

# Sarnia's tale of a twister remembered

*Dan McCaffery - May 2026*

Seventy-three years ago this month a ferocious tornado struck Sarnia with sledgehammer force.

I'm a survivor of that catastrophic event. In fact, I was living on Charlotte Street, just a few doors down from Christina, where much of the worst devastation occurred.

But I can't give a first hand account of the May 21, 1953 storm because I was a 10-month old baby, huddling in the cellar with my mother and my older brother. Needless to say, I don't remember a thing about it.

However, I did hear family stories from time to time in the years that followed. And I saw photos my father took shortly after the danger had passed. I vividly recall one picture in a family album of a refrigerator lying in the middle of Christina Street. For some reason, that image has stayed with me.

Growing up, I heard tales about golf-ball-sized hail coming down shortly before the funnel cloud came thundering onto the scene, sounding for all the world like a freight train.

A war buddy of my dad's was drinking in a local pub when the storm picked up his car and tossed it into the St. Clair River as effortlessly as if it had been a dinky toy.

Nearly 100 Sarnia businesses and about 150 homes were destroyed or damaged. In one particularly astonishing incident, a house was blown across Oxford Street, scattering wreckage in every direction. Somehow, a lad who was upstairs at the time was only slightly injured.

I heard at an early age there were no fatalities. People talked about that fact as if it was a miracle. Decades later I discovered it was only partially true. No one died within the city limits but seven lives were lost, including two in Port Huron, one in what was then called Sarnia Township and four more in other parts of Ontario.

The tornado set down just before 4:30 pm about 16 kilometres south of Port Huron, picking up frightening speed before barrelling into that Michigan city, destroying or damaging 400 buildings. It then swung across the river and plowed headlong into Sarnia, pummelling much of the central business district and a number of residential neighbourhoods.

The storm, which finally fizzled out near Stratford, lasted almost two hours and forty minutes, travelled at least 121 kilometres and, at its peak, was 2.4 kilometres across.

In addition to the seven people who died, 117 were injured, including 38 Sarnians. Damage across the region was pretty close to \$200 million in 2026 currency.

Casualties would have been much higher if not for the courageous work of radio announcers at both CHOK in Sarnia and WTTH in Port Huron. They could literally see the tornado approaching out their windows but gallantly stayed at their microphones, issuing urgent warnings to take cover. They only stopped broadcasting when the twister battered their stations, knocking them off the air.

Because I grew up hearing stories of this disaster I've always taken tornado warnings seriously. And I've always felt better living in a house with a basement.

So if you do hear a tornado alert, don't brush it off. Taking shelter may seem like an unnecessary inconvenience, but it could save your life.