

Francis Smith(interview7)

Pete James (Interviewer): And this is Mrs. Francis Smith. Hello, Mrs. Francis.

FS: Ms. Francis Smith

Pete James (Interviewer): Well, thank you very much. Sorry about that. Ms. Smith, what was it like in Fayetteville back in 1952?

FS: Well, this particular day, it was raining. And it hailed, and it was just real stormy. And then it quit, and it got right yellow. Everything on the outside was just right yellow. And then, it rained again, and that's when the tornado hit. My uncle had been to town, who lived with us, and he tried to shut the back door, and it wouldn't shut. And I could hear the popping. So I went back, and I never could shut it, because the tornado was going across. And I came back through the dining room and looked over at the church. That's what I saw, the inside of the church. And my mother was lying down and she said, "Get back here in the hall! There's a cyclone!" And she could see chairs on my aunt's porch, the one right next to us, just rocking. And so of course, the time we all got back there then. So of course, I ran to the front door, and I didn't look up to see the tornado. I was seeing what it had done. Of course it had made that hole in the church. And the house across the street over there belonged to Ms. Mamie Fanney. And she had gas, and a tree was uprooted, and it caused the house to catch on fire. And she had just gone to the hospital with a heart attack. And Mrs. Rachael Burress had a problem upstairs, and I've forgotten who had the apartment on the porch, but they got nearly everything out. And then I looked up the next house up there. It didn't have any top on it. Everything was just sitting up there like it didn't have a top on it. And then of course, the house across the street had the big tree flopped over it. And then, it just kept raining a misty rain, a messy rain. So my cousin's wife and I got out to ramble around and see what it looked like. And that's when we went on down to see the Templeton Garage and the bus station and all those places down there that were torn down. And of course, there was no electricity, and we had a little two-burner kettle kerosene stove and a Coleman stove. And that's what we cooked on until we got some electricity. And we didn't have any heat either and had to go over to my aunt's to keep warm. They had gas, and we could keep warm there, but for electric we couldn't. And Mother had an old lamp, a kerosene lamp, and that's what we had for electricity. We'd take it around wherever we went with that light. And of course, people bought up candles and everything that afternoon, because we knew we weren't going to have (electricity). And I kept water boiling, and I kept coffee for the boys that were working, you know, standing around and working. And every so many hours, I'd take them out a cup of coffee. And my aunt could come back over from her house to my house to cook her breakfast on the little kerosene stove.

Pete James (Interviewer): What's your most vivid memory about that day?

FS: I just hope I never go through another one like that. It was one of the worst days. And my little boy and a cousin were sitting in the floor playing lotto, and the glass up here broke and just fell all over down in them, but it didn't hurt them. It was just little. In fact, it took all the chimneys. We didn't have a chimney left. It took all the chimneys. And they came and told me to put out my fire that was in the living room, and I told them I could have spit on it any other time to put it out, and I had to put a bucket

of water on it to put it out. And because I was up all night up and down. I'd go to bed and get warm, then I'd get up and go out on the porch, because this house was burning across the street, and I was afraid it might blow over on our place.

Pete James (Interviewer): Now you were talking about Mrs. Mamie Fanney. Now, she went to the hospital earlier in the day, long before the tornado.

FS: Oh yeah, she was already there a day or two before. And so old Mr. Patrick had to tell her then that her house had burned and all and so. Of course, that upset her quite a bit. But the woman that stayed with her grabbed a lot of things, her silverware, and a lot of her personal things that she knew she loved. She grabbed them and took them out and saved them for her. And of course they never did build back over there. That's been vacant all these years. And, I don't even know who owns it now, but they wanted to build a filling station over there, but of course, they couldn't.

Pete James (Interviewer): How do you feel nowadays when the sky turns dark?

FS: I used to look up and see a cloud as big as my hand and, I'd get scared of it. But I've gotten used to it now, and I don't know, well if it does it does, and if it don't it don't. So, that's just the way I feel about it now. But I used to just be scared to death of a black cloud.

Pete James (Interviewer): How did the town recuperate, in your opinion, after the storm?

