

A Step Back in Time

By Bobbie Sue Shelton-Lonas

April 3, 1974 - PRESIDENT DECLARES STATE DISASTER AREA -

President Nixon declared the states, of Alabama, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio and Tennessee to be national disaster areas today because of devastating tornadoes that swept through those areas.

Tornadoes rampaged across the eastern half of Tennessee from Nashville to Cleveland Wednesday afternoon and early Thursday morning, killing at least 54 persons, injuring hundreds and doing millions of dollars in damage. Tennessee fatalities reported included, Pickett County, 6 deaths, Fentress County 9, Cannon County 2, Overton County 3, Lincoln County 8, Franklin County including Estill Springs 7, Knox County 2, DeKalb County 3, Nashville 1,

Cookeville 10, Cleveland 1 and Etowah 2

The tornadoes struck between 3 p.m. Wednesday and 2 a.m. on Thursday morning. Forecasters at the National Weather Service in Nashville agreed it was the worst single day of tornado destruction in the history of Tennessee. Most of the business section of Etowah, a city of 3800 population, was destroyed when twisters hit late in the afternoon. Earlier twisters also were reported in Nashville and in Bradley, Bedford, Cannon, Trousdale, Wilson, Blount, Hamilton, Robertson, Lawrence, Monroe and Polk counties. "We have reports on 30 touch downs," stated Ray Burgess of the national weather service in Nashville. Davidson County has had only nine in the past 23 years. Shelby County has had only 25 in the last 23 years. He



The Fultons at Rover house blew away in a tornado in April 1974 35 years ago.

TORNADOS – 35 Years Ago

said that from a nationwide standpoint, the storm system itself was the worst since the 1965 Palm Sunday tornadoes.

State-By-State Tornado Death Toll for Wednesday, April 3, 1974

- Kentucky 77 dead at least 280 injured,
- Indiana 63 dead, at least 1,000 injured.
- Alabama 69 dead at least 350 injured.
- Tennessee 54 dead, hundreds injured.
- Ohio 35 dead, more than 500 injured.
- Georgia, 15 dead more than 60 injured.
- North Carolina 4 dead.
- Michigan 3 dead.
- Illinois 2 dead, 22 injured.
- West Virginia 1 dead.

Ironically, the National Earthquake Information Service also said a moderate earthquake was felt in northern Middle and West Tennessee at 4:05 p.m. Wednesday. It was felt from Chicago to Nashville and from St. Louis to Columbus .

The tornado that ripped through Murfreesboro recently brought back memories of earlier devastating twisters, especially to the Fulton Family, whose family members survived a destructive tornado.

It was a miracle that Bedford County Tennessee didn't have two more deaths added to the large number killed on that stormy Wednesday in 1974. Mrs. Billy "Willene" Fulton and son Tommy, of

the Rover Community, escaped with cuts and bruises as their rural brick home was totally destroyed.

The storms, with really bad lightening, thunder, rain and hail as large as golf balls, had been hitting the area that afternoon. Willene and Tommy were the only family members home, on Cedar Grove Road, at 6:20 p.m. that evening.

Willene stated, she did not see the tornado coming, but heard a loud roar as it



approached. They heard a car passing their house. Willene told Tommy if the noise wasn't the car, then it was a tornado. The car passed their house and they still heard the roar. As she and Tommy fell to the floor, the kitchen window blew out. "All the stuff was blowing and I thought we were gone. Big pieces of brick and insulation were flying inside the house. It was all over in a matter of seconds", Willene explained. She had grabbed Tommy and held him down while the tornado leveled their home and blew debris for several hundred yards. Virtually all was lost but their lives and the family pictures, that remained in tact in the cedar chest, Willene's husband, Billy, had made for her after they married. The tornado ripped through, destroying the family's barn

an instant before hitting their home.

Willene was trapped under a piano, as it fell on her ankle. The family's automobile was lifted from the driveway and dropped, in the living room area, near the center of the house, knocking over the piano. Roofing shingles were found under the car, as if it had been lifted higher than the roof before falling. Tommy required 13 stitches in a laceration he received on his head while Willene received only bruises and minor cuts in the narrow escape. It was truly a miracle that they lived through it. The Fultons later re-built their home on the same location.

Severe property damage was inflicted throughout the northwest quadrant of the county as several mobile homes were destroyed or overturned, trees uprooted and broken off, houses lifted off foundations and lightning and rain swept through the area.

It is believed that there were two tornados that touched down in Bedford County. The first tornado made its path down the Cedar Grove Road and across to Rover and demolished at least one house trailer, set the Cedar Grove Church off its foundation, demolished the Fulton home and barn, removed the siding from an adjoining farm house and removed the Nat Puckett house, located on highway 41 A, from its foundation and set it back about one foot.

Mrs. Puckett and her husband went to the basement of their home when they saw the tornado coming, and were not injured, as the high winds destroyed all of their outbuildings and killed one calf. Windows and doors in the house were blown completely out and Mrs. Puckett reported she looked to the rear of their home, toward a pond, to see the tornado drawing water up like a water fountain.

Oddly enough, some of Billy Fulton's cancelled checks were found at the Puckett Home some three miles away.

High winds or a tornado were also reported later that night about 11 p.m. It caused heavy damage to some houses in other

areas of Bedford County, especially the Unionville and Pleasant Grove areas. At least three house trailers in the Hickory Hill Community on Unionville Highway were overturned by the late night winds and a house under construction had one end heavily damaged. Reports of damaging hail, measuring two inches in diameter, were received from different areas of the county.

Don Lee area manager for Duck River Electric Membership Corp.

reported most of the electrical service interruptions were concentrated in the western section of the county and repair crews worked all night repairing the downed lines and damaged poles. At least 10 poles were blown down in the Unionville and Rover areas. Some of the poles, he said, were picked out of the ground or twisted off and blown several feet away.

Due to the devastating tornado in Murfreesboro on Friday, the Fultons relived their frightening experience of 1974 through memories and pictures, at their Easter family gathering.



The Fulton pump house destroyed but almost all canned food jars was unbroken.



Close call - Willene's ankle was trapped under the piano