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Madison County's Tornadoes – Mother Nature's Deadly Destruction

JAMES-PAUL DICE

Huntsville and Madison County are no strangers to severe weather – especially one of nature's most destructive storms – the tornado. It is not surprising our current fascination with twisters since this area has been a geographic bulls-eye since the beginning of weather records. Fast-moving upper-level winds and a rich supply of moisture from the Gulf of Mexico in the Fall and Spring make the Tennessee Valley one of the most tornado prone areas in the United States.

As a meteorologist working in television, most of my time is spent concerning myself with current conditions and predicting future weather. Admittedly, past weather has never been a top priority. But, there are valuable lessons to be learned from our history and the world of meteorology is no exception to that rule. Looking back, it is easy to see our community is much better off today than a century ago, both from lessons learned and improvements in technology.

These days, tornado spawning circulations are detected on Doppler radar usually long before any damage is done. Instantly, warnings are issued and sirens are sounded. But, imagine a Huntsville farmer tending to his cotton fields in the late 1880s. A dark cloud could mean a harmless afternoon soaker or deadly winds capable of driving a straw of hay into the bark of a tree. Without today's technology, it was difficult to determine if the cloud was going to be friend or foe.

Little information is available on early tornados in Madison County, however the earliest newspaper account from this area was described in the much faded April 19, 1822 issue of the *Huntsville Republican*:

“On Saturday night the 13th instant, this county was visited with one of the most destructive tornados ever known in the country. It passed through the county in a northeasterly direction, prostrating trees, buildings, fences, and every other moveable object in its course. From the best information we have been able to collect of the injury done by this dreadful visitation, it commenced in the county of Lawrence, crossed the Tennessee River, and passed through the county of Limestone, pursuing a north-easterly course through Madison, passing about four or five miles northwest of

Huntsville, sweeping like a beacon of destruction everything in its way for about a quarter of a mile in width. It spent its greatest fury in this county.

The deadened trees were generally uprooted, the trunks of the green ones in the forest were twisted and broken off about fifteen feet from the ground, and almost every building of all description razed with the ground so that in many instances it is impossible even to designate their foundations. The roots of houses, large ? logs, furniture of every description, and even trees were carried a considerable distance and scattered over the country. In short, this tremendous gale, which accompanied as it was with rain, hail, thunder, and lightning, was attended with all the alarming and destructive ?.

It happened in the dead of night while nature was sunk in slumber and forgetfulness and although a great number of dwellings were destroyed by its fury, we have not heard of the loss of any lives. A great number of persons indeed almost every individual in the prostrated houses was very severely bruised and wounded, but by the care of a kind Providence who aids in the trumpets and directs the storms, they have escaped with their lives.

We have not been sufficiently informed of the individual instances of distress by the tornado to give a circumstantial dread of them, but would be glad to give place to any interesting particulars that may be communicated for publication.

Since the above was in type, we have learned that the tornado passed through the northern part of Franklin County almost 70 miles distant from this place. We also learn that it continued its devastation through the eastern part of the county, and extended into Decatur and the northwestern part of Jackson County. Five lines were said to be found in the upper part of Madison County, which is upwards of 10 miles from any pine woods in the direction of the tornado.”

The Weather Bureau began in 1870, and it was at that time that a more accurate method of record-keeping was established. Unfortunately, there is no real data before that time to track the nature or severity of tornadoes in Madison County. Since 1884, there have been 58 confirmed tornado touchdowns in Madison County. Some of these twisters were harmless, but 16 of those tornadoes claimed lives.

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Madison County's first recorded tornado killed two people on April 1, 1884. The tornado developed around 9:50 p.m. and was on the ground for 10 miles and tracked northeast from near Owens Cross Roads to the south of Gurley. According to records, the tornado was an F2 with winds ranging from 113 to 157 mph. In the April 4, 1884 edition of *The Advocate*, a story under the headline "A Terrible Storm" reported that the house and farm of Mr. Pulley, occupied by John White, was carried away. Mrs. White and her mother-in-law, Mrs. Connor, were killed. Mr. White had a child on each knee, and although the children were not injured, both of his shoulders were broken.

The next deadly tornado happened early on March 21, 1913, at around 1:30 a.m. The storm was on the ground for about 40 miles tracking from Trinity in Morgan County to just south of Meridianville. Three people were killed, including two children. Twenty were injured. The storm destroyed a church, several homes, and every building on a plantation.

