25 years ago, deadly tornado churned through Trumbull County

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Plain Dealer Reporter

It has been 25 years since one of the state's deadliest storms — the May 31, 1985, Trumbull County tornado — churned through the small Northeast Ohio towns of Newton Falls and Niles.

But not even a quarter century of harmless, clear blue skies could ever overcome the eerie memories that disturb and strangely stir some of its survivors.

"I'll never forget any of it — the sound, the way it looked — any of it," said Dan D'Annunzio, now a retired Trumbull County sheriff's deputy who was finishing a karate class when the tornado hit Niles just before 7 p.m.

"People say it's like a train, but I'd say it's more like metal being scraped or crushed like a giant metal monster was coming at you."

It's no wonder: This Newton Falls-Niles monster tornado that stayed on the ground for 47 miles through Ohio and western Pennsylvania was a rare and prodigious F5. Its winds probably topped 300 mph and was later determined to be the largest tornado in the world that year.

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Tornado outbreak of May 31, 1985

On May 31, 1985, a deadly outbreak of more than 40 tornadoes hit Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Ontario, Canada. It was the 12th-largest tornado outbreak ever recorded in the United States, and among the farthest east and north. An F5 tornado that ripped through Newton Falls and Niles, Ohio, then Wheatland, Pa., was the largest tornado recorded that year.

The F5 tornado's track through Ohio and western Pennsylvania

6:38 p.m. Storm touches down in eastern Portage County.
6:49 p.m. Nine people killed in Niles.
6:52 p.m. Nine people killed in Niles.
7:06 p.m. Storm leaves two dead in Hubbard Township.
7:13 p.m. Seven people killed in Wheatland, Pa.
7:30 p.m. Storm ends.

SOURCES: ESRI TeleAtlas; National Weather Service; Penn State University

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Tornado time in Ohio

But improbability is relative: While the 1985 outbreak was rare for its power and the sheer number of tornadoes, Ohio is hardly in the clear. The state has had nearly 1,000 tornadoes over the last 50 years. While the vast majority are of the lesser F0 or F1 variety, the potential for a storm of any size remains.

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TORNADO

FROM B1

F5 storm caused huge devastation

The F5 tornado is the rare type of tornadic storm identified aptly as “incredible” on the Fujita scale (and famously referred to as the omnipotent “finger of God” in the 1996 movie “Twister”).

Since 1950, less than one-tenth of 1 percent of all tornadoes have hit the F5 mark — yet they’re responsible for more than 1,000 deaths (21.5 percent of all tornado fatalities).

Ohio has had three: 1968 in Scioto, Lawrence and Gallia counties; 1974 in Xenia; and 1985 in Trumbull County. The 1985 twister was the only F5 to reach as far east as Pennsylvania, where most tornadoes are turned away by the Appalachian Mountains.

This storm was also so huge that it reflected a rare radar signature that meteorologists call a “debris ball.”

“There was so much debris — trees, wood from buildings, you name it — being tossed up in the air and carried along that it had a bulging, ball-like radar signature,” said Greg Forbes, severe-weather expert at the Weather Channel, who was an associate professor at Penn State University in 1985 and watched the Ohio storm cross into his state.

The massive twister killed 19 people. It became Ohio’s worst tornado since the behemoth F5 that leveled Xenia in 1974.

The May 31, 1985, tornado first touched down about 6:30 p.m. in Portage County, just east of the Ravenna Arsenal, and began to plow its way east toward Newton Falls, sucking up and splitting out buildings, trees and debris along the way.

Lives spared in Newton Falls

But Newton Falls had a sentinel on duty.

The recently deceased Clayton Reakes, a captain in the city’s safety police reserve, had been a storm spotter for nearly 30 years.

“D’Annunzio was briefly knocked out and cut with flying debris, not.”

More than 40 tornadoes touched down in Ohio that day.
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Greg Forbes,
weather-noser expert at the Weather Channel

More than 40 tornadoes that day

But the Newton Falls-Siles twister was only the largest among a swarm of more than 40 torn out by a line of thunderstorms that swept across Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and Ontario over a six-hour stretch on that harsh, humid evening.

In all, the May 31, 1985, tornadoes killed 86 people that evening. More than 1,000 people were injured and more than $450 million in damage was reported, including $466 million in Ohio.

The outbreak is still listed by the National Weather Service Storm Data Center as one of the worst tornado events of all time in the United States.

Pennsylvania also had the deadliest single tornado: An F3 along the Mercer and Crawford county line that killed 21 people.

It killed a 10-mile-long path, staying on the ground for a full, terrifying hour.

The tornado outbreak was not only especially powerful, but it was also improbable.

The worst storms of the Great Plains, and even in Ohio, for that matter.

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