FS: Well that was about 5 o'clock. Well, people began to come in here in town with saws and all that kind of thing. And Mulberry Avenue, you couldn't come up there for all the trees right in there. And they began to cut and move trees where traffic could go. And of course, this house that was burning across the street, the fire truck couldn't even get up there, because of all the trees across the street. And finally they did get up there, but there was just one fire truck that was working, so I kept my eyes on that fire all night. My husband was downtown, and he had an office upstairs over a barber shop, I believe. Anyway, they were opening and shutting the doors. He told them, he was an insurance inspector. And he had told them, "Don't do that. It'll just zoop right in and get you." So, he just had to fuss at them. And he watched it, and it almost hit the courthouse cupola. And it went up before it hit there. And then, he didn't watch the rest of it. But then he saw the smoke coming from (the house across the street), and he thought it was our house. And of course, he couldn't come in the car, because there was no way to get up the street. So he came just stepping and thought it was our house.

Pete James (Interviewer): Let me ask you some general questions. Long before the tornado hit in 1952, what was life like in Fayetteville?

FS: Oh, it was alright. I wasn't working then. We lived right down there on the corner next to the church. That's where we lived. I worked some. I worked some extra, and my mother worked some then. But everything was alright, and we'd hear of tornadoes being other places. And we'd think, "Well, we never have had one." But, we had one alright. Because, that was in '52, February the 29th of '52.

Pete James (Interviewer): What kind of town was Fayetteville in 1952? Was it a busy town?

FS: Well, of course it's grown quite a bit since then, because there's all these subdivisions they've built. But, along in there it was more or less just Fayetteville. And we had a good square. The old people, it was a good square. And of course, Carter's was there, and I don't know. I always enjoyed living in Fayetteville. And my father died in 1919 in Texas. I was five years old. And we came back here, and in a year's time we had to sell property out there, and we bought property here then. And the first place we lived was in Old Jackson's Courts, which the tornado tore away in a place where Andrew Jackson had spent the night one time. And so we lived there, then we got our home and we lived there then for a long time. And then we sold it. And right where Ken's fast food is we lived there. Our house was there at one time. So, we moved a lot in Fayetteville, just mother and I. So we'd move here and move yonder.

Pete James (Interviewer): How's Fayetteville changed since those days back then?

FS: Well, Fayetteville has gotten awfully commercial. You know, in the years as it's come on. And of course, we have gotten more industry. Of course, it was an agricultural town. Of course, way back on a Saturday night, you'd go to town. And my mother worked and wouldn't get off till 9 o'clock. And a friend of mine would go, and we'd walk around the square, walk around the square. That was the way we entertained ourselves.

As I came through the dining room, and looked out toward the church, there was the big hole through it, all the way through from the southwest to the northeast. It liked to broke my heart. Anyway, they had to tear down the whole part of that church. And they took the bricks eventually and made a new preacher's home out on Second Avenue. And the seats that were in there, Mimosa Church of Christ has them in their church out at Mimosa. And we at that time worshipped down at the Elk's Club, which was down across from Higgins Funeral Home, down there at that big house.

The church had two cupolas, and the other one was completely blown off. But that one, they had to take it off, it looks like their fixing to pull a tooth where they've got that thing up there. And they got it off, and then of course, they had to go down and take the whole church building down. And they covered the floor with tarp, and we used the basement for people to come get clothes and things. People began to send in everything – furniture, and canned goods, and clothes, and food, and everything. And some of us were over there all the time to unload and get people's things.

And that's where I lived. My mother, my uncle, and my child lived there. And he had just come in from the town and never did get the back door shut. It was still popping until it passed over. And my son and a little cousin were sitting in the floor in the living room playing lotto. And it broke a window light out there, and it came all over them but it didn't hurt them. Didn't any of them stick or anything. And, it took all of the chimneys off. We didn't have any chimneys. And I had to put the fire out in the living room in the grate, because they we didn't have any chimney. And we didn't have any heat, and it was a cold 29th of February. We lived there then, and used kerosene lamps and candles.

There's the house just in front of where I lived down on Washington Street. And the big tree fell right over, and it uprooted and lay on that house. And you can see where it did something to the roof. And of course, the people still lived there. It didn't hurt anything, but we had to keep people looking, because people were going around and looting. That's what we were afraid of.

That is up at the hospital. And they didn't have any electricity, and they had to use hand pump to make electricity to take care of everybody. And I don't think there were too many patients up there then, but there were enough that they had to have electricity. And that woman there is holding a (lantern). So that's about all I know about that.