Just four years later at 1 a.m. on May 28, 1917, another deadly tornado struck Madison County. The path was spotted just southwest of New Hope. The twister stayed on the ground for 18 miles, moved through Marshall County and ended in Jackson County. Twenty homes were destroyed, six people were killed, and 35 were injured. The devastation was 1/2 mile wide, 18 families were left homeless, and feathers were blown off of chickens. In the newspaper story, entitled "Prompt Relief Response to New Hope Destitute," names were listed along with their contributions to the homeless. Some contributions were as little as one dollar and as much as 50 dollars.¹ Many years later, the tornado was rated as an F3 with winds ranging from 158-206 mph.

Another tornado struck in the darkness on April 20, 1920. This one was a monster! The tornado was estimated to be about a quarter-of-a-mile wide and originated two miles south of Lily Flag Street in Huntsville. Home were either leveled or swept away from the storms carrying 207-260 mph winds. The storm claimed the lives of 27 and injured 100 residents.

Twelve years later, 38 people were killed when another F4 tornado struck. Again, it happened at night at around 8 p.m. on March 21, 1932. The tornado began near Lacey Springs, moved through southern Madison County and Jackson County, and traveled 75 miles to Ladds Switch, Tennessee. The estimated 207-260 mph winds collapsed a large hosiery mill near Paint Rock and destroyed 125 rural homes in Jackson County. The storm injured 500 people. The biggest problem with relief effort was in finding the damaged homes and injured people who lived in somewhat inaccessible areas such as coves and mountain sides. Damage to the prop-

erty of C.M. Rousseau of Paint Rock was especially extensive. He lost his store, gin, two saw mills, a full implement warehouse, and a barn. He was in the hospital and listed in critical condition – from a nervous breakdown!²

At 10:15 p.m. on April 5, 1936, an F3 tornado traveled 50 miles from Rogersville in Lauderdale County, through Limestone and extreme northern Madison Counties, and ended up in Lincoln County, Tennessee. Five people were killed and 13 injured.

At 12 a.m. on April 11, 1939, a small tornado killed one and injured 11 when it struck five miles southwest of Woodville. Several small homes and a mill were destroyed by the estimated 113-157 mph winds.

At 3 p.m., March 22, 1952, a deadly F4 tornado moved into Madison County near Redstone Arsenal. The storm claimed four lives in Morgan County when it leveled 35 homes. Fifty people were injured.

A tornado struck at 5:40 p.m. on March 11, 1963 in southwest Limestone County. The twister traveled around 47 miles, moving through Hazel Green and Pleone in Madison County. Three people were injured, two killed near Cullman, and a woman died the next day when she tried to cross a creek in Limestone County and her car was swept away. The tornado had dumped 7.5 inches of rain in Limestone County alone! The erosion damage was estimated to be four million dollars. Dramatic photographs on the front page of *The Huntsville Times* say more than words about Mother Nature's wrath.³

Tornadoes do not always strike in the Spring. On December 18, 1967 at 3:24 a.m., a deadly tornado hit the Talucan Community in Morgan County. The storm was on the ground for 22 miles, causing the most damage in Huntsville. Two people were killed and 27 were injured. Two houses were destroyed and 46 homes had major damage. The tornado was later rated as an F2 with 113-157mph winds.

On April 3 and 4, 1974, Madison County was part of the most deadly tornado blitz to ever hit the United States. The outbreak lasted for 16 hours and affected 13 states. When it was over, 330 people were killed and over 5,000 were injured. The first tornado to affect Madison County as part of this huge system occurred at 5:50 p.m. It was the most powerful tornado known to man – the F5 with estimated winds at between 261-318 mph. The tornado was on the ground for 52 miles traveling from Lawrence County through portions of Morgan County, through Limestone County and ending in Madison County near Harvest. Twenty-eight people were killed and 267 were injured. In Madison County alone, nine people lost their lives. But it was far from over.

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Less than an hour later, another tornado developed. This was a devastating F4 tornado with estimated winds at between 207-260 mph. The funnel spanned more than a quarter mile in width and traveled for 62 miles. Twenty two people were killed, 250 injured, and more than 1000 buildings destroyed. The tornado originated in Limestone County and traveled through Capshaw in Madison County and eventually Lincoln and Franklin Counties in Tennessee. Another deadly tornado, part of this same system, occurred at 9:24 p.m. This twister moved from near Decatur and traveled for about 46 miles through south Huntsville and ended near Princeton in Jackson County. Two people were killed and seven were injured.

