

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Tornado Victims of 1985

Personal Experience

O.H. 1199

THOMAS G. RIDER

Interviewed

by

Molly McNamara

on

October 11, 1988

THOMAS RIDER

Mr. Thomas G. Rider of 965 Nancy Street, Niles, Ohio, was a victim of the 1985 tornado. He lives with his wife and two daughters in Niles. He describes the event of the tornado, the destruction of his home and neighborhood. Mr. Rider explains how he and his family strived to rebuild their home. He talks about the help he received from the relief organizations in Niles, federal agencies and his church. Mr. Rider also talks about the sightseers and looters that roamed the streets after the disaster. He and his family finally rebuilt their home in November of 1985.

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INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS G. RIDER
INTERVIEWER: Molly McNamara
SUBJECT: destruction of tornado, family, aid, church,
sightseers, feelings about tornados now
DATE: October 11, 1988

M: This is an interview with Mr. Tom Rider for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Tornado Victims of 1985, by Molly McNamara, at 965 Nancy Street, on October 11, 1988, at approximately 1:00 p.m.

Mr. Rider, can you tell me a little bit about your family; your wife and your kids?

R: I have a wife, Stephanie. We've been married for 15 years. I have two daughters, Lindsay, 6, and Megan, 12. We have lived on Nancy Street [for] 15 years now.

M: Can you describe what your neighborhood was like before the tornado? Tell me a little bit about the people that lived there.

R: There was really a mixture of people. There was all kinds of religions: there was Catholics married to Protestants; there was Jewish People married to Catholics; there was Jehovah's Witnesses; there was Mormons. It's really a mixture of the neighborhood. Everybody just kind of minded their own business really. They'd say hello to everybody and they were friendly but just stay to themselves.

M: Would you say it was a young neighborhood?

R: Not really. I'd say, before the tornado, we were the youngest couple on the block.

M: I see.

R: So it is mostly older people with not too many children now.

M: Tell me what a typical day is like in your life.

R: A typical day? That's funny. I don't have typical days. Every day is different really. Things happen like, I come to work and there is always something new at the job. Daily, we do about anything we want to do at our job.

M: You are in business for yourself, right?

R: Yes. My brother and I are partners. We do landscaping, we do building maintenance, we do carpentry, plumbing. . . . So, everyday is different. It's a surprise when we come to work, really.

M: I want you to describe May 31, 1985. First of all, where were you?

R: I had just come home from work; late, as usual. It was about 6:30 and I was in the family room watching TV. It was really hot and humid that day and my wife goes, "Something is going to happen." If you could believe this. I said, "You're crazy." It was her last day of school. I said, "You don't have to worry about school now, so you're going to worry about the weather or something else." The kids were upstairs in the bathtub. It was hot and they wanted to cool down. So my wife went upstairs. It wasn't two or three minutes later, then I heard it. I yelled for her to get the kids and come down [to the] cellar. We just made it down [to the] cellar and it was over.

M: What happened to your house?

R: I heard the cellar door slam shut. I didn't think what happened, happened. I went upstairs and all the walls were gone in the house. The roof was completely gone. All there was, was a few inside walls. The furniture was sucked out. Practically everything was gone.

M: This happened that fast?

R: Yes. I'd say 30 seconds.

M: But you got your family downstairs in enough time.

R: Yes. We just made it to the bottom of the steps and we stayed right there.

M: Were you warned? Did you have any warning of this besides knowing that there was a storm coming? I think everybody remembers that but. . . .

R: No, I just heard it and I instantly knew what it was.

M: So it was just instinct, you think?

R: When you were young, you had drills of what to do, where to go and things happen and you did it. That's all.

M: So you think that helped in a way.

R: Oh, yes.

M: What was your immediate reaction after going upstairs?

R: I couldn't believe it. I went upstairs and looked and I could see out to the whole neighborhood. It was like a bomb went off. I went back down about three or four steps and I had to go back up again and look to believe my eyes. My wife was down [in the] cellar trying to find matching clothes for the kids. She had just done some washing, luckily. I said, "Get them out of here." They didn't have any clothes on from the bathtub. I said, "Get anything on them and get them out of here. You won't believe what is up there." I said, "Go upstairs and look."

M: Did you hear any noise as far as. . . . I remember everybody saying to me that they heard a train. It sounded like a train coming.

R: It was much louder, like Niagra Falls even. My wife even had to put her hands over my youngest daughter's ears because it hurt from the loudness. It was amazing.

M: So everything in the neighborhood was gone?

R: Pretty much so. [It was] like an atomic bomb, if you want to say that. It was rubble everywhere.

M: So what happened right after that? Was there any help immediately?

R: Not really. Isolated areas in the city. . . . More north of us, it was even worse, like the roller rink. A neighbor of mine went around and turned off everybody's gas meter. So he had some presence of mind to know what to do that way. But the police came and said

for everybody to get out and they blocked the street off. I couldn't get a hold of anybody to come pick us up because the phones were down and everything. So finally, we got my wife's uncle to come and get us and took us to my in-laws' house. We just went from there.

