

NATURE'S FURY 20 YEARS LATER

Twenty-one tornadoes hit parts of Ohio and northwest Pennsylvania on the evening of May 31, 1985.

They killed 76 people.

The toll in Pennsylvania was 65 lives, 936 homes and \$264 million in property damage.

Ten blocks of Albion were gone.

Twenty years later, survivors are still paying a price.

pg 1

FROM
5/31/2005
ERIE TIME



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Stunned residents view what's left of Albion after fierce, destructive tornadoes swept through the region May 31, 1985.

ILL WINDS

pg 2

Tornadoes cut indelible swath through communities, lives

By ROBB FREDERICK
robb.frederick@timesnews.com

BULLETIN ACTIVATE
EBS
TORNADO WARNING
NATIONAL WEATHER
SERVICE ERIE PA
513 PM EDT FRI MAY 31
1985 EXPIRES 530 PM

... A TORNADO WAS
SIGHTED BY STATE POLICE
NEAR PENNSIDE ... SOUTH
OF ALBION IN ERIE COUNTY
AT 505 PM ... MOVING
TOWARD THE NORTHEAST
AT 30 MILES AN HOUR.

firehouse radio in Albion. He'd seen his share, in 56 years with the department. But this was different.

The storm was an F4 on the Fujita scale, which goes to 5. It spun on 250 mph winds — strong enough to strip the bark off trees, and to send a size 7 wedding dress flying into Allegheny National Forest, some 70 miles away.

The National Weather Service observers did not yet have Doppler radar. But they expected a storm. A cold front had hung over the Great Lakes, and an area of low pressure had reached east from Minnesota, sparking

Gabby Brewster got on the ➤ Please see **TORNADOES**, 6A

A LOOK BACK

"Death from the sky," the front page of the Times-News Weekender declared on June 1, 1985, one day after "killer tornadoes" ripped through the region.

➤ For more stories and photos from that day 20 years ago, see 6-7A.

➤ Good Morning: Tim Hahn shares respect for, fascination with storms. 2A



6A | Erie Times-News | www.GoErie.com | Tuesday, May 31, 2005

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NATURE'S FURY: 20 YEARS LATER

Tornadoes: Ill winds

Continued from 1A

thunderstorms. Fat black clouds bored toward an unseasonably 85-degree Erie day.

The storm, when it formed, stretched over 14 miles. It was two blocks wide.

The weathermen circled it with red pencil on their overlay maps.

They got the warning off, and Gabby Brewster sounded the alarm, and the old-timers told the kids to get off the damn street. And then it hit, ripping out of Ohio and over the tip of Crawford County and on to Pennside.

It was coming right at them.

Geri Dean had just dropped the girls at home. They had wanted McDonald's and, at the counter, had wanted it to go, so they could watch "Little House on the Prairie" while they finished their fries.

John Hosey had just stepped into the shower. He bowled on Friday nights.

Bunny Reighard had pizza on the table. Jimmer, her 6-year-old, had graduated from kindergarten just the week before.

Gloria McCabe was coming back from Kennedy's hardware when the first hail hit her car. It sounded like a bucket of golf balls.

The sky turned psychedelic.

"It looked like a real bad coloring job," she said. "One side ran into the other, and they just danced."

The men at the weather service drew more red circles.

BULLETIN ACTIVATE
EBS
TORNADO WARNING
NATIONAL WEATHER
SERVICE ERIE PA
545 PM EDT FRI MAY 31
1985 EXPIRES 630 PM

ERIE RADAR SHOWS 3
TORNADOS ON THE
GROUND. ONE NORTHEAST
OF WATERFORD ANOTHER
NEAR CAMBRIDGE SPRINGS
AND ANOTHER SOUTHWEST
OF MEADVILLE. THEY ARE
ALL MOVING TO THE

Where
tornadoes
struck

Today marks the 20th anniversary of the tornadoes that struck northwestern Pennsylvania, including seven that struck in the Erie region. The tornado that struck Albion and Cranesville in Erie County left 12 people dead and 200 injured.

