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<b>LOCAL WEATHER</b>
Temperature Wind Direction Extended Forecast
<b>HOME PAGE</b>
<b>ABOUT US</b>
<b>HOMETOWN NEWS</b>
<b>COUNTY NEWS</b>
<b>INDIANA NEWS</b>
<b>CLASSIFIEDS</b>
<b>OBITUARIES</b>
<b>PHOTOS</b>
<b>SHS ALUMNI</b>
<b>LOCAL LINKS</b>
<b>SHERIDAN.ORG</b>
<b>HISTORY</b>
<b>SHERIDAN MAP</b>
<b>ACCESS INDIANA</b>
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## SHERIDAN'S MOST TRAGIC DAY

### Palm Sunday, April 11, 1965

BY DALE A. ROBBINS - April 11, 2010

It seemed similar to many other Sundays at Boxley Methodist Church... except that the crowd was a bit larger for the Palm Sunday service. As I sat in the pew next to my parents, I tried to listen to the sermon... but my thoughts kept drifting outside where I could hear kids playing in the unusually warm temperatures. For this 12 year old, I was anxious to get home and out of the starchy clothes -- looking forward to my sister and brother-in-law who were coming over for Sunday dinner.

Though sunny and hot, it was a relaxing afternoon under the shade trees sipping on lemonade with family. As dusk approached, the familiar sight of dark clouds were accumulating in the west. Distant sparks of lighting could be seen on the horizon, meaning a typical Midwest storm was brewing. The family had gone indoors and were watching TV when news of a tornado warning scrawled across the screen. Such warnings were frequent and didn't generate much concern until the program later interrupted with an urgent news bulletin. They reported that moments earlier, a twister had touched down in Lebanon and Elizaville to our west, and was headed due east toward Sheridan. We were alarmed and realized it was time to take refuge in the basement.

My dad was the last of us to arrive below when the lights suddenly went out. We were fumbling to find a flashlight, when there was a hush. "Do you hear that?" Mother whispered. We stood motionless, straining to hear what seemed to be the increasing sound of a distant roar. But in mere seconds, the noise had become a rumbling vibration that was now shaking the structure above and around us.

Instinctively, we each knew the danger that was upon us, but there was no time to react. My heart was pounding in my chest. Behind me I could hear my mother's soft, familiar voice, praying.

Then suddenly we heard and felt the impact of a massive collision. The house shook violently -- we were deafened by the sounds of breakage and the groanings of timbers being twisted and torn. Suspended in shock, all eyes peered out helplessly from the small basement window. In the dim light we could see a blurry collage of objects hurling past from the wind's great force -- trees, farm machinery, huge objects. Near the window, a small tree bent completely to the ground without breaking.



Remains of the home of Lawrence and Elwilda Kercheval of Sheridan (Curryville) . They were killed when their home was destroyed by the Palm Sunday tornado, April 11, 1965.

Then as quickly as it had begun, there was silence. The tornado had apparently passed. We carefully emerged from the basement, and to our surprise, we found the house intact. But when we pushed the front door open, the surrounding devastation was beyond belief. It appeared that a nuclear bomb had exploded. Fallen trees, portions of buildings, automobiles, clothing, home appliances -- mangled debris of every kind covered the ground and hung from disfigured trees in all directions. It seemed nothing short of a miracle that our lives had been spared... but we soon discovered the toll was far more severe just a couple miles West toward Sheridan.

On Monday morning, my dad and I attempted to drive into Sheridan, but downed power lines, trees and debris littered the roads. On foot we got as close as Curryville, a small subdivision on Sheridan's northeast side, and although police and emergency crews held us at a distance, we could see the utter destruction. The once lovely wooded community was leveled.

The homes of many friends or acquaintances had been damaged or destroyed... many were injured or killed.

Lawrence Kercheval, 56, and his wife Elwilda, 55, owners of a lovely Curryville farm that we passed every day on our way to town, were killed and their home was completely demolished. Further West at Jerkwater Road, Herschel Graham's home was also leveled. He had seen the approaching twister and tried desperately to get his family into a crawl space beneath the house, but his wife Rosemary, 38, and youngest son Brian, 8, were sucked away by the force of the wind. Only Herschel and his older son Brant survived.

West of Sheridan about three miles, the path of the tornado had an especially destructive impact near the intersection of Hwy 47 and Terhune Road. The home of James (Paul) Good, 56, and his wife Orpha, 54, was destroyed and they both were killed. The only survivor was their 20 yr old son, Jerry. He later said that he and his parents had just seen the coming twister from the kitchen window, and only had time to put their arms around each other before it hit. He later awoke in the front yard to discover that his mom and dad had perished. Compounding these parent's tragic death was the fact that their grown daughter, Betty, 25, lived next-door... and she and her husband Robert Starrett, 30, and their two small children Brian, 5, and Brenda Kay, 2, were also killed. And only 300 yards further West of the intersection, the home of neighbors, Earl and Ethel

*In Memory  
of these who perished in  
Sheridan's Palm Sunday  
Tornado, April 11, 1965*

Neal, was also leveled. Ethel survived but Earl, 77, died shortly thereafter from his injuries.

The following day after the twister, a car concealed with debris and mud was discovered near Hwy 47 in the field behind where the Good's and Starrett's homes had stood. Inside were two deceased passengers, John Thomas White, 21, and his wife, Judith K. White, 21, college students who had been in route from Anderson to their home in Lafayette until the twister swept them from the highway. This sad discovery, along with the subsequent deaths of those who had been critically injured, brought the Sheridan area death toll to 13.

We eventually discovered that the F4 twister had originated as far West as Crawfordsville, and had wreaked greater tolls of death and destruction along it's path near Thorntown, Lebanon and Elizaville before moving on to Sheridan and Arcadia. This was a part of a series of many other killer storms that swept across the Midwest on that same day, and only one of eleven other Indiana tornadoes that leveled entire communities and killed as many as 137 persons.

For me, the events on Palm Sunday April 11, 1965 changed my life. The other survivors with me in that basement... my parents, Myron and Irene Robbins, as well as my older sister Helen and her husband Gerald Sanders... have all passed away in recent years, but I have never forgotten those shocking events, nor my mother's prayer for God's help.

It was an awful and distressing experience for so many who lost loved ones or who suffered the loss of virtually everything they had. However Sheridan's most tragic day could have been far worse. The town had for the most-part been spared from being wiped off the map. Forty-five years have passed, and Sheridan has continued as a growing, flourishing community... but the events of that one day will never be forgotten and will have a lasting impact on many for generations to come.

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