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*Charles City Remembers the Tornado of 1968  
— 40 Years Later*



L. L. Love May 15 1968

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# A moment frozen in time

*Forty years later, residents still vividly remember the day Charles City was nearly blown away*

**By Mark Wicks**

Managing Editor

"My God, there it is!"

KCHA radio announcer John Phillips would later say he thought the microphone was off when he looked out the window of the downtown studio moments after broadcasting a report that a tornado was striking the south side of Charles City. Those last five words, though, are burned into many residents' memories as they recall the most infamous day in the community's history.

"I remember the static and panic in the announcer's voice," said Barbara Fuls, who was then a senior at Nashua High School on May 15, 1968.

"Then the radio station went blank," added Jeff Heller, who was at his family's farm outside of town. He and his mother watched as the massive twister traveled east of where they were, then turned north right into Charles City. "I looked at my mother and she started crying, saying the whole town was probably gone."

Not quite, but close enough.

What would later be categorized as an F5 tornado tore through the heart of the community, traveling northward into the downtown area and beyond, leaving a path of destruction behind five blocks wide and 2-1/2 miles long through town. To this day, it remains among the biggest tornadoes ever recorded in Iowa – and one of the deadliest. Thirteen people lost their lives in town that day and another 462 were injured. The statistics are staggering – 337 homes destroyed and another 2,000 damaged to one degree or another; 58 businesses wiped away and 210 more damaged; eight churches and three school buildings, along



## Horror image

This famous shot of the 1968 Charles City tornado was taken west of the Floyd County Fairgrounds by then-Sheriff L.L. Lane. To this day it remains one of the strongest and deadliest tornadoes on record in Iowa, killing 13 people in Charles City and injuring 462 others.

with the Elks Lodge and other club sites left in ruin; more than 1,250 vehicles demolished; signage erased; and hundreds upon hundreds of trees uprooted, sheared off or left broken. It was reported that 2,200 out of Charles City's 3,600 families at the time had been directly impacted by the tornado.

Damage estimates were put at \$30 million in Charles City alone, with another \$1.5 million inflicted elsewhere – primarily in nearby Elma which was also hit - during the monster twister's 65-mile rampage. Translated into 2008 figures, according to Floyd County Emergency Management Agency Director Bridget Moe, the damage to Charles City would have surpassed \$184 million.

"Total devastation," eyewitness Cal Larson called it. "I was in shock seeing so much devastation."

"I'd like to say I was a baby and can't remember the tornado," remarked Kathy Krieger of Charles City, who was 14 at the time of the big storm. "However, I do remember it well and for all of us that experienced it, it is a memory that can't possibly be forgotten."

## Unseasonably hot

Those who experienced the horror first-hand all described the day prior to the storm's arrival as "hot and muggy." Elizabeth Bahe later wrote in a student paper about the tornado that the temperature had already climbed above 60 by 7 a.m.

and had reached a "humid 80 degrees" by noon. The thermometer reportedly topped out at 84 degrees – 15 above normal for that time of year.

"It was so very, very hot," confirmed Bonnie Mitchell, a middle-aged mother at the time and owner of the Golden Touch Beauty Salon on the north end of town.

At 2:35 p.m., the National Weather Service issued a tornado watch for Floyd County.

The Charles City schools back then usually let out classes at 3:30 p.m., but that particular day was a special one because of the annual grade school track meet. As a result, students were dismissed 15 minutes earlier that day. Looking back, those

extra minutes may not have made a difference – then again, no one will ever know for sure.

"Can you imagine what would have happened if the tornado had hit a little earlier, especially considering what it did to the school buildings in town," more than one person wondered out loud as they retold their stories 40 years later.

Then-12-year-old Jeff Sisson recalled the wind switching direction as the afternoon progressed, starting to blow more from the south, and it getting quite warm.

"Winds were very gusty and the running course at the College Grounds was laid out east to west. We figured they did that because running to the south for kids of that age would have been hard that day," remembered Sisson.

He called the walk home to 714 Third Ave. after school "very muggy. It was sunny and hazy."

Like many children, Sisson and his siblings tuned into "Bart's Clubhouse," a children's show hosted by the KGLO-TV weatherman Bart Curran that came on at 4 p.m. Over on Blunt Street, eight-year-old Carnette Starr had just come home from Central Elementary and was also watching Bart's Clubhouse.

"I remember at school they told us to go straight home because there was bad weather coming," said Starr.

They were right.

## 'Strange' sky

Witnesses said the sky began to turn dark around 4:30 p.m.

"(It) went to a green-black color," recalled Susan (Blume) Butler, who now resides in Round Lake Beach, Ill. "It looked so strange outside and

## Tornado

Continued on page 4



Pictured from left to right: Washington School, First Methodist Church and Central Methodist Church.

# An 'eerie' stillness before the storm

## Tornado

Continued from page 3  
then the wind ..."

The National Weather Service (NWS) reports that the tornado that would eventually hit Charles City first touched down a mile northeast of Hansell at 3:10 p.m. It tracked east of Aredale, west of Greene and east of Marble Rock, growing bigger and more intense as it went.

"We knew the storm was coming because we started getting phone calls from Greene and Marble Rock wanting the sheriff to report tornadoes," commented Rhonda (Havner) Wilson, now of Denver, Iowa, but then an 18-year-old high school senior who worked as an operator at the Northwestern Bell office in Charles City. She had just reported for work that day at 4 p.m. "We were able to track it by the phone calls as it got closer and closer to town."

Cal Larson was a maintenance worker at Salsbury Laboratories (now Fort Dodge Animal Health and Cambrex-Charles City) and the son of long-time meteorologist E. G. Larson. He grew up in the Weather Bureau building in Charles City that his dad was stationed at for 30 years, so he knew all about bad weather – and he

could feel something coming.

"We were told that a tornado was down the other side of Marble Rock and we were told to put the cooling water on and shut everything down," he reported. "About 4:30 p.m. we could see this front coming in from the southwest. We were heading for the shower room and saw this little tornado come down somewhere near the fairgrounds and go right back up. I joked, 'There's our tornado, now let's all go home!'"

However, Larson said he wasn't satisfied that was all there was.

"That front was still coming, so I went along the front of the chem building and out east where there was a tank farm to get a better look."

At 4:25 p.m., Bart's Clubhouse was interrupted for an important weather bulletin.

"The TV said there was a tornado headed for Charles City. I went to tell my parents across the hall, but my mom said don't worry about it and we got ready for supper," recalled Starr.

Several residents noted that it got "eerily still" out. It began to rain, then came the hail – golfball size and bigger.

"The size was enormous," stated Sisson. "I remember them coming down and splatting on our driveway

and thundering off of my father's International Scout."

Charlie Hardt was an assistant track coach at the time and was out lining the track at the College Grounds.

"I had just finished when it started to hail. I saw some dismal-looking clouds and my son Kim said he saw three things hanging down," reported Hardt. "I didn't know my car would go that fast as we took off for the high school."

Larson was standing on the Salsbury Laboratories property looking to the west, when he turned around to see what was coming from the south.

"I looked and there was this tornado, this huge thing, real close to the ground," he said. "I was standing there and it looked like it was coming straight towards me, getting bigger and bigger. I noticed that there were these little dinky tornadoes that were coming down and twisting into the main funnel."

Over at the Northwestern Bell switchboard in Charles City, Wilson said another operator took a call in which a woman screamed, "It's here, it's here. It's at Charles Street!"

## Tornado

Continued on page 16



Top: Looking north from Clark Street  
Below: The Elks Lodge



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# Area no stranger to tornadoes

*First known C.C. twister was century ago*

**By Mark Wicks**  
Managing Editor  
**and Jeff Boyne**  
National Weather Service

While the Charles City tornado of 1968 is by far and away the most widely talked about, it is far from the only twister to strike the area.

According to the National Weather Service office in La Crosse, Wis., there have been a total of 23 confirmed tornadoes in Floyd County since 1850, including one F5, two F4s, one F3, 10 F2s, five F1s and four F0s (see Fujita Sale at far right). Seven of those twisters have been in or around Charles City.

The first recorded tornado in Charles City's history came on June 7, 1908, when an estimated F3 twister tracked northeast through town at 4:50 p.m. One death and 10 injuries were reported. A man (W.R. Beck) was killed by a falling chimney. About 200 buildings were damaged or destroyed.

The tornado was said to have been 100 yards wide and was on the ground for 11 miles. Five homes on the eastern side of town were destroyed and about 20 others severely damaged. A farm house had only

the floorboards left. Total estimated damage at the time was around \$10,000.

The story made the June 8, 1908, edition of *New York Times*: "Tornado hits Iowa Town — Man and child killed in Charles City and 200 buildings destroyed."

"Path of the storm about 10 rods wide and 10 miles long," the *Times* reported. "The tornado just missed the Charles City College buildings, barns were carried several blocks. Water was lifted from the channel of the river through town."

Former Charles City resident William L. Burge, now of St. Louis, has collected several 1908 tornado photographs and stories.

"My favorite," Burge shared, "is there were four hobos playing poker on the river bank and one was taken over to the other side and set down by the creamery. He would not give his name, but wanted to get out of town."

On May 20, 1953, an F2 funnel was seen in Charles City around 9 p.m. No deaths or injuries were reported and the only noted damage were some downed trees. More damage from the storm occurred in nearby Butler County, as the tornado tracked 20 miles on the ground and

## Twisters

Continued on page 6

### Enhanced Fujita Scale

The Enhanced Fujita Scale, which was adopted as of Feb. 1, 2007, is used to assign tornadoes a rating based on the highest wind speeds and related damage. The original Fujita Scale — introduced in 1971 by Tetsuya "Ted" Fujita of the University of Chicago — was revised to better reflect tornado damage surveys.

The National Weather Service is the only federal agency with authority to assign official tornado EF scale ratings.

### EF Rating

(based on 3 Second gust of wind)

Rating	(mph)
0	65-85
1	86-110
2	111-135
3	136-165
4	166-200
5	Over 200

There are 28 different damage indicators, ranging from small barns and outbuildings (1) to softwood trees (28)

Serious efforts to count tornadoes did not begin until the Weather Bureau tornado watches in 1953.

