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THE TORNADO THAT CHANGED AMERICA

This is the incredible story of an
11-year-old boy and the deadliest single
tornado strike in U.S. history.

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As You
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How does the author help you imagine what it was
like to live through the Tri-State Tornado?

Eleven-year-old Adrian Dillon had heard stories about ferocious monsters lurking near his hometown of Parrish, Illinois—like the Ozark Howler, a bearlike creature with razor-sharp teeth and a bellowing roar. But the monster Adrian was about to face was far more ferocious than any creature of legend. Adrian was about to face the Tri-State Tornado, one of the most catastrophic twisters ever to strike the United States.

The Tri-State Tornado roared out of the sky on March 18, 1925. Over the course of roughly three

hours, it ripped through Missouri, Illinois, and Indiana, killing nearly 700 people and sucking entire towns into the sky.

Parrish was one of those towns.

AN EXCITING DAY AHEAD

Adrian was growing up during a time of rapid change in the United States. By 1925, many Americans in cities and big towns enjoyed electric lights in their homes. They owned cars, telephones, and radios for the first time. But in Parrish, a speck of a town nestled

TORNADO

AMERICA

tornado strike in U.S. history **By Lauren Tarshis**

from "I Survived: Tornado Terror"

within the grassy hills of southern Illinois, life was much the same as when Adrian's family settled there 100 years earlier. Parrish School did not yet have electricity. Few residents had telephones or radios. Many, including the Dillons, still drove around in wagons pulled by horses.

But as small and un-modernized as the town may have been, for Adrian, Parrish was the center of the world—and never more so than on March 18.

That morning, Adrian woke with a jolt of excitement. The day of the big marbles tournament had finally arrived.



The town of West Frankfort, Illinois, after the tornado struck on March 18, 1925

From I SURVIVED: TORNADO TERROR by Lauren Tarshis. Copyright © 2017 by Lauren Tarshis. Reprinted by permission of the author.

At the time, marbles was one of the most popular games in America, and Adrian and his friends were fanatics. They played every day at recess, trying to knock one another's marbles out of a ring they had drawn in the dirt. Adrian loved everything about the game—the feel of the cool glass in his hand, the sound of the marbles clacking together, the hoots and shouts of his buddies.

And, of course, Adrian loved to win. He would never brag, but he was one of the best shooters at Parrish School. His prized possession was a sack filled with marbles he'd won in matches. If he

did well in the tournament, he'd be the town's marble champion. His photo would be in the newspaper. He'd be famous!

Adrian lay under his quilt, smiling to himself until the sound of his father's voice snapped him out of his reverie. Even a marble champ had to do his morning chores.

Adrian hopped out of bed and threw on the worn trousers and shirt he wore to school every day.

The Dillons lived on one of the many small farms that surrounded Parrish. There was always work to be done—horses and cows to care for, buckets of water to fill from the well, fences to mend, fields to

weed. That morning, Adrian and his 13-year-old brother, Leonard, milked the cows. Ten-year-old Ruie helped prepare oatmeal and bacon for breakfast. Little Wendell and Faye pitched in by feeding the family's pet rabbits.

Though the work was endless, the Dillon home was a happy one. Adrian's parents—Edna and John—



Kids in 1925

Above: Kids play a game of marbles, one of the most popular games at the time. Right: There are no surviving photographs of Adrian's school in Parrish, but this photo shows a typical one-room schoolhouse from the time.



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John—

had a loving marriage. Edna **doted** on the kids and their animals. John was a warm man with many friends.

After the chores, the family sat down for breakfast. At 8 a.m., Adrian, Leonard, and Ruie left for school. Adrian waved to his mom, brother, and sister.

He'd never see his house again.

THE RAGING STORM

The Dillon kids walked to school under a bright blue sky. The day was warmer and more humid than usual. The blueberry bushes were in bloom, and the wildflowers were starting to peek their bright heads up through the tall grass. Ruie's braids danced around her shoulders in the breeze. All seemed peaceful.

Meanwhile, hundreds of miles away, a monstrous storm was brewing. Overnight, violent thunderstorms had lashed Oklahoma and Kansas. Egg-sized

hailstones had shattered windows and punched holes in rooftops. Now the storm was in Missouri—and gaining strength. At 70 miles per hour, it was moving as fast as a speeding train toward Illinois.

When the storm blew into Illinois later that day, those summery breezes that had followed the Dillon kids to school would make it more dangerous. Warm, moist air adds power to thunderstorms and makes tornadoes more likely.

But the people of Parrish had not been alerted to the threat of a tornado. The weather forecast that morning had said only that rain was possible. This was wrong, but at the time, most weather reports were wrong. In 1925, scientists were not able to accurately predict the path of big storms. After all, meteorology was still in its **infancy**. There were no high-tech storm-tracking tools. Weather forecasts were more guesses than scientific predictions.

But that's not the only reason no tornado warnings were issued on March 18. The very word *tornado* was banned from government weather reports. Since the late 1800s, meteorologists had not been allowed to use the word in their forecasts. The word *tornado* was considered too frightening; people might panic. Besides, tornadoes were almost impossible to predict. Why terrify the public with a warning that was probably inaccurate?

And so, on March 18, thousands of people in the storm's path went about their day.

For their part, Adrian, Leonard, and Ruie settled in at Parrish School, a brick building not far from the center of town. Like most country schools in the 1920s, Parrish was a one-room schoolhouse. One teacher was in charge of about 40 kids ages 6 to 14. The youngest children practiced their letters, scratching away on small slate chalkboards. Older students worked on grammar and math and took turns reciting poems. At recess, Adrian practiced his marbles shots.

No one had any idea that disaster was about to strike.

THE FIRST VICTIMS

The Tri-State Tornado was born at about 1 p.m. in a Missouri forest 150 miles west of Parrish. It was just a ropy little funnel when it dropped from the sky, but it was powerful enough to chew apart trees and scatter branches.

The tornado killed its first victim, a farmer named Sam Flowers, then sped northeast. At about 1:15 p.m., it reached Annapolis, Missouri.

Whoosh!

In less than 60 seconds, the tornado **obliterated** all but seven of the town's 85 homes. Annapolis School, a small stone building, was smashed to rubble with all 32 students inside. Main Street's shops and restaurants were swept away. Incredibly, the tornado took the lives of only four people in Annapolis. All 32 schoolchildren climbed from the wreckage alive.





The Damage

A child sits with his puppy in the ruins of a building following the Tri-State Tornado.

The tornado then whirled across miles of thick forests and craggy hills until it reached the town of Biehle.

Whoosh!

It devoured homes and farms and killed 17 people before setting its sights on the school. It lifted the building clear off the ground. As the school broke apart in midair, the children and their teacher were scattered into nearby fields.

Astonishingly, they all lived.

A HUNGRY BEAST

By the time it reached Biehle, the tornado had been on the ground for more than an hour, which was highly unusual. Of the more than 1,200 tornadoes that strike the U.S. every year, most blow over a few trees and mailboxes and then **dissipate**. A typical tornado stays on the ground for about 10 minutes before losing strength.

What made the Tri-State Tornado so unique and horrifying was that it did not lose strength. Quite the opposite, it grew larger

and stronger as it consumed everything in its path.

After passing through Biehle, the storm continued east, feasting on forests and farms and claiming another eight lives.

Back in Parrish, Adrian kept his eyes glued on the clock. School let out at 3:15 p.m., but he and four other boys were being dismissed early for the marbles tournament.

Meanwhile, the tornado crossed the Mississippi River into Illinois. The twister was now about three-quarters of a mile wide. Its swirling winds carried tons of wreckage—shards of glass, slabs of wood, dirt and mud scoured up from the ground. It also carried thousands of objects ripped from homes, like pots and beds and quilts and toys. All of this was spinning around in the tornado at 300 miles per hour.

Just inside the Illinois border, the tornado smashed into the town of Gorham. It took one minute for every building to be annihilated. Twenty-seven people were killed.

Six minutes later, the tornado

hit Murphysboro, a thriving city of 12,000 people. It had taken 100 years for Murphysboro to grow from a scrappy railroad town into one of the most prosperous cities in southern Illinois. It took less than two minutes for the heart of the city to be destroyed, for 237 people to lose their lives.

The tornado wasn't finished.

Within minutes, it struck its next victims: the farming towns of Bush and De Soto. Both were almost entirely demolished. At 2:38 p.m., the tornado plowed through West Frankfort, killing 127 people.

At this point, the tornado had been on the ground for 100 minutes. Behind it was a trail of death and ruin more than 100 miles long. And now, it had taken aim at Parrish.

