

## Never-To-Be-Forgotten 1917 City Tornado Killed 58

### Leveled Homes Along Two-Mile Area Of Charlestown, Grant Line Roads

A twisting, spiraling funnel appeared above the Knobs northwest of New Albany a few minutes after 3 p.m., Friday, March 23, 1917.

It came with unheralded and intense fury, passed through the valley that separates the knobs at the lower end of New Albany, and with ominous roaring and mumbling swept with appalling ferocity into the city, leveling homes for two miles along Charlestown and Grant Line Roads and for many blocks along Vincennes Street.

The sputtering whip-end of the funnel cut a path half a mile wide and approximately two and one half miles long. It traveled from northwest to southeast and finally spent itself a short distance below Jeffersonville over the Ohio river.

### Filled Hospitals

The tornado snapped life from approximately 58 citizens and accumulated damages estimated at \$1,500,000.

Within a very short time following the tornado scores of injured had been taken to St. Edward's hospital until every available inch of space had been taken. The injured lay in rows in every room and the halls and basement of the hospital were filled. Louisville hospitals responded to pleas and cared for those less seriously injured.

It was reported that the storm, after leaving New Albany, swept over the Charlestown Road area and wiped out Sellersburg, but the story was exaggerated although some damage was done there.

Damage done to the Corydon Pike area, below New Albany, was great. Hundreds of trees, uprooted and carried with great force through the air, littered the ground.

Many small homes on the Corydon Pike were flattened and scores of citizens injured in that area.

The storm left its sting of death at the Cherry Street grade school where several hundred Negro students were in attendance. Teachers and children were trapped in the building and none escaped injury. It was estimated that 20 children were killed when the funnel dipped down and struck the building broadside. Some of the bodies were found a great distance from the death scene.

### Six Kahler Employees Killed

An infant, Martha Stella Ehringer, whose parents lived on the Corydon Pike, was forced through a window of the Ehringer home by the "pull" of the tornado. After the storm subsided the baby's body was

found lying in Falling Run Creek, near Pearl Street, with a toy dog clutched in her arms.

The Kahler Furniture Company, located on the corner of Grant Line Road and Vincennes Street, was reduced to a mass of twisted wreckage and left almost level with the street. Six employees were killed and 15 were injured.

The building of the Hoosier Panel Company, one half mile east of Vincennes Street, was hard hit. A third of the building was blown away, killing one man and injuring ten.

There were many eye witnesses to the approaching funnel. Mr. and Mrs. William Criswell, who resided at the corner of Shelby and Silver, saw the funnel appear over the hills to the northwest. Almost immediately Criswell ran to the kitchen stove and put out the fire.

"I never heard such a roaring," he said, "and it became almost as dark as midnight. The roaring sounded like a thousand B-29s flying overhead."

#### School Rocked Like Cradle

The scene at Silver Street School was typical of schools throughout the devastated area. The red brick building, newly constructed, "rocked like a cradle."

When the storm struck, windows of the building were "punched" out by the impact of the great wind.

Flying glass sprayed the school children, most of whom became hysterical and began running through the dark throughout the building.

Several score children, crying for their parents, poured en masse toward the main entrance doors. To run out into the storm could have meant death to all.

At the site, just inside the doors, the late Marshall Smith, who was janitor of the building, blocked their path like a beast at bay. The children charged him but he stood his ground and fought them off. On several occasions he was forced to use his fists.

#### "Had To Hit Some"

Finally getting the children under control, he herded them into the basement. Tears were in Smith's eyes and he cried openly after the storm abated. "I had to hit some of those poor little kids," he moaned.

Suddenly the clouds passed away and parents of the children came staggering through the doors, seeking their offspring. They had to wade through water almost to their knees.

The Silver Street building "held" but several teachers, who kneeled and prayed, admitted that they thought the building would collapse for sure and all would be killed.

Scores of residences on either side of Charlestown Road, Grant Line Road, Cherry Street, the extreme northern portion of State Street, the northern portion of Vincennes Street and Ekin Avenue were leveled. In some sections nothing was to be seen of homes but roofs lying on top of caved-in walls and splintered furniture.

Flower pots, bed springs, davenports, china closets, chairs and even pianos littered the streets. In front of some homes were suppers which had been awaiting the working man of the house.

One of the finest apartment buildings in New Albany was that owned by Mrs. Charles DePauw at 2000 Charlestown Road. The building was three stories high and contained five apartments all of which were occupied.

It was struck with full force by the storm and reduced to a mass of debris.

Scores were injured when the DePauw structure went down. Allan MacLean, an official of the Wood Mosaic Company, was taken to the hospital, but died.

Ruins of houses were thrown in a continuous mass across the Monon tracks, and passengers and freight trains were delayed until after midnight.

The cyclone, although death-dealing, played many pranks. There were a few instances where chairs were blown intact, from one residence to another, where rugs were whipped up by the wind and placed "gently" on clothes lines. Domestic animals, such as cats, birds and dogs were found uninjured in tree tops.

Following the tornado, relief committees were set up at the old Kerrigan Theatre; prisoners from the state reformatory at Jeffersonville were set to work clearing debris and soldiers and state police scanned the entire area to ward off the expected band of looters.

The following day, Saturday, March 24, was clear and cool. The sun shone on a "world" of devastation and those who had lived through the terrible ordeal were thankful.

It had been said that a tornado would never strike New Albany due to the hill barrier. The tornado made a mockery of that belief.

The hills were not high enough....

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