

Violent Flint Tornado of May 12, 1956

On May 12, 1956, a violent tornado struck Flint and areas just east of the city, causing three fatalities and 116 injuries. That tornado was among an outbreak of ten tornadoes that struck south-central and southeast Michigan 45 years ago. This outbreak resulted in a total of 4 fatalities and 156 injuries.

Early May, 1956, was cool with below-normal highs in the 50s and lower 60s nearly each day from May 1 through May 10. A rapid warm-up occurred on May 11, 1956, when high temperatures soared to 77 degrees in Flint. On May 12, 1956, Flint's high reached 80 degrees. Unfortunately, the warmth did not bring with it completely pleasant weather.

The tornado that struck Flint began in the southeast part of the city around 625 PM, just west of where the present-day I-475 runs adjacent to Thread Lake. Along an approximately 6 1/2-mile path the tornado moved east-southeast, dissipating northwest of Atlas. Courtesy of reports from *The Flint Journal*, considerable damage occurred along and near the path of the tornado from Dort Highway between Lapeer and Atherton Roads, southeast across Bristol Road to near Maple and Irish Roads. Five commercial and 71 miscellaneous buildings were recorded as a total loss, and 453 buildings, 35 house trailers, and 8 other homes suffered damage.



Approximate path of the 5/12/56 Flint tornado. Map courtesy of Expedia.com

The highest concentration of damage was estimated to be between Center Road and M-15, south of Lippincott, where over \$1 million of the \$5 million in total damage occurred. Severe thunderstorms also produced baseball-sized hail on Lillie Road, and at Flint Bishop Airport, the Weather Bureau observed a peak wind gust of 92 mph. Radio and TV towers, some to a height of 467 feet, were bent or toppled.

The following table describes the tornadoes that affected lower Michigan on May 12, 1956:

Tornadoes on May 12, 1956 in lower Michigan				
<i>County</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Deaths</i>	<i>Injuries</i>	<i>Fujita Scale Strength</i>
Montcalm	405 PM	none	none	F2
Isabella@		none	none	F2
Gratiot	415 PM	1	4	F2
Clinton	502 PM	none	3	F2
Shiawassee	515 PM	none	1	F1
Genesee	525 PM	3	116	F4
Wayne	545 PM	none	none	F0
Saginaw	600 PM	none	none	F2
Livingston%	600 PM	none	5	F2
Livingston%	600 PM	none	5	F2
Oakland#		none	none	F2
Oakland#		none	none	F2
Wayne	655 PM	none	22	F4

@ moved into Isabella County from Montcalm County

% two, simultaneous tornadoes

moved into Oakland County from Livingston County

Fujita Tornado Scale:

F0 - Gale Tornado (42-72 mph) F1 - Moderate Tornado (73-112 mph) F2 - Significant Tornado (113-157 mph)

F3 - Severe Tornado (158-206 mph) F4 - Devastating Tornado (207-260 mph) F5 - Incredible Tornado (261-318 mph)

The National Weather Service recommends, for tornado safety, to move to an interior room on the lowest floor, away from windows, preferably in a basement. Put as many walls between you and the

