

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

An Analysis of the Oak Lawn Tornado of 1967

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With Honors

Department of

Meteorology

By

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Dekalb, Illinois

June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021

University Honors Program  
Capstone Faculty Approval Page

Capstone Title:

An Analysis of the Oak Lawn Tornado of 1967

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Date of Approval: February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Date and Venue of Presentation: *Recorded Video*

Abstract:

The purpose of this project is to analyze and discuss the events of the Oak Lawn Tornado of 1967. First, I approached analyzing this event is by looking at stories and facts about what happened to see how devastating the event truly was. Second, I collected archived weather data of the event and analyzed how this event was so strong. The paper will discuss what happened and stories of the event and the PowerPoint will provide scientific background of the event. Both will show a descriptive analysis of that day and help the reader understand what was so significant about the event.

On the afternoon of April 21st, 1967, a tornado outbreak ravaged the northern part of Illinois. Approximately 15-20 tornados struck the northern part of the state, and 52 existed throughout the entire system. Around 58 people were killed that day (57 in Oak Lawn and Belvidere alone) and nearly 40 million dollars in damage occurred (314.13 million adjusted for inflation). The worst hit area was the town of Oak Lawn, where an F4 tornado destroyed a large part of the town. The area that was most affected in Oak Lawn was at the corner of Southwest Highway and 95<sup>th</sup> Street, but the damage that this storm caused was extensive. This storm was a harsh reminder that events like this can occur in the city of Chicago. This paper will talk in depth about what happened that day, including how it developed, how it happened, and the aftermath.

Oak Lawn is located in Cook County, 13 miles southwest of the Chicago Loop, on the very edge of the Chicago city limits. What once was a farming community is now home to mainly commuters. The first settlers established the area in the 1840s and 1850s. The town was first known as Black Oaks, due the dense grove of black oak trees. A schoolhouse was first built in 1860 in the town. After the Civil War, more immigrants began settling there. In the 1880s, the Wabash Railroad connected the area with Chicago. After the railroad, the first subdivision was established there and called Oak Lawn. A post office was first established in 1882. The first real commercial building began construction in 1927, when an innovative plan to concentrate commercial development began. The population of Oak Lawn grew from 8,751 in 1950 to nearly 50,000 in 1967. Most people that lived in the town were immigrant families of Dutch and German descent. Most of the people that lived there moved in to have a better life and were unfortunately unaware of the danger the area possessed. This kind of thought process is very similar to the tragedies that happened in what is now known as the “Children’s Blizzard” back in

1888 in the Dakotas where several of the victims were people that immigrated into the United States and were not aware of the weather risk.

The winter of 1966-1967 was a very harsh one. On January 26/27, 1967, Chicago and most of Northern Illinois got their biggest snowfall from one storm with 23 inches of snow. This record still stands today. The 1966-1967 winter also set the record of most snow over the course of an entire winter up to that point, with 68.4 inches of snow. This record, however, was beaten in 1978-1979 with 89.7 inches of snow. There was snow cover on the ground for a 42 day stretch (January 26-March 9). After the winter had passed, the temperature increased dramatically. Rockford hit 80 degrees in mid-April. This showed signs, at least to the people who lived in Northern Illinois, that the dreaded winter was behind them, and they could look forward to a calm and mild spring. Everything seemed to signal a peaceful spring until Friday, April 21<sup>st</sup> came.

The first line of thunderstorms developed around 8 AM CST in western Iowa, northwest Missouri, and northeast Kansas. There was a fatal combination of factors that led to development of strong rotating supercells that moved from Iowa and Missouri towards Northern Illinois. Tornadoes were reported in northern Missouri during these storms, including one EF4 that occurred in the late morning and early afternoon. As the afternoon progressed, the line of thunderstorms moved northeast into Illinois and eventually into the Oak Lawn and Chicago area. The supercell that produced the tornado in Oak Lawn was first indicated on radar around 4:45 PM CST. The cell formed around approximately 18 miles west of Joliet, between the towns of Plattville and Shorewood. 30 minutes later, eyewitness viewers spotted rotating clouds about 10 miles north of Joliet. This included a restaurant at the intersection of McCarthy Road and 127<sup>th</sup> Street who had their windows blown out. Even though the storm had already caused damage,

there was no report of a funnel cloud. A few minutes later, there were reports of cars bouncing in the parking lot and three-inch quarter sized hail. Mr. Lace, at the Little Red School House located at 99<sup>th</sup> street and Willow Springs Road, called the Weather Bureau and was the first indication of a potential tornado. However, the bureau employee was unable to call his report in due to bad connection.

