

Bobby Gross (interview4)

Pete James (Interviewer): This is Mr. Bobby Gross. Bobby, thanks for speaking with us.

BG: Pete, good to talk to you, and it's very easy. You called and asked me to recall some things on the tornado of '52. It's very easy to do, even after 40 years or so. That particular day I was back in our plant working, and I came to the front of the building to the office. And, Mr. Jack Peck, Office Manager, had spotted (what he didn't know was) a tornado or whatever on the southwest part of town. And we watched it before it even hit Fayetteville. It was, I can't even remember exactly the time of day. It was in the middle of the afternoon, I think. But we could see, as it hit Fayetteville, the building material, tin, whatever. And that's when we really made up our mind that it was a tornado. But we still looked at it for, gosh, I don't know how long, and kinda foolish, because we had never seen a tornado before. But, shortly we tried to get to a safer place. So, we went back into the building and got where there wasn't any glass that could hit us. But there was a sliding door, a hinge sliding door, a shipping door, that we were standing beside, some other men. And as the wind picked up, it blew this door open, and foolish-like, we grabbed it, all of us, and put a shoulder to it. And it just picked us up and slammed us back against the wall. Nobody was hurt, but then the tornado had gone through. We were very lucky. About 50 yards from us was a stock barn that was operating that day. They were having their Friday sale, and there were, I know, 40 or 50 or maybe more people, livestock, right in the middle of the sale. And it skipped right over, didn't even raise a piece of tin on that building. And then where Walter Tanner wasn't even there at that time, but one block over was where they had a fatality, a gentleman was killed. And it shows how it danced, but you could watch the thing. As it came through, you heard that it sounds like a railroad train going through. Well, the winds picked up, and gradually it did sound like a train coming through. After that then, it was just stillness that you can't imagine. It was so quiet, there just wasn't any sound. And then we had just a rain for, I guess, 15 minutes that came down just like a torrent. After that then, everything was quiet. You got out, there wasn't any movement. I tried to go to Mulberry Avenue in my car. I couldn't do it. And then I went by foot because I wanted to check on my dad's house which was on Mulberry Avenue. Everything was there alright, but you couldn't get around. And there was one thing during that time that you always remember about our people. And we were in the business of slaughtering and everything was perishable. And when the power went out, we were in trouble. But we did as we do today. We had a good electric power system. And they said they would do the very, very best they could to get it back on as soon as possible. No promises, but said we'll really work on it. And believe me, they did. By a little over 24 hours, we had power back, and that was a good thing to see. We had had to go to Nashville and haul back I don't know how much dry ice to put on our rail system. We didn't open the doors to make sure, just like you would do with your refrigerator, where we wouldn't lose any refrigeration. And we came through it in good shape. It didn't raise not one shingle on our building. And Fayetteville was very lucky that day that it came at the time of day that it did. If it had been, say, 6 o'clock in the afternoon, I think a lot more people would have been hurt and killed.

Pete James (Interviewer): Where were you at the actual time when you were standing watching it?

BG: I was in the office. We have a very good view, an excellent view. There at that time, Mr. Jones, he had a store, and we could almost see where we were. We knew where (it) was traveling. It was dancing;

it was just like a finger, Pete. It wasn't just a solid funnel. The thing danced, and you could see as it danced and what it would pick up. We could almost tell when it hit, it's on down from the hospital now. I mean, I don't know if there's a grocery store there now or not. But Mr. Jones' store was completely demolished. But, as it hit there, all the building material, it just went right up the funnel. And that's when we knew, it wasn't any doubt. But if it hadn't been for Jack Peck, I would have missed the whole tornado. I would have been in the back of the building.

Pete James (Interviewer): But it was coming right at you?

BG: Right at. Stupid, that's what you would have to, you know, country boys, I guess. But we watched that darn thing till it was, well, it gives you an idea. If it was at the hospital coming towards you, it's time to kinda move. But, it was an experience, I'll never forget it. And I'm sure there's a lot of other thick people like me. It's very vivid. You may forget it, but you recall it very soon. I have a son too that, my oldest son, was born the year of the tornado, and my wife, as I say, it was a joke. She didn't even know it went over when I called to check on her. She'd been in the shower and it'd gone through, and she didn't even know we had a tornado.

Pete James (Interviewer): How do you feel when the skies get dark today?

BG: You still look up, and as I say, you'll never forget it and the sound either. Anybody that heard that darn thing, everybody gives a description. But the best they can describe, it does sound like a freight train coming through. And right at the peak of it, it definitely sounds like a freight train.