

39 Left Dead as Tornadoes Shatter Towns

By JODI WILGOREN

PIERCE CITY, Mo., May 5 — The relentless barrage of some 80 tornadoes that tore through the nation's belly on Sunday did not simply kill 39 people, smash hundreds of buildings, and knock out water and power for thousands in eight states.

It snatched a wood-frame house with a family of four inside off its foundation in Cherokee County, Kan., and dumped it in a pasture a quarter-mile away, leaving Julie Green, 50, dead in the rubble. It toppled an emergency tower in Jackson, Tenn., and damaged the concrete fountain there memorializing the seven victims of a 1999 twister. It ripped the roof off Wilson's Creek Baptist Church near Battlefield, Mo., as 35 parishioners huddled in the basement praying and singing, "I've got peace like a river."

Here in Pierce City, a town of 1,385 on the brink of revival, the storm marched through the historic main street like a horrific parade, leaving the once-picturesque downtown looking like one big demolition site.

"Devastation" was the first word on many lips as public officials declared states of emergency after what experts said were the worst tornadoes in decades.

"It's a war zone, it's a big fat war zone," said Michelle Bacarisse, 42, as she and her mother, Norma, waited for word that it was safe to rescue their inventory of handmade quilts and other crafts from the Thistle, a store they opened here last fall. "It's like a bombing of Europe."

Amanda Fager-Maghe, 16, picked up the pieces of her grandmother's life from a mound of debris in Franklin, Kan., where years-old anniversary cards were tangled with a sink pipe and length of lace. Josephine Fager's home had been tossed across the street. Her body had been found down the block.

"You see tornadoes on TV and you see them in movies," Amanda said, "but you don't realize what they can do."

Randall Moody, who is the pastor of Wilson's Creek and Battlefield's emergency director, lamented the loss of his 1992 Chevrolet Lumina, which had logged more than 200,000 miles of church outings and errands, as well as the new 15,000-square-foot auditorium the church completed in October.

"You could hear everything come apart," Mr. Moody recalled of the storm. "The entire basement was shaking."

The storms pounded the country's midsection for hours, leaving Louisville, Ky., without lights for the Monday morning rush, flooding parts of Iowa, where 2.83 inches of rain fell in 24 hours, and dropping baseball-size hail in parts of Nebraska and South Dakota, the

Federal Emergency Management Agency said. State officials said the tornadoes took 18 lives in Missouri, 14 in Tennessee and 7 in Kansas; no one died in Arkansas, though a woman from Antioch, 50 miles north of Little Rock, was in critical condition after emergency surgery for a head injury.

Eleven of Tennessee's deaths were in Madison County, which includes Jackson, a city of 60,000 that is the largest between Memphis and Nashville. The rest of the deaths were sprinkled across three counties in Kansas and eight in Missouri.

One man, Dale Taunton, died in the vast destruction here as he stood outside the National Guard Armory, an old stone building where about 40 people sought shelter only to be pummeled by debris as the adjacent gymnasium crumbled. ...