New reports saw a funnel cloud (not yet on the ground) at U.S. 45 and Kean Avenue. The reports stated that the cloud was slowly moving closer and closer to the ground as it headed east/northeast, and then finally touched down east of 88<sup>th</sup> Avenue between 105<sup>th</sup> and 106<sup>th</sup> Street. The reported time of touchdown was 5:24 PM CST. The point of touchdown was reportedly a creek, which turned out to be one of the lowest spots in the area, before continuing into an open field. At around 5:26 PM CST, the tornado was reportedly  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  city blocks wide, which equals around 350-400 feet. The tornado then crossed the tri-state tollway (I-294) and then hit an area near Harlem Avenue between 98<sup>th</sup> and 99<sup>th</sup> streets. Continuing an east-northeastern path into central Oak Lawn, the tornado then took the greatest toll of life as well as the most damage. The tornado's winds were so strong that even well-built brick homes were destroyed in the center of the tornado. At 5:28 PM CST, the tornado did its worst damage. This occurred at the intersection of 95<sup>th</sup> Street and Southwest Highway. At that corner alone, a tavern, restaurant, motel, food market, and two gas stations were leveled. A hotel owner who worked on that corner said that all seven buildings on that corner were destroyed. Between 25 and 40 automobiles were halted at this intersection's traffic light, and all of them were thrown around in different directions. This street corner is also where Oak Lawn Community High School sits. The south end of the east wall of the high school was taken out, and some of the cars at that stop light were thrown into the athletic field next to the high school, which was approximately 500-600 yards away. The

Southwest Suburban Bus Lines garage was also damaged and some of the buses were thrown nearly half a block away. We know the storm hit the high school at 5:32 PM CST, based on a clock that was stopped in the high school at that time. The storm was not done there, as it continued toward Laramie Avenue and eventually towards Cicero Avenue. It crossed Cicero Avenue near 91<sup>st</sup> place and Southwest Highway. Loss of life happened when the tornado destroyed a roller rink at Cicero and 92<sup>nd</sup> street. The storm then continued into Hometown. Surprisingly, even though there were several homes destroyed in the town of Hometown, there was no loss of life that occurred. The tornado then moved towards Crawford Avenue and even hit St. Mary's Cemetery, which knocked over 200 monuments. It then moved into the town of Evergreen Park and caused significant damage to buildings on Kedzie Avenue near 88<sup>th</sup> street. The tornado moved northeast along 87<sup>th</sup> street, before passing through the Beverly Hills Country Club at 5:32 PM CST. A reported 100 MPH wind gust was recorded from a 360° direction at 5:39 PM CST, just before the storm eventually hit Lake Michigan and dissipated. The tornado traveled 16.2 miles in 15 minutes (greater than 60 miles per hour). The width of the damage was approximately ½ to ¾ city blocks wide. However, the tornado was not always at ground level. Reports say that the tornado was on the ground from 88<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 107<sup>th</sup> Street to 87<sup>th</sup> and Western Avenue (8 miles), but then was at tree top level for about 2 miles to Halstead Street, and then touched down again within the next mile. Finally, from State and 83<sup>rd</sup> Avenue to Lake Michigan, it was around tree top level (4.5 miles). The line of thunderstorms continued through lower Michigan, but the worst damage had already occurred.

As mentioned earlier, the hardest hit location was Oak Lawn, specifically near 95<sup>th</sup> Street and Southwest Highway. Many of the deaths from this storm were from people in automobiles, which proves the point that an automobile is one of the most dangerous places to be during a

tornado. Another important note was that most people who took refuge from the storm did so in the southwest corner of their basement, since the storm was approaching from the southwest. This was a tip given by the Weather Bureau that certainly paid off. Another thing the Weather Bureau did was report the warning 24 minutes prior to the tornado striking Oak Lawn. Most of the people who were home during this time were aware of the warning, but those that were driving home from work, or out to dinner perhaps, were not aware. This is where the high death toll from the system came from. There were people at the time of the warning in restaurants that had no way of knowing about the situation. That is because there were no cell phones back then and no other way for people to alert them. Those in their cars could only hear about it on the radio. Another problem was the timing of the storm. Since the storm hit in the afternoon, there were more cars out on the street than normal. For the people in their cars listening to the warnings on the radio, many did not have the opportunity to avoid the storm because they were potentially stuck in traffic.