NOTHING LEFT

Just after 3 p.m., Adrian and four other boys arrived at Parrish's railroad **depot**, where the marbles tournament was to be held. By then, the skies had turned purplish black, like a gigantic bruise. Thunder

growled in the distance. The boys groaned. Would the marbles tournament be canceled?

Then Adrian saw it: a **roiling** black cloud advancing from the west. His blood turned to ice as he realized what he was looking at.

At first the boys thought to take shelter in a small store. But Adrian shook his head. "We have to get back to school!" he shouted.

In a blink, the boys sprinted across the tracks toward school. Rain started to fall. The day turned to night. They made it inside just as the tornado hit.

Crash!

Every window shattered. The school shuddered. Dirt and shards of wood flew through the air.

And then everything went still.

The tornado had passed.

On shaking legs, Adrian and

the other students made their way outside. Adrian stared in shock: All he could see in any direction was wreckage. Not one building stood except the school and the church. The scene looked more like a bombed-out battlefield than a peaceful small town.

Clutching each other's hands, the Dillon kids headed home. The path was strewn with debris—wagon wheels, smashed furniture, torn fabric. They passed the spot where Adrian had stood moments before the tornado hit. The store where he and the other boys had almost taken shelter was gone.

But even that could not prepare the Dillon kids for what they found when they got home: nothing. The house was gone. So was the barn.

They called for their parents, for little Wendell and Faye. But their

voices disappeared into the eerie silence. Adrian fought back tears as one terrible thought rasped in his mind: Everyone must be dead.

AMAZEMENT AND RELIEF

The scene was the same across southern Missouri and Illinois. Stunned survivors searched desperately for loved ones, clawing through rubble to reach those who were trapped. And still the tornado roared on. It crossed into Indiana, hitting several towns and killing four more people.

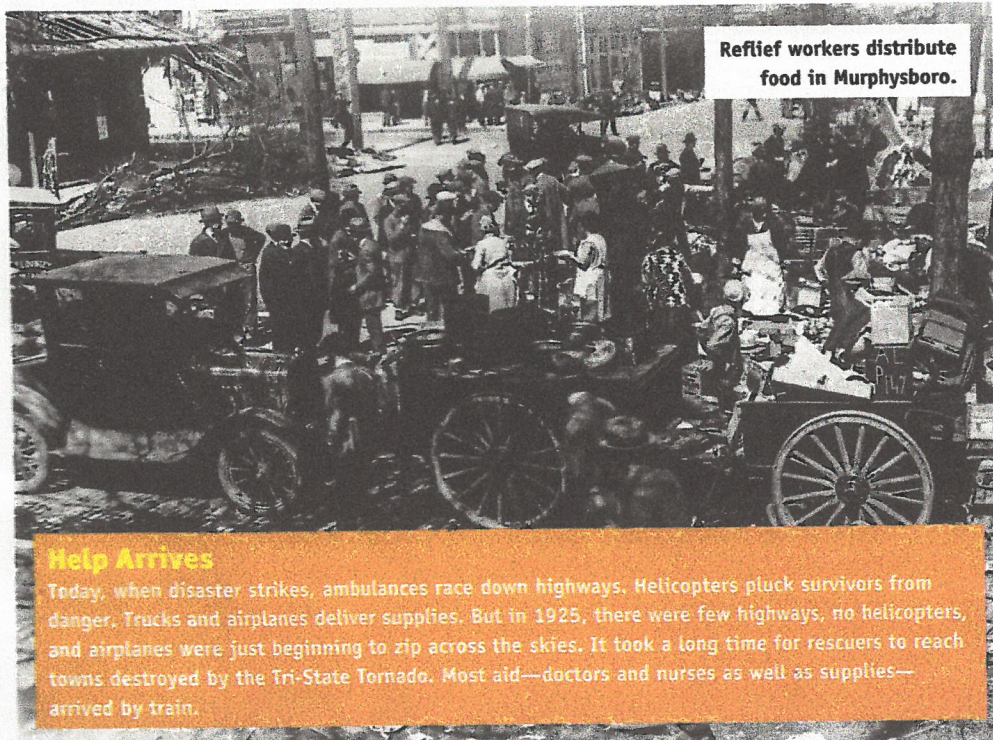
And then, at about 4:30 p.m., the monster faded to a ghostly swirl. It took its last breaths over a field in southern Indiana before disappearing at last. Finally, the Tri-State Tornado was dead.

