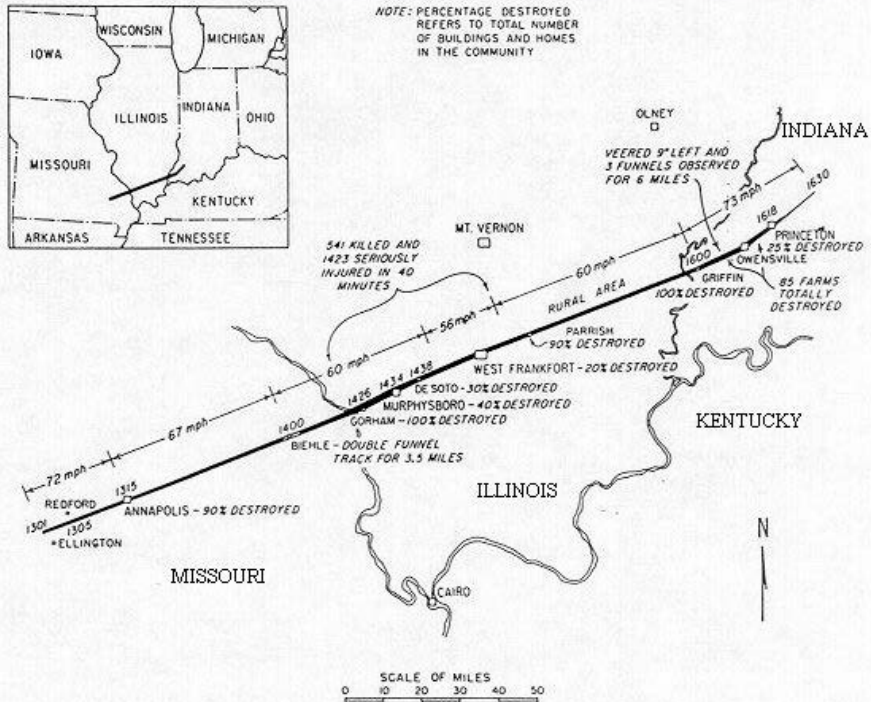


## March 18, 1925 Tri-State Tornado



The Tri-State Tornado Track, courtesy "Illinois Tornadoes" by John W. Wilson and Stanley A. Changnon, Jr., Illinois State Water Survey, Urbana, IL (1971).



**3.5 hours**  
**219 miles**  
**3 states**  
**mile-wide funnel**  
**300+ mph winds**  
**695 lives lost**

Layout by  
**Kat Kreationz**



## Memories

of the 1925 Tornado at Griffin, Indiana



Bethel Township School before the tornado.

**Mary McIntire**

who was  
**Mary Alene Runyon**  
 and 11 years old then



Bethel Township School after the tornado.



On March 18, 1925 a terrible tornado came thru our county from the southwest, killing 74 in the general area, livestock was killed, many buildings demolished and the town of Griffin very nearly flattened.

That morning Tom Ridens came across the river to ride to town with us as Dad (Noah Runyon) took me to school. Tom was in the spring seat and I was on the seat board behind it and Dad came toward the wagon to get in but first reached thru the barbed wire fence to pick up a blacksnake whip that had been lying there all winter. I wondered why he was going to put it in the crib now (he had a room in the front where he kept small tools). Tom said, "What are you going to do with that?" as by now Dad was putting it in the wagon. My father was known by all the farmers as a man that didn't use a whip on his teams nor allow any hired man to, either. Dad replied, "Something tells me I will need it before the day is gone."

I remember the day as grey, cloudy and sultry. Mr. Shaw, our principal, let school out some early as he had been watching the barometer fall steadily. I hurried to town where I knew Dad would be waiting for me. I was watching a terribly dark cloud in the north and thought, "We will about drown."

Dad was in front of George Doll's store saying, "Hurry!" I thought I was but it wasn't fast enough to suit him. I complained about the dark cloud but he said it wasn't what worried him. We were soon in the wagon and going south. Mrs. Wilson, a dear family friend, seeing us coming, had the window up and called, "Let Mary stay here. You will drown." Dad didn't slow the team but called back, saying, "I can't stop, we've got to get home."

Just south of town we came to the farm where Mr. John Delashmit and family lived. He, too, wanted us to



wunderground.com/blog/jphurricane2006/comment.html?entrynum=32



such as skirts, were torn away. She was all black from dirt and they thought she must be a boy. But she wore a ring and Ted finally convinced them by that and they took her home with them, yet not fully convinced, he thought. It was months before her eyes cleared up and they were confident she would see.

