

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Tornado Victims of 1985

Personal Experience

O. H. 1195

DIANE K. TAMLFSON

Interviewed

by

Molly A. McNamara

on

October 25, 1988

DIANE K. JAMIESON

Mrs. Diane Jamieson was a victim of the 1985 tornado which struck Niles. She and her family lived on Lantern Lane for eleven years. On May 31, 1985, Mrs. Jamieson had left her home to go shopping. Her husband and children were at home. Mrs. Jamieson witnessed the funnel cloud on Route 422. She immediately sought cover outside of her car on the ground by the YMCA. After the tornado passed, she frantically made her way back into Niles to find her family. As she entered Niles, she saw debris and pieces of homes laying about her. As she walked closer and closer to her neighborhood, she could see the tremendous destruction from the tornado. Mr. Jamieson and his two boys had just made it into the cellar when the house collapsed around them. One of the boys was slightly injured. The Jamieson's house was one of the worst destroyed in Niles. Nothing remained from the house. It took the Jamieson's working with the Niles community eight months to rebuild their home. They rebuilt on Lantern Lane and reside there today.

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INTERVIEWEE: DIANE K. JAMIESON

INTERVIEWER: Molly A. McNamara

SUBJECT: Destruction of Tornado, Red Cross

DATE: October 25, 1988

M: This is an interview with Mrs. Jamieson for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Tornado Victims of 1985 by Molly McNamara at 1135 Lantern Lane, Niles, Ohio on October 25th 1988, approximately 7:00 p.m.

Mrs. Jamieson, can you tell me a little bit about your family. Tell me about your husband and your children.

T: My husband and I, we were both students at Bowling Green and when we started working after graduation, he was working in this area so I looked for a job here too. I started teaching in Warren and I've been there ever since. We have two boys, Kevin and Stephen. They both attend Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, here in Niles.

M: How long have you lived here, in Niles?

J: I've lived in Niles since I came to the area, so that's been seventeen years. And here at this address we've lived now, eleven years.

M: Tell me a little bit about your neighborhood. Tell me what it was like before three years ago, before the tornado.

T: In many ways, very similar to what it is now. Young families, lots of children, some retired folks but mostly young families with children. Almost everyone

works. There is not a lot of neighboring going on because most people are busy, very busy so...

M: Is it a close neighborhood, do you think?

J: What, people knowing one another?

M: Right.

J: We're closer now than we were before. Yes, we knew each other to say hello but didn't really socialize much.

M: Tell me about a typical day. I know you work. Tell me what you do.

J: I teach handicapped youngsters in Warren. I work with handicapped youngsters in grades eleven and twelve and place them in vocational programs and then I help the instructors modify the program to meet the learning problems of my children, my students. So, I leave for work 7:15. My husband is here to see the boys catch the bus to the school. He goes to work in Youngstown. He sells tools. I come home usually by around 3:30, do whatever it is- the one boy has football practice and a paper route. I usually have a meeting or something else back in Warren again with my different organizations. All the busy double life that all working moms lead.

M: I want you to bring me back to May 31, 1985. Tell me what that day was like. Tell me what you did that day.

J: That was a special day because that was clerical day. That was the last day of school and teachers are as ecstatic about the last day of school as students are. So a friend of mine, another teacher, we had left Warren and gone up to Stouffville, and so on, a food outlet store, we had stocked our freezers because we didn't want to cook all summer long. We had bought all this frozen food and it was very hot that day, it was very sunny and very hot and I came home. It was also payday and so I was headed out to the mall. I had supper with my family and it was funny because the phone rang and it was a college friend I hadn't talked to in eight years, at least eight years, and she lives in Maryland now and so we had chatted for at least a half an hour on the phone and I hung up the phone and I left because I still wanted to get to the store. As I left I thought, wow, we're going to have a real storm because the sky was getting dark. I went up to the corner of Vienna Road and 422 and I was waiting at the traffic light. I noticed people at the Thornton's gas station, which is no longer there, that's where the Niles Park Plaza Shopping Center is. At Thornton's gas

station they were pointing behind me. So as the light turned green, I made a left turn on to 422 and I looked in the direction that these people were pointing. And my entire line of vision was black. The entire sky was black and I thought to myself, my God, what a storm this is going to be. We're really going to get hit. And then I saw the debris. Then I saw the black pieces of something in this black sky and it was probably my house that I saw at that point in the debris. But I thought, my God, this is no storm, this is a tornado.

