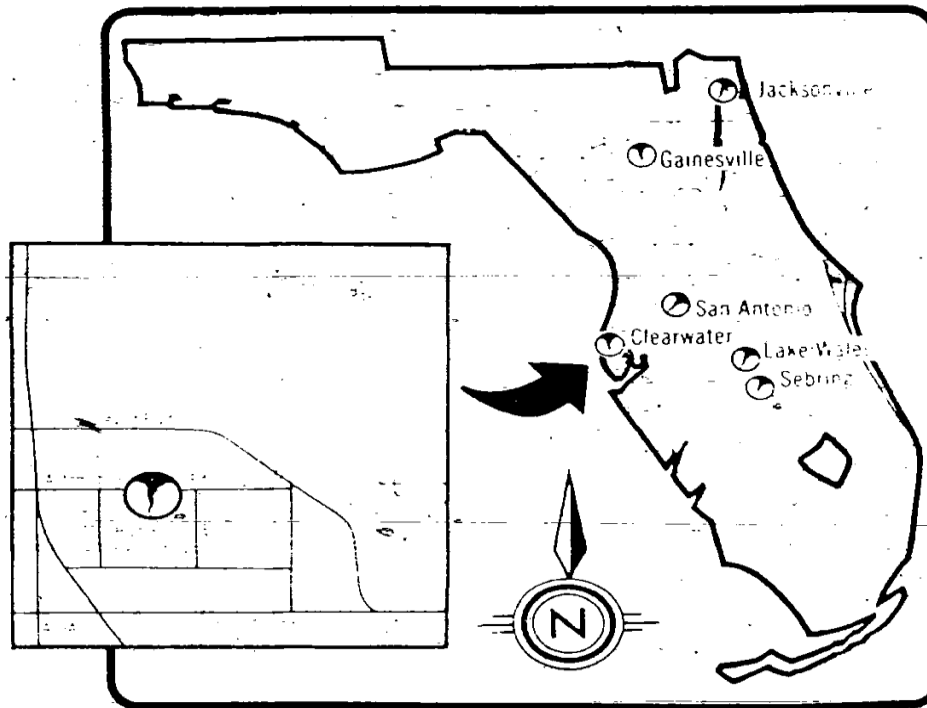




# Tornado Kills Children at Elementary School in 1978

## Fact Sheet

- Date: May 4, 1978
- Time: 1147 am
- Estimated Tornado Intensity: F3
- Estimated Maximum Wind: 158-206 mph
- Tornado Width (Yards): 200
- Path Length (Miles): 2
- Deaths: 4
- Injuries: 94
- Damage Amount: 43M with a 3.1M loss to the school
- Number of Homes Damages: Many homes and trailers & 1 school
- County: Pinellas



Shown above is where several tornadoes hit in Florida; the big arrow pointing to the tornado that hit Pinellas County.

**Tampa Tribune**



# 'People Were Screaming'

Tampa Tribune

## Two Killed, 93 Injured As Twister Rips Open Pinellas County School

Tampa Tribune



Just a splintered shell of what was High Point Elementary School remains in the wake of Thursday's tornado.

Tampa Tribune

### Summary of event:

Just before noon on May 5, 1978 it was just another day for the people in Pinellas County. Parents and guardians already dropped their children off at school and were already at work when the sky went from sunny to grey and dark quickly.



The storm approaching was fierce and it did not care what was in its path. As the tornado hit the school unexpectedly no one was prepared for what happened. Things quickly turned to horror. Many stories of the incident were told from many different perspectives from students, teachers, and witnesses.

#### Detailed experiences:

Cheryl Guthrie, a fifth-grader, was in a portable classroom when the tornado struck. **“The portable started rocking up and down like a boat. The lights went out and the teacher fell to the floor. I got so hysterical. I ran out the door. I went to the cafeteria but the whole school has just caved in,”** she said. **“Everyone was running around, crying and getting soaking wet. In the classroom, everyone was just screaming”** (Tampa Tribune, May 5<sup>th</sup>, front page). Another student was another lucky victim to the tornadoes devastation. Billy White, 11, said he was sitting by a window in his classroom when the lights went out and the window panes shattered. The wind picked him up and tossed him through one of the windows, he said. He was not hurt though. (St Petersburg Times, May 5<sup>th</sup>, A-3)

