

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

The Great Tornado of 1896

(©2008 by Mount Clemens Public Library. All rights reserved.)

Mount Clemens residents suffered a great natural disaster on May 25, 1896, when the area was assailed by torrential thunderstorms that spawned a huge tornado. Portions of the city were leveled by the cyclone, which lifted buildings from their foundations and dropped them long distances from their original locations. The Mount Clemens Press of May 28, 1896 reported: "The house of **Edward Moser** on Belleview avenue was moved several feet from its foundation and the roof of the main part torn off. Mr. Moser saw the storm coming and went to the barn to make things secure. Just as he was about to close the door of the building he was snatched up by the wind and hurled several hundred feet through the air, landing near the **Frederick Breitmeyer** place. His arm was dislocated and he suffered bodily injuries. The barn was picked up and carried several hundred feet east of its foundation."



*Residents clear tornado damage near the old water works after the May 1896 storm
(photo donated by Henk Photography)*

At the **Charbeneau** settlement, five houses and four barns were wiped out, and an immense timber from one of the barns was hurled into the residence of **Captain Charbeneau**. Fortunately, the inhabitants of the homes escaped serious injury.

One resident, **Mrs. Dominicus Pohl**, had to be dug out from the ruins of her house which had been crushed by the storm's fury, and died of her injuries four days later.

The **Mount Clemens Sanitarium** (eventually to be renamed the **Colonial Hotel**) was under construction on Gratiot Avenue at the time. The derrick had just been completed, but the tornadic winds leveled it, causing the contractor a loss of several hundred dollars and a costly setback in construction. Several of the center walls of the buildings were also blown down.

While Mount Clemens was fortunate to escape without great loss of life, the damage to homes, trees and property was enormous. Numerous buildings had been reduced to kindling. Mayor **A.T. Donaldson** called a public meeting to raise funds for the care of the victims. The town's theatrical community rose to the challenge with a benefit performance at **Nelson's Opera House**.

In an odd footnote, the storm's devastation briefly became a tourist attraction. The Rapid Railway put on extra cars and offered a 35-cent excursion to view the ruins. The *Monitor* reported that the Grand Trunk Railroad brought 24 cars packed with gawkers through Mount Clemens on the Sunday after the cyclone struck.

For more information on the tornado of 1896, we recommend:

- Racine, Edgar D. "Down Memory Lane," *Macomb Daily*, November 29, 1965.
- *The Michigan Cyclone of 1896*. Oxford, Mich. : Northeast Oakland Historical Society, c2001.
- "It's All in the Day," *Mount Clemens Monitor-Leader*, June 24, 1953.
- Waterbury, Rodney A. "Way Back When in Mount Clemens," *Mount Clemens Monitor-Leader*, October 31, 1951.
- "Our Sunday Company," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, June 5, 1896, p.1.
- "The Story of the Storm," *Mount Clemens Monitor*, May 29, 1896, p.1.