

Sunday Marks 75th Anniversary Of Deadly Bunker Hill Tornado In 1948

by Tom Emery
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BUNKER HILL/FOSTERBURG/GILLESPIE - Seven decades later, Herman Landreth still remembered how his ears popped when the worst of the storm passed nearby. He also remembers the massive damage and pain left behind.

“Our house was the only one on our street that wasn’t destroyed,” said Landreth, a Bunker Hill resident who died at age 95 in 2019. “Two of my sisters-in-law died in that storm. My brother, Albert, and all three of his sons had broken legs, and they had to amputate my brother’s leg.” His brother’s home and grocery store were also lost.

Sunday marks the 75th anniversary of the deadly Bunker Hill tornado, which ripped through the heart of town around breakfast time on March 19, 1948, killing nineteen. Minutes before, the tornado leveled most of Fosterburg, north of Alton, where nine died.

Another five were killed in Gillespie, bringing the death toll to 33, though some sources report even more. In between, the tornado inflicted serious damage in the Dorchester area. It remains the deadliest weather event to ever hit Macoupin County.

The storm originated near Alton, damaging a number of homes around 6:30 a.m., a Friday morning. The tornado then continued northeast to Fosterburg, demolishing eighty percent of the town.

At 6:50 a.m., the tornado roared through Bunker Hill as lightning lit the dark skies and rain fell in buckets. “The lightning was just flash, flash, flash,” recalled Landreth. “I turned off the oil heater, so it wouldn’t start a fire. I always remembered how bad the lightning was.”

The storm destroyed most of the center of Bunker Hill, including all five of the town’s churches. Most of the business district was reduced to rubble, while the bandstand, a town landmark, was leveled. Another central feature of the town, a statue of Abraham Lincoln dedicated in 1904, was knocked off its pedestal.

At her family home east of town, nine-year-old Betty Zarges was recovering from the measles and was unable to attend that evening’s scheduled school production of *Pinocchio*. The tornado changed all that, and she got a firsthand look at the damage in nearby Bunker Hill.

“My aunt and uncle lost their home, and they stayed with us for a while,” said Zarges, who now lives near Woodburn. “She’d go into town every day to sift through what was left of their home, and she’d take me along.”

Even today, Zarges is struck by the psychological effect of the survivors in the days that followed. “I think I was kind of a touchstone for my aunt,” she said. “I think she just wanted me nearby.

“When someone loses a home in a fire or something like that, other people try to help,” she remarked. “But when the entire community has suffered such a loss, it’s in a different way. It’s likely that the next person has lost as much, or more than you, and it’s difficult to identify with someone else.”

Remarkably, a few items were spared. “My aunt was digging through the debris, trying to find what was left,” remembered Zarges. “I was helping her, and I found this little tea set. My aunt said I could keep it. I still have that tea set.”

Outside of town, twenty-one-year-old Lester Lawton heard the approach of the storm, and learned of the destruction within minutes. “We had one of those old phones that I call ‘hoof-and-holler’ phones, the ones with a hand crank,” said Lawton, who passed away in 2020. “It was a party line, with six or seven other people on it with you.

“It rang ten times, which I’d never heard before,” recalled Lawton. “It meant there was an emergency. I answered, and was told that Bunker Hill had been blown apart by a tornado, and they needed all the help they could get.”

Lawton, who operated a trucking business, and a friend drove into town in a two-ton truck to help out. “We started looking for people that needed help, and we found one person who needed a hospital,” he continued. “We made a stretcher out of two-by-fours, and carried him up to Main Street, which runs east-west out of town, where an ambulance could get to him.”

An account in the *Macoupin County Enquirer* wrote that “Bunker Hill looks as if it has been hit by an atom bomb.” Illinois State Police and other law enforcement sealed the town, which kept some residents from getting back in.

One was Malvern “Mook” Allen, a 21-year-old student at the University of Illinois, which was holding classes in a former military hospital in Galesburg. “I had an exam at 8:30, and someone said that this town in southern Illinois, Bunker Hill, had been hit by a tornado and was really badly damaged,” he said. “I went ahead and took the exam, then started for home.”

Allen, who also died in 2020, said that he hitchhiked for much of the way, over twelve hours in all. He later recalled the views across town, which had not existed before.

“We used to be the city of trees,” said Allen. “Then, there were no trees left. You could stand in our front yard, and look clear across town.”

In some cases, the Illinois National Guard and law enforcement were ordered to shoot at looters. On Palm Sunday, March 21, sightseers in Bunker Hill were so numerous that bumper-to-bumper traffic was reported for ten miles.

Relief efforts continued for days, and volunteers poured in. Over 100 Boy Scouts from around southern Macoupin County were joined by local veterans’ groups on the scene. Some farmers brought bulldozers and tractors into Bunker Hill, to assist in the cleanup.

"North of town, there was this group of Amish people from the Arthur area, who set up camp," said Allen. "Each day, they'd come into town and bring meals and work, trying to help clean up. They were there every day for at least a month."

Some, though, saw a quick profit. In the days that followed, an East St. Louis company selling steel Quonset huts placed a display ad in a Carlinville newspaper. The heading of the ad blared “Tornado Victims! Here’s Immediate Housing.”

A reported 126 people were injured in Bunker Hill alone, overwhelming hospitals in Alton, Carlinville, and Litchfield. On Easter Sunday in Bunker Hill, services were conducted from a parked tractor, which served as a pulpit for two of the town’s four ministers.

The tornado is the sixth-deadliest on record in Illinois history, and is even considered among the worst in American history. The Bunker Hill-Gillespie tornado is published annually in *The World Almanac and Book of Facts* in its list of notable tornadoes to hit the United States.

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