One teacher explained what happened in her classroom when the storm struck. **“We were sitting there having our little rest period after lunch. I heard the ripping of the roof. I stood up. I realized what was happening. The roof was leaving us. I screamed, ‘Get down. Get down and cover your heads.’”** **“There was just this tremendous sound,”** Canas said. **“Very few children even heard me. When the glass started flying, I fell over the children closest to me.”** Her blouse was spotted with the blood of an injured child (Tampa Tribune, May 5<sup>th</sup>, front page). Another teacher explained what she and some fellow teachers did to protect themselves from the tornado. **Teacher Carolyn White said her students had gone to the cafeteria and she was having lunch with two other teachers in one of the school’s portable classrooms when the storm hit. “Two of us jumped under the table and started to pray,”** she said. **“One teacher went into a supply room but the wind pressure was so great that the door started to suck in on her. We tried to get out of the building, but we couldn’t open the door.”** (St Petersburg Times, May 5<sup>th</sup>, A-3)

There was a lot of disorder after the tornado passed and all the damage was done. News finally went out about the tornado. **After learning that a tornado had torn into the building near Largo during the lunch hour Thursday, parents shared the initial horror of not knowing who was hurt and who was safe...who was trapped under debris and who was lost in the storm and confusion. Frantic mothers and fathers dug in driving rain through the rubble that used to be Pinellas County’s High Point Elementary School, looking for missing boys and girls. Children cried for their parents** (Tampa Tribune, May 5<sup>th</sup>, front page). Sharon Wilson who is a mother of two of the children at the elementary was in shock **“Men**

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were carrying bleeding children out. Nobody knew where any body was. Children were screaming and running. Such confusion.” (Tampa Tribune, May 5<sup>th</sup>, front page)

There were a few witnesses that were at the scene when the disaster occurred. **Bill Carlisle was sitting in his car 200 yards from the school. He said he saw the tornado coming. “It was just like a vacuum,” he said. “Everything went up in the air and the debris was just-flying around in a circular motion” (Tampa Tribune, May 5<sup>th</sup>, front page). Some other witness said the school looked like it had been bombed. Debris was hanging from electric wires. Pieces of plaster board and insulation were in the tops of trees. A tree about three feet thick had its top ripped off almost clean, as if by a giant saw. Brick veneer and concrete blocks were scattered (Tampa Tribune, May 5<sup>th</sup>, front page). Incredibly there were only four deaths that occurred due to the storm. One was a little boy who was getting ready to celebrate his birthday. “It was Timmy’s (Duval) birthday,” said the grieving teacher as she recounted the terror at High Point as the twister hit at about 11:47 a.m. “His mother was going to come to school at half-past-one and have a party with us. Everything happened so fast. We were just on the floor. I was trying to cover a couple of kids. We were all bending over and everything was hitting me. It was so fast. The ones that could walk ran outside with the other kids. I couldn’t find everybody” (St Petersburg Times, May 5<sup>th</sup>, Section 3-A).**

Timmy was 5 years old. He and another classmate “**Gary Staly**” died from a roof collapsing in their classroom. They both suffered from severe head injuries. (St. Petersburg Times, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 3-A). The death toll was very low and for one main reason. It was lunch time. A large part of the children were in the cafeteria eating; away from their portable classrooms and parts of the school where the tornado hit harder.



A woman looks through the debris after a tornado ripped through High Point Elementary School.

<http://www2.sptimes.com/weather/SW.4.1.html>



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St Petersburg Times — TONY LOPEZ

Jodie Long, 10, a High Point Elementary School pupil, is treated by Dr. James Eutzler at Sun Coast Osteopathic Hospital.

St Petersburg Times

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Tampa Tribune

## Agony Of Uncertainty

*Frenzied Parents Dug Not Knowing Who Was Safe, Who Wasn't*

Tampa Tribune

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Kathy Phillips was relieved when she was reunited with her son, Robbie, but she waited word on a second child.

Tampa Tribune

## Frenzied Parents Baffled

• From Page 1A

"She was stiff, lying on the floor and her back was full of blood and she didn't want anyone to touch her," he said.

At Clearwater's Morton Plant Hospital, where most of the injured children were taken, happy reunions of parents and children greatly outnumbered more unhappy scenes of parents still unsure if their children were living or dead.

Kathy Hoveck, without shoes and in shorts, stood soaking wet at Hubert Rutland Hospital waiting for news of her 6-year-old son Chad.

She had just come from the school, where she had looked for him, but couldn't find him.

"All I could picture was him underneath that rubble," she said.

She and her husband, Norman, finally located Chad at the hospital and watched as emergency room workers carried their son past them in the waiting room. She sobbed and clutched her husband.

He was being taken to the operating room and was believed to have suffered head injuries.

"I can't find my kid," other parents were saying, both at the school and in hospital waiting rooms.

Often the reply was, "I've just seen your boy. He's all right."

After the uninjured children were sheltered from the storm and separated from the injured, they quickly calmed down.

Waiting for their parents in Morton Plant Hospital, many of the children sang and ate snacks.

**Tribune Photos  
by Fred Fox,  
Mack Goethe and  
Dan Fager**