

'It looks like a

Mayor Mike

Blizzard conditions keep university closed

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homes in Omaha were without power for much of Sunday. In Lincoln, power outages were scattered from block to block. While one neighbor had power, another did not.

Lincoln Electrical Systems officials said Sunday it would be one or two days before Lincoln residents would see their heat and lights turned back on.

At UNL, falling trees knocked out electricity on East Campus for more than six hours early Sunday. The campus generator was being repaired and could not be used. Power stayed out for 1½ hours on City Campus before LES reinstated service.

On the roads, Nebraska State Patrol officials estimated that 200 to 500 motorists — including the Nebraska Wesleyan Volleyball team — were stranded between Omaha and Lincoln along Interstate 80. They could not estimate how many were stranded west of Lincoln.

However, the state patrol had no reports of weather-related traffic fatalities.

The Nebraska Department of Roads opened I-80 late Sunday, but Lincoln police closed northbound I-180 Sunday night, describing it as a sheet of ice after temperatures plunged.

Streets in Lincoln's core were jammed with wet snow and scores of fallen trees and branches, making travel through neighborhoods almost impossible for much of Sunday.

"The neighborhoods are just decimated," Mayor Mike Johanns said. "It looks like a war zone out there in some of our neighborhoods."

Greg Erixson, director of public

"I thought something other than a blizzard went through. This is like a tornado or hurricane. I don't even know where to start with these limbs."

DARRELL DUBRY
Lincoln resident

works, said after road crews plowed all the major streets, they were heading to the neighborhoods. He said, however, the plows would be forced to plow around some of the bigger fallen limbs until they could be removed.

Officials estimate the unusually wet, heavy snow caused hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage to trees and other landscaping at UNL.

Most of campus' trees — with branches bowed to the ground beneath a thick blanket of white — will not return to their original, upright positions. Many of their branches will snap before the snow melts, he said.

The damage could take several years to repair, said Jeff Culbertson, East Campus landscape manager.

"It looks pretty bad," Culbertson said. "So many people have contributed so much time to designing this. In one night, (the snow) just pulls it all down."

"It's very sad."

After a tour of the city, Robak said the extent of the tree damage was "amazing."

"The city looks like a tornado hit it," she said.

Trees weren't the only troubles

throughout the city. Power outages in Ashland stopped water pumps to Lincoln. Johanns took to the airwaves Sunday to ask people in the Belmont and Air Park neighborhoods not to shower or flush to conserve water.

Sunday afternoon, however, the power was back on and water was restored to all Lincoln areas.

The loss of power also made for cold nights for many Lincoln residents.

Dustin Claus, a senior philosophy and classics major, huddled in the basement of his house at 3301 N. Ninth St. with his three roommates to keep warm during the night.

Claus said his neighborhood lost power shortly before 2 a.m. Sunday, and was not restored until late Sunday night. To escape the cold seeping into his house, Claus and his roommates abandoned the house for the day and stayed at a friend's apartment.

"The thing is, our heater's gas, but the fan that blows the air is electric," he said.

Though a giant tree yanked a thick power line across E Street, Marinelle Burling's house still had power as she and her son shoveled snow off the front steps at 1936 E St.

Ocean current linked to Lincoln storm

BY ERIN GIBSON
Senior Reporter

With weekend snowfall totals more than doubling past records, some meteorologists blame El Niño, a warming period in the Pacific Ocean, for the storm.

Others disagree whether the current, which scientists still struggle to understand, can be blamed for the millions of dollars in damage to the city. But none deny a strong El Niño has persisted in the Pacific since July, and unusual weather in the United States has followed the current's appearance.

Since July, the U.S. Climate Prediction Center has noted unusually wet and cool weather conditions over the northern Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains. The pattern is typical during El Niño seasons, the report states, along with abnormal patterns of temperature and precipitation worldwide.

The last El Niño season occurred in 1991 — the last year a significant snowstorm occurred in Lincoln in October.

According to the National Weather Service, nearly 5 inches of snow fell on Halloween night that year, accompanied by 40 to 50 mph wind gusts that

greatly reduced visibility.

More than a foot of snow fell between 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday morning in Lincoln.

But forecasters predicted fewer than 5 inches in the Lincoln area, said Ken Hubbard, director UNL's High Plains Climate Center. Hubbard points his finger at El Niño.

"With El Niño ... we've got a lot of energy available" in the atmosphere, Hubbard said. "And it seems to have manifested itself in a pretty heavy snowstorm."

According to the Climate Prediction Center, El Niño originates in the western tropical Pacific, when easterly trade winds relax and a westerly wind develops.

In normal conditions, trade winds blow in the opposite direction, piling up warm surface water in the west Pacific about one-half meter higher than in the east.

As a result, normal ocean temperatures are 8 degrees Celsius higher on the Pacific's western edge than off the South American coast. There, cold water from deeper levels rises and cools the surface.

Plentiful rains fall over the warm, western coastline and South

America's western edge remains dry.

But during El Niño, the changing wind direction stacks warm water against the east Pacific, causing heavy rains along its South and North American coastlines. This occasional warming trend was observed as early as the 1600s off the coast of Peru.

Hubbard said El Niño contributed to Lincoln's storm, but many of its effects are more subtle.

It may result in a warmer, wetter winter, but El Niño hasn't brought a slew of record-setting, destructive winter storms, he said.

