

# Remembering the Cyclone of 1919



*Fergus Falls, Minn. After The Cyclone June 22, 1919. Union Ave. & West*

SECTION B | WEEKEND EDITION, JUNE 22, 2019

## Overcoming my fear of storms

I grew up in Houston, Texas, which lies near the southern tip of Tornado Alley. The state of Texas has the highest average number of tornadoes per year by far at 140-- Kansas is second with 80. When I was 6 years old, Texas was hit by its 10th deadliest tornado, the 1997 Jarrell tornado which killed 27 people. I'm not sure if these are the exact reasons why, but until about the third grade I was absolutely terrified of thunderstorms. I would be in the clutches of a full-blown panic attack throughout the duration of the storm until it passed. The mere mention of a tornado during one of these storms would send me over the edge into absolute inconsolability.



**JOHANNA ARMSTRONG**  
Cyborg Serials

It took a Girl Scout camping trip to finally cure me of my phobia. We went camping at a new ground that our troop hadn't been to before. Each troop was assigned an area, and there were small cabins that accommodated four cots, along with a central picnic shelter. Our first day there we had to spend the morning clearing hornets' nests and black widows from the cabins. At night, if you got up from your sleeping bag, cockroaches and other insects would scurry across your pillow. It really was a nightmare of a place, now that I think about it, even though the days were full of fun recreational activities.

One of the nights we spent there, a huge thunderstorm descended upon us. The rain was torrential, the lightning was blinding and the thunder was deafening. And there we were, a group of 8-year-olds with a couple of moms huddling inside tiny cabins that were full of some of the nastiest creatures in the Texan woods.

Of course, I wasn't the only child with a fear of thunderstorms. I know at least one of my troop-mates in another cabin wet the bed out of fear of having to go out and walk to the restroom (the adults were in their own cabin, so us kids were fending for ourselves). However, one girl in my cabin got extremely sick. I don't remember the details, but I know and have experienced since then, that no matter the circumstances if it seems that someone needs my help, a total feeling of calm and purpose comes over me.

Despite the tempest outside, I walked to the parents' cabin and told them what was wrong with my friend. One of the troop leaders came out with me and we stood under the picnic shelter. She made the call to the camp center, and they said they'd send someone out to walk us to the nurse's area since it was so dark and raining so heavily. While we waited, the troop leader and I stood as sentinels under the picnic shelter light. I probably told her that I was very afraid of thunder, and she told me all the kinds of things people speculate is happening during storms: it's angels bowling, giants stomping, etc. It was fun, and distracting, to make up stories about what was happening in the sky.

When someone from the camp came to get us, I walked with my friend and troop leader to the nurse's area, watching frogs hop around in the rays of our flashlights, their skin as shimmery as the mud we were trudging through.

The rain was gone by the morning, and, with it, my phobia of storms. We all got the patch for camping in severe weather, but I feel like I earned something more: the knowledge that, no matter how bad or scary things get, if I have a purpose I'm committed to, like helping someone, then I can get through it as if there was no problem at all.



OTTER TAIL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**LONE SURVIVOR:** The Red River Milling Co. on the corner of Union Avenue North and Stanton Avenue stands alone among the destruction of the 1919 cyclone which killed 57 people and injured hundreds.

## MEMORIES OF STORM

*Centenarians remember where they were on June 22, 1919*

By Johanna Armstrong  
The Daily Journal

In June of 1919, Harriet Meyer turned 7 years old. Her family lived on a farm in Fergus Falls and, during the school year, she'd walk 3 miles to school every day, except in the winter when she'd ski to school instead. Her dad owned the first car in Fergus Falls, a white Buick with no doors installed and no lights.

At the same time, living on a dairy farm just southwest of Barnesville, was 5-year-old Arliss Dow. Later in the month, on the 25th, she would be turning 6. On school days, she'd take a one-horse buggy to class and was home-schooled in the winter. Although her family did not live near Fergus Falls, they would visit on occasion to buy things they couldn't get in Barnesville, like nice dresses and other luxuries.

Although neither girl saw the tornado that ripped through town on June 22, 1919, both of their families came to Fergus Falls not long after to search for friends or help with rebuilding. The two girls bore witness to the unforgettable devastation left behind by Minnesota's second deadliest cyclone, which killed 57 people, injuring 200 and leveling two-thirds of the town.

