

## Tornado Cuts Path through Williams Bay - April 11, 1965

For those living in the Midwest fifty years ago, the Palm Sunday tornadoes are ingrained in their memory. One of the 47 confirmed tornadoes struck my hometown of Williams Bay shortly after 3 p.m. There were no warning sirens that day. The wind was blowing hard, but we didn't suspect anything more than a spring storm where we lived just north of the village.

What we didn't know right away was a tornado<sup>(1)</sup> had cut kitty-corner through town less than a mile away, damaging buildings, mangling trees standing in its path, and destroying businesses on Elkhorn Road (Highway 67) before bouncing over the swamp and causing more damage near Lake Como.

The 1965 Palm Sunday weekend began quite chilly as a large cold front moved across the Great Lakes area and into the Ohio Valley. Sunday dawned with beautiful skies and warm temperatures. People around the Great Lakes were eager to enjoy the balmy spring day after the long cold winter. All across the Midwest, people were making plans to enjoy the day or attend Palm Sunday services. There was no hint of the disaster yet to come.

The Severe Local Storms Center (SELS) in Kansas City, MO., issued the following severe weather forecast at 1 p.m. C.S.T. for extreme eastern Iowa, extreme southern Wisconsin, and portions of Northern Illinois:

"A few severe thunderstorms with large hail, damaging winds, and one or two tornadoes are expected from 1 p.m. until 6 p.m. C.S.T. this Sunday afternoon and evening in an area bounded by the points 40 miles south of **Burlington, Iowa** to 50 miles west of **Lone Rock, Wisconsin** to **Milwaukee, Wisconsin** to 40 miles south east of **Chicago, Illinois** back to the point 40 miles south of **Burlington, Iowa**."

Severe weather warnings in the 1960s were first issued to local weather bureaus, which then put the warnings out to the public. In the mid-1960s, tornado warnings were not issued until a tornado had been positively identified by visual sighting or confirmed radar detection.

Charles (Buzz) Wright observed the start of the storm in a low lying cloud at the southwest edge of the village. The cloud changed into the ominous funnel cloud that slammed into the village leaving a path of destruction. The tornado first destroyed a building on the College Camp golf course and then a garage at the home of Joe Herman as it moved into the village.

The home of the Richard Monier family was severely damaged by the tornado, as were trees along Observatory Place. The roof of the Harold (Mac) McCarthy home on Geneva Street was lifted off and set back down, leaving the roof out of place by

about a half inch. The Monier and McCarthy families were not home at the time the tornado struck.

A tree five feet in diameter on the property of Richard Kenyon was twisted by the wind leaving it resembling a huge piece of twisted taffy. Windows, structures and hundreds of trees in the tornado's path were damaged or destroyed. The roof on the new east wing of Sherwood Rest Home was ripped from the walls and disappeared with the twister. Amazingly no residents were injured.

The tornado continued through the village, destroying the buildings of Peterson Cabinet Shop and Case Plumbing and Heating. Les Case was in his shop talking on the phone when the tornado hit, knocking him to the floor. When he stood, all that was left of his shop was one wall. Miraculously, Mr. Case was unharmed. On the opposite side of Elkhorn Road, the horse owned by Joe Herman was in the field untouched by the storm.

In the following days the tornado was the talk of the town. Everyone seemed to have a story to tell. What follows is a recap of what a few of the village residents had to say.

Roland Salzmann, who lives on Observatory Place, reports his Springer Spaniel, tied to the bumper of his car, was suspended in the air when the big wind came. The dog was dazed, but not injured, and there was only slight damage to the car.

John Brusner's trailer on Valley Street was destroyed, and the glass was blown out of the windows of his car. A garage nearby owned by Yerkes Observatory was also destroyed.

Police Officer Oscar Ortiz was coming out of his home when he heard the roar of the wind and sounded the first alarm and summoned emergency help.

Mrs. Hans Wendt reported seven rooms in Sherwood Rest Home were destroyed. The occupants of these rooms were not in them when the twister hit. Reconstruction work on the one-year-old wing began Tuesday. Residents of the rest home feted Louis Rasmussen on his 83rd birthday with a party less than three hours after the storm.

Albert Horvath and son Butch, age 14, were in their garage on Clover Street at the time of the disaster. Mr. Horvath saw the roof blown off of Sherwood Rest Home. The trailer home adjacent to the garage was set on its side, and the refrigerator almost fell on top of Mrs. Horvath and their daughter, Wilma. They were treated for minor bruises. The trailer was demolished, but the adjacent garage was not affected by the winds.

Mrs. Fritz Granath described the sound of the storm as like "a lot of low flying jets." She was in her living room when glass started flying through the house.

Bob and Jan Hanson were visiting the Elmer Hanson family. Bob was sitting in front of a large picture window when he saw the large gray funnel cloud bouncing along the ground. "It is a sight I hope to never see again," he said.

Dr. Clifford Wiswell treated 12 residents for minor injuries.

Although no warning siren was heard in Williams Bay on April 11, 1965 no one was seriously injured or killed. Regrettably, the same couldn't be said elsewhere in what was one of the deadliest tornado outbreaks in U.S. history up to that time. Forty-seven confirmed tornadoes struck Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio on April 11, 1965, killing 271 and injuring over 1500 more.

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*<sup>(1)</sup> According to Wikipedia, the Williams Bay tornado was an F1, the least powerful on the Fujita scale, with F5 being the strongest.*

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