

Remembering the destruction from the 1985 tornado



Grand Valley survivor reflects on impact 40 years later

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It has been 40 years since a devastating series of tornadoes ripped across central Ontario.

The severe weather incident happened on Friday, May 31, 1985, leaving a trail of destruction in the Town of Grand Valley and killing two town residents.

Another eight people died in Barrie as the storm moved northwest across the province.

According to Environment Canada, a total of 14 tornadoes struck several communities in Ontario, including Arthur, Grand Valley, Orangeville, and Tottenham.

Classified as a powerful F4 level twister, the tornado that stormed across Grand Valley began around 4:15 p.m. near Arthur and moved west for over 115 km, leaving a trail of destruction along its path all the way to Mount Albert.

It was the third recorded tornado of the day and lasted for over an hour, it became the longest-lasting tornado in Canadian history.

The Town of Grand Valley was directly in the tornado's path.

When it was over, many buildings in the town had been destroyed and trees were uprooted. Debris littered the streets of the town.

The Town library was especially hard hit and an employee was trapped in the wreckage.

Stunned residents emerged after the storm to see much of their town had been left in ruins.

Considering the strength of the tornado, it was a miracle that many people escaped with only minor injuries, but others weren't so lucky.

A man was killed in his pickup truck and a woman died after being blown out of her house.

The tornado moved west and delivered more devastation to Orangeville and crossed Highway 10 where it destroyed the Mono Shopping Plaza.

Many rural residences and farms were damaged as the storm moved west. Two more people were killed in Tottenham, and 25 families lost their homes to the powerful twisting winds.

Grand Valley resident Cindy Groen was 11 years old the day the storm happened. She said the tornado "changed her life."

Cindy was walking home from Grand Valley District Public School with her sisters Michelle and Leanne to their Amaranth Street home when they saw the storm approaching.

Although the skies were getting dark and it was obvious that bad weather was coming, no one was prepared for the ferocity of the winds that were about to wreak havoc in the town.

When she arrived home, the family got in the family van to travel to Canada's Wonderland for a trip with her Girl Guide troupe. They had to stop at a doctor's office in Orangeville for one of her sisters to get an allergy shot when the storm plowed through the town.

"We had a brown GMC van. The hail started and the trees were bending over the van," Cindy recalled. "My dad pushed us under the bench seat of that van and covered us with a blanket."

The buses that were going to take the group on the trip were cancelled, and the family started the drive back home. It wasn't till they arrived back in Grand Valley that they realized how much destruction there was.

They stopped at a neighbour's house, who told them there had been a tornado.

"We couldn't get into Grand Valley because the roads were blocked," Cindy said. "I remember my Dad taking a long way around to get into town, and even then we had to prove to authorities that we lived there before they let us in."

As a young person, Cindy saw some horrifying sights during the drive through town.

"As we were driving in through one of the back country roads, it was devastating," Cindy explained. "We were all crying. I saw cows walking around with fence posts through their belly. I saw houses that were destroyed. I remember seeing one of my friend's grandparents' house - the barn and house were gone except for one little corner that still had one hanging plant. The closer we got to town, the worse it got."

The family couldn't get to their home. They had to stay with relatives.

Cindy's father went to their street to see the damage. He had to come back and tell them their family home had been destroyed.

"My telephone was found near Tottenham. One of my sisters had a quilt on her bed, and it was threaded through the tree in our front lawn like a needle."

It took a long time for Grand Valley to recover from the devastating impact of the storm.

However, Cindy said it also brought out the best in people.

"That storm changed my life and the lives of all the kids I went to school with," she said.

Cindy and her family had a picnic and sadly watched as a backhoe knocked down what was left of their house.

?The good news is, this community pulled together like you wouldn't believe. Neighbour helping neighbour. People helping people,? Cindy recalled. ?The arena was opened up for people who lost their homes and the food was brought in. It was a long battle watching everything be rebuilt, it was a long haul. The community just pulled together.?

Considering the power of the storm, it was a miracle that more people weren't seriously injured or killed when the tornado tore apart houses and sent deadly debris flying through the air.

Grand Valley survived and was rebuilt, but for those who were there on that day, the memory of seeing their town destroyed in a matter of seconds will never go away.