It was not until dawn when the real damage was able to be assessed. They stated that from the air, communities resembled battle zones. The job of cleaning up appeared to be overwhelming. Village of Oak Lawn President Fred Dunkey stated that they hoped to have the debris cleared by Tuesday (the storm hit Friday). “The first step was the Fire Department moving in to check for any bodies. Second, the building department moved in to determine if the debris should be removed or if it could have been salvaged. If they had to tear them down, then professional wrecking crews came in. The debris was then hauled away by trucks and loaders.” As they discovered more bodies, the death toll climbed to 32 with more than 500 injured. Governor Kerner, who toured the area, said, “It’s the most massive destruction I have ever seen.” He also said that the loss of lives could have been worse if not for the weather warning system.

Shortly before 10 o'clock, widespread looting occurred in Oak Lawn. Police and National Guardsman went in to seal off the community. Cook County Sheriff Joe Woods told them to shoot the looters on sight to stop it. "This order was issued to professional policemen," Woods said, "This certainly discouraged the looters." The problem with all the looting was that there were citizens of Oak Lawn who were not currently in the neighborhood. To re-enter the town, they needed to show an ID. This was troubling for some teenagers who spent the afternoon out of town with their friends and weren't allowed back into the town because they did not have a driver's license.

The following are some of the tragedies that happened that day. At the intersection of 95<sup>th</sup> and Southwest highway, 18 people died. Three people died at Fairway Supermarket, one at Sherwood Restaurant, three at Shoot's Lynwood Tavern, two at the Suburban Bus terminal garage, and nine in cars waiting at a red light in the traffic. Other places in Oak Lawn where people were killed included two people at the Airway Trailer Park, four people at the Oak Lawn Roller Rink, and 12 others in cars who drove into the vortex of the tornado.

Some of the survival stories that came out of this system were truly incredible. One man said that a light pole fell between his legs, and if the pole had hit him in the upper part of his body, he likely would have died. The man stated, "It was an act of God that saved my life." Other stories included a man who personally dug himself out of the debris. Another man who recorded the tornado on a reel-to-reel recorder, was so traumatized by the event that he completely moved his family out of the Midwest and to Colorado. This man's name was Robert Kehe, whose house was completely destroyed, but the lives of he and his family were spared. He stated, "God protected all that I had, which were my loved ones, and I guess I can be thankful for that ... I am at this point completely wiped out. Say a prayer for those who lost their lives".

Roger Mobley and his father talked about how the cloud was so dark they could not even see each other. They saw the twister coming and immediately took cover. His father told his son, “Hang on, it’s going to take us.” Unfortunately, his father did not make it, but Mobley has no idea how he survived, considering he went unconscious and woke up with his clothes completely gone. An incredible moment happened at his father’s funeral, where a man returned both his and his father’s wallets back to him. Other witnesses stated that the twister lifted cars and heaved them like baseballs. Rita Schneemilch was ten years old when the tornado hit, and she described her experience with it. She had mentioned that after the storm was hit, her and her family started to drive around Oak Lawn looking for their father. They were not allowed past Ridgeland Avenue because everything past that point was completely destroyed, and they immediately thought the worst. After driving around a little bit longer, they went back home. However, to their surprise, he was there, but he was not the same. He was not hurt by any means, but the storm affected him mentally. She described him as aging 25 years overnight. Rita’s father said that this was his second time he cheated death, considering he was the last survivor of the U.S.S. Arizona in Pearl Harbor. Her father worked at Fairway Supermarket and she said that the deaths of the customers that day haunted him until his death.

I personally conducted three interviews with people around my town. Here is what they told me about the event. All three of them are people that have lived in Oak Lawn since that day. I had them tell me simply what happened that day from their perspective.