Just a short distance on the west of the VanWay house stood an old ramshackle crib. After the storm, it still stood. If Mr. Oller had driven on he and the children would have been safe.

After some time, Mom and Dad wondered about my schooling. Word was sent that no one had to attend some place else but they wanted me to go if I could. Mr. Johnson, the truant officer, wanted me to come live with him and Mrs. Johnson in Mt. Vernon, but I didn't want to go so far from home and I wouldn't know anyone. Dad thought of Beatrice Alsop, Irene and Harry's mother, in New Harmony but Dad didn't want me away from home all week, either. Finally, they decided I would cross Black River and go with Mary and Delbert Ridens out the lane, get on the school bus and go to Stewartsville School.

A willow lay over the water, which was narrow at this spot. Dad fastened a long heavy board to the end of the tree and anchored it on the sand bar, made a rail so we could hold to it and I could cross the river alone with no trouble. Before this, Mom and I went to our schoolhouse to see if I could get my books.

We got into the big hall downstairs but an enormous hole was in its middle, but I walked carefully around it and entered the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade room on the southwest corner. The entire south end of the room was caved in. I got my books and we suffered no mishap. I have a picture of the school taken toward that corner and in it the upper floor has caved in on the desks and floor. So, I've always felt ourselves fortunate to get the books and ourselves out unharmed.





Tents (at left) provide shelter for survivors of the 1925 tornado in Griffin, Indiana. The town was a complete loss. [national-geographic.com/forcesofnature/forces/t\\_img\\_2\\_2.html](http://national-geographic.com/forcesofnature/forces/t_img_2_2.html)

He said he butted against laths and clawed at bricks until he was free but they perished. Two more classmates died, too. Lester Price in the fire and it is supposed Virgil Horton did but no sign of him was found. Lucille Stallings was in George Doll's store, huddled by the huge iron money safe, save from death but severely injured. George Doll was, also, and for months it wasn't known if he would see.

Mr. Stinson was picking his way home in the north part of town when Blanch Doll ran to him (their house is where M.E. building is). She said, "Oh, Mr. Stinson, go tell George our house is blown away". She was in such shock she hadn't yet seen that all else was gone, too. He explained to her and it was as though she awakened from a dream. Then she got to the store ruins as fast as she could, digging the bricks away from George until her fingers bled. Some of Mae Young's family fell thru their basement. One of the girls had the piano on top of her. George Westheimer, the big strong blacksmith, their neighbor, tried but could not move it. But Mr. Young, slightly built, lifted it off her. But she was dead, Clarrisa, older than me, and Vera, a year younger than me, died too.

Our friend, Mary Ashworth, was on the same bus as Ted McIntire (he was almost 10 years old). The driver stopped in front of the VanWay residence to let Harry, Helen and Evelyn off, then he decided to wait there until the clouds let up. Harry ran back to the bus to talk to friends and stood on the back step, as you entered the bus from the back. He was killed there. The bus body was torn off; just the driver's seat and steering wheel remained. Chick Oller, the driver, died. Ethel Carl, Ruby Cleveland, Helen Harris and Helen VanWay died the next day. Ted got a cut low on his head, Albert, his brother, had a broken leg. Vernon had gone to visit school that day as he wasn't old enough to be in school. What a day to have gone! I believe a little Wade boy was killed, too.

But the Ashworths hunted and hunted for Mary up into the evening. Mr. McIntire had a child with them that no one claimed and Ted kept telling them it was Mary, but no one listened. She had on black sateen bloomers and her outer clothing,



stop, watching as I did, the dark clouds in the north. But Dad said to him, "I can't, John. We've got to get home."

Just then the wind veered from the southwest around to the southeast and caught straw from Mr. D's straw stack and it came toward us. The mules tried to turn back to the north and that was when Dad picked up the blacksnake whip. This urged the mules on south to where we would turn east off the gravel road, (just a mite south of I-64).



As we approached this corner, clouds, low and yellow were coming from the southwest. Dad said, "There is going to be a terrible storm. I saw one when I was 7 years old and I've never forgotten it. The clouds looked just like these. If it were not for the team, we would lie down in the ditch. But we can't let them be hurt. We've got to get home." I've wondered if mules could talk if they wouldn't have wondered to one another if Mr. Runyon had lost his mind. They had never had anything used on them except a very narrow piece of whang fastened on a stick. I doubt if it hurt any worse than a horse fly's bite for I've seen them flick their hide and step up for three or four steps then fall back into their regular gait. Usually when he wanted them to really hurry he kicked the front of the wagon. My raincoat was unbuttoned but I couldn't button it for it took all my time holding on the seat. Finally the front hook on my side of the spring seat came off the wagon's edge. Dad said, "Just hold on. We can't stop."