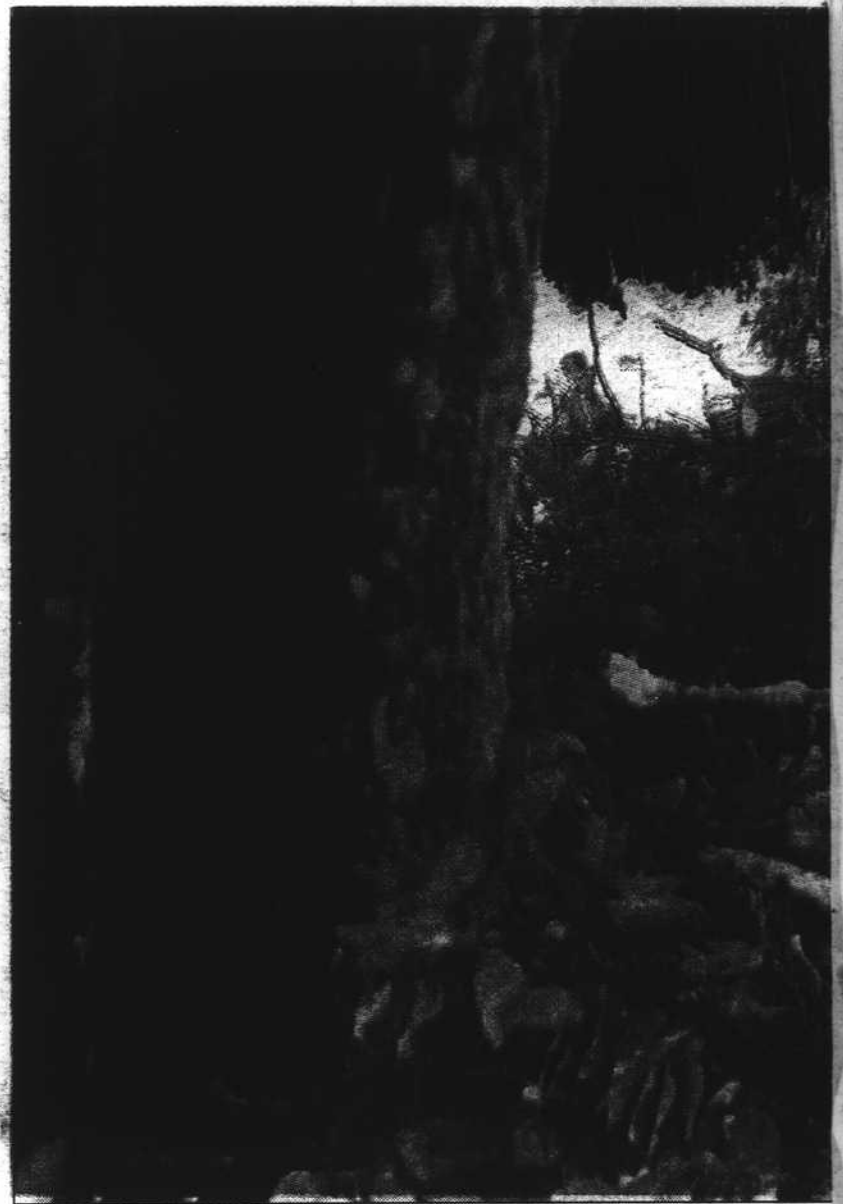
Cathy Zapotocny, a National Weather Service meteorologist, agreed El Niño results in weather changes, including increased precipitation in the Great Plains.

But she refuses to blame El Niño for the storm.

"You get such a variety of weather, to say one event is caused by El Niño, I wouldn't feel comfortable saying that," Zapotocny said.

Both Zapotocny and Hubbard agree that heavier than usual precipitation has been predicted.

But El Niño likely will pile snow more thickly on Nebraska this year, they said.



"I don't think we expected this," she said. "They predicted it, but we didn't believe it."

Burling admitted she wasn't a religious person, but this act of God has made her believe.

"This is out of our hands," she said.

Kevin Bergstrom, along with his four roommates at 1804 F St., could only watch as a big tree branch hit and dented a car about 1 a.m. Sunday. Trees were cracking and falling every few minutes, he said.

Residents digging their cars and homes out of the snow Sunday all echoed each other: tornado, war zone, disaster.

"I thought something other than a blizzard went through," said Darrell Dubry, whose chain saw was making firewood out of a giant tree branch that had fallen on his neighbor's Toyota Camry.

"This is like a tornado or hurricane," he said, surveying the damage down B Street. "I don't even know where to start with these limbs."

Neither did Paul Bryngelson.

A tree on the south side of his house at 1407 N. 21st St. fell onto his roof and ripped off an aluminum gutter and chunks of roofing. Another brushed his garage as it came down, landing right where he normally parks his truck.

"I've been through tornadoes and I've never seen trees downed like this," the senior biology major said.

After midnight Saturday, Bryngelson came home from work and heard the continuous sound of branches snapping, he said.

"It was like gunshots. Pop. Pop. Pop," he said quickly. "It was like Beirut or Bosnia or something."

Without electricity, Bryngelson said, he didn't know what he would do or how he would keep warm. He and his wife used their gas stove to cook a breakfast and keep their home a little warm, he said. Maybe they would



play Monopoly until power was restored, he said.

"I really don't feel like studying by flashlight."

As Lisa Knott brushed snow off her car in front of her apartment at 21st and Dudley streets, she explained how she wasn't even supposed to be here Sunday. The senior political science major at UNL was supposed to spend Sunday with her family in Manilla, Iowa, for her grandmother's 80th birthday party.

"I guess Granny will have to have her party another day," Knott said.

And Knott's situation Sunday was far from a party. Her electricity was out. Her heat was out. She had to put in her contact lenses by candlelight.

She also worried about her family. Her parents drove as far as Atlantic,

Photos by Ryan Soderlin / DN