

Editorial Matters

DEPARTMENTS

Photo Gallery
 Photo Portfolios
 Daring designs
 Building Readership
 Archived Chat
 Transcripts
 LeeGroups mail lists
 Principles for quality journalism
 Archived newsletters
 Lee's Job Openings
 Contact Us
 Home

LINKS

Lee newspapers
 Online Storytelling:
 Helpful Resources
 Editor and Publisher
 Readership Institute
 Poynter
 Poynter's Journalism links
 Reporter's desktop

Stories

Tornado ravages Ladysmith; much of downtown in ruins

By **ROBERT GUTSCHE JR.** / *Wisconsin State Journal*



A tight, well-written report from Robert, who shows how easy it is to apply storytelling techniques to breaking news stories. -- DAVID STOEFFLER

LADYSMITH - The clock on the wall stopped at 4:24 p.m. Monday.

Lights flickered and went out.

Anne Hraban, 45, looked up from the cash register at the Holiday Station Store and gas station where she works to see a tornado roll into houses, peeling off roofs and sending her customers and other people running for shelter.

"There was not time to yell anything to anybody," she said.

The tornado was part of a storm that ripped across northern Wisconsin Monday afternoon and evening.

Ladysmith, about 240 miles northwest of Madison and Rusk County's county seat, appeared to be the hardest hit.

About 30 people were treated for broken bones, cuts from flying glass and other injuries. No life-threatening injuries or deaths were reported.

The storm destroyed the town's water tower, damaged churches, wreaked havoc on phone lines and sent hundreds of people to shelters in the nearby community of Bruce and to the Rusk County Memorial Hospital in Ladysmith.

At least 60 homes were damaged or destroyed in and near a section of the downtown that is four blocks wide and 15 blocks long, said Rusk County Sheriff Dean Meyer.

There were about 20 people sleeping on cots or blankets at a Red Cross shelter at about 11:40 p.m. and more were expected, said Nancy Knoll, a Red Cross volunteer.

More than 100 people, she said, had stopped at the shelter for rest or food.

Gov. Scott McCallum declared Ladysmith a disaster area.

After damaging about five homes near Hraban's gas station and sending glass and shingles flying, the tornado lifted up and landed a few blocks away, destroying most of the downtown's businesses and homes, witnesses said.

The Ladysmith Fire Station was heavily damaged as well as a senior citizen housing center, said Police Chief Norm Rozak.

There was little warning that a tornado was on its way, Rozak said. The area had been under a thunderstorm warning for an hour.

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Rozak said he didn't know if tornado sirens sounded. A police officer called for the sirens to go off at about the same time the tornado hit, he said.

Hraban said her business was preparing to give away food and fire up a power generator so that the homeless could stay in the store.

More than a dozen people ran into her building when the tornado hit, she said, as wind gusts opened and closed the store doors, hitting some people as they entered and frightening others huddled against a wall.

"It was one of those things where it seemed like forever but it was just a second," Hraban said.

Monday's storm, however devastating, won't stop the 4,000 people here from rebuilding, said Mario Friedel, principal at Ladysmith Elementary School.

"We'll take one day at a time," he said.

No school buildings were damaged, Friedel said, but classes were canceled because so many people were affected by the storm. It's not known when school will reopen.

John Scrivner, 42, said he was visiting a friend a few blocks from his own home on Lake Street near downtown when he heard the tornado hit.

He said his house was destroyed. "If I would have been home, I would have been killed," he said. "It just about took the town."

Walking the main street afterward, Scrivner said, he saw crying people, much rubble and many damaged buildings. He said he will stay with friends.

The sheriff said reports of three gas leaks at businesses downtown forced the evacuation of about 100 people.

Just south of the downtown, a person was rescued after being trapped in a trailer that was damaged by high winds.

Authorities searched for injured people in homes in the tornado's path. A curfew was in effect from 8 p.m. to sunrise.

A second tornado passed through parts of northeast Wausau at about 6:40 p.m., damaging power lines and knocking down trees. A house there was also partially damaged, said a spokesman for the Marathon Sheriff's Department.

Funnel clouds were reported near Aniwa -- about 7 miles south of Antigo -- around 7:15 p.m. Monday, and at 9 p.m. near Brandon, in Fond du Lac County. In Ladysmith, Rozak said "it's amazing" that there have been no fatalities reported. "There is a lot of damage ... I would have expected we would have lost some life here."

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