The Worcester Tornado

June 9, 1953, was the last hot day of a late spring heatwave. School hadn’t finished for the summer, but Junior League Baseball had already started. It was for kids too old for Little League, and was made up of Greater Lawrence teams. I was walking across the Playstead to watch my brother Bucky play on the Andover team. I was 10; my older brother Bucky was 14.

It was about 6:30 PM. A kid came up to me and said my brother had been beaned, and my parents had taken him to the hospital to be checked. I asked if he seemed ok and they kid said “yuh”, so I wasn’t much worried, but figured I’d head home in case my parents called. It was a short walk, which included a jump across Rogers Brook. As I was meandering toward the brook, another kid came up to me and asked if I’d heard about the tornado that “wrecked” Worcester. He said we were supposed to watch for them. That was pretty exciting, I thought, as I looked toward the northwest where most of Andover’s weather comes from. The clouds were dark.

Meteorology was my first hobby. I knew that thunderstorms and tornadoes came from cumulonimbus clouds and the worst thunderstorms occurred when a sharp cold front pushed out very warm air - like we had. No one was home except our fox terrier Toby, the world’s meanest dog, and our cat. The world’s meanest dog ignored me, so I picked up the cat and turned on the television. The announcer, who was standing in a blank studio, was reading a report. He said that a tornado had gone through Worcester and everyone in Eastern Massachusetts should be on watch for other tornadoes. The announcer hadn’t told me more than the kid had. News in 1953 still traveled slowly and T.V. news was minimal.

The night before, a tornado had hit Flint Michigan, killing 116 people. It was the 9th deadliest tornado of all time in the U.S. Although they didn’t have a scale to rank the violence of tornadoes then, subsequently, the Fujita Scale was created and storms were ranked from F1 to F5. The Flint storm would then receive a rank of F5. The cold front that caused the Flint storm was the one that was coming through New England on June 9th. At 10 A.M. that day, the Boston Weather Bureau anticipated the likelihood of “tornadic conditions” later in the day. However, the Bureau feared that using the word “tornado” would cause widespread panic. Instead of issuing a tornado warning they issued New England’s first-ever, “severe thunderstorm watch.” In retrospect, one wonders how the weather bureaucrats could have arrived at such a silly decision. Imperturbable New Englanders have never demonstrated that they were a panicky group. At 4:25 P.M., people boating on the Quabbin Reservoir were the first to see the tornado that soon would kill 94 and injure 1,300 people. Heading for Worcester, the storm went through the rural towns of Barre and Rutland. It was growing into a giant storm, becoming a mile wide - one of the biggest or the biggest ever seen. What was equally unusual was that it stayed on the ground for 84 minutes. Most tornados touch down and leave little damage. The Great Worcester Tornado traveled 46 miles on the ground and was at maximum power when it punched the city at 5:08 P.M. Worcester was the second largest city in New England, at 200,000 people. It would never be bigger.

Some people had read the evening papers, which contained the first news of the Flint storm. So little was understood about tornadoes that some readers wondered if this was the same tornado that struck Flint the night before. Others later said they believed the Soviets had dropped an atomic bomb. So dramatic was the air pressure change that it was reported that one man’s chest was blown open when his lungs exploded. A two hundred year old tree, four feet in diameter, was pulled up, roots and all, and went spinning into the sky. Winds exceeded 300 m.p.h. A young man, who was the principal of an elementary school, had just sat down to supper with his family. As a Marine, he had fought through much of the vicious Pacific Campaign in World War II. The tornado killed him. Assumption College in Worcester was hit, and
several faculty members died. The Burncoat Hill area was devastated, but the Great Brook Valley neighborhood was leveled, and many houses disappeared. Forty people died there. A municipal bus was picked up, rolled over several times, and thrown against an apartment building. The Brookside Home Farm, a city-owned dairy, was destroyed, killing 6 men and 80 Holstein cows. The storm continued through Worcester and ended in Southborough at 5:45 P.M., precisely the moment the weather bureau finally issued a tornado warning. Smaller tornadoes associated with the cold front caused damage and injuries in Colrain, Mass. A small tornado rolled through Exeter and Rollinsford, N.H. Baseball-size hail was reported in many communities, and airborne debris was blown eastward. The furthest documented item was blown from Holden Mass. to Eastham, on Cape Cod, a distance of 110 miles, one of the greatest such instances ever verified. Around Worcester, the sky was blacked out by debris. The tornado sucked objects as big as couches into the mother cumulonimbus cloud, where updrafts are so powerful that carrying objects as big as furniture comes as no surprise to anyone who studies weather. These clouds are enormous, sometimes reaching 39,000 feet. Many objects were dropped in the suburbs of Boston. At the time, the Worcester Tornado was the most expensive in the nation’s history at $52 million dollars ($385 million, today), and it is the last tornado to have killed more than 90 people. The front page of one Worcester newspaper the next day was simple and dramatic: it was a list of the 94 people who died in the storm.

Back in Andover, I continued to watch the northwestern sky when the phone rang. It was my Dad telling me that my brother was fine. He asked me if I’d heard about the tornado. I said yes. He said they’d be home soon. In Andover that night, the only weather change was the temperature drop; it became nice and cool.

Meteorologists and weather historians couple the tornadoes of June 8th and 9th of 1953 referring to them as the Flint-Worcester Tornadoes, because they came from the same cold front. 1953 would be a year of few but horrific tornadoes. Of the 20 most deadly tornadoes in US history, three occurred in 1953. Worcester is ranked 20th, Flint, Mich. 9th, and Waco, Tex. 10th. The deadliest tornado in U.S. history was the Tri-State Storm (Missouri, Illinois and Indiana) that took 695 lives in 1925. The Fujita scale (F1 through F5) was developed in 1971 by Professor T. Theodore Fujita of the University of Chicago. It measures the damage caused by a tornado. If an horrific tornado happens where little damage is caused, it might be an F1 or even an F0. Only 1% of all tornadoes measure F4 or F5. The width of a tornado is not necessarily a measure of how violent it is, although it certainly affects the range of damage. The Flint tornado was calculated at F5. The Worcester tornado at F4, although that calculation is periodically challenged. One of the reasons that Worcester was not measured at F5 was that the decision panel believed many of the destroyed homes were constructed right after World War II, and were of poor construction.

In any event, the Flint-Worcester tornadoes occurring so close together caused one congressman to call for hearings into whether testing of nuclear weapons was causing such storms. He withdrew his request a few days later. However, a more positive legacy from the storm was that it was the primary reason for the nationwide implementation of a weather radar system designed to better predict such storms. The number of lives saved by this system can’t be estimated.