

Primary Source: The 1896 East St. Louis Tornado

from The Illinois State Journal - Friday, May 29 1896

On the afternoon of May 27, 1896, a Category 4 tornado hit St. Louis, Missouri and East St. Louis, Illinois. It is the third deadliest tornado in U.S. history, and one of the rare ones to hit a large urban area. Below is a report from The Illinois State Journal from May 29, 1896.

DEATH AND RUIN IN EAST ST. LOUIS.

Tornado.

Roundhouses, Hotels and Business Blocks Levelled To the Ground by the

Freight Trains Torn from the Tracks and
Hurled Bodily Into the River.

*Scores of Bodies Have Been Recovered From the
Ruins and the Dead Will Number
Fully Two Hundred.*

Almost the Entire Northern Portion of the City Destroyed
By the Fury of the Cyclone.

Steamers Swept From Their Moorings at the Docks, Capsized and Sent
To the Bottom of the River—Water Works Destroyed
And the Water Supply Cut Off.

East St. Louis, Ill., May 28.— East St. Louis is in ruins. The cyclone which swept down upon the city last night obliterated block after block of business houses and dwellings and left behind it a trail of death. Scores of human beings were buried beneath the walls of flattened buildings or crushed to death in the streets by the flying debris. The improvised morgues and hospitals are fairly choked with dead, some crushed and battered out of all semblance to human shape, and through them slow a steady stream of hysterical women and grim faced men looking for their missing ones.

It is impossible to make an accurate estimate of the killed. At the various morgues and at St. Mary's hospital there are fifty-six. Six are in the Big Four freight house ruins and how many more there are

scattered about the city ion private houses is impossible to tell, but a conservative estimate would place the total number at at least 150.

The scene is simply appalling. From the riverbank to the National stock yards, a distance of over a mile, scarcely a building is standing. The greatest slaughter was done on the "Island", so called. Here were located the Vandalia freight house and general offices. , the riverboats warehouses and the humble abodes of workingmen. Nothing is left standing, the houses and depot being literally swept away by the fury of the storm. In the Vandalia general office alone there were 20 to 25 killed, the bodies of some of whom are still buried beneath the broken rafters and bricks.

The monetary loss can not be estimated, but it will run into the millions.

SCENES OF DEVASTATION.

Many Buildings Completely Demolished **by** **The Terrible Tornado**

St. Louis, May 28.—The estimated death list at East St. Louis is two hundred and the injured will reach reach about 250. The storm struck at the big elevators, 300 yards below the Eads bridge, followed the river to the Eads bridge, started diagonally towards the relay depot and continued on to Collinsville avenue, then lifted and dropped again at the National stock yards. Nothing whatever remains of Broadway from the river to the viaduct, and on the east side, for a width of probably 600 yards, there is absolutely no semblance of a house, freight shed or cars left standing.

Cars in the yards were thrown on their sides, ends, and on top of each other into the ponds abounding on the island, and completely wrecked. The Big Four, Vandalia and Louisville & Nashville freight sheds are razed to the ground, not so much as a stick remaining in an upright position. The office force together with the freight handlers at the latter shed, sought refuge in boxcars to the north of the platform on the approach of the storm, and owe their lives to that fact. No one was hurt their beyond a few slight bruises.

At the Vandalia the loss of life and the number injured is very great. Nothing remains of the relay depot to mark where it stood. The National hotel and the National stock yards are wrecked, the whole front being torn out, the roof off and every window on all sides being blown in. The Nelson Morris Packing company plant is minus its two upper floors and its stables are leveled to the ground.

The river front for a thousand yards is one great mass of wreckage,; steamboats, ferry boats, transfers and tugs are piled up in an indiscriminate heap, some partially submerged, others high and dry on the shore. The heavy stone masonry on the east end of the Eads bridge was cut off clean with the railroad tracks, while the approaches are twisted and wrecked, trains passing over very slowly and carefully.

Every undertaking establishment in the place is an improvised morgue, and the hospitals are full of injured. At St. Mary's there were probably 60 patients, with some seriously hurt.

At the East St. Louis police station nothing could be learned beyond what could be seen at the morgues,

hospitals and out on the streets. It will be several days before the exact situation is known. The search for the dead is still going on, but it is slow work. There is as yet too much confusion to proceed systematically.

Questions

1. What does *obliterated* mean here: "The cyclone which swept down upon the city last night obliterated block after block of business houses and dwellings"?
2. According to the article, what was the latest projected number of deaths in East St. Louis?
3. How did one group of office workers and freight handlers escape with only bruises?
4. If \$1 in 1896 is equal to \$27.57 today, how much would a million dollars in property value damage be equivalent to today?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. obliterated
2. scores
3. conservative
4. appalling
5. humble
6. semblance
7. improvised
8. systematically

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) “The cyclone which swept down upon the city last night **obliterated** block after block of business houses...”

- a. revived b. rained on c. wiped out d. shocked

2) “**Scores** of human beings were buried beneath the walls of flattened buildings or crushed to death in the streets by the flying debris.”

- a. small groups b. large numbers c. a handful d. a small family

3) “...but a **conservative** estimate would place the total number at least 150.”

- a. aggressive b. safe c. republican d. realistic

4) “The scene is simply **appalling**.”

- a. beautiful b. dark c. bright d. shocking

5) “...the riverboats warehouses and the **humble** abodes of workingmen.”

- a. simple b. cute c. large d. flashy

6) “...there is absolutely no **semblance** of a house, freight shed or cars left standing.”

- a. remains b. buildings c. likeness d. original structure

7) “...Every undertaking establishment in the place is an **improvised** morgue...”

- a. theatrical b. new c. imaginary d. makeshift

8) “There is as yet too much confusion to proceed **systematically**.”

- a. haphazardly b. consistently c. randomly d. cautiously