M: What did you do?

J: I was driving, moving toward the mall, I'm between the roller rink now and this tornado. I knew I had to get out of my car. I knew the worst place for me to stay was my car. All I could see around me was concrete. I didn't want to lay on the concrete. So all of a sudden I saw the sign for the Y. I said the Y, there's grass there, I'll lay down there. I remember driving into the Y probably at ninety miles an hour, and I remember grabbing my purse and my car keys and running for the grass. At that point, the noise was deafening. I could feel the ground shaking. I'm thinking to myself, is this the way it's going to end? Is this it for me? I decided to lay myself down next to the building. I thought that would be safer or something. But I remember thinking, is this it? I threw myself on the ground and covered my head and I knew the tornado was passing because I could feel the ground shaking. And when it was passed, I looked up and the building and everything was still intact. I watched the funnel move away. It was moving off, I guess, at that point towards Still wagon Road. I watched the funnel moving away and I thought, Gee, it got that nursing home. Now it didn't occur to me, that the only reason I could see the nursing home was because the roller rink was gone too. I looked back the way, the direction I had come and debris was everywhere. I knew I couldn't get back home that way. I also knew that I had to get home. I knew that from the direction that that was not good.

M: You were thinking so clearly, I'm amazed.

J: It's phenomenal. I felt very calm. I probably looked like I was scared... (My neighbors have told me I looked like a wild person as I finally got home because I was covered with mud from laying on the ground) I knew I couldn't come back the way I had come. So I went down the hill passed Alberini's. At the bottom of the hill, I wanted to turn left then, to come home the other way. And the traffic light is out. I remember turning right in front of someone and he was looking at me and shaking his fist and I don't care, I'm going home. I saw traffic in front of me so I had to back up. I said, I

can't sit in a traffic jam, I'll go crazy. So I pulled off behind the Baptist church. I knew that the housing development ended in a culdesac down there. I pulled off behind the Baptist church, drove as far as I could and then walked through a field to get into bottom of this development. As I got in to where the houses were, I saw a house without a roof and I thought, well, if we just lost our roof, we'll be fine. No problem. I'm saying to the neighbors, how is it at the top of the hill? How bad is it? No one knew, of course it had just happened. No one had been around, everybody was in a state of shock, they were still pointing at the sky. I'm walking, I had on sandals and I'm walking through all this debris and as I was coming up this little hill here in this development, the closer I got to home the worse it got. Houses were no longer just without roofs, they were collapsed. Then I rounded the corner here and my house was gone. There was nothing there. I knew I had left my family in there five minutes before and I was certain they were dead. Then our neighbor grabbed me and she said, "Diane, they're fine, they're right over there." And I felt... I could still feel it today. This big weight roll off my shoulders and I looked at the three of them and I said, "Are you okay?" They were a little dazed and stunned but they were fine. My younger son was mad because he had a bruise on his arm and my husband's arms...he had protected the boys in the basement as cement blocks had fallen around them and his arms were bruised. The other boy was fine. They were all barefoot, of course. (When you walk in, in my house, you take your shoes off) Before we left that night, we had to find shoes for them. All I could find of my husband's was one brown shoe and one black shoe. For my older boy we found some G. I. Joe snow boots. Finally for the younger one, I found his tennis shoes. I said, Oh, great. A pair of shoes, this is super. He puts them on, cringes and takes his foot out and it's full of glass, the tennis shoe is full of glass. Crazy stuff. They had just managed to get to the basement. They had been watching television. Thank God both boys were in the house. I don't know how we would have got down-stairs quickly enough otherwise. My older boy said the TV had gone out, the cable had gone out. At that point, my husband said, "My God, listen to that noise." Gee, if that would be a tornado. We knew there were watches that day. But I had not heard that there had been tornadoes earlier that day in northern Trumbull County.