#1 – Family Friend: “I was 7 years old when this happened. All we heard was to get to cover, and so we did. Although we did not know what for. Thankfully, we (me and my family) and our house were okay. Once it had passed, the police would not let anyone into town the next day. The most memorable thing that happened was that my father was at work, and like I

mentioned, the police did not let anyone into town. Remember that back then there were no cell phones, so we did not know if he was okay. We were just in our house that day praying that he was okay, and he finally showed up the evening the next day. It was a very scary experience for sure.”

#2 – Retired Teacher: “The only thing about that day that I remember was what happened to my sister. I was out of harm’s way, but I knew that my sister was on a school bus coming home when we heard that there was a bad storm coming. When she got home, she had told me that the school bus she was in was lifted off the ground a little bit. She had some injuries from it, but the most important thing was that she was alright.”

#3 – Neighbor Across the Street from My House: “This is a storm I will never forget about. It was almost a miracle that my house survived when I saw the damage to neighboring houses. I remember walking down 95th Street and buildings were destroyed, and I didn’t even see the worst of it because the police did not allow us to get close to where the worst damage was which was over by Southwest Highway and 95th Street. The police had stopped anyone from crossing Ridgeland Avenue” Another very crazy thing that my neighbor had told me is that the house that I am living in (or at least the house that use to be where I am living) was destroyed by the Tornado and they built the one I am living in now in the aftermath of the storm. She also told me that the house that use to be where I live was the only one on the block that was destroyed, but other houses in the neighborhood down the street to the south were also completely destroyed.

Oak Lawn was not the only area affected by a tornado this afternoon. The town of Belvidere, Illinois was also struck by a tornado on this day. Belvidere is located in the far

northern part of Illinois, just east of Rockford. The tornado struck the town at 3:50 PM. Most of the deaths from this tornado came when students were being let out of school, unaware of the oncoming danger. 13 children died who were boarding school buses. The wind was so strong that most of them died from school buses flying. Many of the parents of these children did not know their fates well into the next day but assumed the worst. The path went from the high school in Belvidere to the hospital. The Highland subdivision was next. Harry Ferris drove his police car through the street of Highland and alerted everyone of the storms that was incoming (5 minutes before). 24 people still died and over 1000 were injured in Belvidere and Highland. It took 2 and a half years to build some houses there and the storm destroyed them in 2 minutes.

Lake Zurich was also an area that was hit by a tornado. Lake Zurich is located in Lake County Illinois, and the tornado that struck that day was one of only three EF4 tornadoes to hit the county in recorded history. The tornado destroyed over 110 homes and damaged another 100, leaving over 800 people homeless. The tornado first touched down at Cuba Road and Route 14 and cut through North Barrington and Lake Zurich. The tornado was around 300 to 500 feet wide and caused around \$2 million in damage. The hardest hit area by this tornado was Manor Subdivision near Route 12 and Miller Road. One person described the tornado as not even lasting 10 seconds. But, that short amount of time was enough to destroy homes in the path of it.

Looking back, this day is known as the worst tornado outbreak in Northern Illinois history. It is also known as the last tornado to have hit Chicago. Although no tornado of this significance has hit Chicago and Oak Lawn since, this storm is certainly a reminder that things like this can happen. Even though the worst destruction from the tornado did not hit the downtown area, it still affected many areas within the city limits. It is not, however, the worst

tornado to have hit the area, and even in recent memory. Back on August 28, 1990, an EF5 tornado hit the town of Plainfield, killing 29 people. This was the last EF5 to hit the state of Illinois, and the only one to hit the Chicagoland area in recorded history. This tornado was not within in the city limits, but most of Chicago and the surrounding area also remember this storm. It is important to note that for both the Plainfield and the Oak Lawn areas, many more people live in locations that were destroyed by the tornados now than they did when the tornados hit. While the 1967 Oak Lawn tornado hit a fairly densely populated area, there are still approximately 5,000-10,000 more people living in the tornado path today than there was back in 1967.

Even though this tornado hit 54 years ago, there are people in Oak Lawn who not only remember, but experienced and survived it. There are memorials recognizing this storm at both the Oak Lawn Public Library and Oak Lawn Community High School. This storm is not only remembered by the people in Oak Lawn, but rather the entire Chicagoland area. Every year, on April 21, WGN news in Chicago does a news segment about that day. This includes recapping the events that unfolded, but mostly shows interviews with survivors who remember it. This is certainly a storm that will never be forgotten.

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