

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Tornado of 1985

Personal Experience

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ANNA MAE CUCHNA

Interviewed

by

Molly McNamara

on

November 14, 1989

ANNA MAE CUCHNA

Mrs Anna Mae Cuchna of 915 Lincoln Avenue, Niles, was a volunteer during the 1985 tornado in Niles. She helped at the Red Cross headquarters at Niles McKinley High School. She served meals with other volunteers to victims of the tornado and those in the relief organizations. After serving with the Red Cross, Mrs Cuchna volunteered to help with the Niles Coalition. This organization distributed funds to various families whose insurance was insufficient. Today, Mrs Cuchna teaches at Jackson Elementary School in Niles. She has a husband, James, and three daughters.

M This is an interview with Anna Mae Cuchna for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Tornado of 1985, by Molly McNamara, on November 14, 1989, at 915 Lincoln Avenue, Niles, Ohio, at 4:30 p.m.

Mrs Cuchna, tell me a little bit about yourself. What do you do?

C I teach first grade at Jackson Elementary School in Niles I have twenty students this year, and we have a lot of fun It keeps me busy and keeps me hopping I enjoy them very much, and I enjoy teaching.

M How about your family? Tell me about your family

C I have a husband, James, and I have three daughters. Cindy is a graduate of Edinburg State College Sherri is a student at Cleveland State right now, but she is going to go back to Youngstown State to graduate and get a degree in Communications Maribeth is in the ninth grade at Niles McKinley High School

M I want you to tell me what you were doing on May 31, 1985 Tell me what you remember.

C. I was at my daughter's baccalaureate at St James Church on May 31, 1985 I think that it was St James Church in Warren They were having their baccalaureate services there, and the lights went out.

They did not even have any electricity after a while This occurred right after the mass started You could not hear anyone, and it was dark. It was light, but yet, it was dark We did not know what happened

I drove my daughter there, and my husband drove separately because he came from work and met us there After the service, we all went home My husband and I went home in separate cars, and my daughter went out with a friend.

When I started to go home toward Niles, I could not get through because the roads were blocked off I asked them why I could not get through, and they said, "Well, there was a tornado " I said, "Where was this tornado?" They said, "Well, it was up by the cemetery " I said, "Oh, my goodness. I live very close to the cemetery Did it hit very far or what?"

My other two daughters did not come with us to the service, and they were home alone. Well, I was in a state of panic I was coming into Niles by what I call the back way I am not sure whether it was 153 or 193 It is a main street going out to Warren

I went back, and I tried to go down 422 Well, the traffic was horrendous Finally, I happened to get over, and I turned down some side streets I parked the car, and I was in a state of panic because I wanted to get home. Everybody said, "There is no way you could get down 46 "

M Where were you? Up at the top up here?

C I was up at the top of 422 by the bowling alley heading toward Niles I passed in front of the mall and turned down one of those streets. They said that there was no way I could get in During all of the noise from the ambulances and police cars, I was panically yelling, "Oh, my goodness "

Well, I did not know how it cut across the way it did or how it hit. I was worried about my family The other family was home I did not know whether my daughter was with her friend.

I parked the car on some side street and got out There was a kid there, and he said, "You cannot get through there The tornado came through " I said, "Well, I have to get through I have to get home to make sure that my daughter is okay "

I ran with my heels and my hose on I still had a dress on from the church. I went running through these woods and through these trees. This kid took me through the trees, and we ended up behind Lincoln School There were these men there who said, "You better get out of here. We do not know if any of these gas lines are going to go."

I said, "I just want to get home and make sure that my kids are okay." Then, I cut up by Lincoln School I did manage to get across the wires that went down It does panic you.

I was thinking about the safety of my family I cut across the yards where I used to live and where I grew up I could cut up there I went through, and there were my kids and the dog out on the sidewalk I said, "Thank God that you are okay " We just hugged each other

As I was coming across the street, I noticed all of the things that were blown all over the place The neighbor's house right next to us had a big hole in the front window It was like something skipped off the top of the roof and went in the ground in the backyard

It was close Like I said, thank God that it was okay Now, my husband was still in his car, and he could not get down 46 either He had an experience, too He got out of his car somewhere by 46 and parked it He came through the cemetery He said, "I could not believe what I saw. It was a really eerie feeling, like in a war zone or something."