M: I don't think anybody knew

J: I think I might have been a bit more cautious if I had known already that day some tornadoes had touched down somewhere locally. We didn't know that. Anyway, they

were both in the house. He grabbed both boys, they ran to the basement because the older one had mentioned the tornado drills they had had at school, that they needed to go to the basement. Within twenty seconds of the time they went down to the basement, the house was gone. My husband said it was dark, they could hear this great creaking and it was light because everything above them was gone. The front of the house literally exploded. We never found a piece of furniture from the boys bedroom and the spare bedroom. Nothing-- the carpeting, the flooring. As the floor left, this was a small three bedroom ranch and as the floor left, of course, it knocked the furnace over and the gas water heater in the basement because the piping left also. So there was gas escaping and so immediately, they knew they had to get out and they had climbed out by means of the freezer because the stairway from the basement was flipped and laying on the middle of the I beam and the only other way to climb out was out on the freezer. They climbed out from the basement.

M: It's a good thing that they were so lucky.

J: Had they been anywhere upstairs, they would have been killed. Some people I know huddled in their bathrooms or in a separate closet in the middle of their homes. If your home just lost all the outside walls or whatever that was fine. Mine blew away. There was nothing left of this house.

M: What happened right after that, after you found out that your family was okay. I know that was your immediate concern. What happened right after that?

J: I think I had...I wanted the children out...It was so devastating, dangerous, there was broken glass everywhere, nails, it was awful. I wanted...I don't know. My husband and I started looking through some of the debris. His car was on the top of our refrigerator in the middle of the backyard. Bizarre stuff. I had the kids go to a neighbors' for a while because some of the houses on the one side of Pepperwood were just damaged. They weren't severely damaged.

M: These ones right here on the front?

J: Along the even numbered houses on Pepperwood all sustained major damage. They all ended up with new roofs, new siding. But the houses were livable. Where as on the odd numbered side of Pepperwood, those houses were all unlivable and here on Lantern Lane they were gone. So anyway, I had them stay there for a while. I remember one of my neighbors being dazed and going to get his Polaroid camera and said, I got to take a picture, nobody's going to believe this. (The mess was here for

weeks.) But he was going to take a picture. He lived on the corner over here and he had been painting in the livingroom but his patio was blown out as the tornado came through. He was sucked from the livingroom through the diningroom, out the patio and deposited on the backyard in the grass and so he's walking around very dazed. I was fortunate to be able to get home as quickly as I did. Because like I said, I had talked to my girlfriend, my old college friend, I would have been at the mall, it would have taken me hours to get back home again. Because I was out, we had a car we could use, we were free to go over my girlfriend's house in Vienna to spend the night then. Otherwise we would have been on the gym floor at Niles McKinley High School or some place. In that respect, it was a little easier. She had power again, by midnight. So for us and the kids the next day, things were real normal. Cartoons on Saturday morning and toast and everything just like it should be. I think in some respects, it was tougher for those kids who lived here whose houses weren't damaged enough to leave and they were still in all this.

M: What did you do the next day on that Saturday? Where did you even begin?

J: We came back, it was like we had to come back. We came back and at that point, that evening, none of my neighbors...they were all gone, ball games, different activities and I don't remember seeing any of my immediate neighbors that night. But that next morning, they were all here. Of course, the all coming together kind of thing. Emotional support. We were very close to the people next door here. Those are the ones we would share things back and forth. Since then, I am much better acquainted with all these people. That day you're sifting through debris trying to find things. I remember going through the debris and some stranger walking up to me and saying, "Why are you bothering, why are you trying to save anything, isn't this all covered by insurance?" I looked up at him and said, "Yes, but I didn't feel like going shopping today." I thought, you jerk, my kids need underwear, if I can find something, my girlfriend can wash it for me, we can wear it. There's nothing open at the mall. Everything's closed and we had nothing to wear. It was just strange, people were strange.