— From the National Weather Service Web site



Damage from the Charles City tornado of 1908

— Photos courtesy of Bill Burge



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# Summary of Floyd County tornadoes recorded since 1908

## Twisters

Continued from page 5  
was estimated to be 125 yards in width.

A year later, on July 8, another F2 tornado was reported eight miles north of Charles City around 3 p.m., damaging a barn and farm machinery. There were no deaths or injuries from the 200-yard-wide twister that was only on the ground for about a mile.

A small funnel cloud, rated an F0, was reported two miles west of Charles City at 5:05 p.m. on June 16, 1984. No injuries and no damage was listed.

Likewise for an F0 on June 22, 1984, which was sighted at 6:02 p.m. five miles south of town.

An F2 tornado was reported traveling 12 miles from Nora Springs to seven miles west of Charles City on July 10, 1993. It was sighted near Nora Springs at 12:55 p.m. and outside of Charles City at 1:25 p.m. The 110-yard-wide twister caused no reported injuries but several farmsteads were damaged.

An F1 tornado on Aug. 23, 1997, damaged seven farms and destroyed numerous grain bins and outbuildings around 8 p.m. Eight cattle were killed by downed power lines, but there were no reported human injuries. The twister was said to have been 150 yards wide and on the ground for five miles.

In addition to the Charles City twisters, Floyd County has also seen 15 other con-

firmed tornadoes since 1908. The worst was an estimated F4 on May 9, 1918, that killed seven people and injured 15 others during a 50-mile tirade from near Pearl Rock to Calmar. Reportedly 800 yards wide, the tornado touched down in the extreme southeast corner of Floyd County and moved into Chickasaw and Winneshiek counties, where most of the damage and all of the deaths occurred.

Seventeen people were hurt when another F4 touched down on May 5, 1965, two miles north of Nora Springs and traveled 80 miles through a total of six counties. Reported to be 150 yards wide, it moved east-northeast, passing within three miles of Cresco and lifting near Yucatan, Minn. Two large farm houses in Winneshiek County were lost and some 28 farms damaged or destroyed. Six people in Floyd County were injured, along with five in Howard County and six in Minnesota.

An F2 tornado on June 11, 1925, injured eight people in a 10-mile path from Farmers Grove to five miles northwest of Greene. Touching down at 6:30 p.m., it started out in Butler County and moved north, mowing down trees at the meeting place known as Farmers Grove. A farm five miles northwest of Greene lost all of its barns.

That same storm produced a second F2 tornado at about the same time, said to be 200 yards wide and skipping along the ground for 20 miles. It caused \$10,000 damage to rural homes from two miles south of Marble Rock

to Carrville.

Two people in Colwell were hurt in 1986 when an F2 struck a farmhouse, ripping off the roof and collapsing the house inward over the basement. A number of outbuildings were also destroyed in the short-lived twister which was only said to be 25 yards wide and on the ground for 0.2 miles.

On July 20, 1999, an F1 tornado touched down on the Floyd-Chickasaw county line north of Nashua and traveled just 0.1 mile northeast. However, the 60-yard-wide twister extensively damaged two farms, blew down a silo, damaged crops, sheared off trees and downed utility poles in its brief stint. Golf-ball-to-baseball-size hail was also reported. An estimated \$15,000 in crop damage was caused by the storm.

The estimated dollar amount was the same but this time it was in damage to homes when an F2 hit several homes on the southwest edge of Rockford around 6:30 p.m. on Sept. 6, 1936.

Other Floyd County tornadoes on record include:

- May 11, 1937, an F2 near Rudd at 9 p.m. A barn and other farm buildings destroyed, but no injuries.

- Aug. 27, 1964, an F2 around 11 p.m. No other information available.

- Sept. 9, 1970, an F2 near Greene at 2:42 p.m. moved into Floyd County, destroying some barns and moving a truck 300 feet.

- Aug. 24, 1975, an F0 is reported at 8:45 p.m. No other information available.

- March 24, 1988, a rare winter F1 touched down briefly a mile east of Nora Springs around 3:15 p.m., causing some structural damage.

- June 16, 1990, an F1 touched down at 10:54 p.m. three miles northeast of Nora Springs and caused extensive damage to several farmsteads as it moved towards Rudd for five miles.

- July 6, 1994, an F1 was reported at 1:47 p.m. No other information available.

- June 16, 2004, a brief F0 touchdown two miles north of Rudd at 2:49 caused no damage.

\* Some of the National Weather Service data used for this study came from "Storm Data and Significant Tornadoes — 1680-1991," by Thomas P. Grazulis.



1948 Lonia tornado in Chickasaw Co.



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# The tornado outbreak of May 15-16, 1968

The May 15-16, 1968, tornado outbreak was a significant and deadly tornado outbreak. It affected the states of: Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, and Tennessee. This outbreak produced 39 tornadoes from 3:28 p.m. CDT on May 15 through 2:50 a.m. CDT on May 16. This included two F5 tornadoes in northeast Iowa. Table 1 (at right) provides a summary of the tornado intensities during this outbreak.

These tornadoes caused 72 fatalities and 1,203 injuries. It was one of the deadliest tornado outbreaks in the United States during the 1960s and is one of the deadliest outbreaks ever in Arkansas history. Table 2 provides a break down by state of the fatalities and injuries during this outbreak.

## Outbreak details

As an anomalously deep low pressure system moved east out of the Central and High Plains into the Mid and Upper Mississippi River Valley during the afternoon of May 15, 1968, severe weather developed quickly. The first tornado occurred in southeast Minnesota (Dakota and

Rice counties) at 3:28 p.m. CDT. During the next three hours, another 18 tornadoes were reported across Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota and Missouri. This included two F5 tornadoes that hit central and eastern parts of Iowa about 45 minutes apart during the late afternoon. These two tornadoes caused 18 fatalities and 618 injuries.

The first F5 tornado moved through five counties and 65 miles. It affected Charles City just before 5 p.m. CDT (4:47 p.m.) destroying much of the area. Damage figures were estimated up to \$30 million in Charles City alone, while \$1.5 million of damage was recorded else-

**Table 2**

Summary of Fatalities & Injuries from May 15-16, 1968 Outbreak:

State	Fatalities	Injuries
Arkansas	45	413
Illinois	8	135
Indiana	1	20
Iowa	18	619
Minnesota	0	3
Mississippi	0	7
Missouri	0	6
Totals	72	1203

**Table 1**

Summary of May 15-16 tornadoes by state, strength and number:

State	Strength						Number
	F0	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	
Arkansas	0	1	0	1	2	0	4
Illinois	0	1	0	3	0	0	4
Indiana	0	0	3	1	0	0	4
Iowa	0	2	1	0	0	2	5
Kansas	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Minnesota	1	3	1	0	0	0	5
Mississippi	0	2	1	0	0	0	3
Missouri	0	5	3	1	0	0	9
Ohio	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Tennessee	0	3	0	0	0	0	3

where. This tornado killed 13 and injured 462 others. The second F5 tornado affected Fayette County around 4:57 p.m. CDT. It damaged or destroyed nearly 1,000 homes. The hardest hit areas were Oelwein and Maynard where homes were completely swept away from their foundations. Five people were killed while 156 others were injured. Damage was estimated at \$21 million. These were two of four F5 tornadoes across the United States in 1968, the others being in southeastern Ohio on April 23 and in southwestern Minnesota on June 13. The next and last official F5 tornado in Iowa took

place in Jordan on June 13, 1976.

After the first tornadoes struck the Upper Mississippi River Valley, the tornadic activity developed further south and east during the evening hours of May 15 and early morning hours of May 16. Several deadly tornadoes occurred in Arkansas. One of the tornadoes touched down west of Jonesboro before hitting the Craighead County city itself at around 10 p.m. CDT. The tornado, which caught most residents by surprise since most of the warning systems failed, killed at least 34. One more person was killed in neighboring Jackson County. The

tornado was the deadliest in Arkansas since an F4 tornado that affected White County on March 21, 1952, killing 50 people.

The same city was hit by another destructive tornado five years later killing at least three and injuring 250 others while leaving much more destruction throughout the city than the 1968 event. The damage figures were about \$62 million in 1973 dollars. Another F4 tornado just to the west of Jonesboro killed seven in Oil Trough in Independence County and three others were killed in Baxter County.

The activity ceased across the Deep South when the final tornadoes touched down across the metropolitan Memphis area and northern Mississippi, as well as in the Fort Wayne, Ind., area.

— Provided by Jeff Boyne,  
National Weather Service  
<http://www.crh.noaa.gov/arx>

**EDITOR'S NOTE** — For more on the unusual weather conditions that took place on May 15-16, 1968, visit the NWS Web site at:

<http://www.crh.noaa.gov/arx/?n=may151968>

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# C.C. tornado said to have been merger of two funnel clouds

So, just how many tornadoes were there in the Charles City area that day 40 years ago?

The National Weather Service only officially counts the one that devastated much of Charles City on May 15, 1968. However, witnesses that day have reported seeing two and even three separate funnels on the ground before two of them apparently joined forces and headed into Charles City.

"That very well could have been," said Jeff Boyne of the National Weather Service office in La Crosse, Wis. "With the conditions that were in place that day, there could have been a whole family of funnels born out of that system. In terms of damage, though, it is counted as one tornado."

Then-Floyd County Memorial Hospital Administrator James Johnson reported in the papers the following day that he saw as many as three funnels outside of town. A funnel cloud was sighted near near Marble Rock just after 4 p.m. that day. Around 4:15 p.m., there were reports of two funnel clouds near Oakwood, 12 miles southwest of Charles City, tracking towards town.

Editors Cameron Hanson and Heather Hull wrote in their book, "Past Harvests: A History of Floyd County to 1996," that the two funnels parted ways near the Robert Howe farm, 7-1/2 miles from Charles City. One headed south towards Greene, but the other reportedly continued to track northeast and merged with a third funnel cloud coming in from the east. That's the tornado that hit Charles City.

