

25 years ago, deadly tornado churned through Trumbull County

MICHAEL SCOTT
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 is more like metal being scraped or crunched or even like something was being chewed up — 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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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 18 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 spitting out buildings, trees and debris along the way.

Lives spared in Newton Falls

But Newton Falls had a sentinel on duty.

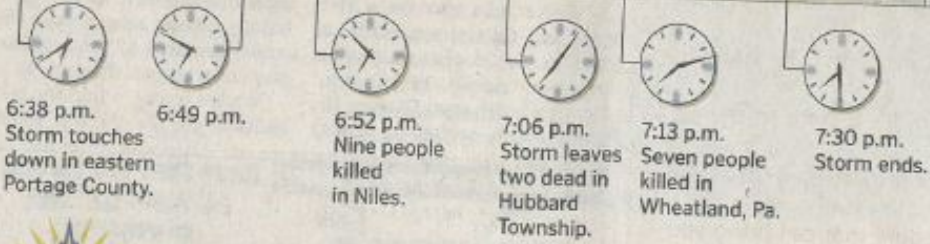
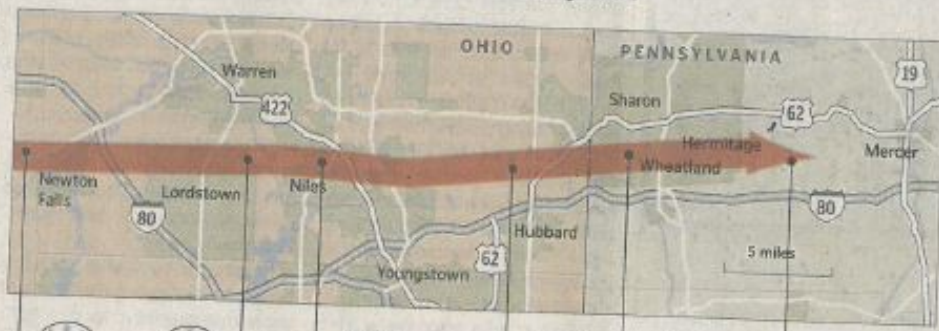
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Tornado outbreak of May 31, 1985

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



cleveland.com/datacentral to see a searchable database of every Ohio tornado since 1950

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

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Tornado time in Ohio

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The state has had nearly 1,000 tornadoes over the last 50 years.

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The recently deceased Clayton Reakes, a captain in the city's safety police reserve, had been a storm spotter for nearly 20 years.

He and another lieutenant had been perched atop City Hall for more than an hour before the tornado arrived. Although they sounded a siren only minutes before the tornado hit, it gave people enough time to take cover — including a hall full of about 150 bingo players at the American Legion next door.

"He gave people a fighting chance," said Michael Blau, the former Newton Falls city manager who now holds a similar administrator position in Tarrytown, N.Y. "It was amazing that no one died here."

Amazing, because seemingly half of Newton Falls was simply swept away by the storm.

"The bowling alley — gone. The gas station on the corner — gone," remembered Joe Politsky, now a professor at Baldwin-Wallace College and longtime teacher at Midpark High School, who arrived in town the next morning.

"I had to drive across yards to get through town because there were so many trees across the roads and so many buildings just demolished."

Politsky said the weirdest thing he remembers from the storm was finding dozens of bowling balls strewn around the rubble of the high school — across the street and down the block from the flattened bowling alley.

Blau had his own odd reminder of the extent of the storm: A woman several hundred miles away in New York later mailed him a document that had been blown from his desk at City Hall — which had had its windows blown out and roof thrown askew.

Niles hit the hardest

In Niles, the tornado, relentlessly clipping along at nearly 50 mph and now stretching more than 300 feet across, picked up three giant propane storage tanks — weighing 75,000 pounds each — folded them like cardboard and threw them across the street.

It did its worst human damage at an area known as "the Strip," or Niles Park Plaza on U.S. 422. It leveled a popular roller rink where hundreds of children and teenagers were due to arrive within the hour.

Those hundreds were spared, but nine others were

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D'Annunzio was briefly knocked out and cut with flying glass from a storefront that blew out in Niles, but he was able to stumble outside to see if he could help anyone.

"I came across a woman whose leg was missing and, I don't know how to really say it, but whose skin was mostly ripped off," said D'Annunzio, who now works for the U.S. Marshal's Service in Youngstown. "I've seen a lot of bad things, a lot of death in my years at the Sheriff's Office — but I've never seen anything like that."

D'Annunzio stayed with the woman, who soon died, until rescue crews arrived.

The next victim he found was trapped by a twisted steel beam, "wrapped around her like a pretzel."

"She was alive when I got there, but then she died too," D'Annunzio said. "It was terrible."

Sam Covelli was certain he'd see death as well. The Niles businessman and his father were driving west on U.S. 422 when they saw the tornado bearing down on them.

Covelli said all they could do was shut off the engine, crouch on the floor of the car, pray and wait. Amid the roar, the car started to take off at a high speed.

"But the car was shut off — the tornado had literally picked the car up and was pushing us down the road and then into a field six blocks away," Covelli said. "It was the scariest day of my life."

"When we got out, the windows of the car were blown out and we had glass and cuts all over us. Then I looked over and saw that the skating rink was totally exploded and I found out the gentleman in the car behind us had been killed."

More than 40 tornadoes that day

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

In all, the May 31, 1985, tornadoes killed 88 people that evening. More than 1,000 people were injured and more than \$450 million in damage was reported, including \$45 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 F4 along the Mercer and Crawford county line that killed 23 people. It carved a 56-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.

There had been an all-day forecast for heavy thunderstorms — the expected result of a collision of a massive, fast-moving and eastward-bound cold front with warm and extremely humid air from the Gulf of Mexico.

But a strange phenomenon quelled the collision most of the day — a stable cap of air atop the mixing masses of air below. That cap kept thunderstorms from rising up into the 40,000-foot-high cumulonimbus structures that often foretell heavy weather.

Then the cap lifted. "And we went from nothing to tornadoes in 10 minutes," said the Weather Channel's Forbes.

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, Ohio is considered just beyond the edge of Tornado Alley — the area centered in Kansas and Oklahoma that produces the most tornadoes in the world.

May and June are the most likely months for a tornado here — roughly 40 percent of all tornadoes occur in these two months, according to a Plain Dealer tornado database at cleveland.com/datacentral.

Still, it is the storms like the Xenia tornado of 1974 or the Trumbull County twister of 1985 that are frozen in time for weather watchers, victims and survivors.

"I don't think the 1985 storms will ever be forgotten," said Jim Bruner, an Ohio Department of Transportation official. Bruner, who grew up in nearby Braceville and only saw the storm clouds from afar, started a website five years ago — may311985tornadoes.com — that helps to make sure that's true.

"The stories from that tornado are so powerful," he said, "that you can tell people will never stop talking about it."

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