M: Were you able to find anything that you were able to use or keep?

J: Some of my clothing, some of my husband's clothing because our bedroom is in the back of the house and the back of the house just sort of fell into the backyard, whereas the front of the house blew away. None of

their clothing, and so forth and furniture. Nothing in my house was usable, although we did find my stainless. .from my wedding, you know that kind of thing, that was usable again. My mother's wedding crystal was all broken and my wedding china and so forth. I found my husband's wedding ring and we found a fair amount of pictures, it was surprising; people would save things as we found things. We have baby pictures from both boys and that kind of thing, because people...we found them in the back yard and six months later, a girlfriend of mine took all the pictures and cleaned them up for me and put them in an album. So that was nice.

M: Yes, where did you even begin to rebuild, or even to start over? Was that one of your concerns right away or...What was going through your head?

J: It was. I have a brother who lives in Dayton who's a State Farm agent. Now he's not my insurance agent but he did get hold of me and he'd been through the Xenia tornado eleven years before with his clients and he said to me, "Diane, you have to go find a house today." He said, "I know it's the last thing in the world you want to do at this point, you can't even think about it, there's only ten good houses in Niles and there's a hundred families looking for them and you have to get one now." And he said, "The bigger the better, State Farm will think anything less than a thousand a month is a bargain, go." And I'm just floored. Then I remembered, I didn't know the family, but I did know there was a house vacant here at the bottom of the development I knew the family was living in Columbus, the house was for sale and I contacted him thinking he would maybe like to rent the house and I wanted a place to put my family. Living with friends is fine but that wears thin after a while, I knew I couldn't go to a motel with a five year old and an eight year old there. The four of us in one room would have killed each other. So that was the big push and I have to say I was as comfortable during the rebuilding as anybody around me. Other people were in small apartments or living with in-laws or other relatives and they were in cramped quarters and we had our own house.

M: So where did you end up going?

J: We rented the house here in the development, friends from school furnished it with used things from people's attics and basements and within a week, I had a completely furnished house, a very nice house and we were on the way back to being normal. At that point, we tried to figure out what we would do with this. We were going to rebuild, where, and look at house plans. We knew we were going to build something different

M: Did you have problems in those first two days

before...I know the martial law was in affect but I know a lot of areas weren't under the national guard right away, immediately. Did you have problems with people coming in here...

T: Oh, there were people everywhere, that night, the next morning. You couldn't drive in anywhere, but anyone could walk through and even when the national guard was here if you were walking through, there was no problem. You weren't stopped. It was impossible trying to drive a vehicle through because the roads were blocked, they were clearing the cemetery, it was such a big mess here. Anyone walking was always able to get through. Yes, there were a lot of people searching and I know, I lost a fair amount of cash. I had just cashed my paycheck. But we didn't have any savings in the house. I know there were people who kept large amounts of money in their homes and those blew away. People were going through picking up money, picking up whatever. The next day, it continued. Of course there were the curious people. That Friday night, all you could here were sirens. The sirens never stopped. It was continual sound of sirens. The next day, it was the helicopters. It was the burning bright sun and helicopters and then the TV cameras. They were all over. Interviews.

M: You were interviewed.

J: Yes.

M: How did you feel about that, how did you feel about people coming in here and looking at what was left of your house?

M: It didn't bother me. At the time, I remember talking to people and I said later, I had to be in shock or I wouldn't have been talking to these reporters. My husband gave an interview for national TV. It was on NBC News. Connie Chung said, "Here we go to Niles, Ohio." And the local NBC person said, "Here's Mr. Jamieson..." We were on National TV.

M: See, we missed all that because we never had any electricity for how long.