He said, "All of the cars were overturned from Carmen's parking lot Then, he said that he heard this voice calling, "Jim, Jim " He thought, "What is this?" going through the cemetery It was funny but not at the time because he could not figure out what was happening to him

You could not see clearly through the trees, and it was getting dusk by then It turned out to be a friend of ours saying, "Jim, are you trying to get home " He said, "Yes, I have to see if everybody is okay." The friend also said, "The girls are fine I just saw them " Right around the corner about six houses up, there were quite a few trees down Actually, everything was down there That was how it was when we got home

M How did you get involved with the Relief Organization? Tell me about the Red Cross

C Well, we did not have any electricity or power, and I could not cook. I could not do anything I told the girls that I heard on the radio or something that they needed help

down at the high school I said, "Well, there is no sense in sitting here and doing nothing I feel like I need to help somebody Thank God that I am well, and I can go down there to offer my services "

I went down to the high school and asked if they needed any help Well, of course, they needed help I spent a good part of the days there because we did not have electricity for three days

M What exactly were you doing?

C Well, I guess a little bit of everything At first, I think that I was basically making sandwiches Ellen Sharkey was the main person from the Red Cross that I was talking to at that time She would say, "We are going to be feeding so many people, and we need this many sandwiches Then, we have to get a menu for tomorrow "

When somebody called, we would ask the person what they could donate Then, we would start to plan a menu. The places like Giant Eagle or whatever would call and say that they had hot dogs and hamburger meat that they could give us because their freezers were shut down They were donating it Whatever she told me to do, whether it was cooking, setting the table, or preparing the food, I did it

M How many people did you serve? Do you remember?

C At first, there were not too many There may have been a couple hundred After a couple of days, we fed about five or six hundred people. It may not have been that many, but it was quite a few.

M You are probably right because she gave me figures

C She did Well, it has been quite a while, and it is hard for me to remember exactly how many. At lunch time, they have said, "We have to make sure that we have enough food for three hundred and fifty people. Make sure we have the coffee ready "

M Were you left in charge of the group then?

C After a while, they said, "Okay, Anna Mae, make sure that this is done " Sometimes, I would be in charge of the vans to make sure that they had the food to take out to the people that could not come into the food to them, so they would not have to take that long of a break and keep on working.

Sometimes, we would pack the sandwiches with a cookie, and she would say, "Make sure that you have a fruit, a cookie, and a sandwich, and make sure that we have plenty of coffee or juice for them to drink " Then, they would tell us how many they needed for each stop, so that we would send the things with the drivers

After being down there one or two days, I got familiar with the drivers Ellen Sharkey felt that I knew them I did it then I got involved

M Yes, you got involved. I will say so

C Then, I got to answer telephones

M What do you mean by answering telephones? What kind of calls?

C Well, the calls came from different people from different parts of the country They would say, "What do you need?"

M I did not know that

C They also asked, "What other kind of assistance do you need? What do you need more of? Does she have her list there?" So, if somebody called and said, "We need sixteen loaves of bread for tomorrow morning, could you have them there?" Somebody would bring in bread Then, a lot of families would bake things or make things and send them in

M That was very nice

C It kept me busy I am the type of person who has to keep busy because if I would have sat at home, I would have felt useless I felt like I could help them in that way

I know a lot of the people because I had friends who were involved Friends whose homes were destroyed, but other people were helping them clean up and find things I thought, "Well, I guess I am supposed to be here." It felt like something had called me there

M Was it well organized down there?

C I thought that it was very organized At times, it was confusing, but everything fell into pattern after a while Then, you knew who you could talk to or who you should talk to before you did something.

M: What happened when the people from the state came in?

C The state people set up in the gymnasium Then, when the families would come, they would come in and have coffee while they waited to have their turn The Federal people would know how many people were coming in and how many there were.

We just sort of had to try to keep track Ellen Sharkey was on top of it all Mary Jane Belle was, too I am not sure what the other people's names were, but I know those two women I knew a few other people, but I cannot remember their names

When they would come in and tell you something, you knew that you had to hop to it and do what they asked you to do. They would say, "They will be here in an hour Make sure that you have them ready " You just did it. We pulled together whatever we

could, and we did whatever we could, too

They had full strength going down there because once I got down there and said, "Well, do you need me?" They said, "Well, yes, we really do need you " I said, "Well, which shift would you rather I work?"

Well, even if they did not have somebody in the evening, I would come home, and I would go back down Then, I would go back down early in the morning if they needed me. The cooks from the school system also came in and volunteered their time

They cooked in the kitchen We did not have to worry about that because I never cooked in quantities like that before

They had good homemade soups for them some of the times It was neat to see how everybody pulled together and how everybody just pitched in Somebody would say, "What do you want me to do?" Somebody else would say, "You pack the lunches We will make the sandwiches and put them in bags." It was nice.

M Now, did you ever go out with the trucks when they were delivering the food?

C No, I did not.

M You did not do any of that?

C No, I just stayed back.

M Now, did they call this a canteen? Is that the term for it?

C I do not know

M I had heard a few people mention that because they were feeding all of these people, the Red Cross used this term. Anyhow, after they had closed this down, what did you do with your time?

C Well, they said that they needed help I got a call from one of the girls at our church They put her in charge if the Relief Niles Coalition. They needed volunteers to go out and ask at some of the different homes if they needed any further assistance or if they felt that their insurance took care of what they had

We had to ask specific questions I said, "Sure, we could help anybody else that needs help " Some of the people were quite elderly. They did not have any extra financial help They said, "Well, they may get the money from the bank or something " So, I went and did that

M What area did you cover?

C I covered Niles-Vienna Road and a little bit of 422 over toward Stambaugh's Garage Some of the people still had damage and needed some help. Others said that they did not

want any help Some people just were leery about even giving out any other information

M I wonder why

C I do not know Some people would just say, "No, my insurance is taking care of it " That was it You still just had to be nice and just accept if they naturally did not want to talk to you. That was their own business

M Now, what did they look like back then? I know that they had cleaned some up, but I am sure that you were right there

C Right Quite a bit of it was cleared up by the time I went out there

M Was that not only like a week or so later?

C It was probably about two weeks later that we did that A lot of them had big problems, and they were saying, "I wish that we would have had this sooner "

They felt this way because they hired people to come in and had to pay them, and they would not get the money back It was stump removal from the big trees

M I am surprised that their insurance did not cover that

C I do not know why they did not Some people's insurance covered it, but other's insurance did not It all depended on who they had for their coverage I do not remember now

M So, what was the goal of the Coalition?

C I think that the goal was to see what further service was needed for those who did not have assistance I think that it was the Church of the Nazarene or something that is up on Vienna Road

The Amish people came in and helped them build a log cabin Some helped them build a barn or something for Sisco's I think that the Coalition helped do that because there were people who were still willing to donate time They did not know where their talents could be best put to use

They also cleaned up Steven's Park and the cemetery, which were two big areas The National Guard had to come in with big trucks and everything because of all the trees that were in both of those areas

Many of them wanted power saws or something like them, so that you could put the tree limbs in instead of having to tie everything up That takes a lot of work. It would have been nice just to have those to put your things in when the city brought their trucks, they had to take care of the city properties

M That was a really good idea to form the Coalition because of all the expenses of that

C. Yes, I think that it helped a lot of the people, and it was good. Some people said, "Why are you coming now? Why were you not here a week before?" You have to get organized, too.

You have to put someone in charge and get volunteers to go and help. Everything does take time. Plus, you could not get into a lot of the areas because of the wires being down. I would not want to take the chance of hurting myself.

The wires were down, and we wondered, "Are these not or are they not?" You just do not know. Then, we wondered, "Are there gas leaks or not?"

M That was a terrifying situation.

C. Yes, it sure was. It was terrible the way it went through. It went around, jumped, skipped, and missed many houses. It took a straight path, but it still missed the fewest amount of houses. If it would have just moved one way or the other, what could have happened?

M Sure. It could have wiped out this whole section, rather than the whole cemetery. That was just a bunch of tombstones. Then, the Coalition did help clean up a lot of that, too.

C. I think that I remember what part they had. I just remember this, and I remember Sue Heatherington. She was in charge of that.

M What was your overall impression and the most impressive thing about this whole situation? What do you remember?

C I just think that the way the people all pulled together and helped the families that were hit by the tornado and the willingness to give time and effort. The people who volunteered their time to go down to the high school and work.

There were cooks and janitors that came down to help keep the buildings clean without expecting any compensation for it. You know that the people were so willing to give. It was nice just to see them being so willing to help.

