



# HOLY COW! HISTORY: AMERICA'S WORST TORNADO, 100 YEARS LATER- INSIDE SOURCES

Posted on March 16, 2025 by J. Mark Powell | INSIDE SOURCES



Winter is rarely a bed of roses, and 1925 had been a particularly rough one.

A late January blizzard had dumped up to 4 feet of snow in some parts of the Northeast. In Alaska, a diphtheria outbreak threatened the remote town of Nome. The tragedy was averted thanks to 20 sled dog teams that relayed life-saving antitoxin serum through subzero temperatures across nearly 675 miles. (That journey is commemorated in the annual Iditarod race.)

In America's midsection, drabness was drawing to a close as winter-weary folks looked forward to spring's arrival.

However, a nightmare arrived first.

March 18, 1925, began like any other Wednesday in the Heartland. It didn't stay normal for long; when the day was over, it had entered the history books.

Late winter had been warmer and drier than usual a century ago. Low pressure began moving out of northeast Oklahoma that morning, just as warm air was being pulled up from the Gulf Coast. It was the makings, to borrow a phrase, of a perfect storm.

A supercell tornado outbreak was soon roaring through the region.

The worst single storm, the Tri-State Tornado, began forming at lunchtime. It touched down in rural southeastern Missouri, an F5 monster on the modern scale, and howled its way north and eastward.

Radio was in its infancy at the time, and there was no warning system. So, the worst tornado in American history (and the second worst worldwide) moved on, with people in its path unaware of what was racing their way.

How bad was it? An 80-foot-tall tippie (a structure used to load mined coal into railcars) was knocked over at Peabody Mine 18. Farmers were killed in their fields. Entire families were swept away by the more than 300 mph wind. Debris sucked up in Sedgewickville, Ill., landed 80 miles away.

And half the population of Gorham, Ill., died that day.

The killer storm broke up in Pike County, Ind., that afternoon. It had covered 219 miles in 3 hours and 45 minutes. Some 695 people were

dead, and more than 2,000 others were hurt. Hospitals from St. Louis to Indianapolis were overrun with victims. At least 15,000 homes were leveled. When they tallied up the damage, it came to \$16.5 million. (More than \$3 billion today.)

As bad as the Tri-State Tornado was, it wasn't the only severe weather that terrible Wednesday. The supercell spawned 10 additional significant storms, with damage reported from Kansas to Alabama. Severe thunderstorms (with one producing hail larger than softballs) were reported from Ontario, Canada, to West Virginia.

When all was said and done, 751 people had lost their lives, and nearly 2,300 more were hurt, all on a single Wednesday afternoon.

The cleanup was slow, and the relief was spotty. The Federal Emergency Management Agency was still 54 years away. Some assistance came from volunteer organizations like the American Red Cross, churches and other charities. However, it was mostly limited to neighbors helping neighbors. In a catastrophe of that scale, there was only so much neighbors could do.

Some small towns slammed by the twister never recovered. In little Griffith, Ind., for example, not a single structure was untouched, with most of it turned into rubble in a matter of seconds. DeSoto and Murphysboro, Ill., and Owensville and Princeton, Ind., likewise suffered extensive damage.

There is no known image of the massive twister. People were too busy running for their lives to root cellars and basements to think about grabbing the Kodak and snapping a picture. In this case, a photo of the funnel was unnecessary; image after image of entire towns transformed into piles of splintered wood was terrifying enough.

Time moved on. Those who were able to rebuild did so. There were other disasters that year. Earthquakes rattled Montana and Santa Barbara, Calif. Another tornado killed five and injured 35 in Miami that April. An unusually heavy late-fall snowfall covered the East Coast from Washington to the Great Lakes the day before Halloween, spooking residents there about what could be coming that winter.

The United States experienced other horrific tornados in the last century. More than 200 people perished in 1936 when Tupelo, Miss., was struck. More recently, more than 150 lives were lost and one-third of the city was destroyed when an F5 storm barreled through Joplin, Mo., in 2011.

None have ever come close to the 1925 Tri-State Tornado Outbreak. Meteorologists, first responders and people living in Tornado Alley pray one never will, either.