

Twenty-six years ago this week: Pelham's terrifying twister spins an urban legend

Sweeping down Highway 20, May 20 1996 storm left trail of destruction

BY DON RICKERS
CONTRIBUTING NEWS EDITOR

Today the Can-View Drive-In on Highway 20 stands desolate, a ghost from a by-gone era when such open-air theatres were pavilions of entertainment, capitalizing on the cult of worship of the automobile. Its 84 acres are currently for sale, listed at \$10.8 million dollars.

Back in the 1960s, drive-ins numbered in the thousands across North America. Today a just over a dozen remain in Ontario. They were a cheap night out for young families, and front-seat passion pits for amorous teenagers. For kids, they held an aura of magic, replete with neon lights, flickering images on a mammoth silver screen, and the smell of popcorn and French fries wafting in the air.

Some in Pelham may not be aware of the Can-View's brush with international fame back in May of 1996, when a tornado howled across the landscape and shredded one of the movie screens, on an evening when the Hollywood hit *Twister*, starring Helen Hunt, Bill Paxton, and Philip Seymour Hoffman, was slated to play.

At first blush, it was a pretty simple story of the power of Mother Nature. That is, until the media and human nature intervened.

Early factual news stories of a single movie screen's destruction quickly morphed into a tale of a tornado flattening a drive-in, while the blockbuster movie was actually playing, sending people fleeing for their lives.

The incident, which happened on Monday, May 20, was widely reported by news media, fueled by the testimony of purported witnesses. Though discredited by numerous sources, including internet fact-checker Snopes, the urban legend mushroomed.

A 2016 short documentary produced by Jay Cheel for *The Atlantic* magazine, entitled "Twisted," detailed the distorted and exaggerated claims. Even drive-in employees Ann Atamaniuk and Sonny Tutti maintained that the theatre closed early when the weather hit well before sundown, and that no movies were screened that night at all. In fact, the movie *Twister* was never even scheduled for the particular screen that was destroyed by the tornado.

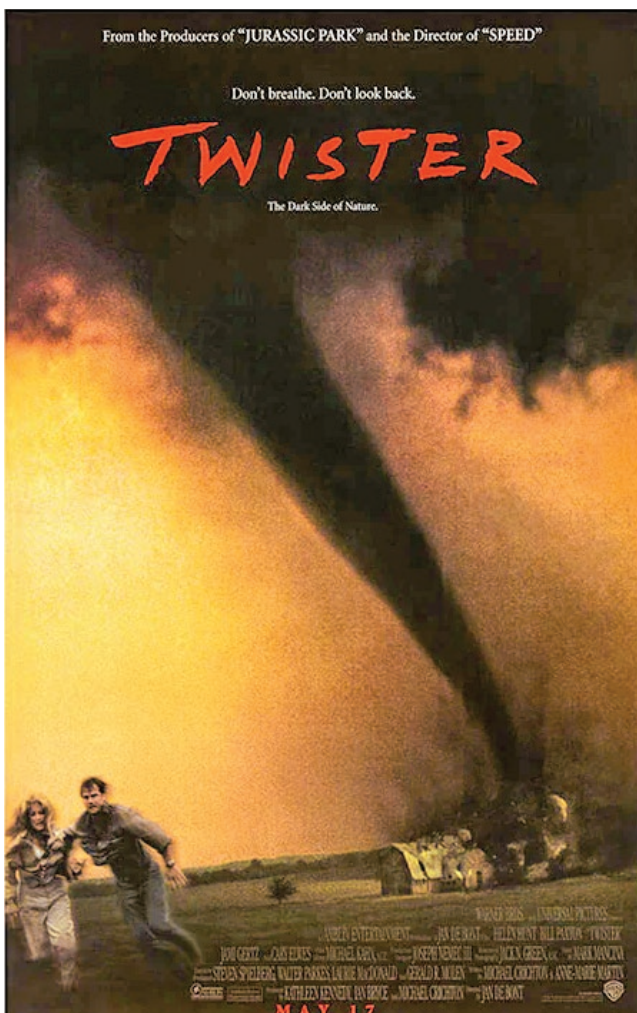
Atamaniuk said that the screens were engineered to withstand 190 kilometre per hour winds.

Brock University psychology professor John Mitterer, interviewed for the Cheel documentary, discussed the imperfect recollections of drive-in patrons.

"How do you know that a memory that you've had



Can-View Drive in manager Ann Atamaniuk. **STANDARD**



The blockbuster hit *Twister* was released on May 10 1996, and went on to be the second-highest grossing film that year. Store this away for a bar trivia night: It was the first film ever released on DVD in the US. It lost out at the Oscars, though, to *Independence Day* and *The English Patient*, also 1996 releases. **SUPLIED**

is, in fact, a true memory?" he asked. "We are natural storytellers, about our lives and our histories, both as individuals and as a culture. Stories get elaborated over time, especially if you're being rewarded for telling a more interesting story. There's no doubt that repetition, with a tendency to embellish, can produce tales that get pretty flamboyant over multiple tellings." So there we have it. Memory is fallible, truth can be subjective, and human storytelling has enduring power. "I think most people will

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Top, among other damage the tornado lifted the roof from the strip plaza opposite Pleasantview Memorial Gardens, on Highway 20 east of Fonthill, then home to Kremble Automotive. Above centre, a toppled trailer at the RV Complex, also on Highway 20. Centre right, metal pieces from the strip plaza helped take out a hoop house at the former Beamer's Market, near the 406 interchange, where today a thrift store makes its home. Madelyn Beamer, daughter of owners Don and Nancy, is less than pleased. Madelyn is now a professor of health sciences at Brock University, while her mom Nancy is a District School Board of Niagara Trustee. Lower right, already in the wood-selling game, the storm helpfully left plenty of raw material at a business on Effingham Street. Above, a massive barn lost its roof on Metler Road in North Pelham.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY CAROLYN MULLIN EXCEPT THE BARN PHOTO, COURTESY ASA HANSLER



If we can't be first, let's be best, recalls former Pelham Herald editor

BY CAROLYN MULLIN
SPECIAL TO THE VOICE

While initially disappointed that we had missed the fireworks on Victoria Day in 1996, the storm that ripped through Pelham that night gave us more adventure than anyone had bargained for.

My husband Bernie and I, having a rare day off from our jobs at Niagara newspapers (mine as editor of the *Pelham Herald*), decided to take the drive to Niagara-on-the-Lake to catch the fireworks at the Virgil Stampede. We had seen a flyer somewhere that week — there being no website, Tweets, Facebook events, or Instagram posts to provide the salient details — but we were mistaken on the timing. The fireworks had gone off spectacularly the night before.

Back at home, sitting on the front porch of our home in downtown Fonthill, we chatted about the vacation adventures to come in our first summer as a married couple, plotting and planning on just how much camping gear we could fit into the bed of the new (to us) Ford Ranger in the driveway. We were marveling at how much beautiful blue, pink and white light still remained in the sky shortly before 8 PM, when that same sky turned almost immediately black. Thunder rumbled, lightning cracked, and a down-pour arrived minutes later. We heard a loud bang — the sound you hear when a transformer blows — so naturally our power went out, followed quickly by the sounds of multiple sirens around town.

Journalistic instincts took over as we grabbed notebooks and our own camera — my work camera was locked safely away in the newspaper office at the corner of Highway 20 and Pelham Street — and jumped in that new pickup for a drive around. With a tree down on Port Robinson (the source of our power outage) our path to the east was blocked, even as we kept hearing

Special Storm Edition

Pelham Herald, Wednesday, May 29, 1996
Tornado turns businesses upside down



ideas needed
Still much to be done to cut pollution in river
page 8

Pens win
Lemieux gives team critical lift
page 1

Duds for dudes
Fashion industry now focusing on menswear
page 7

The Standard

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Storm wreaks havoc



Above, the St. Catharines Standard's cover the next day. Top, page 1 of the Pelham Herald's special section a week after the storm.

VOICE ARCHIVES / BOB LANG

more sirens from that direction. Heading over to Highway 20, we again found the road blocked at Rice Road, later learning trees had come down near Cataract Road and even further east near Pleasantview Memorial Gardens.

We tried snapping a few photos, but while the rain had stopped and the sky's lightning show was settling down, true darkness was now upon us, and we were not able to get very far without being blocked by emergency vehicles (rightly so). We decided to call it quits and head out again in the morning. By today's standards of citizen journalism

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and online immediacy, this seems like an amazingly lame response to on-the-spot news, doesn't it? Without any outlet for publishing, though, this type of live news was something left to the big outlets — television stations or radio stations with proper recording equipment to capture and disseminate the story.

While our publishing company had been working on a website, it wasn't yet live, and it was going to be a static landing page in any event. I was ten years away from even starting a Facebook account, and other social media was in its infancy or non-existent. Besides, I reasoned, with a weekly newspaper already laid out, and printing set to take place the next day, I wasn't able to publish anything for another whole week anyway.

Driving around Tuesday morning, snapping photos of the damage and talking to business owners and property owners, the idea of a special section started to take hold. If the other news outlets were beating us to the spot news coverage, why not take our time, and provide some extra — and hopefully useful — content for readers? The publisher liked the idea, and we set about putting it together. By we, I mean me (with a few shots from Bernie), as the lone paid writer at the *Herald*.

Yet at the same time, I wasn't alone. Community connections came through

with regular phone-in updates to the office on how people had fared, or how people were starting the recovery, after this freak storm. Several Highway 20 businesses seemed hardest hit. The Can-View Drive-in story was already taking hold — you know, the urban legend that the movie *Twister* was playing on the only screen at the four-plex that was damaged. While one of the screens was damaged, and *Twister* was scheduled to screen that night, it wasn't on that screen, and no movies had started by 8 — sufficient cinematic darkness had not yet descended, funnel clouds notwithstanding.

Property owners snapped photos and brought them in. A former schoolmate working on the spiritual staff at Fonthill United Church offered to write a column on how one's sense of faith intersects with such trials. And local historian Asa Hansler was quick to inform us that this storm followed an established pattern of storms every 102 years in the town. His call to the paper's office also turned into a contributed column.

The other informative pieces came together easily enough with stories around insurance claims after damaging storms, on the Town's emergency response plan, and information about how first responders had been kept busy throughout the night and into Tuesday. After seeing recreational vehicles turned upside down, barns completely destroyed and a few other collapsed roofs, we were all immensely relieved to hear there were no

significant injuries reported anywhere that night.

When planning the layout, it was clear that community spirit and resilience would take centre stage in the four-page section, with a story on how North Pelham's residents spent the rest of the week moving from property to property, clearing debris and branches near houses, churches and farms, and assisting the farmers on Metler Road whose historic barns were leveled.

Luckily, because we used our own camera for some of the shots, those photos survived and, because of a pandemic project cleaning up part of our basement — in the same home that was new to us back in 1996 — I was certain I would be able to locate them for this recollection. I did, in a roll that also contained images of Bernie standing beside his shiny red truck. (It ended up being the perfect vehicle for our trip down east later that summer, in case you're wondering. Of course, the two-seater no longer fit our lifestyle when we became a family of three a few years later. But that's another story.)

The photos I captured on my work camera, on the other hand, were on black and white film that I bought in bulk and processed as negatives without prints in a makeshift darkroom in the *Herald's* damp basement. Since the parent company closed the paper at the end of that same year, those negatives are long, long gone. Of course, with the end of that chapter came the birth



of the *Voice* as an independent, award-winning community-owned publication — one of the few still in existence today.

Looking back, our preference for telling stories of community positivity, celebrating those who give of themselves for others, shines through in that four-page special section. Rather than focus squarely on what was gone, we put a spotlight on help and hope in times of trial. And if you happened to keep a copy of that section, or have seen a copy some time in your own past, you will note that the last article on the bottom of page 4, is a short but heartfelt submission from the Daboll families, expressing thanks for the many offers of help: "Pelham truly is a caring community," they wrote.

I agree. Today no less than yesterday. ♦



Top, Albert Hansler takes a chainsaw to a tree felled by the tornado on the Hansler family farm, est. 1786, in Fenwick. Above, local historian and Albert's brother, Asa Hansler on the farm last week where the old generation willow trees have made a comeback.

HANSLER FAMILY ARCHIVES / DON RICKERS

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continue to believe whatever stories support their beliefs and narratives, and question everything that challenges their ideals," Cheel told *The Atlantic*, in discussing his documentary. "And when truth depends upon memory, things seem to get very complicated."

As reported by the Associated Press at the time, the storm followed a weekend of severe thunderstorms and flooding. Environment Canada spokesman Phil Chadwick said at least one tornado occurred locally, with one demolishing two barns housing 30,000 chickens, and tearing the roof off another containing a collection of vintage cars, destroying two of the vehicles.

The storm took a path down Highway 20 and up through North Pelham. Mayhem followed.

Wade Daboll still lives on his ancestral bicentennial farm in Ridgville. He was 35 years old when the twister roared across his family property, decimating some 600 trees.

"We had a willow tree that was 55 inches in diameter lifted up by the roots," said Daboll. "My dad

had a massive pile of logs after the storm, and ended up going out and buying a sawmill."

The clean-up evolved into a custom woodworking business, which Daboll maintains to this day.

"At that time, I had a pizzeria in Pelham near the old HoHo's Chinese restaurant," he said. "I thought there was a freight train coming down Highway 20, the noise was incredible. I thought that the front window of the restaurant was going to blow in."

Daboll recalled that Kremble Automotive, located in an industrial mall on Highway 20 across from Pleasantview Cemetery, lost its roof, and the Barrett family barn on Metler Road was destroyed and scattered across a wide area as the storm reached its peak around 8 PM.

Asa Hansler, a Pelham author and historian, was at his home on Highway 20, down the street from Clare's Cycle, when the twister swept through, tearing limbs off majestic willows on the property close to his house.