Soon we turned east again. After a bit Dad said, "Tell me where the clouds are now." They were very black and not far back of us. In a bit more we passed the end of the wide hedge that ran south thru the pasture. Just around this was the gap in the fence. Dad was glad to see Mom (Cora Runyon) there with the gap open. He said to her, "Get in." and she jumped in the back of the wagon as we passed her as there was no end-gate in. We were soon to the barn and were soaking wet as it had begun to rain as we went thru the gap. I have always said the drops were as big as silver dollars. They told me to go inside and Mom helped Dad get the team unhitched in the barn.



After a bit the rain quit and Dad went to out to see if he could tell if the storm did anything. We could see smoke to the north and he said, "That's the Armstrong place burning." He felt terribly uneasy and finally said, "Things don't look right and I'm going on to the north road and climb up on the blown down oak to see if I can see anything." If we got in the right places we could see the upper parts of the grain elevator and the top story of the Frazer place. Mom and I went southwest of the house on a knoll, taking my toy spy glasses and we could not see the Frazer house. When Dad came back he said he couldn't see anything either.

He saddled Kate and said if he was not back by 5:00 for us to hitch Captain to the buggy and come out. At 15 to 5 we went to get him ready. The buggy was under a shed on the east side of the barn shutting off our view of the lane. Mom har-nessed him up and he wouldn't let her put him to the buggy, turning back and going in the barn. After the third time of this she said, "He's smarter than I am. He senses something I don't, so we will quit." Just then Dad rode up. He was so glad he got there in time to keep us home and began to tell us some of the terrible things he saw. He said, "Captain would have run off and killed you if you had even got out there."

We ate supper and they decided we would walk out to the 'town'. The wind was so strong it blew our lantern out and finally Dad quit lighting it. I think I never saw a darker night. The only light was in the center of town as the restaurant and stores were burning. We got as far as the railroad, stood there a time, then came home. I've often wondered why Dad went as we couldn't do anything. But he'd seen such devastation I guess he felt like he couldn't bear to sit home safe and dry and warm. I was so frightened I didn't sleep much as I was afraid the wind meant another storm. But it was from the north-west, child that I was, I knew nothing of those things and they didn't think to explain that this wasn't storm winds.



The next morning Dad took the team and wagon to see if he could help anyone. He hauled all that the Delashmit's could salvage up north of town to Fifer's (Mrs. D's sister). Then he helped anyone he could for some weeks until he had to start farming. Mom and I helped Aunt Cynthia and Uncle Lafe Rachels, and I crawled



under the floor where it stood up a way up and got some of her kitchen tools. She and I went to the Baptist churchyard and there their cow lay, dead. She and Uncle Lafe and their grandson, Vincent Pappers, from Lawrenceville, stayed with us until the Red Cross put up a tent on their lot so they could live there and work at clearing up. A doctor from the Army came in and worked in a tent. Aunt Cynthia had a badly bruised shoulder and she mentioned that her shoulder hurt but before she could say why, he told her if it continued she might have to have her teeth pulled. We looked at one another in high glee but managed to keep our faces straight, as she wore dentures.



After a few days the Army manned a Post Office in a train car. I went with a letter to Elbert, my brother, who was on Governor's Island at New York City in the Army. I asked the officer if he would mail it for me, meaning was he the one in charge. I guess he thought I meant would he put the stamp on out of his pocket as he started to say, "No" but by that time he'd seen the address and then he would not let me pay for it.

The Red Cross made what we called Tent City in the pasture just east of the back street. There were many tents there, floored, one tent for the kitchen and dining room and another for sleeping, for each family. Much clothing was donated and the Red Cross brought it in and distributed it.



Nestor family in the ruins of their home in Griffin, Ind., after the tornado on March 18, 1925. Courier & Press archives

Many stories were told, as something memorable happened to each one involved in it. Many people in the restaurant went thru into the basement and were trapped in the bricks and other debris. Slim Combs, our teacher's brother begged the people who poured on water, hoping to put out the fire, to quit as it made so much steam and they were worse off. Our classmate, George Fredrick Kokomoor, his mother and sister, Mary Lou, were trapped, too. He told his mother he could see some light and she told him to try to get out.