Ben Krall, who at the time was working for FS Service Company, also reported seeing two tornadoes.

"Every tornado is said to have an orange ball in it," Krall told then-student Elizabeth Bahe for a paper she wrote on the storm. "I saw it when the two tornadoes joined right in front of me."

According to the National Weather Service, the 1968 tornado first touched down a mile northeast of Hansell at 3:10 p.m. and passed east of Aredale, west of Greene, east of Marble Rock and grew larger and more intense just before it hit Charles City. It continued northeast, striking Elma and causing another \$1.5 million in damage before turning north and finally dissipating two miles south of Chester — four miles south of the Minnesota border. The monster twister was estimated to have been 400 yards wide, with winds in excess of 300 miles per hour and traveled a distance of 65 miles on the ground.

In all, there were seven confirmed tornadoes reported on May 15, 1968, in the La Crosse Region. Nationally, the May 15-16 tornado outbreak in 1968 resulted in 39 confirmed tornadoes in Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio and Tennessee — from 2:28 p.m. CST on May 15 through 1:50 a.m. CST on May 16.

A total of 72 fatalities and 1,203 injuries were recorded from one of the deadliest outbreaks in U.S. history.



This funnel cloud was one of three sighted by the Robert Howe family 7-1/2 miles southwest of Charles City on May 15, 1968.



## Want to read more about the Charles City tornado of '68?

The National Weather Service in La Crosse, Wis., has dedicated a special Web site dedicated to the historic Charles City tornado of 1968. Go to: <http://www.crh.noaa.gov/arx/?n=may151968> online to find out more about the weather conditions that conspired to produce killer tornadoes around the country; tornado statistics and comparisons; view additional photos from the disaster; read eyewitness accounts; and even share your own observations and feelings.

For even faster access, simply click on the NWS link on the Press' home page at [www.charlescity-press.com](http://www.charlescity-press.com).



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# Tornado tales

## From amazing discoveries to rides of a lifetime

**By Mark Wicks and Matt Barnes**  
Staff Writers

You hear about them, but can you always believe them? There are some pretty wild stories floating around out there when it comes to the Charles City tornado of 1968.

Tracy Sweet, for one, is a believer. "I believe every tornado story I hear now," the longtime Charles City resident remarked. "I've seen too many strange things not to."

For instance, there was that stack of Coke bottles in wooden cases he came across after the tornado — never opened, caps still on, but all of them were now half empty.

Cal Larson's favorite tornado story involved two couples who lived on the north end of town in 1968.

"These people were living on 18th or 19th Ave. and would go back and forth to each other's homes for coffee," he explained. "The people on the north side that day said come on over and have coffee with us and we'll ride out the storm. So (the cou-

ple on the south side) went over there, the storm came along, and the house on the north blew away. They were all down in the basement. The people on the south side, they kept their house, but the other couple's house blew over where their's was.

"They said the next time you come over for coffee, don't bring your house with you!"

Former high school science teacher Charlie Hardt is full of tornado stories, some he's heard and passed on, but a number that involve him directly. Like the letter he received from a minister in Preston, Minn., returning his water and light bill after the tornado. Or his friend Artie Wade in LeRoy, Minn., who that summer was out cutting alfalfa and found the Bluhm's Electric sign from Charles City. That sign is now a part of the Floyd County Museum's permanent tornado display.

"I remember we were out picking through the wreckage of our house when my son Mark found a silver dollar by the driveway," Hardt re-

called. "Then he found another — and another. Right inside our garage, inside the exposed foundation block, was a milk dish — unscratched — filled with silver dollars.

"I told (neighbor) Truman Man-ship about it and he asked if they were inside a milk dish, by chance. It turned out they were his and had been sitting on top of the refrigerator inside his house before the tornado!"

Then there was his daughter's bathrobe, which they found sticking out through a tree after the storm.

"I had heard of boards through trees, but not this," Hardt said. "The tornado apparently bent the tree, it broke, then snapped back together with the robe in the middle."

He also likes the story Wilbur Winterink told of the car that crossed the Cedar River during the tornado without using a bridge. Or the sealed can of beer that had nothing in it.

"There are some real weird stories

### Tales

Continued on page 10



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Below: Geo P. Smith office



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# Mannequins are mistaken for victims

## Tales

Continued from page 9  
 out there,” he chuckled. “The people who lived next door, the mother was staying with them and she was in a wheelchair. They found her afterwards, wheelchair and all, three blocks away — sitting upright in her chair.”

Despite losing his new house (“We moved in on Labor Day and moved out May 16”), Hardt takes it all in stride with a smile.

“God left me my family. To this day, I have very little use for materialistic things. I got what I wanted — my family safe,” he commented. “My boys have grown up with the same philosophy. Kim and Mark now live on the east coast. Mark built a house and it flooded. Kim drove down to see how he was doing and there was water in the family room. He and Mark were laughing about it, but their wives didn’t see the humor.

“There’s nothing you can do about it, so you might as well laugh.”

Hardt began a poem about that day back in May 1968, but has never finished it:

Now the 15th of May  
 Was a hell-flying day  
 When in every seaport in town

That the word got around  
 The big tornado was on its way  
 down ...

“That’s as far as I’ve got,” he said. “Every May 15, I think about that poem and how I should finish it some day.”

## ‘The bodies’

Catherine Eichmeier was working at the F.W. Woolworth store when the tornado hit.

“We had three dozen magazines that all went out the front window, along with six mannequins that we had just bought for \$200,” she remembers of the big storm. “Someone afterwards was crying there were six bodies in the street and no one was doing anything about it, they were the mannequins!”

Eichmeier worked the drug and candy counter at Woolworth’s and marveled at how there were bottles of clear nail polish on the shelves — never opened — that had dirt floating inside them following the tornado.

“The worst part was I had 2,000 pounds of candy delivered from Brachs that day and there was black dirt in every box afterwards and I had to throw it all out. They were in closed boxes, inside the store at the

time,” she said.

Eichmeier mentioned she had also been in a hurricane once in Georgia. When asked which was worse, a tornado or a hurricane, she replied “Both!”

Her husband also has his own tornado tale.

“He was in his car at the time, it picked him up, spun him around and dropped him from about 50 feet up, she said of Leston Eichmeier. “He wasn’t hurt, just shaken up.”

Al Bode and his son, Sean, also went for a little ride that day.

“We were at the corner of Riverside and Wisconsin Streets, dead center between the two bridges in Charles City, approximately where the Charles City Public Library is today,” Bode reported. “We were lifted into the air and, as I grabbed Sean and dived into the back seat, glass was blown out of the windshield and slammed into my head. I could see the papers on the windows of the old IGA grocery store blowing out, instead of in. The store was closed, and was being remodeled.

“It was not until later that I real-

## Tales

Continued on page 11



Metal, wood, nor brick proved to be a match for the fury of an F5 tornado



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# Song born out of 'Black Wednesday'

## Tales

Continued from page 10  
ized that the paper was blowing out because the roof had been blown off the building. I blacked out and came to on top of my son. Neither of us suffered any broken bones."

During his subsequent hospital stay, Bode composed a song in his mind which later was used in a video and a two-record documentary about the tornado. The song was "Black Wednesday" —

*It happened in Charles City, on the fifteenth day of May.*

*The black tornado struck the trees and blew them half away.*

*The houses fell like toothpicks and started to decay,*

*While families were separated, looking for homes to stay.*

*The bright red flashing sirens carried people bent with pain.*

*The silence of the aftermath was followed by the rain.*

*Those who heard it come and go had thought it was a train.*

*Now they wondered if they'd ever see the sunny skies again.*

*But helping hands from strangers, and neighbors no one knew,*

*Built a human tower of courage to help the homeless,  
The injured, and the speechless.  
The refugees the black sky left behind,  
As its destruction pass on through.*

*The cars on downtown corners were glassless and obscured.*

*Discouragement was mumbled, but scarcely ever heard.*

*People who lost everything were glad to be alive,*

*While those untouched were hoping that their city could survive.*

*The search went out for relatives and friends who'd disappeared,  
And with the dark of nightfall, the worst was more than feared.*

*Then faces missed for hours found their way to food and beds,*

*While visions of the Killer kept churning madly through their heads.*

*How nice the bridge had looked, when the first cars came across!*

*Now tangled steel and iron greeted doctors,*

*And guardsmen, and the curious,  
The eyes who saw the vicious path,*

*And vowed to save the town from further loss.*

*We'll rebuild Charles City, this mission we all know.*

*There is no time to sit around and allow dissent to grow.*

*The feeling of togetherness, of helping others live*

*Has brought us all new hope for in some way, we all give.*

*Give shelter to the homeless, and cure the wounds through time:*

*Let's listen to confusion die away now,*

*Within our city, this very city,  
Which learned that it could overcome,*

*When Black Wednesday visited and ran.*

*The blackest day of all, my fellow man.*

### Humor in face of tragedy

The death and destruction of that day 40 years ago was almost unbearable to many people, but some have found a little bit of an escape through humor.

Bonnie Mitchell talked about her neighbor on Hildreth St. who had a parrot in a cage that survived the storm — but all its feathers were

### Tales

Continued on page 12



Above: All that's left of Charlie Hardt's new home

Below: Crushed cars on Hulin Street



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# Foul-mouthed mynah bird and more

## Tales

Continued from page 11

gone.

She also remembers the Shell station that had been blown away, but part of the sign remained.

"The owner wrote, 'We Shell Return,' on the sign," she noted. "There were lots of silly things like that."

One neighbor who worked at Oliver, she said, walked home after the tornado hit to check on his wife, who he found in the tub taking a bath with no idea at all of what had happened.

"A very good friend, Elling Goplerud, had a barber shop. His shop was blown away and he held on to his barber chair as long as he could," Mitchell recalled. "He was finally blown into a field. He lived, but was hurt. He picked glass out of himself for a long time afterwards. I remember months later we were playing cards and he would still be sitting there, casually picking glass out of himself."

The May 24, 1968 *Press* reported that Larry Manship of 1806 N. Grand Ave., liked to sleep sans pajamas or other garb.

"Was asleep at the time and hastily awakened by his wife as she escorted

the family to the basement," the article read. "Larry got up just as the tornado hit and drew a fast retreat to a nearby corner of the bedroom. All that was left of the house above the basement afterward was Larry's corner of the house. A quick survey of the scene by the naked Manship revealed his bathrobe snagged on part of the remaining structure, which he popped into with lightning speed."

From the May 28, 1968 edition of the *Press*, comes these "Believe It or Not" tales from the tornado in a story entitled, "Ripley could have a field day in Charles City."

• Floyd Momberg's mynah bird at 1709 N. Grand that had a propensity for usage of foul language. The house was let in shambles by the tornado and the Mombergs assumed their pet bird was gone, but out of the mass of wreckage of what had been the kitchen they heard, "Floyd, you @#!," being repeated with disdain again and again.

• Mr. and Mrs. Orville Sinram of Nashua and just left the KCHA studio and headed south on Main Street when the twister hit. The tornado picked up their automobile, turned it around and set it back down momentarily near Citizens National Bank,

before scooting it further north. Mrs. Sinram was said to have chided her husband, "Well, you don't have to drive so fast!" Replied Mr. Sinram, "Driving? Who's driving? I don't even have a motor!"

• A Charles City citizen, attempting to be helpful, advised two out-of-town police officers standing at the corner of Riverside and Main who were supposed to be directing traffic that this always was a very hazardous corner. It was now even more so due to cancellation of one-way traffic patterns. The citizen explained the one-way system was eliminated because there were no one-way signs remaining. One officer inquired, "Well, why did they take them down?"

• Don Molitor of 106 N. Iowa said the first inkling he had that something was wrong was when he saw Garland Ceradsky fly by the kitchen window. Said Molitor, "I've never seen Garland move that fast before."

• Bob Cook's remarks at seeing his beloved Elks Club in shambles equaled those of the Momberg's mynah, according to a number of people.

## Tales

Continued on page 14



Above: Charles City Manufacturing  
Below: The St. Charles Hotel



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**Charles City Press**

801 Riverside Drive, Charles City, IA 50616

# Corn grows everywhere in town from scattered seed

## Tales

Continued from page 12

• Iowa Public Service Manager Dan Rice survived the collapse of the IPS office building and later took his pen out of his shirt pocket to write something down, but the pen no longer worked. When he unscrewed the cap, a tiny pile of sand came out of it.

• Friends and relatives were helping Mrs. Claude Alderman at 1216 Indiana Ave., remove furniture from her crushed house. The roof was gone and the remaining walls were lopsided. Mason Bunn, attempting to move the refrigerator, asked her if it would be OK for him to slide it across the kitchen floor. Mrs. Alderman replied, "No, you might scratch the linoleum."

## For the birds

Jeff Sisson shared a story about going to the top floor of the St. Charles Hotel after the storm.

"I remember the rooms were a mess, some with bed mattresses half pulled out the windows. In the far northwest corner of the top floor the walls had been peeled off and I recall seeing maybe a thousand robins splattered on the walls and laying on the floor. A flock must have gotten caught in the wind."

He also remembers how everyone was amazed and talked about how the churches and schools in town were destroyed, but the bars escaped damage.

"People said this was because the bars were open and the churches and schools weren't," he noted.

Sisson remembers the long 2x4 driven into the brick of the First Baptist Church near the entrance.

"I remember it looked like an arrow sticking out of the brick," he said. "It seemed like there were always people standing looking at it in amazement."

Also amazing, he added, was the corn that grew up "everywhere" that summer after the big grain elevator had been destroyed on the south side of town. The tornado had distributed the seeds all over and as a result, corn was growing out of cracks in sidewalks, out of the bark in trees and along the street in the parking area.

"It was strange," he said.

## Sky high

Perhaps the strangest story of all, though, was the drive Sherry Sweet took that day in May 40 years ago when she went to pick up her husband, Tracy, at the Oliver plant.

She was six months pregnant at the time waiting in her white 1966 Plymouth Valiant near the door her husband usually exited.

"One of Tracy's friends and co-workers, Jerry Fifer, came out to tell me that my husband was waiting inside the personnel office door, about a block away from where I was parked," she wrote down in a journal account.

"As I started driving through the parking lot, Fifer jumped right in front of the car to warn me that I was driving right into the tornado!"

Fifer quickly got into the car with her as they tried to escape.

"It was just like a big black tidal wave," Sweet said of the twister. "I put the car into reverse to get away. As we were going backwards, Fifer saw a brick wall collapsing behind them, so I immediately stopped and then went forward to avoid that. Having avoided the most pressing dangers, I stopped the car. I never took the car out of gear. I had my foot on the brake the whole time and I was praying like you would not believe."

To avoid getting struck by the broken glass of the windows, they rolled their windows down, put on their seat belts and hung on to each other and the steering wheel.

"Fifer covered me with my raincoat to protect me from flying debris. And with that, we rose off the ground, I say 15 feet maximum. I had nothing to be fearful of because I hadn't witnessed it. I was underneath the raincoat. I never realize how far off the ground the twister actually took us. I didn't find out until 1992, in chatting with Fifer, that we were four stories off the ground, high enough to see the top of the smokestack of a nearby building.

"With that, I almost got sick to my stomach. Every time I think of this, I get shaky. It's not a pleasant thought. And when we came down, we came down with a thud. I went into

labor pains a few hours later, but they were false."

The Plymouth had four blown tires from the impact, many dents and scratches from the hail and other flying debris. A downed light pole nearly missed hitting the car. All of the car's windows, including those rolled down, were unbroken.

"Jerry Fifer is my angel. If he had not stopped me, I would have driven right into it," Sweet said. "For as long as I am alive the memories of that tornado will be me."



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# Narrowly misses hitting the hospital

## Tornado

Continued from page 4

### 4:51 p.m.

The NWS officially has the tornado entering the city limits of Charles City at 4:47 p.m., moving at 40 miles per hour and stretching an incredible 400 yards wide.

"Most tornadoes are like a rope, but this one was five blocks wide," reported Larson.

Some described it as "big and fat, low to the ground," while others said it simply appeared to be a moving "black wall."

"That's why it did so much damage," resident Wilbur Winterink was quoted as saying the next day in the *Waterloo Courier*.

It appeared that the monster's first victim in town would be the recently-built Floyd County Memorial Hospital.

"I thought it had hit the hospital, but it ended up going around it and heading for Charles Street," noted Larson.

The twister tossed around cars in the hospital parking lot, but miraculously spared the facility itself. Not every place would be as lucky, though.

Roaring down between Cedar and

Hildreth streets, the tornado took out power lines and parts of the city went dark. Residents often note how their clocks stopped at 4:51 p.m., a moment frozen in time that many people remember to this day.

Jean Kicherer had just picked her husband up from work at the Oliver tractor plant prior to that and told him they were under a tornado watch.

"I had the road map out, turned the radio on and started tracking it," explained Franklin Kicherer. As we got home, the last I heard it was near Marble Rock and I said to my mother-in-law, who was living with us, and my wife that we should probably gather up anything you want and head to the basement. It wasn't long before the roar came."

Bonnie Mitchell, now 82, lived at the corner of 8th and Charles streets in 1968 — right where the tornado came into town. She had taken her daughter, Amy, to the YMCA for her swimming lesson just prior to the storm and was leaving to head home when she heard on the radio that there was a tornado headed for Charles Street.

"I was frantic because I had three kids at home" she remembered. "I ran back into the Y and grabbed Amy. I

told Helen Frye, the instructor, to get the kids under the wrestling mat, which she did.

"I then went tearing down Main Street, I think I was the only one on Main. I had to get home to my kids. My son had the garage door open when I got there. I got out and saw the tornado hit three houses down and then turn and go over towards Jefferson School. If it hadn't turned, it would have hit us."

Instead, Mitchell said she and her son watched it head north and tear up the downtown.

"It was just a terrible roar," she recalled.

At 1108 Hildreth, Franklin Kicherer, too, heard the roar overhead as the twister passed by.

"The one thing I remember is, even over that roar, I could hear the squeak of hard spikes being pulled up as the roof raised off," he said. "That and the terrible pressure. There was so much pressure I didn't think I would have any eyes or ears left."

## Thrown like rag dolls

The twister moved down toward

## Tornado

Continued on page 18



Above: Gibson Discount Center and Iowa Public Service

Below: This wrecked apartment house is where Sadie Chambers died



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# Former resident working on book about the tornado

Cal Larson and his friends have long told tales in regards to the big Charles City twister of 1968.

"We used to sit around and talk about the tornado. Through the years you hear so many of these strange stories — like straw getting stuck in trees and Obie's Standard Station where a 2x4 went through a tire and it still held air — that I said somebody ought to write a book," remarked Larson.



Cal Larson

So his daughter is.

Teresa Carr was 9 years old when her family's home was destroyed in the tornado.

"As a child during the recovery and rebuilding years, I was sheltered from a lot of what happened with the disaster," she explained. "A desire to gain a better understanding of an event that made a significant impact on my life drove me to gather other people's stories and save them for history's sake."

Now living in Cedar Falls, Carr has trekked back and forth between there and her hometown, interviewing close to 250

people and studying newspapers, scrap-books, diaries and personal narratives to compile her work.

"I was hoping to have my collection ready by this anniversary year, but I'm not quite done editing," she reported.

Carr is asking the public for some assistance in filling a hole in her research.

"I hope to honor the memory of each of the 13 victims of the tornado by relating not only how they lost their lives, but a little bit about who they were and what was lost to the community by their passing," she explained.

"I have found very little information about Mae Gault besides her home address, date of birth and details of her funeral arrangements. I believe that she lived in a trailer court north of town and was survived by her husband, James Gault. I would appreciate a word from anyone who might remember something more about the Gaults."

Carr can be contacted at (319) 277-3679 or at: [teresa.carr@cfu.net](mailto:teresa.carr@cfu.net).



Damaged Congregational U.C.C. Church in 1968

## Church vision survives tornado to celebrate 150th anniversary

This year, on May 15th, many people will think back to that day 40 years ago when 13 churches in town were destroyed. This year, the Congregational U.C.C. Church is looking back even further in its history, as it celebrates 150 years of being a congregation in Charles City.

It all started with just nine original members as Rev. J.H. Windsor arrived here from Cresco with a 2-horse team, with six boxes of books and a trunk of clothing. He came to help organize a church — a dream of nine people who lived here. It was a bold venture for such a small group of elderly people, but they were of strong convictions and wanted a church of their own.

The years passed and with the progress of the country, pastors came and then moved on to other churches. Wars were experienced, the depression was survived, a tornado struck, but there were faithful members who knew the church could be a vital cornerstone of survival in good times and bad.

So the church is celebrating 150 years later and being reminded of the precious heritage bestowed upon the congregation. The official celebration Sunday will be this fall on Oct. 26, but Pastor Phil Corr and all members are thankful each day for the vision nine people had many decades ago.

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# Cedar Terrace housing hit hard; Trowbridge roof torn off

## Tornado

Continued from page 16

the Cedar River, which ran through the middle of town. Before crossing over, though, it shattered the brand new Cedar Terrace elderly housing complex on the south side. Residents had no basements or shelters on site to retreat to.

Kitty-corner to that was the Trowbridge Center, where Schueth Ace Hardware is today. Betty (LaCoste) Schwarck of Rockford was in her 40s and was working downstairs in the shoe department by herself when the storm hit. "I was dusting shoes when the lights went off — the store shut off its

power and gas just before the tornado hit," she recalled. "I couldn't hear because of the pressure, other than a big crash as a wall full of bottles in the drug department fell over. I grabbed onto a shoe rack and held on tight."

Jack Christensen said he had just turned onto Brantingham bridge when he looked in the rear view mirror and saw the Trowbridge Center's roof coming off.

"Shortly after, the windows on my company station wagon blew out and I just ducked down and held on to the steering wheel," he reported. "The next thing I knew, I was sliding across the bridge on my car top. I was against the rail of the bridge and luckily did not go into the river."

Several witnesses claim they actually saw the river bed as the tornado crossed the Cedar, sucking up water and mud as it went and hurling it all over. Winterink shared a story afterwards of a car that went over the river during the storm — without the benefit of a bridge.

The downtown area was next in line

as the tornado's devastating march north continued. At the Northwestern Bell office, Wilson and her fellow telephone operators had a split-second to decide where to take cover — a 3 foot space between the switchboard and the wall that one woman suggested, or else duck under the foot-wide ledge of the switchboard. All but one chose the latter.

"We were down on our hands and knees under there and the roof went off," Wilson reported. "I can remember saying, 'Look at that! Look at that!' It sounded like a train, definitely."

(The operator who hid between the switchboard and wall, by the way, was dragged by the tornado's suction from one end of the switchboard to the other.)

Karla Goddard was six years old then and had just finished her swimming lesson at the YMCA, which was located within the St. Charles Hotel on Blunt Street.

"I remember Mrs. (Helen) Frye coming to the front door to get us and the rest of the kids that were waiting," she stated. "We went back down into the lobby and were told to sit Indian-style with our hands over our heads. Within a matter of moments the lights went out. Kids were starting to cry when the loud noise of the tornado came. We could hear glass breaking all around us and it got very, very dark."

Just down the block at 807 Blunt, Starr and her family also heard the roar. They had just

lit some candles after the power had gone out.

"Mom said, 'Blow out those candles, quick!' My grandma was living in the apartment across the hall, so my mom, my sister and I went into the hallway and stood there waiting for my dad to come with my grandma," Starr explained. "When they came out, they were kind of walking funny and I can remember hearing pounding outside. The door flew open and the tornado had hit. It had literally lifted our house up, that's why they were walking funny."

She said the family tried to get to the basement, but was stopped by debris.

"Then we were thrown around like rag dolls," reported Starr. "We were trying to hold on to each other, but got pulled apart and banged all over the place. I remember holding onto an oak staircase with my legs in the air. It pulled me loose and then I must have been knocked out. The next thing I remember is it was all dark and we couldn't move. We were all together and still in the building, but the tornado had thrown the house down on top of us and the only thing that had held it up off of us was that old oak staircase."

Over at the high school, Hardt the coach had just sent all of the track kids down into the shower room at the high school, but Hardt the science teacher wanted a look at nature's fury.

## Tornado

Continued on page 19



Cedar Terrace housing units were demolished

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Pictured (front, from left to right): Joel Rollefson, Kathy Hunt, and Charley Perry; (back, from left to right): Denise Lensing, Kendra Harris, Renae Wedeking, Tracy Greenzweig, Tera Schroeder, and Linda Hundt; Missing: Bill Bledsoe.

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# Names of dead memorialized in Central Park

## Tornado

Continued from page 18

"I went back to look at the tornado and I remember thinking to myself, 'Look at all that energy!' It was tremendous," said Hardt. "I saw a rooftop fly by and other debris, then I could feel the backwash and worried about something falling on me, so I put my arm over my head — like that would really save me. That's when it threw me backwards on my butt and scooted me along the parking lot for 20-30 feet. I scrambled back up and went inside.

"Before I went in, though, I saw the tornado move across right where I lived on 21st Avenue, I thought, 'Please God, just leave me my family!'"

Larson, too, was watching the horrifying sight from the Salsbury Laboratories grounds.

"I saw the side of a garage or roof go — I could see the 2x4s there one moment and then gone, just like that," he remembered. "I lived on Clinton Street and thought, 'Oh no, my house is gone!' But it didn't take it. It did take the roof off the house, though.

"I saw stuff flying — the debris stayed fairly level, just going around and around a couple of hundred feet up."

Although he had grown up the son of long-time Charles City meteorologist E.G. Larson and knew all about severe weather, this was the first tornado Larson had ever actually seen in real life.

"As I was watching, I thought, 'My gosh, my dad would just love to see this.' He never saw one up close. The one that hit Ionia (in 1948), he was 15 miles away."

Back at the Trowbridge Center, Schwarck said she started praying and was halfway through the Lord's Prayer when everything went quiet.

"God was with me all the way. I wasn't hurt," she remarked. "I saw a little light and people going up the stairs. When I came up, everything was knocked down.

"It was exactly like a dream I had several weeks before of a storm just like that, only I was at home."

As Schwarck and the rest of the residents of Charles City were soon to learn, it wasn't a dream at all but a real-life nightmare that there was no waking up from.

## Utter devastation

"The first thing that came to my mind when I got up those steps is, 'Good Lord, I survived a tornado,'" said Franklin Kicherer as he

emerged from the basement of his home on Hildreth.

On the east side of his street, Kicherer reported only one house was completely demolished out of six. The other five all sustained damage, but were still standing.

"We had to go stay with my son because our house was not liveable," he said. "The tornado had perforated it. Water ran right down through the middle of it. It's hard to describe. It was a real shocker."

Not as much as the scene across the street, however.

"The home on the corner was gone," he said. "Everything on the west side of the street was wiped away."

Kicherer and another man went around what was left of the neighborhood turning off the natural gas valves.

"There was an atrocious smell of gas. Oil, too," Franklin recalled. "We were only a few blocks from the Charley Western (railroad) tanks and the elevators. A couple of them were ruptured, apparently.

"One gentleman thoughtlessly took a match out and was going to light a cigarette. He got jumped on real quick."

The further north one went, the worse the devastation appeared to get. Cars were said to have rolled like tumbleweeds, brick buildings were reduced to piles of rubble and whole houses were tipped sideways, upside down or wiped completely off their foundations. The residential area on the far north end of town was practically erased. Residents reported afterwards not being able to identify where they were because there was no discernable landmarks left.

Larson remarked that he had a hard time trying to figure out what he was seeing.

"Shock of seeing so much devastation, I guess," he said. "Later on I stood on the bridge there by Trowbridges's and looked to the northwest and there was just total destruction. Cars upside down and light poles on the bridge all bent over."

Schwarck walked outside of the Trowbridge Center after the storm had past to a surreal world.

"I had a brand new car, a Chevy Impala, that I found in the basement of a house across the road," she said. "There was also a yellow Volkswagen in there. A couple crawled out of that same basement afterward.

"It was pretty awful, just terrible. I'm thankful to the Lord that there were not more hurt or killed than

there was."

Christensen reported after the storm, "I had dirt and sand driven into my head and something had hit me in the back. A few days later, I took my folks and grandmother out to the plant where they had towed my wagon. The top was crushed down to the steering wheel and the only clean place in the car is where I had been sitting.

"My grandmother took one look at the wagon and said, 'Well the Devil takes care of his own!'"

At the YMCA, Goddard remembers the silence after the storm had passed.

"It was really quiet outside. You could feel that the temperature had really fallen and the smell of rain was strong in the air. I sometimes still smell that when a storm is approaching, a combination of rain and dirt," she commented. "There was a big tree that had made its way through the front door and we all ended up having to climb up and out of the doors. I remember seeing parts of the upper floors of the Y gone. There were people still up in those rooms looking down, having been caught with no warning of where to go.

"There was mass chaos with all the kids wondering what to do next and the Y instructors trying to keep us all in one place. I remember shivering so hard that it hurt. It was just all too much for a 6-year-old to take in."

Eight-year-old Carnette Starr remembers Rev. Ritter yelling into their wrecked home on Blunt to see if anyone was in there.

"My dad yelled back, 'Yes!' But we were trapped. I don't know for how long — it seemed like it was forever," said Starr. "The guys from the garage that used to be where Port Charles is now came and literally chopped us out with axes.

"I remember it being awfully cold when I crawled through the hole they chopped so we could get out. They put me on a chair and then on a stretcher. My mom was calling my name. I thought I was dead. I didn't realize what had happened. Then I thought it was maybe a dream."

Most of the Starr family escaped with just minor injuries. Sarah Chambers was not as fortunate.

"That was my grandma, but she went by Sadie," Starr said. "She died."

Chambers, 77, was one of the 13 fatalities in the tornado of May 15, 1968. The others were Murray Loomer, Harry Hall, Arthur Jacobs, August Merten, May Gault, Lela

Wolff, Florine Leach, Marie Greenless, Virval Dawson, Mr. and Mrs. John (Minnie) Kneisel and Robert Stotts, a student teacher from the University of Northern Iowa and the youngest victim at age 22.

The Kneisels — he was 89 and she was 83 — were killed in their Cedar Terrace apartment; Greenless, 82, also died at Cedar Terrace; Gault, 85, died in her north side home; Jacobs, 82, was killed in his office at Jacobs Elevator; Wolff, 77, died in her Freeman Street residence; Merten and Hall, both 67, were killed in Merten's shoe repair shop near Trowbridge and from debris that struck Hall's Sears van respectively; Leach, 54, died en route to a Waterloo hospital from her injuries; Dawson, 45, died at home on 19th Avenue; and Loomer, the oldest victim at age 95, died at home on Richings Street.

Their names are forever memorialized on a plaque in Central Park.

For many of the survivors, memories of that day 40 years ago are also forever etched in their minds — or the scars from injuries sustained. It took years for Charles City to get back on its feet, but four decades later it still feels like yesterday at times to some residents. It may be a particular sound or smell that triggers those feelings, or perhaps a threatening cloud in the sky.

"I still get feelings of compression sometimes," said Schwarck. "To this day, I still have a buzzing in my ears from that terrible pressure, like lots of cicadas. I've talked to others who went through the tornado that say the same thing."

Starr reports that, "Certain days I can still smell that smell, damp and musty. I respect tornado warnings now."

"I still have tornado nightmares to this day," added Goddard. "This time of the year is the worst with all the public service announcements about severe weather."

"Now we take a pretty good look and we watch," remarked Franklin Kicherer of whenever severe weather is in the area.

Forty years later, Butler said she still has her "Tornado City" sweatshirt and her tornado book, "and if a storm approaches I RUN for cover. No questions asked. It changed my life and lots of other kids in Charles City that May 15, 1968."

## Tornado was strong — but not THAT strong!

By Mark Wicks  
Managing Editor

In the days following the Charles City tornado of May 15, 1968, a pair of weather experts saw a stunning photograph in the *Des Moines Register* of a Charles City farm field from above showing the distinct swirling patterns of a tornado. Paul Waite, a climatologist from the U.S. Weather Bureau in Des Moines and bureau chief Clarence Lamoureaux had never before seen such a detailed shot, which they believed they could use with other information to estimate the wind speed inside the funnel.

The duo drove to Charles City and to the Claire Jaeger farm just northeast of town, and with the newspaper photo in hand as a guide, started measuring the overlapping whirls. Using the recorded speed of the twister, which according to radar had been 40 miles an hour, they used a formula of velocity equals the average of the circumferences of the ellipses, times the number of rings per mile, times the forward speed for the funnel. As a result, they estimated the Charles City tornado to be turning at a speed of 528 miles per hour. Their findings were front page news in the May 26, 1968, *Des Moines Register*.

The only other time prior to that this formula had been used was in 1955 with a lower quality photo from the Scottsbluff, Neb., tornado. That one was estimated at 428 miles per hour.

Weather experts today, however, are disputing those findings.

"About 300 miles per hour is the maximum we've seen from any findings anywhere," reported Jeff Boyne of the National Weather Service office in La Crosse, Wis. "There's no evidence they go much higher than that."

Cal Larson of Charles City, whose father was the meteorologist stationed at the Charles City Weather Bureau for 30 years and who grew up there in the world of weather reporting, agreed.

"I could believe 328 miles per hour, but 528 seems pretty far fetched," he said. "It was a new formula back then, though, and obviously in need of some more fine tuning."

# Outpouring of support helps community get back on its feet

**By Mark Wicks and Matt Barnes**  
Staff Writers

Where do you begin?

That undoubtedly crossed the minds of the stunned residents of Charles City as they emerged from whatever shelter they took on May 15, 1968, when one of the strongest and deadliest tornadoes in Iowa history swept through their community.

In its wake, the F5 twister — spinning at over 300 miles per hour — left a path of unimaginable death and destruction. At one point the monstrous tornado was five blocks wide and tore through the heart of town. Thirteen people lost their lives in the storm and another 462 were injured.

When the damage was all tallied up, 337 homes had been destroyed and another 2,000 impacted to one degree or another; 58 businesses were wiped away and 210 more damaged; more than 1,250 vehicles demolished; and hundreds of trees lost. Out of Charles City's 3,600 families at the time, 2,200 had been directly affected.

Damage estimates in town were put at \$30 million. Translated into 2008 figures, Floyd County Emer-



Red Cross Disaster Relief headquarters was set up at St. John Lutheran Church to aid people affected by the devastating tornado of 1968.

— U.S. Army Photo

gency Management Agency Director Bridget Moe puts the damage today at more than \$184 million.

Of the seven-square mile city at

the time, only four square miles were left undamaged. Whole neighborhoods were erased, streets blocked with debris, infrastructure such as

power, water and telephone service was down, school and church buildings — where people usually congregate in times of crisis — were

uninhabitable, scores of people were left homeless and there were more injured than the local hospital could care for.

“Utter confusion reigned immediately following the tornado strike,” the *Charles City Press* reported the next day. “But within 30 minutes clean-up crews were removing debris from in front of the fire station, which lost the entire portion of its upper wall.”

“It was hard to get everyone organized,” recalled Ben Krall. “Because the ambulance was trapped in the City Hall/Fire Station, the people who weren’t hurt volunteered to take the injured to nearby hospitals.”

Caring for the injured became priority one.

For the first hour, Floyd County Memorial Hospital only had one doctor on hand. The rest of the staff couldn’t get there because the bridge was blocked by debris. Downed power lines also made travel through town treacherous.

“It was amazing because you could not drive down a street because of all the trees. You just had to

## Recovery

Continued on page 21



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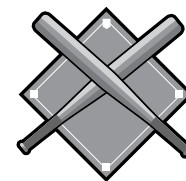
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# Outside aid poured in after storm

## Recovery

Continued from page 20  
walk around everything and you saw people walking around in a daze, kind of bloody, and everyone was just shocked," remembered Elaine Mead.

Jim Hilgendorf was 25 and a member of the ambulance crew in 1968. He and Wes Banks were out on a call with one of the ambulances when the tornado hit and immediately began assisting people.

"We looked across (the river) and it was a war zone," Hilgendorf recalled. "We picked up our first person right about where City Hall is now. We picked up a lot more than one person."

To get from the downtown area to the hospital, he said, the ambulance had to cut across yards to avoid downed trees and power lines. Once people were able to reach the hospital, though, Hilgendorf said "things were thrown into a frenzy."

"I saw one guy who was brought in on a door," he remembered.

By that night, FCMH Administrator James Johnson said the hospital was taxed to its limit and the injured were being diverted to Osage, New Hampton, Hampton, Mason City and Rochester (Minn.).

The *Press* went on to report, "The wail of sirens from emergency vehicles enveloped the city in the hours after the storm and continued until almost midnight."

Hilgendorf and Banks stayed on the job well past their shift and dealt with a variety of injuries.

"We had some pretty bad ones," he said.

The tornado put a tremendous strain on the town's medical resources, but Hilgendorf cited an impressive volunteer effort that kept emergency services operational.

"You couldn't believe the help that poured into this town," he said. "It was really something."

## Help arrives

Within hours of the disaster, help for the beleaguered community was on its way in the form of neighboring towns and farmers. Belmond, which had gone through the same thing two years earlier and remembered the help it received from the folks in Charles City, had a dozen emergency workers on their way almost immediately.

"They will stay as long as they are needed," then-Belmond Mayor Floyd Brosher told the media.

All told, Belmond brought in 30

pieces of equipment and 350 people with the know-how to respond to such a disaster.

Aid also poured in from the Black Hawk Sheriff's Auxiliary; Hardin County Emergency Squad; Osage Jaycees, Junior Red Cross and 24 members of the Osage American Legion; Citizens Band operators; units from the Clear Lake Fire Department and Independent Telephone Company; men from Rudd and Rockford; auxiliary police units from Chickasaw County and Storm Lake; and the Webster City Street Department. So did an uncounted number of civil defense units from around the region, including 21 from Sioux City alone.

The City of Des Moines sent a convoy of 34 vehicles and nearly 50 employees to spend a weekend aiding in the tornado cleanup. Six mounted police officers from Des Moines also arrived to help, as did the Nora Springs Rescue Squad and police units from Cedar Falls, Storm Lake, Iowa Falls, Osage, special deputies from Osage, four carloads from the Bureau of Criminal Investigation, police officers from Garner, Plainfield and Rudd and the fire departments

## Recovery

Continued on page 22



Above: Job Corps workers help remove debris

Below: Salvation Army mobile canteen



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# Red Cross, Salvation Army on hand

## Recovery

Continued from page 21 from Colwell and New Hampton.

"I think we owe a lot to the folks from surrounding towns like Belmond," remarked Bonnie Mitchell. "The Amish and Mennonite families, too. They walked the fields from Charles City to Elma picking up debris so that the farmers could plow. The fields were just full of debris."

She noted that her husband, Bud, was given the task of overseeing minimum security prisoners from Anamosa who were bused in to help with the clean up.

In addition, 88 Job Corps personnel arrived by bus to aid in clearing the debris. They came from Poplar Bluffs, Mo., and Ojibway, Mich., in response to Mayor Harry Brenton's request for help.

Donations also poured in. Truckloads of household items and clothing arrived from Dubuque from the Masons and Eastern Star members there. The response to the plea for clothing was so great that the Red Cross asked donors to "hold off" until what had already come in was sorted.

The disaster even made international news. Photos of the Charles City devastation appeared in newspa-

pers in Frankfurt, Germany. Collections were taken in Frankfurt and Bo-cholt for clothes and blankets and a ship offered to transport the packages. The Germans said they were grateful for the CARE packages received after WWII and were simply returning the favor.

The Red Cross set up shop in St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, which was really the only church in town not heavily damaged. The Salvation Army, meanwhile, had a portable canteen truck on site within an hour, with more to follow, and established an emergency relief station at Immaculate Conception School. It reportedly was serving 10,000 meals a day that first week after the storm. Likewise, the Red Cross figured 52,000 meals and snacks were served the first week, with as many as 15 mobile units in the area making sure everyone had something to eat. The Red Cross also arranged for sleeping quarters for the army of volunteer workers.

The residents who still had a home were doing their part to help out, as well.

Harriet (Eikenberry) Holzer, who is now 83, said she and her husband had 70 people, at one time or another,

in their home on Ohio Avenue that first night.

"We took in three families, we were wall-to-wall people," she reported. "We also had people come looking for their families and friends. My cousins brought a truckload of supplies. We had our own well and a 30 gallon tank, so we had access to water for awhile."

There were four wounded people among their guests that the Holzers cared for, including one woman whose mouth was full of debris.

"She opened her mouth and it was all black," said Harriet. "Her false teeth were wedged so far back into her jaw bone that a dentist had to eventually pull them back out."

For 25 years following the tornado, the Holzers would host a potluck supper of thanks that they had survived. Everyone who came to their house that May in 1968 was always invited.

"We had as many as 25 attend each year, we always had someone join us," Harriet commented,

## Restoring order

With peoples' immediate needs for

## Recovery

Continued on page 23



Above: Floyd County Civil Defense Director Jim McNeilus (at left).

Below: a city planning meeting



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# 'Never ending plume of smoke and fire' at Shaw dump site

## Recovery

Continued from page 22

medical care, food and first aid being addressed, city and county officials could begin to tackle other things like restoring infrastructure and clearing away the debris.

The city council immediately declared a state of emergency. Gov. Harold Hughes was in Charles City the next day to see the devastation first-hand and meet with community leaders, promising state assistance and National Guard support.

A convoy of trucks paraded throughout the city all day on May 16, removing debris and wrecked cars. Flammable material was taken to the city dump and burned. Bricks, concrete, iron and other non-flammable material was taken to area behind Allied Construction Co. on South Grand.

"I remember a never ending plume of smoke and fire at the Shaw Avenue dump site as debris was hauled and burned continuously for months following the storm," commented Jeff Sisson, who was 12 years old back in 1968. "I recall seeing washers and dryers, freezers, lawn mowers and lots of things in a pile that seemed 30-40 feet tall. Every block in the devastated area had a pile like this."

National Guardsmen were in place by Thursday night to provide security, taking up positions around the downtown area. Sheriff L.L. Lane had reports that downtown looting had taken place within 20 minutes of the dis-

aster. A curfew was put in place requiring all unauthorized personnel to be out of the downtown disaster area by 9:30 p.m.

Absolutely no sight-seers were allowed in Charles City at first. The highways into town were already crowded by Wednesday night, but if you were not a resident or an emergency response volunteer, you didn't get in. All persons wanting to volunteer had to report to the Floyd County Courthouse for an official pass.

Complicating matters was a report that the Cedar River was steadily rising in the wake of the storm. High water cut off the Oak Park area, but by 3:30 a.m. Friday, the river began dropping back to normal.

Electrical service to 40 percent of the town was restored by 6 p.m. the first night, but for other areas like the downtown, the only light at night came from emergency vehicles and flares. The hospital had power, thanks to two emergency generators, but there was no city water available. Milk trucks were loaded with water, which was then pumped into the hospital's pipes. Milk cans were also filled with water for other parts of town.

Throughout the first couple of nights, only two sources of gasoline were still available, Holiday station and Banks Standard Service. At times, emergency vehicles ran dangerously low on fuel.

Phone service was restored by Saturday night, thanks to 150 repair crewmen who descended on Charles City. Rhonda (Havner)

Wilson was an 18-year-old operator helping to man the local switchboard under a makeshift tent of plastic sheeting. The roof had been ripped off in the tornado.

"We were actually back up and running in part that first night," she reported. "It was disheartening to take all those calls from people trying to find out what happened to their loved ones. I had seen those areas of town and knew it wasn't good. It was hard, but it was something you just knew you had to do."

Wilson also helped out with the Red Cross switchboard in the days that followed. It was the first few nights, though, that she particularly recalls.

"The eeriest thing I remember is the complete silence at night, except for sirens," she commented. "There were the eerie shapes of a partially demolished Central School and other strange shadows you no longer recognized. But that complete silence, I will never forget."

Near-normal postal service resumed by that next Monday and four local grocery stores reopened during daylight hours, despite having no electricity, so that food and related items in stock could be distributed.

## Organized chaos

The courthouse, which has only been slightly damaged, became headquarters for the massive clean-up efforts. Generators supplied power and light.

Sheriff Lane headed up the disaster unit and

Floyd County Civil Defense Director Jim McNeilus coordinated the efforts of the estimated 300 Guardsmen who reported. They had outside help, as well. Jim Francis, executive director for the Cerro Gordo County Civil Defense, was on hand giving information to persons on where they could go for housing and food, while Carl Blackburn, secretary of the AFL-CIO, kept the list of homeless persons who were being relocated. Floyd County Extension Director Bob McCrackin, meanwhile, was in charge of issuing work passes.

Lack of communication for thousands of people outside of Charles City trying to get word on relatives and friends was a major obstacle. The Floyd County Department of Social Welfare attempted to compile lists of the injured and make it available at the courthouse to eliminate confusion by those seeking information.

The city council directed that recovered bodies be taken to Floyd County Memorial Hospital for identification and the names of dead directed to mayor's office, with the Red Cross responsible for notification of next of kin. The May 20, 1968, *Press* reported the death toll had originally been put at 14, but there was some confusion regarding the listing of a boy identified as Tom Hall or Tom Brown. A search of the many morgues and hospitals

## Recovery

Continued on page 24

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# Determined community rebuilds from the rubble

## Recovery

Continued from page 23  
involved failed to reveal the death of a youth, however, and a young man named Tom Brown was later found to be alive.

A procedure regarding severely damaged buildings was also established. An “X” was to be painted on them and they were to be roped off. Temporary wooden safety canopies were to be used to enter businesses still open if there were unsafe structures nearby.

Urban Renewal Director Don Johnson suggested designating Central Park and the City Hall parking lot as areas for construction of tents as temporary places of business. An office for insurance adjusters was also established in the courthouse.

Help with housing came from Dr. M.C. Ballenger, president of Charles City College, who announced that the college would close within that first week after the storm and that students would move out as soon as possible to free up apartment rental space for displaced community members. The students and faculty of the struggling college had met that Sunday evening and made the decision to close.

Private individuals and businesses also stepped up to the plate. Farmers and their chainsaws helped clear away the fallen trees around town.

H.M. (Mully) Finch, the Oliver tractor plant manager at the time, offered use of any of the Oliver equipment to persons who knew how to operate it. Numerous other businesses also supplied equipment. The Oliver plant itself sustained only limited damage, but the display showroom along Grand Avenue was blown away.

Local hog buyer and farmer Harley Peters took on the job as coordinator of cleanup activities. Peters set up a system of block chairmen to clean up one street at a time, utilizing a citizen’s band radio to dispatch needed equipment from the city sheds. Then Dale Studt and Peters organized a ward system. The town was divided into five wards and each day, depending on who was available to work, ward chairmen were appointed to head the clean-up effort in that area.

“It’s the most organized mass confusion I’ve ever seen, but it’s working,” said Tom Kraft, assistant city engineer, in the May 27, 1968, *Press* about the clean-up.

Waivers were needed by home owners to clean up the rubble and re-

move damaged homes from private property. Through this and the ward chairmen, the city could look at a map and tell at a glance where crews were working, which houses had been removed and which were waiting for removal.

Thousands of destroyed vehicles were hauled to Lion’s Field and stored until they could be disposed of.

“I remember them being stacked like cord wood on the site of the old football field,” recalled Sisson.

Bill Smith, in a tornado report to his customers at Smith Nursery, noted a return of optimism:

“Most of the people are in good spirits and tackling the job with a vengeance,” he wrote of the cleanup and rebuilding effort. “Everybody feels sure that it will just be a matter of time before Charles City is back on its feet and rarin’ to go.”

## Time to rebuild

It was clear that the community would never be the same again after May 15, 1968, but there was a determination by officials and residents alike to rebuild a new Charles City.

Ironically, the top story in town in 1967 was urban renewal. Proposed plans had split support in the community, with a number of town meetings held and a public group formed to oppose the urban renewal plans being presented. Those plans called for an entire new downtown shopping complex, extending along Main Street between Riverside and Kelly, and westward to the mid-point in the block west of Jackson.

Mayor Brenton had indicated his opposition to any form of government subsidized urban renewal in ‘67 and council members were split on the issue.

“The ultimate decision is with the council and generally it appears the controversy will be short-lived during 1968,” a *Press* article reported on March 11, 1968, in its Progress report.

Of course, the tornado made up the community’s mind for them.

A presidential disaster declaration helped provide federal funding for the recovery efforts and a \$10 million redevelopment plan was conceived. Voters approved \$1,412,000 in debt to finance a new city hall, fire station and community redevelopment project.

Assisting Charles City through the rebuilding process was a delegation of city officials from Albert Lea, Minn., which had been hit by a tornado a year earlier.

“The biggest favor you can pos-

sibly do for Charles City is to be hard-nosed, cold, unwavering about the building code,” Albert Lea Mayor Niles R. Shoff said. “Our primary concern and our duty was to build just as good a town afterwards, if not better than we had.”

He emphasized that local residents could be victimized by unscrupulous fly-by-night contractors who would be converging on the town.

The community delegations discussed temporary use of trailer housing, building inspections, working with contractors, building permits and, in particular, warned of trouble with basement walls that could be cracked from the pressure generated by the tornado.

When plans to secure state and federal funds to install a disaster warning system did not materialize, Charles City citizens, firms and organizations stepped forward and helped raise more than \$20,000 so that a new community warning system could become a reality.

School voters, meanwhile, approved a \$3,535,000 bond issue for the \$5,300,000 school building program. The Charles City Board of Education decided to cancel elementary school classes for the rest of the school year. McKinley, the Manual Arts Building and Washington schools all sustained major, if not complete damage. Central Elementary, however, was repairable.

It was decided to rebuild Washington on the same site. Manual Arts would be rebuilt as an addition to the junior high school and an addition to Jefferson would replace McKinley.

Regular classes at the junior and senior highs — which survived the storm — did resume on May 27, with classes running through June 4. Those buildings were not damaged and 210 Charles City seniors were presented their diplomas on June 5.

“Julie Groesbeck, who suffered a leg injury in the tornado, hobbled bravely down the aisle on crutches and made it across the stage without the encumbering aids,” the June 6 *Press* that year reported. “Parents, who would have no after-graduation parties in their homes, but would ‘make do,’ watched with tear-stained faces.”

The title of the commencement address given by Supt. H.J. Eastman was, “The Rising Sun Looks On A New Day.” Dr. Max Johns, vice president of the school board, pledged to the graduates that his generation, “Will build the churches, homes and businesses. We will build a better Charles City.”

## A Walk Down Main Street on May 14, 1968

The following directory of businesses that existed on Main Street on May 14, 1968, the day before the tornado, is from the book “Past Harvests: A History of Floyd County to 1996” by Cameron Hanson and Heather Hull. Published in 1996, the book was commissioned by the Floyd County Historical Society.

Businesses are listed from the south to the north beginning at Main Street’s intersection with the street listed. The odd-numbered addresses were on the west side and even-numbered on the east. Private residences/apartments not listed.

### Gilbert Street

(Highway 18/218)  
106 A & W Root Beer Drive-In  
101 Floyd County Courthouse  
100 Obie’s Standard Service

### Court Street

99 Ray’s Family Kitchen  
98 Abstract and Title Service  
97 Ken’s Radio and TV Sales  
96 Shriver’s Groceries  
94 Bradens  
93 Charles City Chamber of Commerce; Des Moines Register and Tribune Agency; Frye and McCartney  
92 Three-R Wood Shop  
91 Marigold Dairies; Howlyn’s Office Supply  
90 Kepple Realty  
89 Sylvester’s Home Interiors

### Cedar River

95 Melody Lounge  
97 All Iowa Sewing Company

### Riverside Drive

100 Charles City Press  
101 George Wentland Property Management and Insurance  
103 Gambles  
104 Sears and Roebuck  
107 Floyd County Museum  
109 J.C. Penney Store  
112 Spurgeon’s  
113 Van Rees Music  
115 Spic and Span Bakery  
116 Field Drug  
118 Nockles Shoe Store  
119 Ace Lounge  
120 Mode-O-Day  
121 Ben Franklin Store  
121 1/2 Gilbert Hotel  
122 Muesel Hardware

### Clark Street

200 Woolworths  
201 Weinberger Pharmacy  
201 1/2 Hohler Piano Service  
203 Garthwaite’s Office Supply  
203 1/2 Iowa Title and Realty; Mutual Benefit Life Insurance; LeRoy Nelson, Attorney  
204 Lidd’s Clothing  
205 Coast-to-Coast  
206 Brown’s Shoe Fit  
208 Citizens National Bank  
209 Charles City Trading Store  
210 Butler’s Men’s Wear  
210 1/2 Credit Bureau of Chickasaw and Floyd County; Clyde King Insurance; K.T. Marsh Insurance  
211 Van’s Hardware  
214 Montgomery Ward  
215 Dutch Oven Bakery  
216 Western Auto  
217 Dean Jewelers  
219 Avco Delta Finance  
220 Janan’s Children’s Clothing  
221 McDermott TV Service  
222 Koffee Kup; May Drug

223 Uptown Cafe

### Kelly Street

300 Sherwin-Williams Paint; Larry’s Barber Shop; Sharlet’s Beauty Salon  
300 1/2 KCHA Radio  
302 Ellis Jewelry  
304 Thorp Credit  
306 Muller’s Clothing  
306 1/2 Milady’s Beauty Shoppe  
308 Park Fashion  
310 Bluhm Electric; Farmers Mutual Insurance; Martens Agency Insurance and Real Estate  
312 Blunt Printing  
314 Davis Paint  
316 Cora’s Counter  
318 Iowa Public Service  
320 Gibson’s Discount Store Blunt Street  
400 Credit Finance Company  
410 Commercial Trust and Savings Bank  
404 Wamsley’s Plumbing and Heating  
406 Culbert Electric  
409 Charles Theater  
414 Mid-Town DX Gas Station  
417 Knights of Columbus  
419 Charles City Savings and Loan; McMains Realtors; Russell McMains Insurance  
421 Peerless Photo  
423 Glen’s Barber Shop

### Ferguson Street

500 United States Post Office  
501 B&L Shell Service Station  
509 Cedar Valley Farm Fleet Distributing  
512 Spar Maple Lanes Bowling  
523 Charles City Laundry and Cleaners

### Hulin Street

600 Young’s Beauty  
601 Pederson Drive-In Cleaners  
604 Folkerts Printing  
615 Frudden Lumber  
620 Lindemere Dairy; Matthews Products Machine Shop  
624 Duane’s Gulf Service Station

### Spriggs Street

700 Smith Lumber Company  
701 Charles City Granite Works  
703 Golden Touch Beauty Salon  
705 Farm Bureau; Farm Bureau Insurance  
707 Knitting Korner  
721 Eli Goldstein Junk Dealer  
726 Charles City Creamery

### Richings Street

803 Whirlaway Car Wash  
804 Sar Seed Farms  
805 Oliver Corporation Warehouse  
807 North Main Barber Shop  
810 Checkerboard Cafe  
813 S&D Tavern



# Are you prepared for when disaster strikes?

## How to prepare a disaster supply kit

Having a disaster supply kit ready to take with you at a moment's notice ensures that you will have necessary supplies no matter how fast you may need to evacuate. Pack supplies in duffel bags or backpacks and keep them in a designated place. Your kit will also come in handy if you must take shelter in your home. This list will help ensure that your disaster supply kit includes all the essentials.

### Water

Pack at least one gallon per person per day for at least three days.

Store water in tightly sealed, non-breakable plastic, fiberglass or enamel-lined metal containers.

Change your water every six months.

### Food

Pack enough food to last each family member at least three days.

Include canned and boxed foods because they require little preparation and stay good for long periods of time. Remember to bring a manual can opener or to buy food in self-opening cans.

Pack foods in sealed metal or plas-

tic containers.

Replace foods every six months. Include foods for infants and family members with special diets.

### Tools and equipment

Battery-powered radio  
Flashlights  
Spare batteries  
Resealable plastic bags  
Washcloths and towels  
Paper cups and plates and plastic utensils  
Toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo, deodorant, and other toiletries  
Heavy-duty plastic garbage bags  
Change of clothing and an extra pair of shoes and socks for each person

Blankets or a sleep bag for each person

### Personal items

Personal identification  
Copies of birth and marriage certificates, inventory of household goods, bank account numbers and other important documents

Maps

Extra car and house keys  
Prescription medications

### First aid kit essentials

Adhesive bandages  
Antacid  
Antibiotic ointment  
Antidiarrhea medication

Antiseptic  
Aspirin and nonaspirin pain reliever  
Cleaning agents (isopropyl alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, soap, germicide)  
Cotton balls  
First aid manual  
Gauze pad and roll  
Latex gloves  
Laxative  
Moist towelettes  
Needle and safety pins  
Petroleum jelly  
Scissors  
Sunscreen  
Thermometer  
Triangular bandages  
Tweezers

### Preparing for a tornado

Designate a shelter area in your home. Basements or storm cellars are the safest. Otherwise, use an interior room or hallway on the ground floor.

Practice getting to your home shelter area.

If you live in a mobile home, find a sturdy building nearby where you can take shelter. Mobile homes offer little protection in a tornado.

Know the locations of designated shelter areas in place like schools and shopping centers.



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Tornado's path through Charles City on May 15, 1968. That's S. Main Street on the left, Hulin on the right and 9th Street running east-west.



Wrecked cars at Lion's Field

#### Credits

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# Museum expands tornado display for anniversary

By **Matt Barnes**

Press Staff Writer

Mary Ann Townsend is always a little busier in May, whether it be on the phone with a meteorologist or listening to stories from former Charles City residents.

As the director of the Floyd County Historical Museum, she has found that the anniversary of the 1968 tornado strikes an interest in a variety of people.

“People always show more interest this time of year,” she said.

Townsend has fielded calls from local weathermen and hosted officials from the National Weather Service at the museum. She has heard and recorded many stories from past and current Charles City residents.

For the 40th anniversary of the tornado, she has done her part to ensure that the museum offers a comprehensive collection that represents the sights, sounds and feelings of May 15, 1968.

The permanent exhibit at the museum is always on display for the public, and was recently expanded on for the tornado’s anniversary.

The expansion includes more photographs and information. Visi-



This sign from Bluhm Electric Company in Charles City ended up in an alfalfa field in LeRoy, Minn. — 45 miles away — following the tornado of 1968. It is part of the permanent tornado display at the Floyd County Historical Museum.

— Press photo by Matt Barnes

tors to the museum will be able to view a video presentation about the tornado pieced together by Charles

City resident John Sebern. A power point presentation featuring “many views of the tornado” will be exhib-

ited on Saturday, May 17, and will be narrated by Dick Young.

One exhibit highlight not to

miss, according to Townsend, is a recording of a radio station broadcast following the tornado.

“The day before the tornado came, the radio station got a new generator, so without that nobody could have heard anything that happened in town,” Townsend explained.

Immediately following the tornado, the radio signal was knocked off-line, but came back a few hours later. That is when resident Bob Hammer started recording what would have been the first voice residents would have heard over the radio following the disaster.

“When you listen to it, (the announcer’s) voice kind of quivers,” Townsend said.

Handwritten notices that were read over the air are featured with the display.

Other exhibit items include a business sign from Bluhm Electric that was blown across Iowa’s border into Minnesota, and an interactive device that explains the mechanics of a tornado.

The Floyd County Historical Museum is open 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, and from 1-4 p.m. on Saturdays.

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