The late Bob Dunnavant, a staff writer for *The Huntsville Times*, wrote an incredible and descriptive account of his experience in Limestone County that day:

“...about 30 of us – deputies, members of a Rescue Squad, a sprinkling of the curious, and a few reporters – [were] all competing with the grass for a connection to the dirt. Only several hundred yards away a funnel cloud twisted and roared. It was like something out of the Old Testament, a pillar of clouds, black, majestic and ominous, moving across the farmlands of southern Limestone County...the process of unraveling the havoc had begun. Then a radio warned that a second funnel was forming to the west. As we watched, a dark, stormy cloud lit by lightning hovered and lengthened into the recognizable hook shape. It appeared to be headed directly for the highway. With one narrow escape already chalked up for the evening, Sheriff Buddy Evans advised the crowd to head for the drainage ditch. As we moved toward cover, the dull roar, like a jet revving its engines for takeoff, floated across the suddenly still evening. Then the wind began to rise, and in a group we went face down not caring that the ditch was half full of water. From that vantage point the funnel seemed to be floating across the horizon. As the roar suddenly jumped several decibels, and a hard rain began, visibility was blotted out and there was an intense impulse to hug something. So I hugged the bottom and sides of that ditch, and wondered how far the storm would carry my body.”⁴

When the skies finally cleared, the damage was beyond belief. In Huntsville, the roof of McDonnell Elementary School was ripped off, homes were leveled, trailer houses tossed like toys, and a new amusement center

near South Memorial Parkway was flattened. The Cadillac dealership at the corner of the Parkway and Drake Avenue was pummeled, the Pizitz Tire Center was destroyed and the southern end of Parkway City (now Park Place Mall) was sucked open. The local myth that a tornado would never touch down on Monte Sano was blown away just like the trees that were sucked up and spit out.

The most deadly tornado in recent history, and one of the most deadly on record, happened on November 15, 1989. It is widely known as the "Airport Road Tornado." The F4 tornado was a half-mile wide and packed winds up to 260 mph. The first damage occurred near Madkin Mountain on Redstone Arsenal. The tornado continued northeast toward South Huntsville. Unfortunately, the tornado happened around 4:30 p.m. at the peak of rush hour. Most people were in their cars and unaware of the weather conditions. The tornado killed 21 and injured 463 with 259 homes destroyed. More than \$100 million in damage was done to businesses and homes along and near Airport Road.

Another F4 tornado struck on May 18, 1995 at 4:33 p.m. The nearly mile-wide tornado began in Limestone County, traveled into Madison County, and ended near Scottsboro in Jackson County. In Madison County, most of the damage was in the Anderson Hills development north of Huntsville. One person was killed and 55 injured.

In terms of the number of tornados to touch the ground, 1974 had the highest number ever recorded by the National Weather Service. Over 315 people lost their lives in the 148 tornados that spanned over 13 states. The second highest number to touch down occurred on February 19, 1884 when 60 tornados landed in the South and killed over 400 people. The third was in April 1965, when 51 tornados touched down and killed 256 people in the Great Lakes region. In terms of lost lives, in April 1936, tornados killed 446 people in Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia.⁵

Much has changed for the better. Twenty-five years ago, we could see only green blobs on radar scopes and the National Weather Service had to wait for visual confirmation of the tornado before issuing a tornado warning. Today's meteorologists view evolving storms in graphic detail and can now issue warnings before tornados even form. The average lead time on a warning is 11 minutes and with improvements in tornado tracking and detection, the warnings and accuracy continues to improve. Through outreach programs from local television stations and the National Weather Service, the public is also more aware of the dangers of tornadoes and how to play it safe during severe weather.

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On April 3, 1975, the one-year anniversary of the 1974 tornado, 17 live oak trees were planted in the median near the intersection of Williams Street and Monroe Street in remembrance of the people from Madison County and Huntsville who lost their lives. On Airport Road, the newly built Faith Presbyterian Church rose from the ashes of the 1989 destruction. A brick wall was erected as a memorial to the 21 victims of the 1989 tornado. On the wall, 21 bricks are pulled out horizontally and mortared firmly in place. They represent the human lives lost on that terrible day and remind us that they will never be forgotten. Why is it so important for us to detect these storms before they happen? Because we are not in Tornado Alley – we are on the Tornado Super Highway!

Special thanks to the National Weather Service Huntsville Tornado Database and the Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Oklahoma

ENDNOTES

¹*Huntsville Daily Times* dated May 31, 1917

²*Huntsville Daily Register* dated March 24, 1932 “Alabama Lost Heavily when Storm Struck”

³*The Huntsville Times* dated March 12, “Where the Elements Claimed their Victims”

⁴*The Huntsville Times* dated April 5, 1974, “Newsman Laid in a Ditch and Watched Twister Pass” by Bob Dunnavant.

⁵*The Huntsville Times* dated February 23, 1983, “Twisters of Fate – When TORNADOS Hit is Chance But the Season is Here” by Lane Lambert.