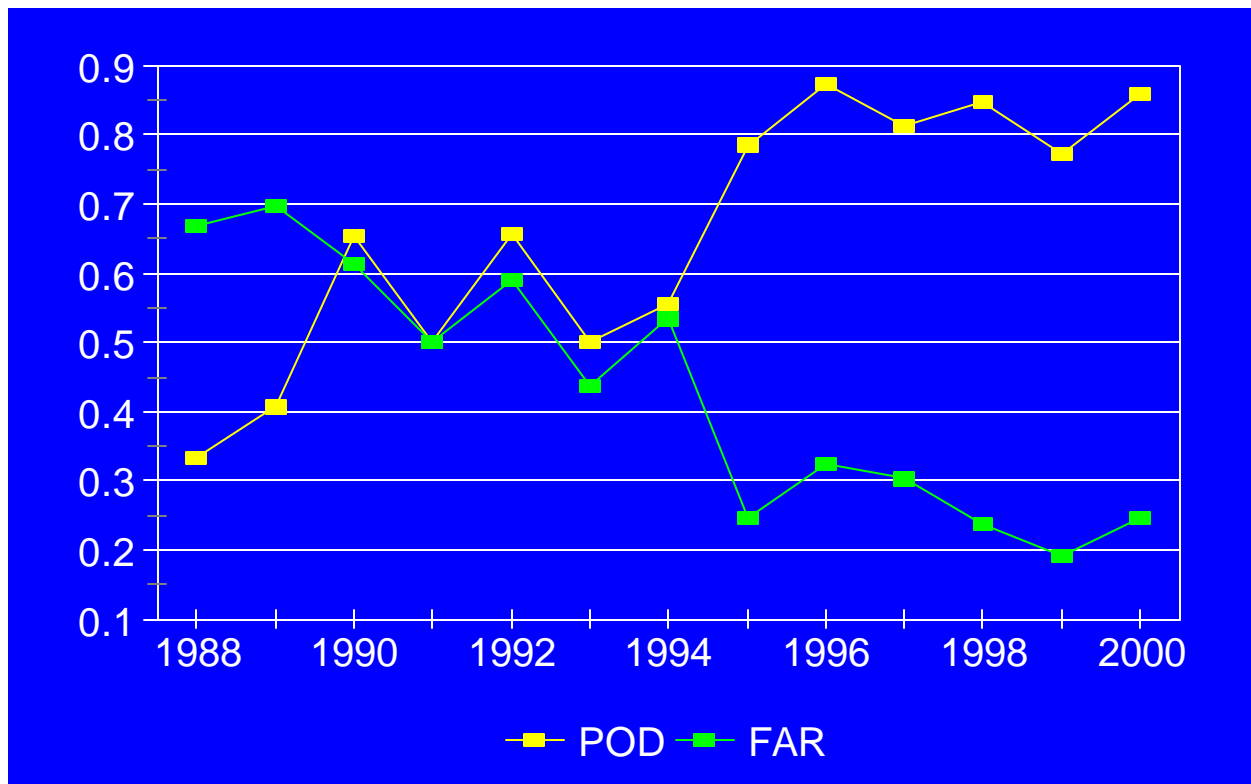
outside as possible, and get under something sturdy. If caught outdoors, try to find sturdy shelter quickly, but if no shelter is nearby, get low in a ditch or other low spot, and cover your head with your hands. In a car or mobile home, leave them and get to the nearest sturdy shelter if one is available. If no shelter is available, get away from the car or mobile home, find a ditch or low spot, and cover your head with your hands.

These lessons were heeded even in 1956, with life-saving results. One couple, caught outdoors, found shelter in a ditch. Though the couple suffered severe cuts, they survived. Many others sought shelter in basements. Twenty-two neighbors crowded into one basement, and in another basement, though the furnace was pulled from one corner to the other, the occupants survived. "Thank God for basements," was the comment of one family on Gilmartin Street in the aftermath of the tornado, whose home had its roof torn off and a 4 X 6 piece of wood driven through the wall. In addition, another family, in their car as the tornado and its debris approached, were able to get inside a store and move to the rear of the structure. This family survived, though the car was demolished.

In the aftermath of the tornado, an article in *The Flint Journal* stated that Weather Bureau experts were planning to test a warning system using a bell that rings when the pressure jumps dramatically. One hundred five of these bells were to be installed nationwide at some police and fire stations, and other locations where individuals were on-duty 24-hours a day. The purpose of this bell was to alert individuals to the ongoing presence of severe thunderstorms due to the extreme atmospheric pressure fluctuations that severe storms produce. Today, advances in satellite and radar technology, networks of trained volunteer spotters, and an emphasis on training National Weather Service meteorologists in

the latest severe weather forecasting techniques allow for most warnings with several minutes of lead time before the severe weather affects individuals in a given county.

Statistics from the Detroit/Pontiac National Weather Service office show a nearly three-fold increase in warning accuracy since the late 1980s. In terms of the ability to issue warnings before severe weather strikes individuals in a county, about 85% of the severe weather events are warned for, compared with just over 30% in 1988. Additionally, the number of false alarms the NWS issues in southeast Michigan has dropped dramatically since 1988. In 2000, the average lead time in southeast Michigan from warning issuance to the first reported severe weather event was 17 minutes.



Severe weather statistics for southeast Michigan since 1988. “POD” is probability-of-detection, or the issuance of a severe weather warning before severe weather is reported in a county. “FAR” is false-alarm ratio, or a severe weather warning issued for a storm from which no severe weather is reported.

For more information on weather, including forecasts, the Detroit/Pontiac Doppler radar, NOAA Weather Radio, and hazardous weather safety tips, see the Internet home page of the National Weather Service Detroit/Pontiac office: <http://www.crh.noaa.gov/dtx/start.htm>

Information for this news release courtesy of *The Flint Journal*, U.S. Department of Commerce Local Climatological Data, the book *Significant Tornadoes 1680 - 1991* by Thomas P. Grazulis, and Expedia.com