### Harriet Meyer, Age 7

Meyer had just turned 7 on June 10 and on Sunday, June 22, she was sitting with her family in an apple orchard on their farm. They had company over, and Meyer recalls, "We were sitting down in the apple orchard and my aunt looked up and she said, 'I think I'm going to get up and see if I can find a four-leaf clover. I need luck I think, the sky looks really bad.'" Their guests lived up near Friberg Avenue, and the foreboding clouds prompted them to leave early.

Although Meyer's farm got nothing from the storm except wind, her father was worried about whether or not their guests had made it home safely. They went into town after the storm had passed to check on them.

"We got as far as Channing Street," Meyers says, "and then there were cops all over, and they said, 'You can't go any farther! You



JOHANNA ARMSTRONG | DAILY JOURNAL

**TOWN'S MEMORIES:** Arliss Dow (left), 106, and Harriet Meyer, 107, were in the area when the cyclone touched down and both came to Fergus Falls the day after to help with rebuilding and cleanup.

can't go any farther!' And my dad said, 'Well, we got to, our company just left and we're wondering if they got home.' And the cops said, 'It's your own problem if you go because there's a lot of wires down.' And I was barefoot!" Regardless of the danger, Meyer and her family continued on into town.

At one point, the road was blocked by an organ that had been smashed into the street, the keys all strewn about on the ground. Meyer's father got out of their car and cleaned it up enough to allow cars to pass. Onwards they went, and Meyer caught sight of a home she recognized. "I think it was Eddie Fossen's mother lived in that house," she recalls, "she was killed, the ambulance was there."

Although police tried once again to stop them from continuing their trek, the family persisted. "We went and got to Lake Alice," she says, "and that was something else."

"The lake was just full, there was a lady there and she was hanging onto a mattress and she was hollering, 'Help me! Help me! I can't get out!' and, oh gosh, my dad said, 'We can't swim out there!' But then somebody came."

Lake Alice was covered in beds and springs, she said. There were many people in the lake, but the shouting woman really stuck with her: "There were none others like that woman." Her mother took to her to a store her uncle owned on Mill Street and they sat on a clock that had been tipped onto the floor. It was there, having just come in from witnessing the greatest devastation she would likely ever see, that Meyer learned what brown sugar was.

Her uncle had glass jars full of sugar and



OTTER TAIL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**LAKE ALICE:** The southwest shore on the south end of Lake Alice. In the foreground is a folded mattress; both Meyer and Dow remember seeing many mattresses strewn around town.

salt, and one was full of a brown substance: "What's that brown stuff in there?" she asked her mom. "That's brown sugar," her mom replied. "Why is it brown?" Meyer asked, the way only a 7-year-old could under those circumstances.

Then there was a commotion outside, there were people without much clothes on trying to find something they could wear to cover themselves. Meyer's cousin began to cut holes in burlap sacks to serve as clothes for people who needed it.

In the end, her family was able to locate the guests that had departed from their home. "They all made it except for, I think, Johnny. He got caught in between," she said. He was sick for a while, but eventually recovered; they were lucky, Meyer admits.

"I've been in a lot of twisters, but nothing that bad," she says. "Lake Alice, that was the worst. Full of people hollering and wanting help," she says, and adds, with a chuckle, "but I never stepped on any wires."



# Cyclone Days events

For the Journal

**Cyclone Ride**  
Saturday, June 22, 9 a.m.  
Meet at Fergus Falls City Hall, 112 W Washington Ave., Fergus Falls.  
Visit 8 locations impacted by the Great Fergus Falls Cyclone of 1919 during this 1 hour-long bicycle tour. Beginning at City Hall and concluding at the point of the most severe devastation. The first 30 cyclists will receive a map of the tornado trail and a Cyclone 1919! souvenir spoke card. No admission.

**Lake Alice Cyclone Tour**  
Saturday, June 22, 11 a.m.  
Meet at St. James Episcopal Church, 321 S Lakeside Dr., Fergus Falls.  
The Lake Alice area was one of the hardest hit areas. Dozens of homes were flattened, leaving the lake filled with debris. In addition to property loss, this tour will explore harrowing stories of heroism, tragedy and narrow escapes. Admission \$6.

**“Tornado!”**  
Saturday, June 22, 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.  
Open house reception at Kaddatz Galleries, 111 W Lincoln Ave, Fergus Falls.

**Commemorative service**  
Saturday, June 22, 4:15 p.m.  
St. James Episcopal Church, 321 S. Lakeside Dr., Fergus Falls.  
Join us at St. James Episcopal Church for a commemorative ceremony dedicated to the victims and survivors of the 1919 Cyclone. At 4:45 church bells will toll around town to recognize the time that the storm began and those that died in the storm or of injuries sustained in the storm. No admission.

100th Anniversary Community Band Concert  
Saturday, June 22, 7 p.m.  
Kennedy Secondary School Auditorium, 601 Randolph Ave., Fergus Falls.  
This concert will include three locally funded commissions: “Tornado of 1919” by Russ Peterson, “Arrows” by Sam Hazo and “Echoes” by Erika Svanoe. Contact Fergus Falls Band Program, c/o Scott Kummrow at Kennedy Secondary School for more information.

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**AERIAL VIEW:** The location of Fergus Manufacturing Co., looking down at Washington Avenue and Union Avenue, Court Street and Junius Avenue.

## CYCLONE: “...he just wanted to volunteer to help people.”

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### Arliiss Dow, Age 5

In June of 1919, Dow was living on a dairy farm near Barnesville looking forward to her sixth birthday coming up on the 25. They had just moved there earlier that year from Forest City, Iowa, where, two years earlier, they had experienced a tornado. When they heard about the cyclone in Fergus Falls, her father immediately wanted to go help. “My dad wanted to help, to do as much as he could because he’d had the same thing go through Iowa two years before, so he kind of knew exactly what to do,” Dow says.

Dow’s father and two brothers were carpenters, and they got in the car and drove up to Fergus Falls to see what they could do. “Coming to Fergus, we met an officer of some kind, because there were so many cars and people walking, and he was turning them all away, but when we got up there my dad told him what we wanted to do, he wanted to volunteer, so they showed him right where to go to sign up,” she said. “He didn’t want pay, he just wanted to volunteer to help the people.”

Her father packed up the car with blankets and pillows so they’d be able to sleep in the car, and went straight back up to Fergus Falls to find where he was most needed. “First we were on the west side of the lake,” Dow says, “there was this nice piano sitting out there, just like you set it out there in the water. A ways away, there was a part of a church in the lake, and I always wondered if that piano was from that church.”

The lake was full, she remembers, “There was just stuff all over, I remember, cloth hanging up on things, up in the trees, the trees that were left. There weren’t many left.” Dow also recalls two large houses on each side of Lake Alice: “Two beautiful, big houses there, and they had so much damage it was just sickening to see,” she says, wondering out loud if and how the people inside survived.

The scene at Alice Lake was only the beginning for her. She remembers seeing a kitchen chair in a tree, and, as they drove along in the car, she saw a dresser drawer on the side



**GRAND HOTEL:** Cavour Avenue can be seen in the back, this is the location of the Grand Hotel where 35 lives were lost.

of the road with clothes still inside. “How that could have happened, I don’t know,” she said. “But it was just like yesterday to me.”

“Uptown they had a lot of damage too, but they didn’t let us go uptown because right after, you know, there were only certain places we could go,” she said. Her father and brothers did as much as they could to help, “Putting in windows, boarding up windows, just everything that people wanted them to do.”

At night, her brothers were tempted to sleep on the mattresses that were strewn about town. “They were driving around and they’d see a nice bed sitting outside, just like it had been set there, and the boys wanted to sleep on that,” she said. So they tried it, “but in the night there’s so many little flashlights coming, I suppose that was people pilfering, and so then they didn’t stay out there, they got scared and slept in the car.”

Looking at Fergus Falls today, she says the town’s revival took a long time. “I think it’s really resolved, there’s a lot of nice trees now,” Dow says, “which was just nothing, you know, after the tornado.”

Today, Meyer is 107 years old and Dow is about to turn 106. They live in an assisted living facility in Fergus Falls, but are as talkative and engaging as anyone. Although the city is, today, 100 years removed from the cyclone,



**LAW AND ORDER:** The county jail (above) and courthouse (below) were among the buildings destroyed. Forty-four city blocks were leveled, including 159 homes and 250 other buildings.



Meyer and Dow serve as living memory of the disaster, while photos of the event help put their words into context. Lake Alice really was full, as Meyer said: It was completely covered in wood from the surrounding trees and homes so that it was difficult to tell where the ground ended and the lake began.

Just as Meyer and Dow

changed as people on that day, perhaps imperceptibly, so too did the town. The women and their families soldiered on, Meyer became a schoolteacher and Dow continued farming, and the town also soldiered on. We rebuilt, we replanted and continued, remembering those who did not make it past that day in 1919.

## Remembering those lost in the cyclone of 1919



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