

Mayor John Ed Underwood (interview6)

Pete James (Interviewer): Folks, this is Mayor John Ed Underwood, and the Underwood name surfaced several times during the 1952 tornado. What do you remember about that day?

JU: Not very much of pleasure, Pete. That was a day, I guess, that will go down in history for many of us that lived through it. But on that particular day, it was a sunny day during most of it. And then about 4:30, it all broke loose, that we, here in this community, experienced a thrill of a lifetime of riding out a tornado.

Pete James (Interviewer): How old were you, and then, tell us what you saw through the eyes of that child?

JU: Well, as I told the paper several months ago, it was the eyes of an eleven year old. I was eleven years old and it was in the afternoon, and I was in my father's business. He owned an automobile repair shop, and there were about seven people in there at the time. And all of a sudden, everything went black, and it sounded like a thousand machine guns shooting at the building, and then a big train came roaring through. And, it blew us away. It absolutely totally tore everything my father and mother owned to 'fair you well'. We had a home that was in front of our business there on Lincoln Avenue. And it was a two-story brick home, and then we had dad's business behind it just kinda the same similar building that's there today. And, in a matter of seconds, it was all gone.

Pete James (Interviewer): Now you were in the building at the time?

JU: That's correct. Yeah, there were seven, probably five mechanics and a mechanic from another town, from Lewisburg, had just pulled in with a wrecked car, and on his wrecker for Dad to set the frame on it, it had been wrecked. And that's what saved three of us, because we three got in it. Or two of the mechanics grabbed me and pulled me inside of it. And in the home, in our house, which the upstairs apartment was rented to a couple. And their two children and their grandmother were in the home upstairs and they had started down the stair well. And the house caved in on them. They weren't really seriously hurt. Gail Hindman Fisk, Mrs. Ronnie Fisk, was one of the girls. And they all lived through it. Every one of us lived through it. But we have a lot of fond memories I guess you'd call it.

Pete James (Interviewer): When the tornado hit, what were you thinking?

JU: Well you didn't have time enough to think, best I remember. It was just everything going wrong. And like I said, I think we had our eyes open, but it was just pitch dark, and it was over in a few seconds. It didn't take long.

Pete James (Interviewer): What do you remember about when you emerged out of Underwood's Garage? What did you see as you came out from under the wreckage?

JU: It wasn't what I saw as much as what I heard. Of course, any child would recognize their mother's voice I guess, and my mom had been to Gunner's Beauty Shop that day. Every Friday for a hundred years, she'd gone and got beautified. But she'd been there and saw the tail end, or the results, of what

was happening around her up there. And she came down the alley, and as she came down the alley, there was a tree across. And of course all she could see was the destruction. And she was screaming bloody murder. And I remember getting away from my father and running towards her, through live wires and everything was popping everything, but I was thinking about that. I was trying to get to Mother, because I thought she was under the tree. And unbeknown to all of us, Dr. Holland, Tom Holland, the eye doctor, Tommy Holland's dad, had her and was holding her trying to keep her from coming on down in there where the live wires were. And that's what I remember of the aftermath. And then seeing everybody trying to get their senses back together. But the most comical part that I remember, as I told you a while ago, there was the man in our business from Lewisburg that had just pulled in with the wrecker with the car on it. And of course, the whole building was down swallowing all of our equipment and cars and everything was down on the ground. Well, he comes out of the restroom where he had run into. And he had had like a engineer's hat on, a train engineer's hat on. When he came out, that hat was gone, and his hair was standing straight on his head. And I'll never forget the look on that man's face. And he kept hollering, telling all the men around there he wanted the beams cut so he could get his truck out of there and go home. He didn't know the whole town was nearly destroyed. And, that was the comical part of it.

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

JU: The noise and just the destruction, the strength of the destruction. You've heard or may have seen the pictures of straw being driven into trees and stuff. Well, it's fact. It happens. I've seen it. And I think anybody that was here in 52 can testify to that. And to see the destruction, it looked like wartime, what you see in pictures today of towns or homes and businesses being blown apart. And the vivid memory of going up (to the home of) Mr. Bass, whose son was in my class. And he came by and got me from Mother and Daddy to take me home with them that night. And we walked up East Washington Street. And when we got up there about where the Baptist church was, which is now the rotary club, it was blown pretty well. And then you looked over at the Church of Christ. It looked like a big Sherman tank had set over on one side of the square and blown a missile through the side of the church. There were two big holes through that church, and across the street, where it's now a vacant lot; there was a beautiful Colonial home, or old home, that was burning. It was on fire and burning. I believe a Ms. Fanning, I'm not sure of the name, but I think Ms. Fanning, was the owner of that house, and it burned down. And then, as you went down Mulberry Avenue, of course that was destroyed too, and there was a lady killed down there in one of the houses down there. But that's what you see.

Pete, now this is a picture of our home with my mother standing there in the front, the way it looked before the tornado.

And now this is what the aftermath was. I guess this would have been made on March the 1st before they actually started the cleanup, on a Saturday morning. And, you're talking about interesting things that happened. One of the things that happened in our home on the south side of the house was a big bedroom, and in the bedroom, of course we had a telephone that sat on the table. After the tornado was over and we went into the house, I can remember that Dad found this table completely across the whole house into a bathroom. It had hit the tub and shattered the table all to pieces. But there sit the

phone there in the bathtub; the receiver was still on the phone. And that's just one of the unbelievable things that can happen during a storm.

This picture gives you an idea of what the house looked like looking from southwest to northeast. And if you'll notice today, that wall there in the corner of the picture is still there. And it'll give you an idea of what the house looked like once it was all over with.

Pete James (Interviewer): So you not only lost your business, but you lost your house as well?

JU: That's right, lost our home and lost the business.

Pete James (Interviewer): Did the business ever reopen?

JU: Oh, yes. We were there until 1978. Dad opened the business there at this location in 1946. I closed the business in 1978.

Pete, this right in here was the garage, and this is our home that was laid down. This building here now is what we know as Shrader's Auto Parts. And right here was the Gunther-Bergen-Johnson automobile dealership, which is now where People's Bank is. And this is People's Bank's parking lot now. And right here was the Jersey Gold Dairies that a lot of people remember. And there's a block building that was completely destroyed, and next to it, a lot may have heard of the Andrew Jackson Court. Well that's where Andrew Jackson supposedly came through to Fayetteville and spent the night on several occasions, and it was left standing. Mickey Putnam, who is an accountant here in town, his folks live there, Mrs. Annie and his brother Ben, David are all there and his sister, I think, later came along. But, Ben and David and Vicky all lived here when we were kids.

Pete James (Interviewer): You told a story about a block building that was completely destroyed? Where was that?

JU: That was right here. That was the Jersey Gold Dairy building. There was two young ladies in there, that worked there, I believe. One had been visiting. But whatever, they lived through it but suffered a lot of pain and agony, I think. One of them, I was told, I never did see her at the time, had a nail driven through her arm, up her arm. And, it was completely gone. Back in this area now, right in here, was some big homes on College Street. This is College right through here. This is where Dwight's Food Town is now. And this over here across the street course was not hurt, but this now is the Lincoln County Bank and Foodland.

Pete, this is a picture I'm very proud of this part, because it shows my father looking around in business, what was left of it. And you can see the steel work behind him, the beams in the building. They're still there, we put them back. He did. But he's standing there with his flashlight in his leather coat looking through trying to see what was left. And the interesting part about this, a young man who was stationed in Germany in the Army called home after seeing this the next morning, maybe Sunday morning. I don't know the date. But anyhow, he saw it in the German paper and recognized Dad's picture and made him look at it and read the article and found out his hometown had been destroyed by a tornado. And

therefore, called home to see how his folks were. And he related this after he came back home. But that's kinda what it looked like on Friday night after the storm had gone through.

This is another picture that will give you just a better idea of the destruction. This is in the building itself, and you can see the beams laying down on this car. There was about seven cars in our building at the time. And naturally, all of them were destroyed. And all of them had to be replaced by insurance. But that's the kind of narrow escape that the people who were in there got out of. Just lucky to be alive. All of them.

Pete James (Interviewer): Now we see those beams on top of that car. How high were those beams originally?

JU: Probably, today I guess they're 20 feet high, 30 feet high. And they were enough that the average man could just stick his arm up, and he could touch them real easy.

Okay, this is a picture of a Coke machine. This is good advertising for Coke. This is when Cokes were a nickel a piece, I believe. I wish I had the box, cause when this was over and they cleaned all the debris around it, it had only a little bitty scratch. And this is what's so strange about tornadoes that some things will be totally destroyed, and then items sitting next to it will be just like brand new. And we found this in several occasions. And I remember also that I had a basketball that I found right beside this machine flat. I mean it was totally flat.

This picture here will give you an idea of the cooperation or the community concern of what went on. This is again a picture of our place, of our home, and this is probably on a Sunday morning. I can remember my father coming and asking my mother about getting the guys to work that day because, it being the Sabbath, and they had 30 men lied up, a crew, and several trucks, and a bulldozer and stuff. And they went in there on an early Sunday morning and started removing all the furniture that we had left, and then started tearing the home down. And by Monday afternoon, the place was cleaned off just like it was never there. But this shows the concern and the cooperation and the people wanting to help when you were down and out. And this is the fact that keeps in my mind I guess from being involved in community service because of so many people came to my mom and dad's rescue, and you never forget those people who helped you.

This young man (I can use that loosely now) I hope many people will recognize. We were talking about people helping people, and he's always done this for his community. This is Mr. Billy Bob Carter, William R. Carter, at the time had just started his business, I believe the article tells about. And the gentleman with him had been in charge of the Genesco Building out here that Mr. Carter helped build. And he had flown in here and looked over their building and plus, looked over the town. But what I wanted to tell you Pete was my father had all those beams that we were talking about that needed to be moved, and Mr. Carter sent a crew of men in that helped with cranes and stuff and set those beams off once everything was cleared away. And when Dad got the joist and everything put back in place, then Mr. Carter sent the same crew probably back in and set the beams back in place. And then, the story goes from Dad that he called Billy Bob and asked him to send him the bill, because he was having to pay his bills for building it. And somehow or another, Mr. Carter had forgotten where he had done the work and

couldn't ever find the bill, and it went unpaid, I believe. But that was the goodness of Mr. Bill Carter. My father and I'll never forget that. But this was the young version of Billy Bob Carter today.