I would ask them, "Would you like something to eat?" They would answer, "No, I cannot eat a thing." In their minds, they may want to eat, but they usually had somewhere to go.

We had a room with cots for the National Guard if somebody had to go to sleep or just needed a break for the night. They had rooms for both of them.

M. I remember going down there and seeing all of the clothing. I was just overwhelmed.

C It is true that some people donated clothing. I forgot about those rooms, too. I went down there one day because they did not need me in the kitchen. They told me, "Well,

you can go down there and help for a little while if you want to "

We were going through clothes or having the people go in and see if there was something that they needed. It was just nice to see how people poured their services or brought whatever they asked for and to see how kind everyone was. I was really impressed with that. The Red Cross came in really fast.

M That impresses me, too

C. How they do that, set up, and know right where to go really impresses me. I feel that the red Cross is at the top of my list for donations or whatever because they do not hesitate, and they are right there

I know that they cannot answer everybody's questions or help everybody like some people expect them to, but some people have to think that they are not the only one there, too. Everybody is different

M That is what I was going to say next. You were talking about these people when you were working in the Coalition who wished that you would have been there earlier. I think that with a little bit of retrospect they probably think that they did the best they could with such little time as volunteers.

C Right. In order to get set up like that, just a few people that are in our Red Cross office are able to get things going like that. I think that it is great

M Now, are you involved in the Red Cross at all?

C No, I am not

M. How about when another disaster strikes?

C Hopefully, we will not have another one, but if they do need me, I know that they will call me. Actually, Mrs. Sharkey called me to help her with something, but I just could not help her with it. She wanted me to get involved in it, but I was involved with too many things at church

With my daughter in school, there are many activities that I am involved with regarding her and my other children. You can only spread yourself so thin, and that is it.

M Yes, I was just thinking that was the last day of school, right?

C Yes, for some kids it was.

M How about your kids?

C I am trying to think. I do not remember if we were out or not

M I know that you were a teacher.

C I think that we usually go until June 5, 6, or 7, or something like that. Then, I do not remember going to school anymore because there was not any school. I do not know whether or not we ended early that year. We may have for some reason or another.

M. Was there any damage to the school itself?

C Our school had no damage. Now, a couple of the other schools had damage done to them. That was really weird.

My room in Jackson School is in the corner, which overlooks Weddell Park. One night, I had a dream that I saw a tornado coming over the school, and it was not a couple months later that the tornado did come through. It missed our school, though.

Our school does not have any windows that can be opened, but there was a window in my dream. I could not actually see it. We were not in school when that happened, but I saw how it happened. It was really weird. I was kind of like a premonition, but why?

I had never thought of a tornado. I do not remember of it before. I do remember that now. I do remember telling my husband, and it was a one-floor building without a basement. That still bugs me.

M Right, I will bet.

C Now, I always feel safer in a home with a basement. Well, I did, but after that happened, it is like one of those things that preys on your mind that you have to take care of.

M Yes. Do you think that it could happen again?

C I am sure it could. I remember when there was a tornado in the 1940's when I was very young.

M. Yes, there was.

C It came up Vienna Avenue. I am not sure if my parents were building our house on Vienna Avenue then or if it happened before they started building. It had come through, and I think that it damaged a little bit of the cemetery. It took a lot of the trees where all of the apartments used to be.

You never know when this can happen again. They say that history repeats itself about every twenty, thirty, or forty years. You do not like to think of those things.

M Yes, that is true.

C It seems to happen whether we like it or not.

- M Is there anything else that you would like to add that I have not covered that maybe you would just like to say?
- C I cannot think of anything right now. Actually, I can think of one comment that I have heard from people They were dissatisfied with the Federal Relief Program established by the Federal Government The people were a little bit negative about that
- M I know that they were I had interviewed people on Woodglen, and it seemed to me that a lot of those people were really disappointed
- C. That is what it was for them, and I will bet you that is where it came from It was like they were lower income housing, and a lot of damage was done there It was hard for them
- M. Yes, it was because most of these other people did not need the federal aid or the insurance.
- C They had good insurance coverage and everything, and it took care of them Those people that did not have good insurance coverage could not get started soon enough on rebuilding or whatever because they did not have the money
- M I want to thank you véry much for letting me interview you
- C. Oh, you are welcome. I just wished that I maybe could have helped you out moire, if I helped out at all.
- M· No, you did Thanks

End of Interview