WHERE ALBION WAS STRUCK

The tornado came from the west and struck these areas:

- 1) South Park Avenue
- 2) East State Street
- 3) Washington Street
- 4) Wells Avenue
- 5) Second Avenue
- 6) Orchard Street
- 7) East Pearl Street
- 8) Thornton Avenue

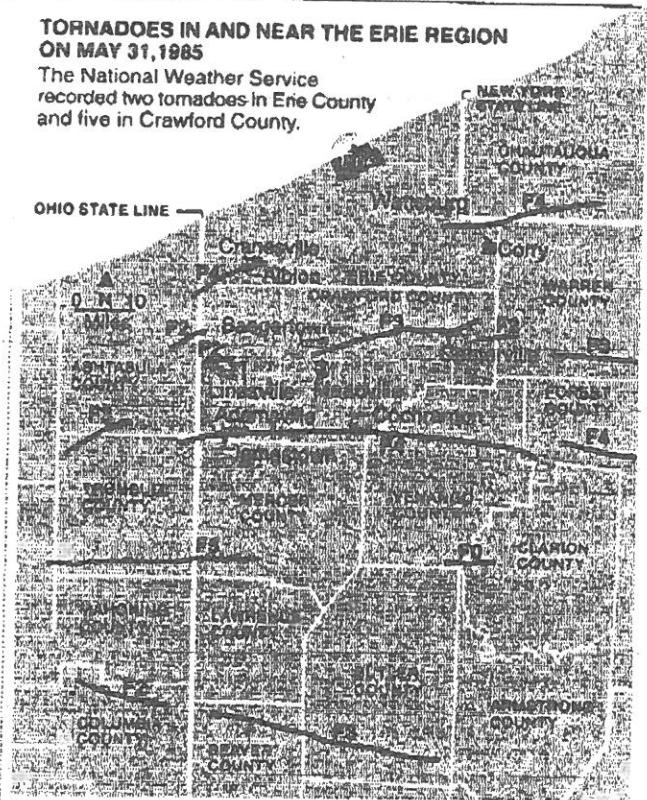
The tornado headed northeast toward Cranesville.



SOURCE: National Weather Service

TORNADOES IN AND NEAR THE ERIE REGION
ON MAY 31, 1985

The National Weather Service recorded two tornadoes in Erie County and five in Crawford County.

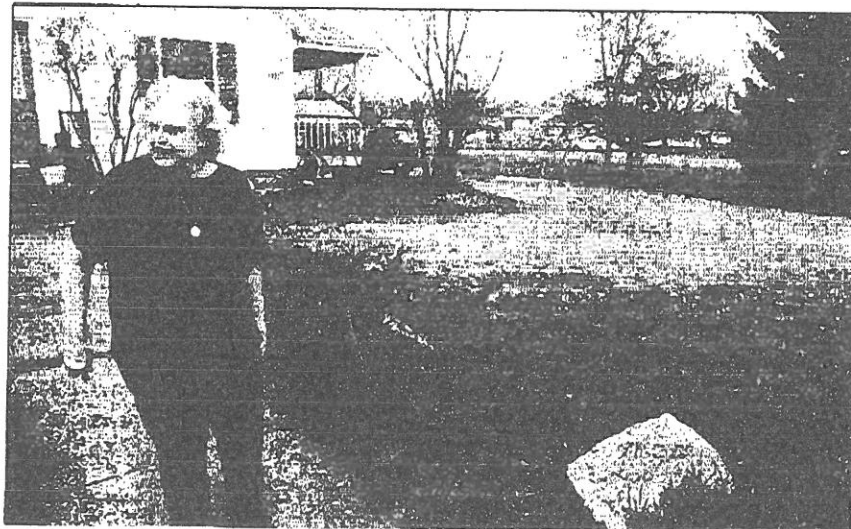


TORNADO MEASUREMENTS

The Fujita scale rates the severity of tornadoes as a measurement of the damage they cause:

Category:	F0	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5
Wind speeds:	Below 73 mph	73 to 112	113 to 157	158 to 206	207 to 260	261 to 318

CHRIS SIGMUND/Erie Times-News



Gloria McCabe stands in her front yard at 171 E. State St. in Albion. Her home, like some others in Albion, is only 20 years old — rebuilt after an F4 tornado destroyed her old one May 31, 1985. The only thing standing on her property from before the tornado is a tree, at right, planted

John Hosey ran to the basement naked. He was still in the shower when the lights went out. His daughter had banged on the door, yelling, "Dad! Dad! You have to get downstairs!"