M: Were you in shock at all?

R: I think so. I wanted to stay there and guard my property, but there was nothing left to guard.

M: I remember them talking about reading a lot in the 1985 newspapers about looters. Did you have any problems with that?

R: I don't think on our street. . . . [On] a street down further, a lady lost her stove and refrigerator and I think a washer and dryer, but nothing on our street.

M: People just came in and took those things.

R: Yes. At night, I think.

M: So there wasn't anything really for you to take. What was left of your house?

R: Well, we had some furniture and some clothes. It seemed like in the livingroom, there was a few things left, but everything was full of insulation. It had to be cleaned or it was scratched and ruined and stuff like that.

M: What happened as far as the relief organizations coming in? Was that immediate or was it just chaotic? Did anybody know what they were doing?

R: I don't think so at first. There hasn't been an experience like this around here in a long time. It took a while for them to get geared up, I think. It was like a circus--a steady stream of people for two or three days, just constant up and down the street.

M: How did you feel about that?

R: Well, I probably would have done the same thing.

M: Did you receive any help at all from the Red Cross?

R: Well, we moved some of the stuff. We tried to salvage what was left. The Red Cross sent trucks down through with sandwiches and stuff like that. That helped out because we didn't have any electricity. I received help from my wife's church. The disaster relief would

help us if we needed anything, but I had good insurance and I didn't really need anything. So I didn't ask for anything.

M: Where did you begin? I can't even imagine where you would have started to rebuild or just organizing things again. I mean, getting your life back together after that. . . .

R: It was really chaotic. I called my insurance man and he went from there. They were great. He was there the next day, the adjuster, and then we started from there. The same person rebuilt my house who built it in the first place. I think he built five right around us so it was good. We just went day to day but everything was really hectic. We moved to a motel for a week and then I found an apartment and we stayed for six months in there. Finally things came together but everything was rush, rush, rush. Finally we moved back in in November of 1985.

M: Did this leave any effect on you or your children or your wife?

R: Oh, yes. Storms still bother us, constantly. After everything was done, I think we were on such a high level of--I don't know if it was adrenaline or what. We had to do so much everyday after we moved back in. I wouldn't say depression, but there was a real let down and you didn't want to do anything. You would just want to sleep all day or whatever.

M: I understand that. What was your neighborhood like after it was rebuilt? A lot of your neighbors had their houses hit too, right?

R: Yes, I think there was only three neighbors that didn't rebuild. I think we had a block party on the anniversary.

M: Yes, I remember that.

R: [The neighborhood's] a lot closer now. Everybody watches out for everybody else. If there's a storm coming, you see two or three men outside watching still. We just watch out for each other now.

M: Has your lifestyle changed any because of this? Do you practice tornado drills or anything like that just to keep up on it? Just to make sure?

R: Well, I bought a weather alert.

M: Did you?

R: Yes, and we listen to that. When the storm comes, we go to the basement now. Even before there are any warnings or anything.

M: What is your impression of the Niles Safety System at that time? You said there was no warning.

R: At that time, there was no warning. I think the last tornado that went through was in the 40's. Everybody's aware of it now, you know. They [installed] the sirens for warnings, but who would have thought it would happen to you?

M: Do you think it could ever happen again?

R: Yes. I wouldn't rule out anything now. I would hope not, but it probably could happen.

M: You were interviewed by several newspapers. Am I right?

R: Yes.

M: At least I know by the Niles Daily Times. Were they on the scene right after this happened?

R: I think it was the next day. [It's a] good thing the police didn't let anyone in there the first night. I mean, there was even a rumor that another tornado was coming and we had to get out. So it was the next day we went back. It was the weekend, so we just got everything and went from there.

M: I really can't think of anything else to ask you. Are you satisfied that you rebuilt on the same street and everything? I know a lot of people, I found, have moved away. I don't know if that has something to do with the psychological feelings.

R: I think it probably would be. . . . I know my neighbor moved away. His wife couldn't come back. She couldn't come back to even take anything out of the house. That memory was in her mind. I don't even think she was home. Her husband and her daughter were home. Just the worry of wondering if they were alive or whatever probably went through her mind every time she saw that house. But it was bad at first and I had to get. . . . The kids weren't too bad, but my wife worried constantly. That picture was in her mind and it took a while to get back to normal in the house. But I was happy on that street and we just decided to stay.

M: So you're happy that you are still there?

R: Yes.

M: I mean, that you decided to rebuild there.

R: Yes.

M: Okay, is there anything else that I haven't talked about that you might like to add? Is there anything that you could think of that I haven't mentioned? I know that your view is so different than mine.

R: I think that throughout the whole thing, the help from people that came that we didn't know. . . . They offered help and they helped us clean stuff up and stuff like that. When something like that happens that your fellow mankind reaches out to help, it is just amazing.

M: That's nice to know. Even myself, I remember that from the people of Niles. It made me feel good, too. Okay, well, that's it then. Thank you for letting me interview you.

R: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW