

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Tornado of 1985

Personal Experience

O.H. 1296

JOHN SHAFFER

Interviewed

by

Molly McNamara

on

December 7, 1989

M: This is an interview with John Shaffer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Tornado of 1985, by Molly McNamara, on December 7, 1989, at 929 Frederick Street, at 3:00 p.m.

Okay Mr. Shaffer, tell me a little bit about yourself. Tell me what you do.

S: I am married, like I say, for 42 years. We are a very close knit family. I have three daughters. I have been in politics a total of 21 years. It has been a very interesting political life. The last four years I was near Niles and decided that I was going to retire at the end of the four years. We did, and then my wife and I purchased a little place in Florida and spent the winters in Florida. We are kind of looking forward to going down there this January.

M: That sounds nice. I want to take you back to May 31, 1985. I want you to tell me what you were doing that day, relive that whole day.

S: The day started at 8:00 in the morning. I went to the city building to visit as usual. To remember what went on that day in the office, I cannot. I sure can remember what happened that evening. I was standing out in the backyard in the garage doorway with the dog. All of a sudden I heard this tremendous roaring sounding just like a freight train coming. I looked up and I could see the debris in the wind. You would see the debris in the tornado just floating around and around. It looked like it was coming directly for us.

M: Which direction was it?

S: It was coming out of the south. All I could think of was my youngest daughter had a new baby. The youngest daughter and the baby were here. We do not have a basement so I came in and I screamed, "Get the baby!" My wife grabbed the baby and squeezed her as hard as she could. They ran across the yard into the neighbor's basement. By that time I could see the tornado turning. I knew it had hit down below us. What I did, I grabbed my police radio and ran down to Nancy St. The end of Bowman got a little bit, but Nancy's got the blunt of it. When I got to Nancy Street, it was just like you see in the movies where everything is stopped and looks so eerie. I thought, "Oh my god, everybody is dead," from my first impression of what I saw. In the meantime it just seemed like the people came out of the ground.

M: You were one of the first persons down there?

S: Right, because I ran through the backyards. The people started to come out. I just made an assessment of what happened down there and found there were some people injured. I would like to back up a little bit. My first thought was everybody was dead. After I saw the people coming up, it seemed like they were coming up out of the ground. It made me feel a little bit relieved that there was some life down there. There were some injuries. I

could not get any contact from the police radio because everything was tied up. Everything was down. The power was off. I ran all the way up to Washington Avenue from Nancy St. and Lane's ambulance was coming just at the light here on Vienna. I grabbed them and they came down. We did get the injured out of there real fast. There was one younger boy at the end of Nancy's street that was cut fairly bad. It was the funniest thing. In the one house there was a girl that came down to Stauffer's. Maybe you do not want to use that name Stauffer's.

M: No, I interviewed her.

S: She came down there to pay the rent from the house she had rented. She came out as the tornado hit and she was in another house with a back injury. That was somebody that went down to pay the rent and got caught in the tornado. I really did not know how bad it was, except what I saw down there. In the meantime, I did get some information. Woodglen was hit, Shatter Ridge, and the Niles Park Plaza. My next move was to go to the Niles Park Plaza which I did. I was devastated when I saw the Niles Park Plaza.

M: You probably thought all of Niles looked like that at that time?

S: Yes. Lieutenant Gorby of the police department set up a command post at the top of the strip, just by the Niles Park Plaza. He did a fantastic job of organizing everything. In the meantime, I came back to check on my family. I said to Ann who is my wife, "My god, I think that so many people are dead." I thought, "Oh my god, everybody is dead out there."

In the meantime, I came back and checked on the family. I thought there was only one thing to do, try to get hold of the governor. In the meantime, the Red Cross had set up a station at Washington Junior High School. I could not get through to the governor. The irony of this was this telephone here was the only telephone in the area working.

I finally got up there and got hold of Joe Williams who was our state representative at the time, and I said, "Joe, for god sakes, can you get hold of the governor?" He said, "Jack, I do not have a telephone." I said, "Go down to my house." He said, "You are kidding." He came down and called the governor. The governor got in about 1:30 the next morning at the police station. We decided what we were going to do. He ordered the National Guard. Walt Desney, I do not know whether you know Walt Desney from Mahoning County Disaster Services.

