

The Evil SW

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In 2011, a massive tornado hit the town of Joplin, Missouri.

It was Sunday, May 22, 2011. Bennett Satterlee was excited for his 11th birthday. That morning, at his home in Joplin, Missouri, his mother baked his favorite vanilla cake.

Bennett and his 7-year-old brother, Ethan, took some icing into the yard. They picked strawberries and had a sweet, sticky feast.

Soon the brothers would leave for Bennett's party at their grandparents' pool. If it rained,

they planned to come home and continue the celebration indoors.

Overhead the sky was **hazy** but blue. The brothers laughed while they snacked in the yard. But by nighttime, their lives would be forever changed. Many of their neighbors would be dead, and more than one thousand people would be injured.

Their city was about to be hit by one of the

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TORNADOES

This is the story of two boys who were caught in its deadly grip.

BY LAUREN TARSHIS

worst tornadoes in United States history.



PAUSE AND THINK: What was Bennett thinking about on the morning of May 22?

Tornado Mysteries

Today, **meteorologists** can **predict** many kinds of weather. They can alert you if your soccer game is likely to be rained out, and they can let you

know whether you'll need snow boots to walk to school.

Tornadoes, however, remain a mystery. These violent spinning **columns** of air form inside powerful storms. Their winds swirl at up to 300 miles per hour and destroy everything in their path. It's difficult to know which storms will produce killer tornadoes. They're often hidden by clouds—and come roaring out without warning.



TORNADO ALLEY

Tornadoes can and do strike anywhere on Earth (except Antarctica). But America has the most. Every year, about 1,000 tornadoes touch down in the U.S. The biggest tornadoes usually happen in an area known as Tornado Alley.



That Sunday, meteorologists were watching the border between Kansas and Missouri. They thought dangerous tornadoes were likely to form—but exactly when and where would they strike?



PAUSE AND THINK: What is a tornado? Why are tornadoes so hard to predict?

VOCABULARY

hazy: partly hidden, darkened, or clouded by dust, smoke, or mist

meteorologists: scientists who study weather

predict: to say that something will or might happen in the future

columns: things that are tall and thin in shape

tragedy: a very sad or upsetting situation

False Alarms

Most people in Joplin had heard that heavy thunderstorms were expected. This meant the Satterlees would have to move the birthday party back to their house, which was disappointing.

The weather report also said that tornadoes were possible, but this was not unusual—the sound of the city's 28 tornado sirens is common in the spring, and it's typically a false alarm. As of that Sunday, Joplin hadn't been hit by a major tornado in almost 40 years.

CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP IMAGES (RUBBLE); WAYNE HANNA (TORNADO); JIM McMAHON/MAPMAN © (MAP)



STILL STANDING The Satterlee family's house was destroyed in the tornado. They later rebuilt a house on the same spot. It's shown here in a family photo from 2015. From left to right: Bennett; his mom, Shannon; his dad, Barrett; his sister, Carolyn; and Ethan.

In the afternoon, Bennett and Ethan went swimming at their grandparents'. By 4:30 p.m., Bennett had returned home, and family members were arriving for the party. They waited for Ethan to come home with his cousin Wyatt, Uncle Frank, and Aunt Sana.

At 5:11, Joplin's sirens rang out. Bennett's mother sent the kids to the basement to keep them safe—just in case. She called Uncle Frank on his cell phone, and he said they were on their way in his truck. "We're getting close," he promised.



PAUSE AND THINK: Where were Ethan, Wyatt, Frank, and Sana at 5:11?

Like a Bomb

Twenty minutes later, when the sirens sounded again, everyone in Joplin knew the danger was real. All around the city, people

scrambled for shelter. At fast-food restaurants, they crowded into large refrigerators with strong metal walls. The Satterlees and their guests joined the kids in the basement.

The tornado was now three-quarters of a mile wide, and its winds hit Joplin like a bomb. Brick buildings crumbled, houses caved into piles of wood and glass, and cars and trucks were tossed thousands of feet through the air.

From the basement, the Satterlees could hear the crashes and thuds of their home being ripped apart—but it wasn't the house that concerned them. It was Ethan, Wyatt, Frank, and Sana. They were somewhere outside, caught in the evil swirling darkness.



PAUSE AND THINK: What kind of damage did the tornado cause?



Bennett and Ethan's parents watch as their damaged house is torn down.



Healing a City

When the Satterlees finally emerged from the basement, they found chunks of their roof missing, furniture smashed, and neighbors' houses destroyed.

And Frank's truck was nowhere to be seen.

By then, the tornado had finished with Joplin. Throughout the city, people dug through piles of rubble to reach neighbors who were trapped. Teenage boys turned their trucks into ambulances.

Gradually, the extent of the devastation became known. The storm had killed 158 people and injured more than a thousand. It was America's deadliest tornado in 60 years.



PAUSE AND THINK: How did the tornado affect the Satterlees?

Best Gift Ever

For the Satterlees, however, the day didn't end in **tragedy**. Uncle Frank's truck finally appeared. The back window was broken, the metal dented and battered—but Frank, Sana, Ethan, and Wyatt were safe.

For Ethan, the ride had been terrifying. Glass sprayed over him when the wind smashed the window. For a few minutes, he was afraid he would never see his family again.



RIPPED APART The Joplin tornado destroyed more than 7,500 buildings, including the homes you see here.

But when the Satterlee brothers remember the tornado, those moments of fear aren't what stand out. They talk about the incredible strength of their community and the support the city received from generous people all over the country.

Recalling his 11th birthday, Bennett knows he got the best gift ever.

"My family survived the tornado," he says. •



PAUSE AND THINK: What are the Satterlee boys grateful for?