

Wilma Bearden (interview3)

Pete James (Interviewer): Alright, this is Wilma Bearden. Wilma, tell me about your day the day the tornado hit you, what you were doing, and what happened.

WB: Well, it was leap year, February the 29th, 1952. And we owned a little business on Adams Street, a little grocery store and a restaurant. And the wind blew hard all that day and it was real warm, and the wind was just real gusty. It looked stormy. At about 4 o'clock, my husband came in. He had been gone somewhere. I don't remember where. But, we had a girl that worked with us, and so, he told me to take her home, that she may get wet. So we left about 4:15 or 4:20 to take her home. She lived on Cherry Street. And we knew the winds were real strong, but we didn't know we were driving into a tornado. So, we went on, and I let her out on Cherry Street, and I drove up on Mulberry Avenue. And I knew the wind just kept getting stronger and stronger. So, I looked over where Mr. Fryson lives, and there's a big magnolia tree there. That thing was twirling around. And I just said to myself, "Gosh this is the biggest whirlwind I've ever seen!" Well, about that time I looked up, and Mr. Matthews' house just crumbled down. The second story just fell in. So, I knew then it wasn't a whirlwind. So, I tried to just keep going, but I don't know what happened. Everything just piled in on my car, and I guess I just took the switch off. I'm not sure, because it blew it up on the sidewalk, just against the rock wall. And it's such a roar. Well, it was just a second or two, and I can't even tell you what did happen, because I guess I was just scared to death. But I did when I came to myself. I was under the dash of the car, and a tree had fallen down across my car, and it just caved it in.

Pete James (Interviewer): How long were you in the car?

WB: Well, I don't know. Just a few seconds. But the time I drove in to it, you see, it was already a tornado, but see, I didn't know it. I didn't know what I was getting into. I didn't know what it was. It just happened so suddenly that I couldn't see too many trees along there, you know, and not thinking. But I found out I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Pete James (Interviewer): At what point did you realize it was a tornado?

WB: Well, I'd never seen a tornado, but I realized it was a tornado when I saw that housetop just cave in, blow away. And then all the wires just toppled in on me, the electric wires, and I looked to my left and another brick house just caved in. And by that time my car was covered up, and I don't know what happened after that.

Pete James (Interviewer): Were you hurt?

WB: I had a knot on my head, and I had mud all over me, and every glass in the car was broken out. Every door was wide open, and all that stuff that's in a tornado. It picked my car up and set it on the sidewalk.

Pete James (Interviewer): Mud seems to be a recurring theme. Everybody mentions mud. I find that to be weird.

WB: Uh huh. You see, it turned just as black as night and that was the mud and stuff that was in the air, I imagine. Dirt, see everything was blowing - everything that was on the ground, up in the air, and everything else was all mixed up blowing, you know.

Pete James (Interviewer): So here you are in a car, and there are trees on top of you.

WB: Wires.

Pete James (Interviewer): Live wires, probably.

WB: No, they had cut the electricity off fortunately. I guess they knew that was coming at the substation out there or somewhere.

Pete James (Interviewer): So what did you think when you emerged from the car. Tell us about what you saw when you came out of the car.

WB: Gosh, when I stepped out, I couldn't go anywhere for the treetops and everything on top of the car. I finally managed to take a few steps and started down Adams Street. I thought the whole town was blown away, and the farther I came, the better it looked. When I got down here. See, we didn't live in this house. It blew the top off this house, and it blew a window light out of our store. And I met Billy Cheatham up the street. And how he got there I'll never know unless it blew him there. And he said, "Wilma, everything's alright at your place." But Robert, my husband, had left, you see, hunting me. He knew I was in it, because he knew I'd just gone up the street here to take the girl home, and he knew I was right directly... but they didn't know what was coming, you see, they were here and when it hit, they didn't know what was happening hardly until they looked out at a little house over here. It just picked it up like a box of matches and splintered it out.

Pete James (Interviewer): How long did it take to get things back to normal?

WB: Golly, it was just as still when it passed over, just for a second just as still. And then everything turned loose - horns blowing, sirens going, you know, the fire department and everything. And, in just a few seconds, all hell broke loose. And then, you know, everybody had to work out all that mess. You couldn't go anywhere you see.

Pete James (Interviewer): How long did it take you to get back home?

WB: Well, I finally found my way down here, and a dog got after me and tried to bite me and me scared to death too. It didn't take long.

Pete James (Interviewer): What did you husband say?

WB: Well, he didn't come in. He didn't find me in the car, and he didn't see any blood, he said. So, he figured I had gotten out. But the car was a total loss. I don't know what wrecker came and got it and toed it away.

Pete James (Interviewer): So now, what do you think today when you see the skies starting to turn?

WB: Well you can imagine, I don't get out in a car. That's for sure. We had had a tornado here about two weeks before this one came. And I was talking to some friends. It didn't strike here. It hit up Mulberry, and went on up toward Winchester. And I just said to these friends, "You know what I'd do? If I knew a tornado was coming, I'd get my car and just start driving." But I found out I don't want to do that. Well, it was really bad.