

EPILOGUE: TORNADO, OXFORD CENTRE

by Peter Chen:

(Peter Chen, Alain Caillet, Billie Taylor and Bill Kiely were at Oxford Centre the morning after the tornado passage, to examine and photograph the damage)

Wednesday morning, August 8, 1979

Clean up was well underway in this small southwestern Ontario community near Woodstock. Grey skies and a few light showers were the setting of this morning after. At approximately 6:30 EDT of the previous evening, severe thunderstorms associated with a cold front moved through southern Ontario. One massive cell in particular generated several tornadoes. The most devastating funnel had tracked from southeastern outskirts of Woodstock, southeastward toward Lake Erie, scarring the earth over 30 kilometers long. Oxford Centre was its first major victim among several communities struck; here a swath over 700 meters wide evidenced the tornado's passage.

Very soon after the first plans and approval to examine and photograph the tornado damage, we were on the highway to Oxford Centre, ready with camera and film, note paper, map and, fresh in our minds, the "what to look out for" instructions we received just before departing Downsview. Our first stop was at the Ontario Provincial Police Station outside of Woodstock. (A wise decision, in retrospect, since we would have had difficulties to cross police blocks). There we were informed of the traffic conditions and given special passes (handwritten on the back of yellow "unattended vehicle" tags) to enter the blockaded damaged areas. Immediately passed the few police blockades, the damage area literally jumped into view. The boundary of the tornado damage was incredibly sharp. The stories heard, pictures seen of past tornado events became very real.

Our first view said it all; the damage was next to total. A roofless two storey brick house stood among the debris from its own structure and from the broken maple and poplar trees. Corrugated tin siding blown from a collapsed barn were seen wrapped around large standing and fallen tree limbs and trunks. Missiles (projectiles carried by the wind) such as wooden boards and tree branches were embedded in the rear wooden wall of the building. A row of established trees were stripped and "uniformly" sheared of their tops. Examples of straw embedded in tree trunk bark were easily found. The tornado had passed to the west, a few hundred meters away.

A glance southward from this first site revealed the extensiveness of the damage which the evening tornado had brought. For nearly four hours we walked through this small community, among the broken houses, barns, thrown cars, fallen tombstones, fallen and stripped corn fields, lawns pitted with scars caused by blown debris, and the broken, twisted, and some uprooted trees, some partially stripped of their bark. The damage was indeed awesome. Virtually every building of Oxford Centre was destroyed, including churches, the general store, 100 year old community center, and thirty houses.

It is somewhat difficult to be objective in retrospect. Nonetheless, the busy activity of clean up was prevalent, yet generally quiet, interrupted occasionally by buzzing chainsaws, and aircraft overhead. The feeling appeared mixed as we talked with a few of the residents. Although no one we spoke to actually witnessed the "twister", their recollection of the evening's events were vivid and convincing. The feelings of disbelief and amazement were common. One never thought that "it would happen to us!" In addition, a common impression was the quickness with which the storm had struck and left, giving virtually no time to be prepared.

The sky was clearing by mid afternoon. Summer was not over.