T: Right and people taped it in other places. My brother in San Diego taped that and shipped it to us and it was later, I said I had to be in shock, we wouldn't have been so free to talk. I got a terrific sun burn that day because we were outside from 7:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. and the sun was extremely hot. There were lots of strange faces and yet some of the strange faces were the Red Cross offering drinks of water and people were helping. People from down the street who weren't as

devastated as we were, were up trying to help us salvage things. All I had on was a pair of sandals and I remember one of my friends from school had walked in and he was helping us and I said, "Please you've got to find me a pair of shoes, I'm going to get tetanus here if I don't find something besides these sandals." So we looked and we kept looking. We had to sift through. You had to look for something because there was nowhere to go to purchase anything, even if you wanted to immediately.

M: What about the Red Cross and the Salvation Army Did you find that they helped you?

J: They were great. Red Cross was there within two days with vouchers to go to Penny's or to go to the mall, wherever you wanted to go and get clothing and shoes.

M: How did that work, I don't understand?

J: They gave you a voucher based on your family, number of children, family size. It was obviously, your immediate need, you don't have anything to wear, you need shoes, you can go get this, here's some money to do that. Later they had food and then they set up a place at the High School where you could go and look through clothing people had donated. People were just wonderful. My husband and I were able to salvage some clothing from the backyard. Some things would be perfectly fine and other things, you'd think it were fine and then there would be this big blob of paint. If you think about it, there were people's garages going around like a giant blender and spitting out things here and there and so if you visualize kitchen utensils and food all rolling around and things from people's garages. You'd pick up something and it would be just fine, something else would be ruined. Anything with any structure was splintered and destroyed. Clothing bends and consequently, there was more usable clothing than anything else I found. The Red Cross was great. Anything from food and those vouchers to get new things. Shoes, there was a separate voucher for shoes if I remember correctly. And they were great with feeding us. You know, as people were doing their salvage and their clean up, they came through here with hot food three times a day. They found us at the house that we were renting and they fed us another week yet after we had moved in. So for two weeks, my kids had fresh dough nuts everyday for breakfast and they would look at me like well, is this going to continue? I remember turning them away saying, "Well no, the Boy Scouts were just here with hamburgers." And they said, "Oh, no, you mean we just drove here all the way from Akron for nothing." Okay, give me five spaghetts. It was the same crew primarily. I don't know. Those people

worked tremendously hard.

M: There were a lot of good things about them. What about the federal agencies, I'm not exactly sure who they helped or I guess it was just the neediest people or those who...

T: I don't know. We were well covered by insurance and so eventually we rebuilt. We were covered by insurance so we had no need. We didn't qualify. If you were truly needy, I don't think you got much either because they expected to be repaid. So if you were truly out of work, and had no means of repaying this federal money, (those were the low interest loans) you were out of luck. I guess there was some money available for initial clean up and so forth but the loans, these low interest disaster loans that they kept talking about, the government wanted to be repaid. So if you were truly destitute, you wouldn't have qualified either. We saw most of the federal money going into the clean up of public land which I guess is good. I mean the cemetery needed to be cleaned, the streets needed to be cleaned. When I asked the mayor about the debris in my yard, he said, "That's in your yard, that's your problem."

M: I heard a lot of people say that and they were responsible. Were you responsible for cleaning that up and paying for that to be taken care of?

T: Absolutely. Now granted, some insurance companies do give you something to go toward that clean up, others I guess don't. I know our particular parish priest paid for dumpsters and trucks and they came in and he cleaned up anybody who wanted to be cleaned up. It wasn't that you had to belong to his parish but right in a row here, there were five families that were from his parish and I bet that that's what brought it home for him. Then later, I guess Catholic Charities did try to reimburse him for that expense. And the public lands need to be cleaned up, I'll grant you that but the city couldn't have brought a few dumpsters in?

M: I know

T: See, that really was a help to have a dumpster out there. Okay, you've gotten this pile of trash together, what do I do with it? There was a dumpster sitting there for a while and that was a great help to have somewhere to go...and the city couldn't have done that?

M: I don't understand that either.

T: Yes, it just didn't seem that that required a lot of effort.

M: Why did you decide to rebuild here?