"The storm took out buildings in the area and uprooted huge trees that were probably 200 years old," he said. "It sounded like a giant freight train when it went through here. The sky was very dark, and I

ran outside to herd the animals into the barn. The air was completely calm, there was no wind before it hit, and then it just blew straight through like a wind tunnel. It was a very scary experience."

Such storms happen once every century in Pelham, said Hansler.

"My great-grandfather Asa P. Hansler, who came through a tornado here in 1896, told me that every 100 years or so Pelham gets hit. Historic records indicate there was an earlier twister in 1792. My great-great-great grandfather, George Hansler, came through that one. He was living where Bissell's Hideaway is now, and lost a lot of trees."

That was Canada's first recorded tornado, and "Hurricane Road" was built along part of its path and named after it.

Coverage the next week by *Pelham Herald* editor Carolyn Mullin captured local reaction.

"I could see a storm coming, but never expected anything like this," said Greg Beamer, whose parents Don and Nancy owned Beamer's Market, now a thrift store on Highway 20 near the 406 interchange. Nancy Beamer is now a DSBN Trustee.

Pieces of the roof at the market

were sent flying, and two Scoops ice cream hut employees, Shanna Maher and Leigh Au Coin, huddled in fear in the gazebo-like structure as a funnel cloud appeared down Highway 20. Deafening winds shook the hut, and broken glass filled the air.

"I thought we were going to die," Au Coin told Carol Alaimo of the *Standard*. "Kids were screaming, picnic tables were flying. It was like something from *The Wizard of Oz*."

Rural roads were washed out, power lines were downed and transformers blown, and tree debris was everywhere, especially in North Pelham, prompting then-Director of Operations for the Town, Jamie Hodge, to declare it "nearly a disaster area."

Hydro workers were on the job repairing power outages during the night, and then-Mayor Ralph Beamer was on the job as soon as the tornado passed, surveying the damage, listening to stories from residents, and pledging help.

Niagara Regional Police reported that tractor trailers on Highway 20 had their roofs ripped off.

"Two-ton trailers were smashed to smithereens," Sergeant Sandy Race told the *Standard*. "The wind tossed them around like toys."

Ed Luska, who owned a recreational vehicle business on Highway 20, told the paper, "I've never seen a storm like this," and noted that several of his trailers had been toppled and crushed by the storm, and truck caps blown into nearby fields.

Glen Gordon's massive 27-ton steel granary located near the driveway was crushed, a \$170,000 loss. "It was an unbelievable sight," said Gordon.

Hail fell along with the fierce winds and thunderstorms, which stretched from Lake Erie up to Georgian Bay and across central Ontario.

Terry King, customer operations manager at the Ontario Hydro district office in Beamsville, told the *Standard* said the storm cut power to between 4,000 and 5,000 customers in Pelham for about 16 hours. Power went out just after 8 PM Monday and was restored shortly after noon the next day.

Pelham was not the only Ontario community to be hammered by a tornado 26 years ago.

It was the Spring of the Twister in Southern Ontario in 1996, as two tornadoes touched down in Grey, Wellington, and Dufferin counties on April 20, resulting in significant property damage and injuries to nine people. ♦

TEAM*continued from Page 1*

patrol officers receive the same instruction.

"The mental health and addiction specialists on this team act to properly screen the individual. The goal is more than just diversion or apprehension, but de-escalation, to bring the situation

to where the person is no longer in crisis."

CMHA Niagara clinical supervisor Brandy Sand told the *Voice* that while there's less crime statistically in Pelham compared to other parts of the region, it doesn't mean that there's less unwellness.

"Mental health workers look to prevent crime by taking a therapeutic

approach," she said. "Our data shows that such calls were trending upwards in Welland and Pelham, just as they had done in other centres in the region, and that's what brought us to where we are today."

Sand said that the MCRRT program has been unfortunately referenced by some in the media as a "suicide squad," but that they in

reality they respond to all calls that are going through 9-1-1.

"We go to car accidents, child welfare calls, sudden deaths," she said. "We're specialists in mental health and addiction, but we can help anybody who's experiencing any type of distress on any call. And we are proud of the fact that our average response time is

only seven to ten minutes."

Resources are available in Niagara to support people with mental health concerns and crises. Urgent Support Services provide mental health counsellors from 11:30 AM to 5:30 PM Monday through Friday, at (905) 641-5222, extension 2231. COAST (Crisis Outreach and Support Team) is a 24/7 crisis outreach and interven-

tion service offering immediate telephone counselling, at 1-866-550-5205, extension 1. The Mental Health and Addictions Access Line provides 24/7 confidential support, information, and referrals to dozens of services available in Niagara, at 1-866-550-5205, extension 2. In addition, various support services are listed each week in the *Voice* on page 4.