He grabbed his fireman's jumpsuit and started down. He risked just one glimpse out the window.

The wind was shuffling the cars parked in the medical center lot.

The Hoseys huddled against the west wall of their basement.

On Knapp Road, maybe three miles out of town, the Reighards scrambled down their cellar steps. The kids went in, and then Jim, and then Bunny. She heard the windows shatter behind her.

"It's funny," she said, with the benefit of 20 years of perspective. "But I remember thinking, 'All that glass is on my couch.'"

The wind lifted their two-story farmhouse right off the foundation. A floor joist hit Bunny Reighard in the head, knocking her unconscious. Her husband, his eyes shut against the dust, heard his daughter scream.

"I thought they were dead," he said. "I opened my eyes, and I looked up, and I could see the sky. The entire house was gone."

He looked out and saw the tornado over Albion. He got back down on the ground.

The storm crossed the Bessemer railroad tracks and pinwheeled down Park Avenue. It spun down Main Street, across the creek, and on to State, Washington, Wells, Orchard and East Pearl. It obliterated 10 blocks of Albion.

The wind snatched Lydia Taylor from her car. It ripped the top off the Harrington Bridge and tossed a refrigerator onto the roof of the bank.

The pipes for the St. Lawrence Church organ shot off like rockets. Debris knocked 7 inches off the cross.

Monsignor Robert Reilly was fresh out of the shower when the storm blew him through the window of his second-floor bedroom.

"I had to spread-eagle just to hold on," he said. "I thought my day had come."

For a dozen others, it had. Debbie Sherman was still in her car when it soared over a farm silo. Helen Sabovik was crushed against the side of her trailer. The three kids she was baby-sitting lived.

A wall collapsed on Sandra Stahlsmith, who was pregnant, and who held her son Luke, who was 4, as tight as she could. She heard two breaths, and then he was dead.

"Go to sleep," she said to him. Outside, more wind blew by.



RICH FORSBERG/Erie Times-News

John Hosey recalls how loud the May 31, 1985, tornado was as it tore through Albion. Hosey's family waited out the storm in the basement.

BULLETIN ACTIVATE
ERS
TORNADO WARNING
NATIONAL WEATHER
SERVICE ERIE PA
620 PM EDT FRI MAY 31
1985 EXPIRES 700 PM

AT 620 PM ERIE WEATHER
RADAR SHOWS NEW
TORNADOS ON THE
GROUND WEST OF ALBION
AND CONNEAUTVILLE
PENNA. MOVING TOWARDS
THE EAST AT 35 MPH.
ANOTHER TORNADO SOUTH
OF SPARTANSBURG MOVING
INTO WARREN COUNTY AND
ONE NORTH OF OIL CITY
MOVING INTO NORTHERN
FOREST COUNTY.

The maps were all red then. There were 21 circles — six of them around powerful F4s, and a seventh on an F5, the first ever in Pennsylvania.

That storm cut a 41-mile path. It killed nine people in Niles, Ohio, and seven more in Wheatland, the Mercer County mill town it wiped flat.

Even deadlier was the F4 that ripped into the summer cottages in Jamestown, on the border of Mercer and Crawford counties. That storm stayed on the ground for more than an hour. It killed 23 people.

The tornado that hit Albion skittered on to Cranesville and the Kennedy Trailer Park. Jodi Lynn Snyder died there. Her son, Robbie, was buried in the rubble for three hours.

Help did come. Firefighters from every township with a truck dug for victims. They lifted strips of aluminum siding and tuft after tuft of soggy pink insulation. They smelled gas. They saw Gloria McCabe's Ford LTD, crushed to a height of just 2 feet.

She had made it home. She hid

in the basement with her mother, who would not squat down on that floor in clean clothes.

Her son crawled into the dryer.

The house broke free of the foundation. "It went up into the air and turned a quarter, just like a flash cube," McCabe said. "Then it came right back down."

The neighbor's waterbed was on them. The cat was gone.

In a minute, McCabe heard a voice. A strong, sure, "Is anybody in there?"

It was John Hosey.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

"I think so."

