Twenty-one tornadoes hit parts of Ohio and northwest Pennsylvania on the evening of May 31, 1985. They killed 76 people. The toll in Pennsylvania was 65 lives, 936 homes and $264 million in property damage. Ten blocks of Albion were gone. Twenty years later, survivors are still paying a price.
ILL WINDS

Tornadoes cut indelible swath through communities, lives

By ROBB FREDERICK
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BULLETIN ACTIVATED
TORNADO WARNING
NATIONAL WEATHER
SERVICE ERIE PA
513 PM EDT FRIDAY MAY 31
1985 EXPIRES 530 PM

... A TORNADO WAS SIGHTED BY STATE POLICE NEAR PENNSIDE... SOUTH OF ALBION IN ERIE COUNTY AT 609 PM... MOVING TOWARD THE NORTHEAST AT 30 MILES AN HOUR.

Gabby Browster got on the firehouse radio in Albion. He'd seen his share, in 30 years with the department. But this was different.

The storm was an F4 on the Fujita scale, which goes to 5. It spun on 250 mph winds — strong enough to strip the bark off trees, and to send a size 7 wedding dress flying into Allegheny National Forest, some 70 miles away.

The National Weather Service observers did not yet have Doppler radar: But they expected a storm. A cold front had hung over the Great Lakes, and an area of low pressure had reached east from Minnesota, sparking...
Tornadoes: Ill winds

Continued from 1A

thunderstorms. Fat black clouds bored toward an unseasonably 85-degree Erie day.
The storm, when it formed, stretched over 14 miles. It was two blocks wide.
The weathermen circled it with red pencils on their overlay maps.
They got the warning off, and Gabby Brewster sounded the alarm, and the old-timers told the kids to get off the damn street.
And then it hit, ripping out of Ohio and over the tip of Crawford County and on to Pennside.
It was coming right at them.
Gerl Dean had just dropped the girls at home. They had wanted McDonald's and, at the counter, had wanted it to go, so they could watch "Little House on the Prairie" while they finished their fries.
John Hosey had just stepped into the shower. He bowed on Friday nights.
Bunny Reighard had pizza on the table, Jimmer, her 6-year-old, had graduated from kindergarten just the week before.
Gloria McCabe was coming back from Kennedy's hardware when the first hail hit her car. It sounded like a bucket of golf balls.
The sky turned psychedelic.
"It looks like a real bad coloring job," she said. "One side ran into the other, and they just danced."
The men at the weather service drew more red circles.

Where tornadoes struck

Today marks the 20th anniversary of the tornadoes that struck northwestern Pennsylvania, including seven that struck in the Erie region.
The tornado that struck Albion and Cranberry in Erie County left 12 people dead and 200 injured.

WHERE ALBION WAS STRUCK

The tornado came from the west and struck these areas:
1. South Park Avenue
2. East State Street
3. Washington Street
4. Wells Avenue
5. Second Avenue
6. Orchard Street
7. East Pearl Street
8. Thornton Avenue
The tornado headed northeast toward Cranberry.

Tornadoes in and near the Erie region

On May 31, 1985
The National Weather Service recorded two tornadoes in Erie County and five in Crawford County.

Tornado Measurements

The Fujita scale rates the severity of tornadoes as a measurement of the damage they cause:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>F0</th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>F3</th>
<th>F4</th>
<th>F5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wind speeds:</td>
<td>Below 73 mph</td>
<td>73 to 112 mph</td>
<td>113 to 158 mph</td>
<td>159 to 206 mph</td>
<td>207 to 261 mph</td>
<td>262 to 318 mph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Weather Service

Gloria McCabe stands in her front yard at 171 E. State St. in Albion. Her home, like some others in Albion, is only 20 years old — rebuilt after an F4 tornado destroyed her old one May 31, 1985.
The only thing remaining on her property from before the tornado is a tree, at right, planted
John Hossy ran to the basement naked. He was still in the shower when the lights went out. His daughter Betsy was in the bed, and the oldest, 14-year-old, was in the nursery. They all scrambled down their cellar steps. The wind was howling, and the Howes were chilling.

"It's funny," she said, with the benefit of hindsight. "But I remember thinking, 'Oh, that glass is on my couch.'"

The wind lifted their two-story farmhouse right off the foundation. A floor joist hit Betsy Reilly in the head, knocking her unconscious. Her husband, John, ran to him, and he heard his daughter scream.

"I thought they were dead," he said. "I opened my eyes, and I looked up, and I could see the sky. The chimney was on fire."

He looked out and saw the tornado over Albion. He got back on the basement.

The storm crossed the Bessemer road and the runway down Park Avenue. It spun down Main Street, across the creek, and on to State. Wauchope, Wills, Orchard, and East Pearl. It obliterated 10 blocks of Albion.

John Hossy ran to the basement. He saw two tornadoes on the ground. One was in the west, and the other was in the north.

"I had to spread-eagle just to hold on," he said. "I thought my day had come." For a day, he said, it had. Debbi Sherman was still in her room when it soared over a farm silo. When the storm blew through the window of his second-floor bedroom, he jumped on the bed and hid under the bed. The kids were safe under the bed. She heard the wind howling, and she heard him scream.

The tornado skated over to Cranesville, and it took out the town. They were crushed against the side of their trailer. The three kids were safe under the bed.

When the storm passed, the Bessemer road was torn up, and the Howes' family waited out the storm in the basement. They were not injured.

The Howes recalled how loud the May 31, 1985, tornado was as it tore through Albion. Hossy's family waited out the storm in the basement.

The Howes were not injured. They were not killed. They were not injured. They were not killed.

BULLETIN ACTIVATE TORNADO WARNING NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE ERIE

500 PM EDT Fri May 31 1986 EXPIRES 700 PM

AT 500 PM ERIE WEATHER RADAR SHOWS NEW TORNADOES ON THE GROUND WEST OF ALBION AND CONNEAUTVILLE PENNA. MOVING TOWARDS THE EAST AT 30 MPH

ANOTHER TORNADO SOUTH OF SPARKSBOURG MOVING INTO WARENND COUNTY AND ONE NORTH OF OIL CITY MOVING INTO NORTHERN FOREST COUNTY.

The maps were all red then. There were 21 tornadoes. It was a level F4. It was a level F5. It was a level F6. It was a level F7.

Even deadlier was the F4 that ripped into the summer cottages in Jamestown, on the border of Mercer and Crawford counties. That storm stayed on the ground for more than an hour. It killed 23 people.

The tornado that hit Albion skated over to Cranesville, and the Kennedy Trailer Park. John Lynn Snyder was there. Her son, John, was buried in the rubble for three hours.

Help did come. Firefighters from every township with a truck dog for victims. They lifted up dogs from the rubble.

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The information in this story was taken from interviews, Erie Times-News archival clipping, the National Weather Service and the National Climatic Data Center.
An F4 tornado that led a path of destruction in Albion on May 31, 1985, was one of seven storms to tear through the Erie region that day. Twenty-one were spotted in northwest Pennsylvania and Ohio.

Bob Gould surveys damage to his East State Street home after a tornado ripped through Albion May 31, 1985. The F4 twister traveled down Main Street before skipping around in a path of destruction that included parts of State, Washington, Wells, Orchard and East Pearl.

A McCabe family photo shows Albion homes sheltered after the May 31, 1985, tornado. Gloria McCabe, whose family hid in the basement during the storm, says her house "went up into the air and turned a quarter, just like a flash cube. Then it came right back down."
Albion, Cranesville dead remembered

DEBORAH McQUAID
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ALBION — Ellen Carr stepped back and admired the flow marigolds she had just planted in the garden atop the wall at the corner of East State and Orchard streets.

This corner is important to the residents of the Albion-Cranesville area. A memorial there is the only remembrance of the May 31, 1990, tornado that cut through the center of town and into Cranesville.

Nine people in Albion and three in Cranesville died. Their names are engraved into a plaque at the center of the Albion memorial, which was dedicated May 31, 1996.

Caring for the flowers is a job Carr inherited from Ruth Taylor, a retired schoolteacher who died three years ago.

It's a job Carr shares with the 51 Club, a social group with 30 female members. Each member of that club takes a turn for a day during the summer to water the flowers.

Carr, like all Albion-area people who lived through the storms, can recall every detail of that night, even though she is unwilling to talk about it in detail.

She prefers to talk about the memorial's flower garden.

"I have so many people mention it. They enjoy it. I'm glad it makes people happy to see it. That's my motivation," Carr said. "It seems to catch people's eye when they're driving by."

The memorial was paid for by money left over in the Albion-Cranesville Disaster Fund after all the families affected that day had been helped.

Ellen Carr takes care of the Albion memorial honoring 12 people who died in Cranesville and Albion as a result of the devastating tornado 20 years ago.

Albion funeral director Sam Steff, who lost his home and business during the storm, donated the property for the memorial.

Northwestern School District Business Manager Paul Sachar, who was on the disaster-fund board, took over the perpetual-care fund and still administers it.

Sachar described Carr's dedication to the upkeep of the memorial as a "labor of love."

Carr said she knows it's important. "I think it means a lot. I guess that's why I volunteered to keep it going."

LIVES TAKEN BY TORNADO

The names of the dead from the tornado that hit Albion and Cranesville are listed on a plaque at East State and Orchard streets in Albion. They are:

Marie T. Eagen
Norman F. Elliott
Ralph Hecker
Lena C. Keith
Chas. B. Kirka
Stanley J. Kirka
William R. Revak
Helen S. Sabovik
Debra Jane Sherman
Jodi Lynn Snyder
Luke Tyson Stahnsmith
Lydia J. Taylor
Tornado decimates Cranesville trailer park

By DEBORAH McQUAID

CRANESVILLE — The barking dogs were Frosty Crane’s first clue that something was terribly wrong.

It was May 31, 1985, and Crane — chief of the Cranesville Fire Department — was working inside his truck repair garage when his dogs wouldn’t stop barking.

He yelled at them to stop, but they wouldn’t.

When he went outside to investigate, he saw it — a huge, black funnel cloud that was bearing down on him.

He warned his son, Tim Crane, and the two took off in separate vehicles, headed for the Cranesville fire hall.

“IT was coming down the field, and I couldn’t follow him,” Frosty Crane said. “He was screaming in the back. I thought it was going to get him.”

He watched in disbelief as large trees became uprooted and circles overhead.

“And then it hit the trailer park,” he said.

What followed was three days of intense work — first to rescue the injured, then to recover the dead and then to recover personal items that had been blown from several homes.

Tim Crane, the department’s captain, and Terry Rea were among the first firefighters to reach the fire hall that day.

There was no power, and the ambulance was on a call in Erie.

They gathered what gear they could and headed to the trailer park, the entrance to which was blocked with debris.

“I can still remember climbing through the trees, and there was the trailer park and there was nothing left,” Tim Crane said. “All I remember is debris and gas meters blowing gas everywhere. I got a crescent wrench and just started shutting off the gas meters and trying to get the people to sit down. They were cut and bruised and in shock.”

Other firefighters started arriving within minutes.

“IT hit me, this is something serious,” Thomas said. “There was nothing there but piles of debris. All the trailers were pushed up against trees or down over the hillside in piles.”

Charles Kennedy, who owned the trailer park, and his daughter, Kay Pomeroy, walked through the destruction along with the firefighters.

There had been 13 homes, and they tried to make a list of the inhabitants by identifying bits of the trailers.

They comb through the debris until dark and then went to the fire department to help identify the injured and the dead.

Two people from the trailer park were killed.

“I saw my dad age that night about 10 years,” Pomeroy said. “She identified 36-year-old Robbie Snyder, who was found alive alongside his mother, Jodi Snyder, who was killed.”

Firefighters were digging under a destroyed trailer when they found Robbie.

“We thought it was a miracle that someone could be under there for so long,” said Thomas, who helped bring him out. Pomeroy said the little boy was “barely alive” when he was brought into the fire hall.

Robbie Snyder recovered from most of his injuries, but never regained his speech. He died in 1990 of pneumonia.

Pomeroy, Tim Crane

FROM: NOAH’S HALL LEATHER SUC ERIE

THOMAS, Rea and dozens of other firefighters from around the county continued the search in the trailer park and surrounding fields for the next two days.

Rea said it was just a sense of duty that kept them going.

Thomas said he went home only once to get a pair of socks.

Cranesville firefighter Jim Reiser spent three days escorting people into Cranesville and Albion. The area was shut off by the National Guard, Pennsylvania State Police and Erie County Sheriff’s Office deputies to all but those who had reason to be there. Special identification cards were made up and handed out.

Once all of the Cranesville residents were accounted for, the fire hall was turned into a clothing store, Frosty Crane said donations came in from everywhere.

Later, people started bringing in items they found in their yards and people came looking for lost possessions.

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In aftermath of storms, Atlantic altered forever

By JOHN BARTLETT
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ATLANTIC — This rural, crossroads community is forever different from most others. There are vacant lots where houses should be. Numerous mobile homes seem out of place, and the other homes all seem about 20 years old.

This town should have an abundance of grand old homes, but only two are readily visible here.

This is Atlantic.

What made it forever different was the tornado of 1985, which claimed five lives and left little standing.

Bob Wasser, now assistant chief of the East Fallowfield Fire Department, gazed across the town from his lot on Atlantic Road — from the spot where his house once stood.

"It was destroyed, like most everything here," he said.

Wasser now lives in a house he built after the tornado at the rear of the lot where his previous home stood until shortly after 5 p.m. on May 31, 1985.

"I was lucky," he said. "A lot of people didn't rebuild, or couldn't replace what they had. I'd say about a third of the people are gone. It sure changed things."

Jeff Sterling, pastor of the Atlantic Community Church, arrived here some 11 years after the tornado passed through.

It was the center of everything after the tornado.

"It was quite a sight to see," Wasser said. "It was amazing that he spared our church," Betty Gosnell said. "It was for a purpose."

The church became the base of rescue and recovery operations.

"The National Guard, Red Cross and other volunteers slept in the pews. What's now my office became the post office," Sterling said.

Wasser said the whole community gathered at the church every morning for breakfast and then went to work cleaning up. There would be a break for lunch and some talk at the church and then back to work until dinner at the church.

"The Gosnells huddled with their then-19-year-old son and a visiting insurance agent in a central hallway of their home as the tornado swept through the town. When it was gone, so were both ends of their house. Only the center portion remained.

"August. This community was always a community that worked together, but when the storm came, it really pulled together."

Emerging from the wreckage, the couple said they were stunned by what they saw all around them.

"It was the most eerie feeling. There was a lot of silence. You saw destruction, but didn't hear a thing, not a person, not an animal. Just silence," she said.

Hardly a day goes by that there is not some reminder, Betty Gosnell said.

"You can never forget," she said.

An Amish buggy drove by as she spoke and the family waved. That's one of the remarkable changes brought to the community by the tornado, Betty Gosnell said.

While still living in much different worlds, the tornado's aftermath created a single Atlantic-area community, rather than the two distinct communities that existed previously, she said.

Wasser also made note of how the two communities came together after the tornado.

"It is different now. The Dutch (Amish) and the English are much closer," he said.

"Everyone is."

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