

Extreme Weather from Washington County's Past

Last Memorial Day weekend, severe weather battered the Twin City area; sirens and horns sounded and the sky turned a frightening blackish purple before depositing heavy rain, hail and funnel clouds. In Hugo a massive tornado touched down and destroyed several blocks of homes, causing millions of dollars in damages and taking the life of a child.

Tornados have hit Washington County many times in the past, tossing buildings like they were toys, and sending people scurrying into their root cellars in pursuit of a safe haven.

On the sultry afternoon of July 14, 1893, a "cyclone," as described in historical records, crossed the shores of Lily Lake in Stillwater and spun its way across town before doing major damage at the Atwood Mill.

The tornado blew through the brickyard near Lily Lake causing sheds to be destroyed. The barns of Thomas McCallan and George Miller, on South Fourth Street, were blown over. The tornado continued down the path of Churchill Street where it summited the bluff south of the Atwood Mill, and flattened the rafting shed. Two men, Windom Anez and Sam Simonson, who were working near the shed, were killed by flying debris.

In April 1929 a tornado touched down south of Forest Lake "spreading a path of destruction." According to newspaper accounts, "Hail stones the size of hens eggs fell in

Forest Lake at the time the storm struck south of town, breaking windows here and there. The school house at Forest Lake had many window panes broken."

The Forest Lake tornado first hit the George F. Taylor farm. The barn and other farm buildings were destroyed and the Taylor family lost 13 head of cattle. At the Emil Pollreis Farm, the new brick farmhouse was reduced to "shambles," and the family lost 200 chickens and five hogs. These were major economic losses for the times.

Near the Pollreis farm, George Lundgren, a newcomer to the area, was killed in the storm. Lundgren and his brother, Frank, had moved into the Morris Flagen place two days before the tornado hit.

On June 13, 1930 a tornado hit the Washington County community of St. Paul Park, damaging homes and uprooting trees. Thankfully, the injuries were minor.

According to St. Paul Park residents Rosie Meyers and Betty Cox, the Morey sisters, the tornado came from the Mississippi River [the west], picked up the garage with their Hupmobile car in it, and set it down on top of the well, with the car tipped on its side. Later, several men tipped the vehicle back on its tires. The sisters' father started it and the car ran just fine. The Morey home, at the time the storm hit, was located on Seventh Avenue between Third and Fourth Streets.

The Morey sisters' German shepherd dog, "Mickey," was reportedly blown away by the storm. Incredibly, they found Mickey near the Harbrechts' house on Third Street – scared, but still alive.

The tornado continued up the hill and destroyed the Cora and William Noltimier home and damaged the McNearney home next door before departing St. Paul Park.

In late May of 1958, the storm clouds rolled in around 3 p.m. just north of White Bear Lake, and within seconds funnel clouds were seen in the sky. The first tornado touched down near White Bear Lake. A tornado moved into the Dellwood area, ripping through the Norman Slade farm doing major damage.

Traveling in a southeasterly direction, the twister took out power lines, trees, farm buildings and more. The tornado continued on its path of destruction as it swooped into the Lake Elmo area and took out the large, noteworthy, barn located on the Cloverdale Farm.

The Cloverdale barn was one of the largest farm buildings in the state at the time. It was constructed in 1924 at a cost of \$58,000 by Thomas Irvine of St. Paul. The barn originally held trotting horses which Irvine bred and maintained as a hobby. The barn was 157 feet long, with a center section about 70 feet wide and two wings 54 feet wide. It had a large hip roof which made the structure appear nearly three stories high. It was the largest building on the 260 acre estate established by Irvine in 1895.

Other residents in the path of the storm were members of the Alvin Bergman family, who owned a farm just off of Highway 36. The tornadic winds destroyed the barn, five outbuildings, and did substantial damage to the Bergman home. The family, which included five young boys aged two to sixteen, were able to eventually move back into their home while repairs were underway.

Walter Gleason was completing his new three-bedroom rambler on highway 212 northeast of Lake Elmo when the tornado hit, leaving Gleason with little more than an open basement and a pile of debris. Miraculously, Mrs. Gleason - who was in the house when it collapsed – suffered only a cut to her head.

On May 25, 2008, nearly 50 years to the day that the tornado struck Lake Elmo, the massive F3 tornado pummeled Hugo. The storm caused millions of dollars of damage, and took the life of 2-year old Nathaniel Prindle. “It’s a miracle more people weren’t killed,”said Hugo City Administrator Mike Ericson. The spring tornado touched down in the Waters Edge and Creekview Preserves area of Hugo. More than 50 homes were destroyed, 350 were damaged and the estimated damage of the tornado in Hugo exceeded \$25 million.

The residents of Hugo, like their fellow citizens in the past, cleaned up the debris and wondered why the storm hit their community. No easy answer, but a review of history shows that extreme weather has always been part of the fabric of life in Washington

County. As in the past, residents will endure, rebuild, and resume their lives in Minnesota's first county.

Brent Peterson is executive director of the nonprofit Washington County Historical Society. Visit www.wchsmn.org for more on the rich, diverse history of Washington County.