"Are you breathing?"

"Yes."

"Can you move?"

"No."

And he dug, and he got to them, and they stood up, dazed, and covered with dust, and they stared out at the town.

It looked like Dresden.

Some images stay with them. There's the National Guard, rolling barbed wire across Route 6N to help keep the curfew. There's the trophy deer mount the Gibsons nailed to a tree in the front yard. There's Monsignor Reilly, speckled red where the dirt had hit him.

For months, little pimples rose on his arms and neck. That was his body squeezing out the glass.

Geri Dean, who was in Eric when the storm hit, and whose granddaughters, home alone, survived, still remembers the sight of her storm door, caught high in a tree. It hung there for days, taunting her, mocking her loss.

That March she had paid off her trailer. The storm smeared it across the neighbor's yard.

Dean went to the middle school, where the American

Red Cross had set up 100 cots. She helped sort the blankets and towels and donated T-shirts. She helped find a hand-stitched feather pillow for a 90-year-old man from Atlantic.

"Those were really bad days," she said. "It was hard at times not to just stand there and cry."

"We did our darndest, though," she said. "These were people you'd known all your life. Their families had been there forever."

Martha Sherman ran the effort for the Red Cross. Her daughter-in-law was at the high school, which was the morgue. Sherman didn't even know.

Monsignor Reilly used the Lutheran church for funerals. Gloria McCabe played the organ.

She already had stopped dressing for bed. She wanted to be decent if she had to flee into the street.

Even now, she sleeps in sweat pants.

The Reighards still live a few miles out of town. They built a nice ranch house about 20 feet from their original foundation. They had what mattered.

"If somebody walked up to me and said, 'What would you keep if a disaster was coming?'" Bunny Reighard said, "I'd say my family. And that's what we got. We walked out of that with our family, and that's the most precious thing. Everything else can be replaced."

Some things worked their way back to her. One of the kids' savings books turned up in McKean. The other was found in Mayville, N.Y.

And in 2000, a full 15 years after the tornado, a neighbor chopping wood turned over an old, moldy photo. The Reighards' wedding portrait.

Jim Reighard found the best of his guns — the unique ones, with the stocks his father had checkered. But the others were gone.

That happens, no matter how small the town. So when Martha Sherman visits a neighbor, and when she sees a piece that once belonged to someone else — a special doorknob, maybe, or some antique drawer pulls — she shrugs it off.

"You can't say a whole lot," she said. "So nobody does. It's done. It's over with. You leave it alone."

The information in this story was taken from interviews, Erie Times-News archival clippings, the National Weather Service and the National Climatic Data Center.

ROBB FREDERICK can be reached at 870-1733 or by e-mail.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

An F4 tornado that led a path of destruction in Albion on May 31, 1985, was one of seven storms to tear through the Erie region that day. Twenty-one were spotted in northwest Pennsylvania and Ohio.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The F4 tornado that leveled parts of Albion and Cranesville on May 31, 1985, sheared off part of this house on State Street in Albion. When the storm was over, about 10 blocks of Albion were destroyed.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Bob Gould surveys damage to his East State Street home after a tornado ripped through Albion May 31, 1985. The F4 twister traveled down Main Street before skipping around in a path of destruction that included parts of State, Washington, Wells, Orchard and East Pearl.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A McCabe family photo shows Albion homes shattered after the May 31, 1985, tornado. Gloria McCabe, whose family hid in the basement during the storm, says her house "went up into the air and turned a quarter, just like a flash cube. Then it came right back down."

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NATURE'S FURY: 20 YEARS LATER

Tuesday, May 31, 2005 | Erie Times-News | www.GoErie.com | 7A

Albion, Cranesville dead remembered

DEBORAH McQUAID
borah.mcquaid@timesnews.com

ALBION — Ellen Carr tipped back and admired the low marigolds she had just planted in the garden atop the one wall at the corner of East

ale and Orchard streets. This corner is important to the students of the Albion-Cranesville area. A memorial there is the only remembrance of the May 31, 1985, tornado that cut through the center of town and into

Cranesville. Nine people in Albion and three in Cranesville died. Their names are engraved into a plaque at the center of the Albion memorial, which was dedicated May 31, 1988.

