

Woman clings to baby as twister 'lifts' both

By TIM ZORN
News-Dispatch Staff Writer

When 32-year-old Sandy Morris was picked up and thrown into a field by the tornado which demolished her family's house last Friday, she clung to an eight-month-old baby she had been babysitting with as she whirled through the air. Her action probably saved the baby's life.

"I don't know how she did it," said her husband, Ray Morris. "It wasn't a man's strength. It was her mother's instinct that made her hold that baby."

Mrs. Morris, the most seriously-injured of the LaPorte County tornado victims suffered a deep cut and broken thigh bone in her left leg, as well as back injuries.

The Morris house at 1365N County Line Road was broken up and scattered across the field by the twister.

The baby, eight-month-old Brett Calloway, 4805 Johnson Road, survived with cuts and scrapes. Brett is the Morrises' nephew.

Mrs. Morris was in the St. Anthony Hospital intensive care unit from Friday night until Monday afternoon, when she was moved to a hospital ward.

The hospital reported today that Mrs. Morris is in fair condition and Brett is in good condition. Also in good condition is James Harvey, 20, 8997W County Road 300N, injured when his trailer was tumbled by the tornado.

"My wife remembers the whole thing now," Morris said. "She was playing with Brett. She looked out the window and saw things flying, but there hadn't been any tornado warning.

"At first, the next thing she remembered was lying out in the field. Later when she was in the hospital, she recalled being up in the air, thinking she and the baby were going to be killed.

"She must have held on until just before they hit, because the baby was found only a few feet away," Morris said.

Just before the tornado hit, Morris was speeding home from his job at the Jewel supermarket. Store manager Bill Lenke had just learned about a tornado in Illinois.

"I was going to beat it home," Morris recalled. "If I'd just grabbed a phone and called, she'd have been out of there." Near County Road 300N, Morris saw a cloud rolling and swirling "and then the bottom of the cloud just fell out."

When Morris arrived, nearby residents Mrs. Edgar Hellman and Leonard Bootcheck, already had found Mrs. Morris and Brett in the field. Another neighbor, Chuck Mooi, helped direct the neighbors' tornado response.

From then on, Morris remembers only occasional scenes in the agonizing wait for the ambulance to arrive. Because of some initial confusion as to whether anyone was injured, the ambulance arrival was delayed, and it was a little after 3 p.m. when the ambulance left with Mrs. Morris and Brett. The tornado hit about 2:10 p.m.

Luckily, Morris said, an off-duty ambulance attendant happened to be nearby and helped treat Mrs. Morris. The baby was taken to Bootcheck's house.

"I get lost for words when I think

of how much those people helped," Morris said. Mrs. Hellman had injured her ankle when her own house was tipped off its foundation, but she stayed with Mrs. Morris until the ambulance arrived.

"I can't name everybody who was out there helping," Morris said, "but Mrs. Hellman, Leonard Bootcheck and Chuck Mooi were tremendous."

Ray and the Morrises' two children have been staying with in-laws, though Morris spends most of his time at the hospital. Both children were in Pine School when the tornado hit.

"Our friends and people from our church, the Church of Christ in LaPorte, all have been giving us clothes," Morris said. "We've had to ask them not to bring any more, and people could even get some from us."

Money also came from people the Morrises hadn't seen for 20 years.

Ray and Sandy Morris were reared in Niles, Mich. and moved to Michigan City first in 1968. Morris was then transferred to a Michigan store in 1971, then returned to the store here in 1974. They moved to the County Line Road home in September, 1974.

Morris' house was covered by insurance, and friends have volunteered a bulldozer to scrape up the debris. "I went out there Monday morning but I started to get sick and left," Morris said.

Mrs. Morris faces a lengthy recuperation, but "she's got a lot of faith and strength and she knows God is with her," Morris said. "The doctor said she was in very dangerous condition Friday night, and her recovery has been miraculous."

In the wake of the devastating tornado that hit the area last Friday afternoon, several readers asked the question: Has a twister ever done damage inside Michigan City?

It may have happened more than once, but the record shows a tornado accounted for the most destructive three minutes in Michigan City weather history in April of 1909.

It was the crowning blow, so to speak, of a bizarre day in which lightning bolts and tidal waves also made local news.

The funnel-shaped cloud appeared above the lake hills just after 7 p.m. on April 29 and zeroed in on the Southwest Side.

Before anyone could hard-boil an egg, something it's doubtful that anyone did, the twister had completed its destructive binge and moved on.

Behind, it left thousands of dollars in damage — and a 900-foot gap in the state prison's west wall.

As the Michigan City News summed it all up in its next-day headline: "Terrific Wind Storm Tore Things in General."

That it did. The tornado disrupted communication, twisted, smashed and unroofed buildings, uprooted trees, and generally rearranged the neighborhood's appearance.

Unhappily for the state, the tornado chose to alight at a point where the prison wall, 24 feet high, blocked its path.

That obstacle removed, the twister devoted several seconds to effecting various other architectural innovations at the prison. Gone with the wind were a dozen of the institution's brick smokestacks. Borrowing tops of two boxcars as its tools, the tornado revised the foundation of the north cellhouse. One of the boxcars became a battering ram, moved 200 feet on its tracks by the twister and dashed into a newly-built east gate.

Outside the prison wall — or what had been the prison wall —

the storm continued its spree. It tore into several industries, indiscriminately plucking roofs, chimneys and walls.

Residences, barns, outhouses and other structures also were leveled, damaged or relocated.

But it was at the prison that things were really popping.

The warden was quite perceptive, according to the News' account. After studying the 900-foot gap in the wall, he "at once realized the seriousness of the situation and knew it would be useless to take the prisoners from their cells with nothing on the west to meet their gaze but a stretch of open country..."

At midnight, the warden finally got through to the governor, who dispatched National Guard companies from South Bend and Plymouth.

The tornado highlighted — but did not monopolize — the area's freakish weather.

The day had begun with electrical storms and heavy rains. A lightning bolt shot down the chimney of a farm home near Waterford and killed a man and wife. In Michigan City, a bolt similarly entered a house on Cloud Street, missing a baby and mother by inches.

Hardly had the tornado faded from sight when a Lake Michigan tidal wave hit Michigan City and New Buffalo.

Effects of the wave were evident the entire length of the Michigan City channel. The excursion steamer Roosevelt, wintered at the foot of Seventh Street, shot upward

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and threatened to break from its moorings.

At New Buffalo, where the level ascended an estimated eight feet, a boathouse caretaker had a nerve-shattering experience. The tidal wave hit just as he was undressing for bed, lifted the house from its foundation, rolled it over several times and carried it about four blocks. The semiconscious caretaker was found later, unhurt but understandably bewildered.

A cottage was moved two blocks by the wave, a highway crossing bridge about four blocks from the river's mouth was washed out, and a bathhouse on the New Buffalo beach was — according to newspaper story — “carried around a hill and into the marsh country.”

The News' reporting was thorough: “A barn at 1802 W. 10th St. was torn to pieces by the storm. Two setting hens that were on duty had the scare of their lives. One sustained a broken leg and the other one is still setting on 12 guaranteed eggs.”

A collective sigh of relief on the part of residents followed the tornado's departure. “Surely,” many must have said, “we've had our quota of rain for a while.”

They were right. The next day, April 30, it snowed.

—Bob Kaser

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