M: The name sounds familiar.

S: He came in and we set up the headquarters at the fire station. That was to coordinate the tornado, the cleaning up, the different things that had to be done. I do want to say that the ham radio operators did the most fantastic job of anybody. They set up and had their bases in different sections in Niles. They were in contact with the county.

- M: That was probably the only real way to contact people.
- S: That is right. Everything was out. Ohio Bell was another company that did a fantastic job. Mike Iberis, I do not know if you know him or not, he came in and coordinated putting up phones outside the city building and got us phone communication with different agencies. Let us slow down so I can remember everything.
- M: That is fine.
- S: The National Guard did come in. They set up a command post at the police department downstairs in the safety complex. They patrolled. I decided the very next day to put a curfew on at 9:00 p.m. We arrested anybody that was out after 9:00 p.m.
- M: Did you run into a lot of problems?
- S: I was just going to say, it was amazing that there was hardly any looting. Some of the looting that happened was right at the Convenient Store, up here. We caught the people that were looting. We took the stuff off of them that they had and told them, "Get out, stay out."
- M: It is hard to believe that people would do that.
- S: It was hard to really realize how bad it was until I made the complete rounds of Woodglen and, of course, back down to Cynthia because I did not realize it went as far down as Cynthia at the very beginning. We made that survey, and up in Shadow Ridge, then back out to the Niles Park Plaza.
- M: What was your impression when you saw all of it?
- S: I thought this could not happen because it is the second tornado that I was in. I was in the one in 1948. This was as not populated at this time. It made the same path as this one. Like Ann said, it was not populated at the time. I looked at the cemetery. I thought it cannot be. There was nothing left of that cemetery. We had reports that it blew the mausoleum away. The mausoleum was full of bodies. I thought, "What next." Thank god it did not. It just took the roof off. My service director, Louis Slania, did a fantastic job.
- M: I did not realize they took part in that.
- S: The Department of Transportation helped us get the cemetery cleaned up. They helped Nancy and Cynthia, out on Woodglen they helped to get the debris out of the way. They mostly did things like that to get the roads open for us. It was very important for us to get into a lot of these areas. We had, of course, a power outage which was devastating for the

simple reason that some sick people operated on generators, the safety complex operated on generators. I do have to say the light department of the city of Niles did a fantastic job.

M: I was surprised how fast everything came back on.

S: The power was back on in twenty-four hours. The thing that helped us was our main sub on 422 by the Y.M.C.A. Thank god when the tornado went through that it missed the sub station or we would have been really devastated. They put that back into service and we did have power, not to every person, but the majority had power. We set up a cafeteria, a food distribution center I should say at the high school. People were just fantastic. They worked 24 hours continuously.

We had a lot of food donated. It got to the point where we were running low on food. It just goes to show you how people are. I called one food distributor and I said, "We are really out of food. We need meat, eggs, the general things." Within a half hour there was a truck at the high school with over \$3,000.00 worth of food on it, donated. I wanted to give the company recognition. They said they did not even want recognition. They did not want their name mentioned. It gave you a good feeling that people really care.

I have to give lieutenant John Hughes a lot of credit because he really organized a lot for the clean up and that. Immediately the governor sent in some people from his cabinet. We set up tables in the high school gym, for the different type of agencies like clothing, homes that were destroyed, roofing, so many different things, but what we did was pass an ordinance. The council called a special meeting to protect the people of Niles. Every contractor that worked in the city of Niles must be licensed and must go to the building office and present his license. That was to protect the people from these fly by nights that followed tornados who came in.

M: I have heard a few stories about those.

S: They would rip-off some of these poor old people out of their money and that. I have to say that things went well as far as the clean up went. We had some problems about places to dump which is what we did. We went over to the old city dump and opened the gates up and dumped it. I imagine you have heard a lot of complaints.

M: It depends on which part of Niles you went to.

S: I imagine the people in Woodglen.

M: Yes.

S: The people on Woodglen felt that they were neglected which is not true.

M: They had different reasons for feeling the way that they did. I am sure you would know more about it than I did. I only talked to some select few people. What can you say? It was their own fault. The insurance that they had was not adequate.

S: I might as well say it. Nobody was killed there, thank god. There were a few injuries.

M: I think you are right. I think they knew that, too.

S: I think that they are, and it is hard to say that, but it is true.

M: I think that they are.

S: There was a lot of substandard housing. If you go down Woodglen today, it looks much better. The insurance companies, I felt were very cooperative. There were a few problems with people in the city who had their mortgages through a California company.

M: Really. I did not hear that.

S: There were some problems there. It eventually worked out really well. The local insurance companies, they were fantastic, as fast as could be. I do not think we had much sleep.

M: That was my other question I wanted to ask you.

S: Probably 24 or 26 hours without sleep. We all had blue jeans on then. U.P.S. pulled up a couple days after the tornado hit and dropped a big box off addressed to me. I thought, "What is this?" I open it up and it was a whole box of T-shirts from Willard Scott saying, "Mayor, I hope these will keep you dry," T-shirts and hats.

M: No kidding.

S: Yes, I was really surprised. Getting back to the tornado, it was amazing how the people banded together, especially on Nancy, Cynthia, Shadow Ridge, Niles Park Plaza. It was togetherness that you never saw before in the city. Everyone just seemed to come into one big, knitted network. It started immediately. The clean up started immediately. We gave as much service as we possibly could because the manpower shortage was there. We had people in the water department helping the light department. Everybody pitched in and worked so hard. The fire department did a fantastic job. The police department, I cannot say enough about either one of these departments. I felt that it would be quite some time before we would fully recover. It was amazing how fast we did. I think Nancy Stauffer probably was the first one to really get things moving because she immediately rebuilt her house. Bingo, it was ready. I think that gave a lot of help to the other people down there.

M: Encouraged them.

S: That is the section there that went along real well. Shadow Ridge, I would say 90% of the things went well. There were some people that left Niles. We did not lose too many from the tornado.

M: No.

S: Some contractors bought those homes and rebuilt them and made them just like they were before. The National Guard stayed. They wanted to go within four days, but we met with the commander and asked him if they would please stay the full week. The commissioners, the sheriff, and myself talked to them and they decided they would stay the full week. We left the curfew on for a week. Like I said, it worked very well.

Our trucks did pick up as much debris as we could. The Board of Health worked very closely with people because there were situations where the refrigerators were gone, the food that was there was under the debris. We were concerned about the rat situation because it was in May and June. The weather was going to get warm. We worked very closely with the people. Ellen Sharkey, god bless her. She was just a super gal. She still is a super gal. We had a food wagon that went around. We went to Woodglen and fed people.

M: You took part in that, too?

S: I did not. We coordinated it. It was very well received because there were a lot of people in the Woodglen area that did not want to leave their homes.

M: Yes, I heard that a lot of times.

S: We were concerned that they got enough to eat. In fact, we made three trips a day into that area.

M: What were those people so afraid of?

S: I really do not know. If you know a lot of those people there, they have been there a long time in that area. They just did not want to leave. If you notice, the house on the corner of Woodglen.

M: On the right hand side?

S: Yes, the right hand side. Those people were caught in the tornado.

M: I interviewed them, too.

S: It was one of the greatest feelings that I had ever had when I saw that house go up. I do not know whether you know who did that.

M: I do not know who did it, but I know they were very proud of the fact that it was one of the first houses to go up.

S: It is a nice little house, it really is. The two Swegan brothers did that. Of course, Higley's did the landscaping. Everybody did something there.

M: I am sure personally, a lot of people came to you because they knew you since Niles is such a small town.

S: Yes, like I say, Niles can be a close knit town. There were a couple of people who really were desperate, and we did help. There were one or two people that were really out to try and make money.

M: Really?

S: Yes. There were a few times that I gave a twenty dollar bill or a ten dollar bill to somebody that I knew that was really desperate. I thought we were very lucky as far as our schools went. Boham School did not get a lot of damage. It had some. Of course, Lincoln down here had some. We had a lot of people that had minor damages that were the biggest pain in the neck; more so than the people that had lost their houses.

M: Why do you think they were like that?

S: I do not know. It really bothered me to think that some people would be like that. There was a guy who had a couple shingles off his roof and there was a tree limb hanging over it.

M: What did they think you should do?

S: He thought that we should bring the big fire truck out and get up there and cut the limb down. In fact, I told him, "No way. We are going to take care of the people that are desperate," which we did. There were some people that were like that. It was disturbing.

M: It probably tried your patients.

S: It opened my eyes to my fact that Niles needed a warning system so bad.

M: I wanted to ask you about that, too.

S: We had the one at Washington, the one at Roosevelt School. At the time I was in office,

money was really tight. With the ministers' association through the Methodist church, they collected quite a bit of money. There was "x" amount of dollars left, and we went out and got a price on the siren. That is the one in the city building downtown. We did repair what we could. I do not feel it is adequate.

M: Even today?

S: Not today. I still do not feel it is adequate. We are better off today than we were.

M: Why do you feel that it is not adequate?

S: I do not feel there are enough sirens located within the city. A lot depends on how the wind is blowing.

M: You are right. I think that is true.

S: Of course, the one that we got through the Methodist's is a real good one. It is the one by the city building. Of course, there is a switch that the police department puts off it anything happens. They get the weather watch. You will have to ask some questions. I hope I am not missing anything.

M: I am just fascinated that you remember so much. I am trying to think of what we have not covered. I know I will think of it later.

S: If you think of it later call me. You heard about the party.

M: Tell me about that.

S: What a fantastic party. Everybody was out from the block. That would be the block of Washington, down. That would be North where they were hit. We had a party that was unbelievable. It was the greatest thing. To see people so happy after seeing them so sad. I have a son-in-law who was lieutenant colonel in the reserves. His name is Ed Brill. He married my oldest daughter. They were in Boardman at the time. The first reports that came out were that Niles was wiped out. They immediately got through some way to us. My daughter and my son-in-law took it upon themselves and went into the cemetery and made a damage assessment of the cemetery.

M: Immediately.

S: Immediately, the graves, the stones that were down, unbelievable. Of course, he being a lieutenant colonel, he worked with the National Guard. A funny thing, we had everybody accounted for except two little boys. I said to him, "You know, I just do not feel that those two little children are missing. Let's do another search behind the Park Plaza." We

had heard that they were in that area. We did another search and we came up with nothing except a fellow down on Nancy Street had his trousers hung on the door of the closet with his wallet and everything in it. My son-in-law found them on route eleven, with the wallet still in the pocket. Anyhow, getting back to these two little boys, the aunt had picked them up and took them to Cortland and never notified anybody. They knew we were looking for them.

M: Oh god.

S: I will tell you, that was a nightmare.

M: I'll bet.

S: Once we found those two little guys we felt a little bit better. Backing up a little bit, the very next morning at 6:00 there was the county commissioner, myself, Bill Motice, there was a National Guard helicopter that picked us up at the Youngstown Municipal Airport and took us on a tour of the county and the city. We went all the way up through Newton Falls, almost all the way to Ravenna. As you looked down from the helicopter, you could see how that tornado came. You could just see it. It looked like somebody had taken saws and a big bulldozer and cut the path.

M: I'll bet that was amazing to see.

S: Unbelievable. You could see how it turned and hit Newton Falls. As we were flying over Newton Falls we flew along the railroad track. The cars were just blown over everywhere. We came back down around and picked up in Hubbard Township and back over here.

M: What was the purpose of that? They wanted to show you the damage in other areas?

S: Yes. I will tell you, really and truly it was unbelievable to see what I said about how it came down and you could see the path, like somebody had bulldozed it out and sawed the trees down. It was unbelievable.

M: There was something I should have brought up a while ago and I forgot, I wonder if you remember this. Do you remember if there was a second warning tornado, supposedly right after the first one?

S: Yes, I do.

M: Do you remember where you were during that? I can remember that distinctly.

S: I know I was at the command post at the Niles Park Plaza.

M: Was it really chaotic after that?

S: No, it was not. We felt that what to be is to be. I think the thing that bothered us more than anything was why all of a sudden they gave you a second warning when there was not a first warning.

M: Yes, I wondered that myself.

S: This was a thing that amazed us. There was no warning whatsoever.

M: Why wasn't there a warning?

S: I really do not know. I think it was probably the highest wind velocity that has ever been recorded at 368 or 369 miles and hour. It is unbelievable that there were not more lives lost.

M: That is why I think I was so amazed.

S: It was a happy feeling to know. I felt so terrible for the people that died in the tornado.

M: But it could have been much worse.

S: One thing I remember, I do not think I would forget as long as I live, the woman at the Niles Park Plaza that they got out from under the debris. She was dead. They brought her back and I could see her chest raising. I said, "Oh god, she is going to make it." She did die on the way to the hospital. She worked for Rent-A-Center.

After the tornado and everything got settled down a little bit, the police department wanted to start a cemetery restoration fund, which they did. Rent-A-Center gave \$5,000.00 at the time. Myself for an example, my mom was one of the older residents in Niles. She passed away after the tornado. Instead of flyers we would give the money to the restoration fund which we did. That is how the trees in the cemetery were planted, through the restoration fund, and a lot of donations.

M: And that is still going on today, right?

S: I think they closed the fund up.

M: They have done a great job, though.

S: Yes, actually I will not see it, but you might.

M: Maybe.

S: You never know.

M: That was a beautiful place.

S: It was a gorgeous place. Getting back to the tornado, I worked very closely with a gal from Columbus. I cannot think of her name now, but I will later. I met with her a number of times in Columbus and Niles. We were reimbursed for quite a bit through FEMA. I think they finally finished up. They were over payed \$44,000 dollars and we had to repay that. That is the way it goes.

M: They took care of all the schools, right?

S: Yes, they took care of that. We had a lot of volunteers that did a tremendous amount of work. We had the World Wide Church Association come in here and build some houses on Woodglen.

M: They are not the Amish ones, right?

S: No, they are from down around Georgia and North Carolina. You might want to check that name. I am not sure.

M: What name was it?

S: The World Church Association.

M: I know I heard people mention a church that came in, but I do not remember the name, either.

S: We had from Pensacola, Florida, a truckload of clothes and furniture and that.

M: Somebody else told me this.

S: Bernie Profato, you probably do not remember him.

M: I know the name.

S: He went down to Pensacola, Florida. He is a baseball umpire in amateur baseball. He went down there and met the mayor of Pensacola. I sent him a proclamation and a key to the city. After I left office in May around the date of the tornado, the 31st of May, they came up and Mayor Parise met him out here at Niles Park Plaza with a little ceremony and that. I thought clear from Pensacola, Florida. Who cares about a little city like Niles.

M: People did care.

S: Yes, they did care, they really did.

M: What would you say is probably your most lasting impression of all of this if you could think of only one or several? What are some of your greatest impressions of this whole event?

S: I would have say the people and how they cooperated and how much faith they have in the city, for them to say I am going to stay and I am not moving. That probably is one of them. I think the other one would be how the people give from their hearts.

M: Despite all the ones bickering.

S: All the bickering you had from this and how the people gave. The most important thing was there were not more people killed.

M: You talked about the fund that was set up for the cemetery. What were some of the other organizations set up after the cleanup was all done, say after the first two weeks.

S: There really was not anything after that once everything was cleaned up. We had a lot of work to do. We had to clean up the old dump and things like that. Anne, what were the gal's names? They came in and they collected money.

M: Were they through the Niles coalition?

S: Yes.

M: Sue Hetherington was one, probably.

S: No, these are from out of town. Okay, Father Teolis.

M: From Mount Carmel.

S: He used to be. I wish you could check that. There were two gals from that, that collected money and brought it down. Was it \$750.00? Yes, it was. They worked at a plant and set up a collection there and came down and presented the check which we gave to the Red Cross for \$760.00. Father Teolis sent a check from the church for \$750.00 to the Red Cross. I think the biggest thing was the B & O Railroad.

M: Yes, I think somebody else told me this, too.

S: They gave \$25,000.00. National Gypsum Company gave \$10,000.00. This was not just for publicity. This is something that they wanted to do because the B & O Railroad, I remember one remark they made that they ran through the city of Niles for so many years

they felt they had to do something for the city at that time. How I wish I could remember. In fact, the two gals came down one time after and came to our house here.

M: Maybe you will remember it later.

S: I just cannot say enough about the people.

M: I did not know all that, that so many of these legal organizations had given those large amounts of money. That all went to the Red Cross?

S: Yes, through Niles. It was something that they wanted and they were very persistent, it stayed in the city. Nothing out of the city, which they did. I do want to say the Red Cross did a fantastic job. There are a lot of people that are down on the Red Cross.

M: I think they are down on it because they do not really understand what they do.

S: After the fishing season went out I said to my wife Ann, "I am going to drive for the Red Cross." That is an eye opener when you see what they do. I was up at the office the other day and it was like a zoo up there. They do so many things that people do not know about. Bill Motice is head of the Red Cross in Warren. He helped me tremendously during the tornado. In fact, in March of that year, Barb Monsoe is her name, had the job that Sue Hetherington had for the Red Cross for a while. She was there many years. She gave a damage assessment course. As myself, the service director, my secretary, the city nurse, and the board of health secretary, we took the damage assessment course in March. Who would ever think that we would ever need it. In fact, I just talked to her when I was in Florida. She is living in Sarasota now, the Siesta Keys. We kind of reminisced about the tornado.

M: Interesting.

S: I often thought many times after the tornado that it could have been a lot worse, the way it came, the course it followed.

M: It could have hit all this area instead of the cemetery.

S: They say the tornados follow water. That is where it turned. It came across and down, then back. It is a noise that once you would hear you would never forget.

M: I was just thinking that because I was up on Roosevelt, across from Shadow Ridge and I did not hear anything. I saw it coming toward the house and we all ran into the basement. I saw the debris and everything blowing. I do not remember any noise. It must have been because I was so afraid that I ran like hell into the basement. For the life of me that was something that I thought I would remember. My younger brother said that, too. It

was just this horrible sound.

S: It sounded like the loudest freight train.

M: Before I had turned on the tape recorder you were talking about the earthquake in California. Tell us that story on tape. That was interesting.

S: It was probably around 5:00 one afternoon. I got a call from the Los Angeles Times. They wanted to know if I was the mayor in Niles when the tornado hit. I said, "Yes, but I am not the mayor now, so I do not think you want to talk to me." She said, "Oh yes, we want to talk to you." I said, "Okay." They asked me how I felt when the tornado hit Niles. How did they react? Did they rebuild? I said, "Yes." She said, "Do you think if it ever happens again that they would rebuild?" I said, "Yes, but you have to realize Niles is only a town of 23,000 people compared to the size of San Francisco." She said, "We wanted to get a small town reaction." I said, "If it would happen, would they rebuild again?" I said, "I am sure that they would. I know that they would stick together just like they did last time." She thanked me and I never heard anything again.

M: It was probably an article.

S: It was probably an article in the paper, just getting reactions from different people. The Government had a pretty bad name here. I said, "I cannot say anything bad about them. Sometimes the government does not work fast. I think that is true. The Governor was in here within a matter of hours. I do want to say the governor gave 150%. In fact, he came back a couple times to visit. In fact, he walked through the tornado areas talking to people. I think it made some democrats out of republicans.

M: I think I just have one other question to ask. I usually try to sum it up by asking people. You probably covered this already. Do you think it could ever happen again, and if it did, what do you think the reaction would be?

S: I think it could happen any time.

M: Here, though?

S: Yes. I told you before I was in one other one in the city of Niles. I think it could happen again. I would hope it never would. I feel that with the experience we had, that I think whoever was mayor at the time would use some of the people who had the experience like we did. I did not mention we used the people from Zenia, Ohio. They gave us some tips on what to do. Really, the tip from Zenia was exactly what we set up with the contractors. Like I say, I am sure it could happen. I hope it never does. There is a lot of experience here in Niles that could help the city, too. I think the city was fortunate in itself there was not a lot of damage. We had a little bit of damage to the fire station and

our electrical system. I am sure if it ever did happen there would be no problem with the people.

M: And as an ex-mayor, what advice would you give to a future mayor?

S: I would say, "Joe, go find the experienced people that you have at your fingertips and let them help you."

M: Is there anything else you would like to add?

S: I cannot think of anything more. I will probably think of a million things laying in bed tonight.

End of Interview.