Caring for the flowers is a job

Carr inherited from Ruth Taylor, a retired schoolteacher who died three years ago.

It's a job Carr shares with the 51 Club, a social group with 30 female members. Each member of that club takes a turn for a day during the summer to water the flowers.

Carr, like all Albion-area people who lived through the storms, can recall every detail of that night even though she is unwilling to talk about it in detail.

She prefers to talk about the memorial's flower garden.

"I have so many people mention it. They enjoy it. I'm glad it makes people happy to see it. That's my motivation," Carr said. "It seems to catch people's eye when they're driving by."

The memorial was paid for by money left over in the Albion-

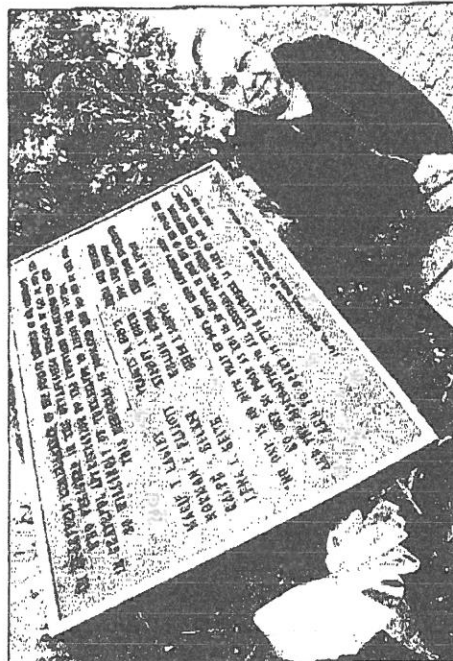
Cranesville Disaster Fund after all the families affected that day had been helped.

Albion funeral director Sam Steff, who lost his home and business during the storm, donated the property for the memorial. Northwestern School District Business Manager Paul Sachar, who was on the disaster-fund board, took over the perpetual-care fund and still administers it.

Sachar described Carr's dedication to the upkeep of the memorial as a "labor of love."

Carr said she knows it's important. "I think it means a lot. I guess that's why I volunteered to keep it going."

DEBORAH McQUAID can be reached at 870-1754 or by e-mail



RICH FORSBERG/Erie Times-News

Ellen Carr takes care of the Albion memorial honoring 12 people who died in Cranesville and Albion as a result of the devastating tornado 20 years ago.

LIVES TAKEN BY TORNADO

The names of the dead from the tornado that hit Albion and Cranesville are listed on a plaque at East State and Orchard streets in Albion. They are:

Marie T. Eagley
Norman F. Ellison
Ralph Hecker
Lena C. Keith
Stanley J. Kirela
William R. Revak
Helen S. Sabovik
Debra Jane Sherman
Jodi Lynn Snyder
Luke Tyson Stahlsmith
Lydia J. Taylor

'I HERE'S NOTHING LEFT' Pg 8

Tornado decimates Cranesville trailer park

By DEBORAH McQUAID
dmcquaid@timesnews.com

CRANESVILLE — The barking dogs were Frosty Crane's first clue that something was terribly wrong.

It was May 31, 1985, and Crane — chief of the Cranesville Fire Department — was working inside his truck repair garage when his dogs wouldn't stop barking.

He yelled at them to stop, but they wouldn't.

When he went outside to shout again, he saw it — a huge, black funnel cloud that was bearing down on him.

He warned his son, Tim Crane, and the two took off in separate vehicles, headed for the Cranesville fire hall.

"It was coming down the field, and I couldn't follow him," Frosty Crane said. "He was weaving all over. I thought it was going to get him."

He watched in disbelief as large trees became uprooted and circled overhead.

"And then it hit the trailer park," he said.

What followed was three days of intense work — first to rescue the injured, then to recover the dead and then to recover personal items that had been blown from several homes.

Tim Crane, the department's captain, and Terry Rea were among the first firefighters to reach the fire hall that day.

There was no power, and the ambulance was on a call in Erie.

They gathered what gear they could and headed to the trailer park, the entrance to which was



CONTINUED PHOTO

Firefighters from Westerville help in rescue and cleanup efforts in Cranesville after May 31, 1985, storms moved through, leveling Kennedy Trailer Park and destroying communities across the region. Though rescue workers found death and devastation amid the crumbled homes at the trailer park, they also found at least one "miracle" — 3½-year-old Robbie Snyder, who was found alive beneath a destroyed trailer.

"I can still remember climbing through the trees, and there was the trailer park and there's nothing left," Tim Crane said. "All I remember is debris and gas meters blowing gas everywhere. I got a crescent wrench and just started shutting off the gas meters and trying to get the people to sit down. They were cut and bruised and in shock."

Other firefighters started arriving within minutes. Frosty Crane, who had yet to learn that his business had been destroyed, took out the first of the injured in his pickup truck. Firefighters used boards and doors from the trailers and loaded people inside.

George Thomas, who was a 19-year-old paramedic in training, headed to the trailer park as soon as he heard it had been hit. Thomas said one of the first things he saw was a human arm in the back end. They were all covered with mud. I didn't know who they were," he said. By the time he got to the fire hall, long tables were lined up so the injured could be treated and evaluated.

Within an hour, Erie hospital workers had established a triage for the injured, who arrived in a steady stream of ambulances from across western Erie County.

George Thomas, who was a 19-year-old paramedic in training, headed to the trailer park as soon as he heard it had been hit. Thomas said one of the first things he saw was a human arm

"It hit me, this is something serious," Thomas said. "There was nothing there but piles of debris. All the trailers were pushed up against trees or down over the hillside in piles."

Charles Kennedy, who owned the trailer park, and his daughter, Kay Pomeroy, walked through the destruction along with the firefighters.

There had been 15 homes, and they tried to make a list of the inhabitants by identifying bits of the trailers.

They combed through the debris until dark and then went to the fire department to help identify the injured and the dead. Two people from the

"I saw my dad age that night about 10 years," Pomeroy said.

She identified 3½-year-old Robbie Snyder, who was found alive alongside his mother, Jodi Snyder, who was killed.

Firefighters were digging underneath a destroyed trailer when they found Robbie.

"We thought it was a miracle that someone could be underneath that for so long," said Thomas, who helped bring him out. Pomeroy said the little boy was "barely alive" when he was brought into the fire hall.

Robbie Snyder recovered from most of his injuries, but never regained his speech. He died in 1993 of pneumonia.

"All I remember is debris and gas meters blowing gas everywhere. I got a crescent wrench and just started shutting off the gas meters and trying to get the people to sit down. They were cut and bruised and in shock."

— Tim Crane, remembering the day the tornado swept through Cranesville

Thomas, Rea and dozens of other firefighters from around the county continued the search in the trailer park and surrounding fields for the next two days.

Rea said it was just a sense of duty that kept them going.

Thomas said he went home only once to get a pair of socks.

Cranesville firefighter Jim Reiser spent three days escorting people into Cranesville and Albion. The area was shut off by the National Guard, Pennsylvania State Police and Erie County Sheriff's Office deputies to all but those who had reason to be there. Special identification cards were made up and handed out.

Once all of the Cranesville residents were accounted for, the fire hall was turned into a clothing store. Frosty Crane said. Donations came in from everywhere.

Later, people started bringing in items they found in their yards and people came looking for lost possessions.

DEBORAH McQUAID can be reached at dm@timesnews.com

Pg 7

In aftermath of storms, Atlantic altered forever

By JOHN BARTLETT

john.bartlett@timesnews.com

ATLANTIC — This rural, crossroads community is forever different from most others. There are vacant lots where houses should be. Numerous mobile homes seem out of place, and the other homes all seem about 20 years old.

This town should have an abundance of grand old homes, but only two are readily visible here.

This is Atlantic. What made it forever different was the tornado of 1985, which claimed five lives and left little standing.

Bob Wasser, now assistant chief of the East Fallowfield Fire Department, gazed across the town from his lot on Atlantic Road — from the spot where his house once stood.

"It was destroyed, like most everything here," he said.

Wasser now lives in a house he built after the tornado at the rear of the lot where his previous home stood until shortly after 5 p.m. on May 31, 1985.

"I was lucky," he said. "A lot of people didn't rebuild, or couldn't replace what they had. I'd say about a third of the people are gone. It sure changed things."