For the rest of his long life, Adrian would try not to think

about those awful moments when he and Leonard and Ruie stood alone on their ruined farm. He would try to forget the sight of his shattered town.

But he would always cherish the memory of what came next: seeing his mother walking toward them, with Faye and Wendell. The three had been carried away with their house—then dropped into a field without a scratch.

Not long after, a voice rang out: It was his father. He had been

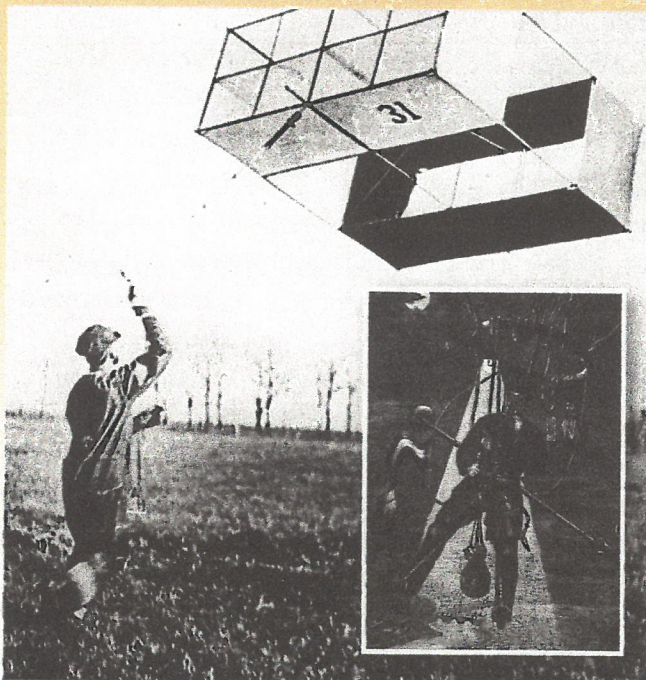


Help Arrives

Today, when disaster strikes, ambulances race down highways. Helicopters pluck survivors from danger. Trucks and airplanes deliver supplies. But in 1925, there were few highways, no helicopters, and airplanes were just beginning to zip across the skies. It took a long time for rescuers to reach towns destroyed by the Tri-State Tornado. Most aid—doctors and nurses as well as supplies—arrived by train.

ADVENTURES IN WEATHER SCIENCE

THEN AND NOW



Before we had weather satellites and radar, it was hard to find out what was happening in the skies. In the 1890s, engineer George Rodek used a hot-air balloon to get a closer look at clouds and take weather readings. In the early 1900s, people used kites to measure air temperature and moisture.



Today, tornado hunters use high-tech gear to follow and study tornadoes. This tricked-out car has armored sides, bulletproof glass, and built-in radar and cameras. If the vehicle is caught in high winds, "tornado spikes" anchor it to the ground. Inside, you'll find sophisticated computers and storm-tracking tools.

inside a store when the tornado hit. He, too, had been lifted into the sky and then tumbled into a field. His leg was injured, but he had managed to run back to the farm. The Dillons huddled together in amazement and relief.

Never before had a single tornado stayed on the ground for so long—three-and-a-half hours. Never before had one tornado killed so many and destroyed so

much. To this day, the Tri-State Tornado remains the deadliest single tornado ever to strike the United States.

The disaster shocked the world and helped change ideas about the dangers of tornadoes. In the aftermath, people from around the country—and the world—donated money to help the storm's victims. Neighbors helped one another rebuild their homes and replant

their fields.

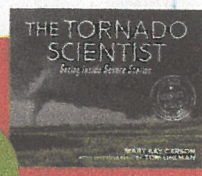
As for Adrian? The Tri-State Tornado had taken everything he and his family owned—their house, their barn, all their possessions. Adrian had lost his prized marbles collection. But they still had what was most precious, the only thing that really mattered: each other. ●

Check out the video at Scope Online!

Writing Contest

In a well-organized essay, explain how author Lauren Tarshis transports her readers to March 18, 1925. Use text evidence. Send your essay to **Tri-State Tornado Contest**. Three winners will each get *The Tornado Scientist* by Mary Kay Carson.

Entries must be submitted by a legal resident of the U.S. age 18 and older, who is the teacher, parent, or guardian of the student. See page 2 for details.



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