This picture here is of showing again down Lincoln Avenue, across Lincoln Avenue, looking back towards our house. The ironic part about this is this home to our left is the one that I had owned until a couple years ago, and it was owned at that time by Mr. and Mrs. D.A. Temple. And you can see kids standing in the yard and all the trash and stuff that was in it. If you look closely, you could probably see the Underwood's Garage sign. It was there for many a year.

Pete James (Interviewer): Just total destruction.

JU: Total destruction. And this was not just in this area. It was all over town for probably a hundred yards wide or a little better and went from one end of the town from the southwest of town to the northeast of town.

This photograph is of a car in a tree that was right across the alley from our place of business. I believe I'm right in saying it was the Wilkerson Laundry truck, and the boy had pulled up in front of our business and got out gone over to Ms. Tempton's house to leave some laundry and the storm hit. Now, where he went, I don't know. I don't think it killed him or anything. It probably scared him to death, but his truck ended up in that tree, and you can see the man on top of it sawing it out. And it was probably four or five feet off the ground. But that's just another example of what it can do to you. This house was sitting where Ray Gardner's parking lot is now behind his building. It was in between the Tempton's home, I guess they owned the house. Sheriff Randall Shelton lived there. And when it was over, it looked like a house that had all the sides taken off it, nothing was disturbed in it. The bed linen was still on the bed and everything was just in place. But, it looked like a display house of where you walk by and see how a house is set up today. But it was amazing that it didn't bother a thing in the house, best I remember. It was just like everything was there, except the sides were gone.

This photograph is of the truck from Standard Drug store here in Fayetteville. That was owned by Mr. Brooks, the father or our ex-mayor Elgan Brooks. And it was completely, totally destroyed, crushed. And they had traded with us for years and years and still traded afterwards. But, it had to be replaced. It was an old Jeep, but it got demolished.

This photo is just looking out the building again toward the house, and you can see the house to the left of the gentleman standing there. He was just a sight-seer roaming through, I guess, looking at the devastation, and you can see another Coke box sitting over in the corner but that was what was left of the back of the home.

Pete, now this is a picture of over in the Macdonald, probably Kiwanis, section of town where the tornado first entered, and you can see the destruction there. It suffered a tremendous amount of destruction over there, homes being destroyed. This would be now probably about where the housing projects are down in that street right below the hospital, and it totally destroyed areas down in there first and then came on across the town.

Pete, this is the way Fayetteville looked from the air in probably 1950, somewhere along in there, right before the tornado. And we'll start and try to track the tornado. As you notice right here is what now is the People's Bank. And this area over here, of course, is where Jerral's and Lincoln County Bank is. And as it moved on, it came across our home and business right through here, came on up through here. This is Main Street that we're approaching now, and many people will remember that the old bus station was right here. It destroyed several homes right along in here, moved on out and crossed and got this home here, which now is the Baptist church and damaged real bad the Episcopal church, which is right here. And it moved on up, and this is what now is the Rotary Club and at that time was the Baptist church and came on across the street here. Here's the Church of Christ, and here is the home of Mrs. Fanning that we were talking about first part of the program burning. And then the tornado just kept tracking across the hill, across Green Street, coming on down and I know got Mr. John Mathis' home, took the roof off of it. And then went over and got several of the homes right on Mulberry. That's where Ms. Gee, I believe, died, and then trucked on down towards the stock yards and out this way. And back across to the wooded area where now the jail stands and the rec center is. An interesting feature of that I remember that several weeks later someone returned to us a bear sign. My father's bear business was a front-end logo had been found there. It was hanging up on the building, and it was in these woods and also, it brought in a green rocker, which had sit on the front porch of our home, and it was in good shape.

Pete James (Interviewer): Where'd you find those?

JU: It was in the woods behind where now the jail sits.

Pete James (Interviewer): That's a good mile out of town.

JU: It's a good mile out, but they were in tact, and I've still got the old bear sign. But that's just the track it took on February 29, 1952 at 4:30, close to, about, and that'll go down in the memory of a lot of Fayettevillians.

Pete James (Interviewer): All these years later, how do you feel when the skies darken?

JU: Now Pete, you shouldn't ask me that. That'd make people find out what I really feel like. No, I guess when you experience something like this as a kid or anybody, any age, you hunt a hole, I guess is the best way to put it. When it gets dark, I get jittery, and I know I related to you a while ago that once getting gas down there at the gas station a cloud came up one day and the wind started blowing the canopy, and I took off and went home. It stays in your mind, and you stay cautious. And the sound is what I remember more than anything, the noise that it makes. And I guess I'll take it with me to my grave.