Jeff Sterling, pastor of the Atlantic Community Church, arrived here some 11 years after the tornado passed through,

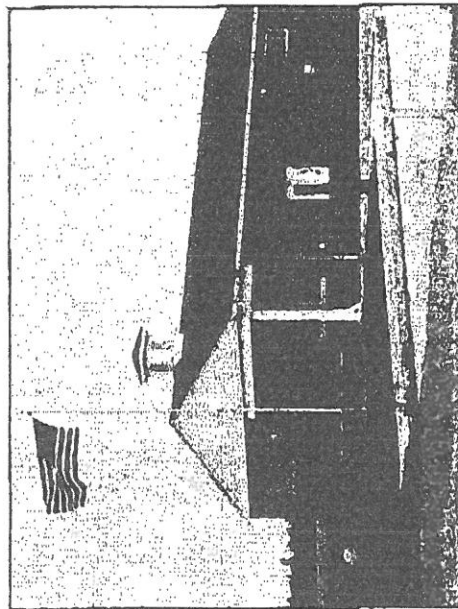
but he knows all about it. "All the people here have their stories. They still talk about it and they've told me all about it," he said.

The Atlantic Community Church's roots remain deeply bedded in Atlantic, but it draws members now from Greenville, Jamestown, Grove City and other nearby communities where people moved after the tornado, he said.

The tornado spared the church.

What you hear throughout the community is that God spared it.

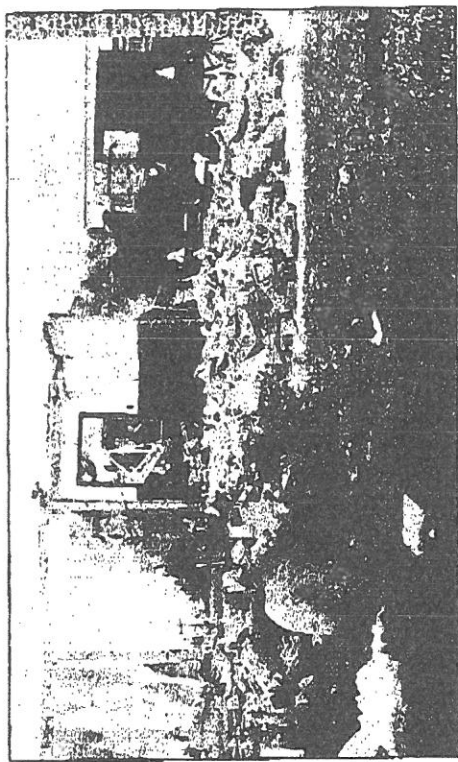
"It was amazing that he spared our church," Betty Gosnell said. "It was for a purpose.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

AT LEFT: The Atlantic post office was a neat, firm building before May 31, 1985.

AT RIGHT: The tornado that moved through turned the post office into piles of rubble. The large rock in the left foreground of the photo was one of few things that stayed in place.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

August. This community was always a community that worked together, but when the storm came, it really pulled together.

The picture window in Betty and Wilson Gosnell's living room looks out across the street to the church and new post office, which sits at the same spot as the one destroyed in 1985.

The Gosnells huddled with their then-19-year-old son and a visiting insurance agent in a central hallway of their home as the tornado swept through the town. When it was gone, so were both ends of their house. Only the center portion remained.

"You could see the shape of our bodies outlined from all the

dust and debris," Betty Gosnell said. Emerging from the wreckage, the couple said they were stunned by what they saw all around them.

"It was the most eerie feeling. There was dead silence. You saw destruction, but didn't hear a thing, not a person, not an animal. Just silence," she said.

Hardly a day goes by that there is not some reminder, Betty Gosnell said.

"You can never forget," she said.

An Amish buggy drove by as she spoke and the family waved. That's one of the remarkable changes brought to the commu-

nity by the tornado, Betty Gosnell said.

While still living in much different worlds, the tornado's aftermath created a single Atlantic-area community, rather than the two distinct communities that existed previously, she said.

Wasser also made note of how the two communities came together after the tornado. "It is different now. The Dutch (Amish) and the English are much closer," he said.

"Everyone is."

JOHN BARTLETT can be reached at (614) 724-6979, 870-1723 or by e-mail.