J: Well we like Niles. My husband works in Youngstown, I work in Warren. Niles is halfway in-between. As far as other locations in Niles, I mean, sure I'm going to live in Florida or San Diego or some warm climate sometime, but as far as living in Niles, there's no other location I would prefer. I'm close to everything here. And really we felt that we owed too much on our old mortgage. If we had had to pay off our old mortgage with the insurance money, we wouldn't have had a lot left then to work with to start over again. So we felt that keeping the old mortgage going, staying in this location, that we could be the most well off. So we did.

M: How long did it take you to rebuild everything?

J: We were in in January, the middle of January so that would have us at about eight months.

M: That's a long time.

J: Yes. The insurance people were starting to question our need for alternative housing and I said look, these are not normal times. Yes. Normally you can get a house built in six months, I said these are not normal times.

M: Yes, especially this area that was hit. I think this was probably the worst street hit.

J: Yes.

M: What about today when you hear, I don't know if you hear that sirens go off, you know testing them or warning for a tornado, what do you do? How do you feel?

J: We're very cautious. We have a weather radio. If there is a weather alert, it sounds like a fire siren going through our house and we come dashing down and listen to the radio. What's bad about that is that they do that for a snow alerts in the middle of winter. And so at 3:00 a.m. you'll come dashing down as the weather radio is going off and it's because there is a snow blizzard alert in Geauga County.

M: Still I guess it does prime you.

J: Yes. We're very cautious, we don't like high winds. Sometimes, I know some nights when it has been a very strong wind, rain kind of thing, I'll be awake all night. Because we've learned a lot. We've learned

that tornadoes can happen at any time of day or night, any month of year, any state in the union, and yes, there are times that are more vulnerable than others but we now know they can happen anytime.

M: There is something I forgot to ask you about. Do you remember there was a second tornado warning right after the first one. Do you remember that?

J: No, well somebody said there were, on the street. We remember the gas company coming through turning off all the valves and somebody saying something that there's another tornado warning. I wasn't the least concerned.

M: Really?

J: We had just lived through one and everything was already gone, I wasn't the least concerned. Now that night when I got to my girlfriend's house in Vienna and they're talking about it, I was a little concerned again, I don't know...but right here immediately, what more could happen?

M: I guess I would feel that way too. What else could be taken? I just have a couple other questions to ask you. Your neighborhood today, has it changed much more, or how has it changed?

J: The new houses are a little bigger. Some neighbors didn't return. The one party had been trying to sell their house, wanted to rebuild a larger home elsewhere and that's what they did. On the other side, they chose to build elsewhere, they didn't want to come back to the same location. You know some people are a little leery about coming back. I felt this is safer than some new location because the odds of it happening again right here aren't real high. The houses are bigger, we're friendlier. We had a block party the year after it happened, we haven't tried anything since then (I guess nobody wanted to organize it) but I do know my neighbors much better and we do talk more. It's still not the old days because people are just too busy for that.

M: That's understandable. Do you feel safer here?

J: Yes. People say that this was the same path that the tornado had taken back in 1940 and I say, no, I can't have been the very same path because those trees in the cemetery were 200 years old. So if it was one thousand feet the other direction then it wasn't the same path and I'm not worried about it. My particular house going up again, we had to be in the center of the path of the whole thing and no, I'm not worried about it hitting here again. We were on vacation a year later

and heard there were tornado warnings through here and I said to my husband, "Well, if she blows, she blows. We'll rebuild again." and he said, "Not in the same spot." So if it goes away the second time, we won't come back.

M: Is there anything else that you'd like to mention that I haven't talked about? Is there anything that I have forgotten?

J: Community support was super. People from all over gave me things.

M: That's nice to hear.

J: Yes. People were marvelous and I guess they had visions of my poor little boys not having any toys and for a while...you know they were only five and eight at the time and they started expecting something every time they saw somebody. I guess that greed is normal. Just wonderful, offering to help and the food and the support. We were very grateful. Everyone. The support of our friends and family was marvelous.

M: Well, thank you very much.

J: Your welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW