

History 21: The Podcast 1.14 – 1939 Anoka Tornado  
Episode Transcript

Moderator: Sara Given

Sara Given: It had been a quiet, Sunday afternoon in East Central Minnesota, when suddenly, about midafternoon of June 18, 1939, a tornado of terrific intensity slashed a path over 30 miles long through Anoka and Hennepin Counties taking the lives of 9 persons and injuring 59 more, 50 of them seriously. Forty homes were destroyed and another 205 were damaged.

The tornado first struck a farm near Corcoran, Hennepin County, and then sweeping north-eastward at a forward speed estimated to be 40 miles-an-hour, tore a path through the townships of Maple Grove, Brooklyn, and Champlin in Hennepin County. Lifted, drove across the Mississippi River, devastated 50 of Anoka's 200 city blocks.

Official report of relief operations from the American National Red Cross, 1939:

Kenneth Lindgren: My name is Kenneth Lindgren and we lived on Grant Street in north Anoka. My memories are very vivid because I was only 12 years old, and I remember this very well. It was a Sunday afternoon. It was about 3:00 o'clock or a little after.

Philip DeJarlais: My name is Philip DeJarlais. That memory lives forever in my mind. I was working for Dr. Harry Kline who was the physician and surgeon in Anoka for many years and I was working in the office at that time. We had office hours on Sundays, and we had many patients waiting. I recall in the afternoon, it was a rainy afternoon, and around 3:00 or 3:30 the power went off.

Rose Smith: My full name is Rose Leah Paul Smith. I was sitting on the front porch, and we were just conversing and just enjoying the breeze. It was very humid. Very heavy humid. We thought that maybe there would be a storm growing up pretty soon.

Don Smith. It was a scary kind of a day with big black clouds rolling through. Some breezy type of a day, humid, until shortly before the tornado struck. Then it, of course, the wind died down to a stillness that was very eerie. I can remember that part of it.

Philip DeJarlais: I went and looked out of the east window and it looked like a lot of leaves and junk up in the air very high and actually those were doors and parts of

buildings and everything traveling off to the east, northeast. I called the power company and said, 'How long is the power going to be off?' The fellow who answered said, 'Well, all the poles are down on Seventh Avenue so it might be three or four days.' I was really shocked when I heard that because we lived at 2812 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue North in Anoka and that was just a block off the Seventh Avenue disaster area.

I was starting down the stairs at that moment because I wanted to get home and see how my wife and my young daughter were. I met my dad and my wife and my daughter on the stairway. My dad had gone up there to check on them and they were both okay. They had spent the tornado time in the coal bin that was very large and underground. So, they were perfectly safe. There wasn't a great deal of damage done to the house itself. Shingles were turned up, and slivers driven through the screens and a few windows broken. I, of course, I stayed at work, then, when I found that my wife and daughter were safe. My Dad took them back home and I got through work somewhere around 8:00 o'clock or 9:00 o'clock.

When I went home, when I got to Ferry and Main, it was blocked off. They didn't permit anyone to travel in. I told them I lived on Sixth Avenue North, but it didn't make any difference. So I went up to Ferry's bridge and took Seventh in and it was blocked off at Grant Street. I turned right on Grant Street and Sixth Avenue was blocked off, too. But I gave her the gas and up over the curb and around the barricade. The guard was yelling at me and I continued on my way home. Next morning we had to get a pass to get in and out of Anoka, so I went down to the adjutant who was in charge of the National Guard, and there were many people there getting passes. As I recall it was in the Hodgkin's Garage where the carpet company is now. I got a pass and didn't have any trouble getting in and out after that.

It has been said that because there were two rivers here Anoka would never be hit by a tornado. That myth was certainly dispelled in 1939. When the tornado crossed the river some of the fellows were standing on the bridge. They said that the water was swept right up out of the river, and they could see the bottom of the river when that tornado went across. It's hard to imagine the power in something like that.

Sara Given: The American Legion District convention was in town that and Verna Ridler, along with her husband, Guy, were preparing the Masonic Lodge on Third Avenue for an event that night and were much closer to the path of the tornado.

Verna Ridler: We were in the basement of the Sonic Temple. I was in charge of the dining room. We had a big dinner coming up that night and I had the tables all set with white tablecloths. We were all ready for the banquet.

Guy Ridler: Well, I was supposed to be helper and pour coffee.

Verna Ridler: All afternoon it was awfully black, so we knew there was something coming. But we got down in the temple, we just got down there, only be five minutes when it hit.

Guy Ridler: A piece of a tree come in through the window. The tablecloths and everything was flying across the tables.

Verna Ridler: We stayed where we were for a while. We couldn't get out. There was this tree against the door. It was a great big, blue spruce, or something like that. A beautiful tree.

Interviewer: What happened to your banquet?

Verna Ridler: We had the food, and so we, I think all of the (*unknown*) from St. Paul and Minneapolis and Rockfield and of course then the electricity was off. They brought lights and set up the temple. So, we just fed people who came in, anybody who came in and wanted something to eat we fed them and we worked 'til late feeding people and taking names. Nurses, doctors from St. Paul, Minneapolis, everybody turned out. It was just wonderful, the people. There was somebody, I don't know who it was, never did find out, always wish I knew. But a man came in the back way, in the kitchen and he washed dishes all that time. And I never did find out who he was.

Interviewer: So, you don't know if he was a man that lived in Anoka?

Verna Ridler: I don't know anything about him.

Guy Ridler: We don't know where he come from.

Verna Ridler: We were so busy with everything else. I never found out who it was.

Interviewer: But he was much appreciated.

Verna Ridler: He certainly was.

Interviewer: I guess.

- Rose Smith: And all of a sudden I saw a great big side of a barn or whatever it was, a big door. Big door coming up way in the sky just coming waving, waving, coming right at us. And boy did we jump.
- Sara Given: With no sirens to warn her of severe weather, Rose Smith and her husband were on the porch when the tornado started to approach.
- Rose Smith: We went right for the basement. But as I got into that dining room to open up that door, it must have just went by then, and the rug went right underneath the table, the dining room table switched around. It was just like a train, choo choo choo choo choo. You know like a train going by. And I ran back. I ran back, the back of the house, and I could just see it coming just like a tumbleweed. Just coming and making that noise. And it was going on the way towards, I would say the northeast direction. I was in the northeast direction it was heading for. And I thought, well, we'd better get back in, its a tornado. I didn't know too much about tornadoes then. It did do a little damage in the house. It cracked all the plaster in the front room.
- They cleaned out the Main Street right away so the ambulance, for the ambulance and the fire, police, and the siren was blowing all day long. Taking people to the hospital, those that were injured. It was a dream for a long time. Its something that stayed in our minds so long, it was unbelievable. And for those that had lost their loved ones in it, it was pretty sad.
- Sara Given: A high schooler in 1939, Rose's son Don wasn't home at the time of the tornado.
- Rose Smith: Don Smith is my son and he was working at Norval's little corner store on Seventh and Main.
- Don Smith: I was working at Norval Olson's grocery and filling station on the corner of Seventh Main Street in Anoka which is just a half a block away from home. Norval and his family had gone to Minneapolis to visit his folks. We weren't real busy in the store that afternoon. It was just a small store. The front door faced out toward the north and looking out onto Main Street there were a lot of cars speeding east like something was chasing them.
- So, I ran outside to see what was wrong and just then Fred Yoho stopped at the corner, at the curb, to let someone out and I asked him what all the cars were rushing for. He said, 'Well, there's a tornado coming.' He pointed off towards the southwest and I turned around and I could see it. Probably just about the time it was moving in towards Champlin. Coming our way. I

think we had a couple young girls and an older woman and Winslow was waiting on them and I said, 'there's a tornado coming, lets all go downstairs.' Norval Olson's house was attached right to the store, on the south end of the store so we had to go through the back door in through their kitchen and then down the basement. After we got down there, I just happened to remember that Mrs. Olson had told me before she left, would I please close the windows in the house if it rained. Well, of course, I thought it was probably going to rain so I ran upstairs to quick close all the windows.

Bernice Olson: Well, we weren't here to experience the tornado.

Sara Given: Bernice Olson and her family were in Minneapolis visiting her father-in-law for Father's Day. On the drive back they didn't have any clue whether the store would be standing when they got back or whether the two high schoolers they left in charge of the store were okay.

Bernice Olson: We had two boys from the senior high school working for us. One was Donald Smith and Winsy Chamberlain. We had the store open on Sunday at the time and they watched the store while we went to the city. And when the storm came they closed all the windows and went down the basement.

Don Smith: We went out, Winslow and I went out into the street after we came upstairs and looked towards town and power lines and trees were blown over and the street was just a green mass of branches and trees down over downtown. We closed the store and thought we'd walk downtown and see what happened. We saw a few people we knew and it was just chaos, of course. Trees down all over and the Armory was destroyed and the houses next door. Winslow got worried about his folks place who were straight north of the store about four or five blocks. Which would have been right in the path of the tornado. So, he thought he'd go home and see what happened.

So, I went back to the store and opened up in case there was business. I had nothing else to do anyway, I was supposed to do that. I was all alone, anyway. Well, low and behold, when I got back, I found out that we were probably one of only two filling stations in Anoka that had nonelectric gasoline pumps. Of course all the power was out throughout the city. Cars started coming in to fill up and I found out from them they were Legionnaires that were wanting to get back home. They had been here for the 10<sup>th</sup> District Legion Convention in town and it seemed like they all of them were low on gas.

I pumped gas steady just about until my mother and dad came over to help and mother brought over, I believe it was an oil lamp, a couple of oil lamps perhaps, and candles. Put them in the store because it was so dark in there. My dad helped me pump gas for quite some time, I don't remember -

it was a long time. Long about 6:00 o'clock, I think it was, one of the Bauers kids came to the store. I knew we were getting low on the gasoline that we had in there. The Bauers boy, his father had the Mobile Gas dealership just a few blocks away and I asked him if he could go home and see if there was any way they could get me some gas and bring it over. Which they did about an hour later. They just drained it off into this small pickup truck with a tank and brought it over store and drained it into the tank. We pumped gasoline there until it must have been 9:00 or 10:00 that night, and that's about the time Olson and his family came back home.

**Bernice Olson:** We were very busy at the store. The National Guard had their tent, or whatever, at the old baseball field, right across, kitty-corner from our store. And of course they were going back and forth all hours of the night so it was a little different with your living, you know. A little noisier. Well, it got people to thinking that we could have a tornado in Anoka, which we never thought we could have because of the two rivers joining. They all said we'd never have a tornado. We found out, when the tornado comes, it comes regardless of any sayings.

**Don Smith:** I remember when Winslow and I went up town right after it happened there was powerlines laying in the brush snapping, you know. It was still charged. We were very careful. I don't think too many people did much nosing around because there was crews busy cutting up brush and that, too, you know. You'd be just in their way. I hope we never have another tornado go through town. As luck would have it, I was two blocks from the tornado. But I could have been right in the path and that foolish move of mine to come upstairs and close the windows could have meant my life, you know?

**Sara Given:** For some the day was just another storm or an inconvenience as they sheltered safely out of the tornado's path. For others, like Herbert Lee, they huddled with family not know if they'd survive.

**Herbert Lee:** My name is Herbert Lee. Later in the afternoon, after lunch Laura went out in the front yard to scatter some grass. Suddenly she called to Herbert, 'take a look at the sky.' He looked up and saw all kinds of debris whirling around. Boards, branches and so forth. As far as you could see. He called for her to come in. Aunt Hattie was lying on the bed in the little room south of the dining room. The room is no longer there. We got her up and got her as far as the dining room when the storm struck. We stood with our arms around each other and someone said, 'God help us all.' He did. We never received a scratch. Herb, Laura, Marlys, Aunt Hattie and the girls. A chunk of my tallest chimney, about two-feet square and three-feet long, came through the window and lay beside the bed.

Mr. McCauley managed to crawl into our house and was calling, 'Mabel, Mabel.' He had lost his glasses and thought he was in his own home. We

all called Mabel, and finally she had an answer. She was completely buried with lathe and plaster. We carefully dug her out to find her worst injury was an injured little finger.

The storm had blown down the maple tree, over a foot in diameter, in our front yard. And the floor that Art and his aunt were on, was turned upside down on it with Art and his aunt underneath. Art crawled out and the firemen came and freed his aunt.

Laura's sister Mary and her husband Art Peterson, managed to drive their car by round-about-way to the 50-yard-line on Fourth Avenue. Art and Herb made a chair by holding each other's wrists. Aunt Hattie sat on that with her arms around their necks. We carried her up over the rubble to the car.

Of course we had no electricity. We found a kerosene lamp with no chimney, so we took a mason jar and soaked a string with kerosene, laid it around the jar in the bottom, set the match to it, then dunked it in cold water to break the bottom. That was our lamp shade. We had a new Perfection oil stove so kerosene was no problem.

Herb's folks lived at Cedar, and first reports of Cedar was wiped off the map. *'The affects on our lives scars will always be on our memory.'*

Sara Given: While everyone in Anoka experienced the tornado in some way, for nine families the devastation of that day included the death of a family member. Including Gladys Syring Christianson's father, Ernest Syring, who was misidentified as Martin in some sources and memories.

Gladys Syring Christianson:

The upstairs neighbors came home from downtown and as she was pulling up to the house she said, 'look what's coming, look what's coming!' She said it was a tornado. The only thing I could think of, there was no basement in the house, the only thing I could think of was to take the kids and go out and lay down on the ground. We were on the, three blocks, lets see, two or three blocks from the river and the storm was on the other side of the river. We could see the outer circle of the tornado. When anybody tells you it sounds like a freight train going over a long bridge, that's exactly what it sounds like. Just exactly what it sounds like.

And we thought that the tornado went over towards our house and so of course we went to my folk's house which was on Seventh Avenue and Johnson Street. When we got over there the houses were twisted up off their foundation and my folk's house was completely gone. My mother came up to me and says, 'I can't find dad.'

Well, my sister had been hurt and she was over across the street in the neighbor's house. I went over and got her and took her to my house. I didn't

know what else to do. I cleaned her up as best I could, and in the meantime the other neighbor had come home. He said they were having an emergency hospital down at the high school and so I put her in the car, with my mother, and we went down there. They checked them both over down there and they sent my sister to the hospital which was on Fourth Avenue; it was Dr. Mork's hospital on Fourth Avenue at that time and she was there for a whole week. On the day of, my dad was killed. He was found over across Seventh Avenue, over the field. Then on the day of my dad's funeral, it was raining, it just poured.

Sara Given: At just 12 years old, Kenneth Lindgren found himself directly in the path of destruction on Seventh Avenue. After the storm, he heard three of his neighbors were among those who died.

Kenneth Lindgren: My dad came in the house and hollered we got a bad storm coming. He said, 'I think it's a tornado.' I was standing out behind our house, and I looked down over town toward town and I saw this wind; this black, black funnel coming and I saw debris going up in the trees and all the rest, going up in the air down around the railroad tracks and, I think, from the railroad actually. Parts of box cars, that kind of thing. You could see all these things blowing up so you knew it was a terrible storm coming. And he said, 'get Mother.' And I ran to the stairs, going up stairs to tell Mother to come down, we got a bad storm coming. And she's well 'just a minute, I'm cleaning up here.' And I said, 'Mother, damnit, get down here,' because we had a bad storm coming.' That was a little out of character for me at the time but, anyway, she finally did come down and dad herded us all into the basement. Dad said, 'let's get in this corner and then if house goes, at least it won't blow it down on us.' So we were in the southwest corner of the cellar.

When the tornado went over, it was very close to us apparently, because it kind of sucked the breath away from you it was (*strangled sucking of breath sound*) and we came up and the world looked different to us. We looked across our garden and saw all these homes were gone. And it had twisted our home on its foundation, so that you could see, we saw daylight from the basement, as a matter of fact. You could look down into all the corners of our cellar because the house was twisted on the foundation so that cellar was exposed. It seemed like it was just in a matter of two or three minutes.

And then the people started coming to our home. All of the windows in our home were broken. They set up a Red Cross station in our house and people started, bleeding people started coming in and from then it was all bedlam. And then we learned that Mr. Groat across the street had been killed, and Mr. Morrissette across on the other side of our garden had been killed. And the story on Mr. Morrissette, as we understood it at that time, was that he had his children and grandchildren visiting on this Sunday afternoon and they had all gone into the basement like we had. But one of the grandchildren was missing. He went upstairs to get this grandchild and



he finally got the grandchild. He got to the head of the stairs, bringing this grandchild back, and he threw the grandchild down and it was caught by one of the people down below and the house was taken off its foundation and killed him.

Mr. Groat's body was just wrong. Like they were saying at the time you could put the body in a bushel basket because all the bones were broken in his body.

Martin Syring was an oil distributor that lived just one block south and a little bit east of us. They found his body across Seventh Avenue, and he'd been decapitated.

And so all three of these deaths in north Anoka were within roughly a block from our home. So, it was quite a traumatic, traumatic experience for a 12-year-old. And I can recall I didn't sleep very well for a long time after that. But as I recall it took a long time to get this cleaned up. You had wire and boards with nails sticking out and I can still remember, with my tennis shoes, I'd step on three or four of those rusty nails that summer and the next summer possibly. It was an experience that I'll never forget, obviously.

Sara Given:

The damage in the City of Anoka accounted for three-quarters of all destruction in Anoka and Hennepin Counties. Estimates show that well over a million dollars of damage of done to property, not counting the loss of trees and shrubbery on the carefully tended home sites. After the passage of over 80 years, buildings were rebuilt, streets repaved, trees regrown and the Anoka tornado is more associated with the high school rather than a weather event. All of which makes it easy to overlook the impact the event had on the individuals and families of Anoka. So we are forever grateful to the residents who powered through, rebuilt and told their story.