

Black funnel of death

A black funnel of death cut a wide swath of destruction through Brant, Oxford and Haldimand-Norfolk last night.

It may be days before the total extent of the damage is known, but the grim tally will be high; at least three lives, injuries in the hundreds, property losses in the millions.

A rare occurrence in Ontario, the tornado - or tornadoes - struck shortly after 7 p.m. and virtually wiped out some hamlets in its path as it cut through an area stretching from Hickson, through the southwestern portion of Woodstock, passing to the east of Norwich, on through Vanessa and toward Simcoe.

Homes, churches, schools,

industries and farm buildings were ripped apart by the storm's fury; vehicles were tossed about like toys.

Tornadoes are usually formed in association with thunderstorms that are in the vicinity of either a squall line or front which invades a region where a layer of warm, dry air overlies moist air.

Along with last night's tornado, heavy rainstorms were reported in several areas.

Widespread blackouts occurred as nine major circuits in Ontario Hydro's main transmission line from Hamilton area to London were knocked out. Power was restored in Tillsonburg after about 42 minutes, but remained out this morning in

badly-damaged areas.

Telephone lines were also cut, making it difficult to obtain information on the full extent of the storm. Roads were blocked in some areas by fallen wires, trees, overturned vehicles and wreckage from buildings.

Emergency crews - ambulance, utilities, police - were rushed to the hardest-hit areas to assist in rescue and repair efforts. Their efforts were also hampered by the loss of phones, making a virtual door-to-door effort necessary to search for possible injured persons.

Worst concentration of damage occurred in the Southwestern part of Woodstock, around the Highway 401-59 area.

Reports indicate some 400 homes destroyed or severely damaged. About 130 persons were taken to Woodstock General Hospital, and 30 admitted, three in serious condition.

Environment Minister and Oxford MPP, Dr. Harry Parrott flew over the area of destruction with Attorney General Roy McMurtry this morning to ascertain if provincial assistance would be required. He was to issue a statement this afternoon.

Norwich Township Council held an emergency meeting this morning to discuss the situation.

Sgt. Bernie Crane, head of the Tillsonburg OPP detachment said the storm touched only the northeast corner of their patrol area. Five or six

houses were damaged but no injuries resulted.

William Snyder, 51, of RR 3, Norwich was killed when the tornado caught his van and threw it off the Beaconsfield Road in the 8th concession of East Oxford.

A Harley area woman is reported to have died in the wreckage of her home.

Provincial constables from Tillsonburg were called in to assist OPP officers from Woodstock and Brantford detachments. Constable Bill Smith, who was patrolling the New Durham area said, "I never saw such a mess in all my life." He said some houses with roofs blown off had furnishings sucked out of them and scattered over the streets. One corn field he passed looked

as though it had been harvested.

Burford Township has been declared a disaster area, with uncounted millions of dollars in damage caused.

Oxford Centre and Vanessa were almost wiped out by the storm.

Woodstock was especially hard hit, with subdivisions in the south and west ends totally devastated.

Police are stationed at access routes into the Southside Park area subdivision, preventing sightseers and unauthorized persons from entering.

"Those people have been through enough," an OPP constable blocking access along Parkinson Road said.

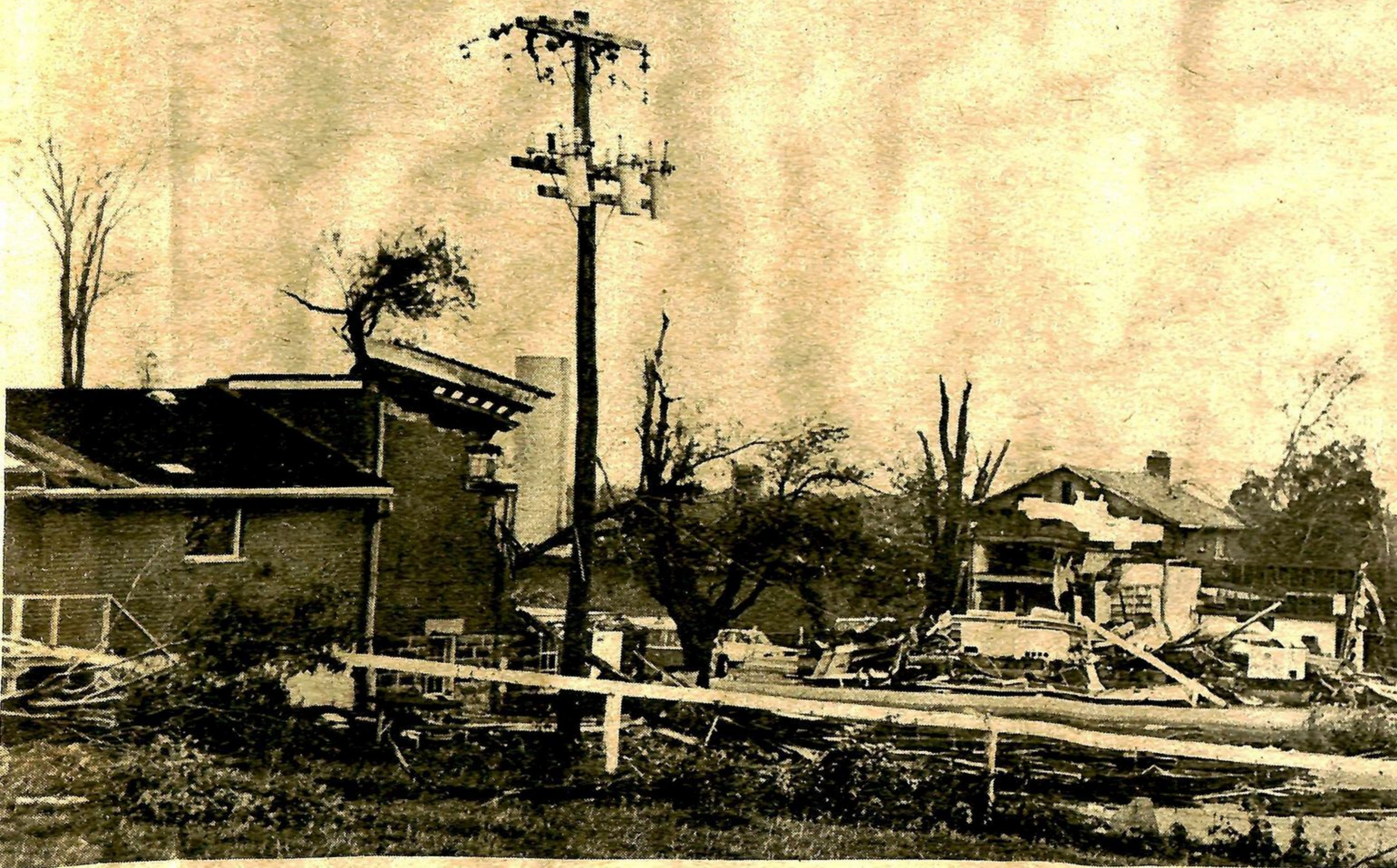
Despite the police and road barriers, people wandered the subdivision's streets staring with disbelief at roofless, blown out houses, toppled hydro poles and trees snapped in two like matchsticks. Piles of debris and shattered windows lie around Southdale Public School and St. Patrick's School, both of which are missing parts of their roofs.

On a new street behind St. Patrick's School, recently-built, once-handsome homes are now nothing but hollowed out wrecks, tattered curtains hanging limply through their windows. The people who live on this street were already out at dawn this morning surveying the damage and talking quietly with neighbors.

The clean-up and repairs will be mammoth tasks, but home-owners were already at work cleaning up debris. The sounds of hammers and saws lent a cheerful note to the dismal scene, as one group of neighbors gathered on the sidewalk in front of their wrecked houses and passed coffee around.

The scene was similar at the junction of Highways 401 and 59. Overturned tractor trailer rigs lie on the median of Highway 401 which was closed for two hours last night, and trees along the highway are festooned with litter and twisted metal

(Continued on Page 4)



A view of Oxford Centre most severely damaged village in the storm. Left is the community hall, to the right the Oxford Centre Variety.

Aftermath of destruction

By CHRIS HOLLAND

The morning was so quiet it made one feel uneasy. Only hours before, the communities of Oxford Centre and New Durham had been hammered by nature's worst fury, and now an uneasy peace seemed to fill the air, as citizens began to realize the extent of the devastation.

The night before there had only been time for action, as residents of these predominantly farming communities took steps to protect loved ones, livestock and property. But in the first light of day, the night's fury stilled, people began to return to the wreckage of their homes and farms.

An attempt to enter Oxford Centre by the Stage Road failed, as the road had been completely blocked by fallen trees. Brian Workman, a member of the Burgessville fire department, was on duty turning cars back and had been stationed there since 3 a.m.

When questioned about the damage in Oxford Centre, he replied: "It's a hell of a

mess," and he advised this reporter to enter the village along East Oxford Concession Five.

The road was open, but the trip was dicey as one drove apprehensively toward the village, dodging power lines and fallen trees. In many instances, there was a only a bare margin to pass through, between the roadside and the trees which had been hurled to the ground. One drove over power lines, and hoped they were not alive, although after the damage last night it seemed impossible there could be electric power.

But it wasn't until looking down the hill toward Oxford Centre that one realized what a tornado could do. The village of Oxford Centre, formerly a pleasant, attractive spot, was now just a collection of shattered foundations and rubble. Cruisers from the Ontario Provincial Police rolled ceaselessly up and down the road, and residents stood in groups, talking quietly and shaking their heads. Many had stayed up all night, ensuring that loved family and friends were

not trapped in the wreckage of homes and barns.

Herds of dairy cattle milled aimlessly around piles of wood and lumber which had formerly been barns. Farmers found it necessary to shoot several cattle which had been injured during the night.

Norwich Township Mayor Jack Burn, on his way to a special meeting of council scheduled for 7 a.m. at the Oxford Centre Fire Hall, said council had been in a protection committee meeting the previous night and had come to Oxford Centre when they heard the news. Members of council, with members of the Burgessville and Oxford Centre fire departments, helped residents search houses for anyone who might be trapped.

R. Armstrong of Oxford Centre, was at work clearing trees from his yard.

"There's lots worse than this," he said. "At least we still have walls and a roof," his wife added.

After leaving Oxford Centre, it was possible to locate the village of New Durham by following the path of the tornado.

A collection of police cruisers and parked

cars marked the entrance to the village, and the damage seemed to begin almost as one passed this boundary. Houses which had been surrounded by pleasant shade trees were now buried in piles of dirt and shattered tree trunks. Despite the severe damage viewed while walking through the village, the worst was yet to come, for it was just east of the village that the tornado spent its force.

Philip Burtis, whose farm was severely damaged, pointed out a hydro transformer which had been buried three feet in the earth of his lawn by the wind. He said he and his wife had spent the time during the storm in the basement.

"That's what saved us, I guess," he said. He said he had lost cattle during the night, but didn't know how many, as he was still trying to get calves out of the ruined barn.

Norwich Village was able to escape widespread damage, although Fire Chief Les Snow reported that one house was struck by lightning at 6 Palmer St. No damage estimate was available.