

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Tornado of 1985

Personal Experience

O.H. 1298

BETSY W. WALLACE

Interviewed

by

Molly McNamara

on

December 13, 1989

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: BETSY W. WALLACE

INTERVIEWER: Molly McNamara

SUBJECT: tornado of 1985, Youngstown Coalition,  
damage done, help needed and given

DATE: December 13, 1989

M: This is an interview with Mrs. Betsy Wallace for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the 1985 tornado project, by Molly McNamara, at 126 North Crandon Rd., Niles, Ohio, on December 13, 1989, at 9:30 a.m.

Mrs. Wallace, tell me a little bit about yourself. What do you do in a normal day?

W: We get the kids off to school. Then, I either go to work or do things around the house. The kids come home from school, and we run around and do the things that all parents do with kids that are in high school and elementary [school].

M: Where do you work?

W: I work for Troutman's. I work part time as a pharmacist. I do relief work for them. I work one-ten hour day a week, and anything else that they need filled in.

M: That's a long day!

W: Yes, but it gets it out of the way in one day.

M: Yes, I guess so. (laughter) You're also on the school board here in Niles?

W: Right. I sit on the school board, and that takes an incredible amount of time.

M: I imagine.

W: But, it's kind of rewarding at times.

M: So, your life is pretty busy [and] pretty fulfilling?

W: Right. With kids at this age, it's just very busy--running around, getting them from place to place, and trying to work everybody's schedule together so that we can occasionally sit down and have dinner together. (laughter)

M: Okay, I want to take you back to May 31, 1985 and talk about the tornado. Do you remember that day in particular? For most people, it stands out and they know exactly what they were doing. Tell me what you were doing that day.

W: The thing that I vividly remember is sitting on the basement steps and talking on the telephone to a friend of mine at about 4:30 in the afternoon. The next thing I saw was the kids bringing all of their toys in from the swimming pool, all their inflatable toys. I said, "What are you doing?" And, Carrie said to me, "We're going to have a tornado." (laughter) I said, "Oh, right." I'm laughing with this friend of mine on the phone, and they're bringing all of this stuff down to put into the basement. It was kind of a nasty day.

M: How did they know that?

W: I don't know! That's what I mean! It's just so vivid, because it was such a bizarre thing for them to say. I think that the training they get at school about tornadoes, how to prepare and where to go makes them acutely aware of them. I can't imagine what would have made them say, "I think we're going to have a tornado," or not, "I think," but she just definitely said, "We're going to have a tornado." They brought all their stuff in and we laughed on the phone. We closed up the house and everything. Jeff came home from work, and it had started to storm. The kids were really nervous, and had gone to the basement.

M: Really?

W: Yes. Jeff and I were pooh-poohing the whole thing. I walked out on the front porch. We just had huge hail and drops of water! I was told later that a lot of that was the water from Mosquito Creek. It was being dropped back down.

M: Oh, really? I didn't know that.

W: They said that all of that creek water was sucked up, and then dropped down in this area. At any rate, I called the kids. I was telling them to come up out of the basement to come look at this. This is how foolish you feel. There are the kids doing the right thing. As adults, you should be down in the basement instructing them, and they were the ones telling us, "You've got to come down into the basement." We could see debris, only at the time, we didn't know it was debris. It was over the rooftop of Pentecost's house. We thought, "What is all of that?" It was just this big cloud of stuff going by. We didn't ever see the funnel, but we saw all this stuff flying by over the tree tops.

M: Was the sky black over that way?

W: Yes. It was just a typical stormy day. We didn't really even have that much wind right here. It was just right over the tops. That was all that we could see, the stuff flying by over the trees in the park.

Then, the rain stopped, and we wanted to go run out to K-mart or something. Not having any idea that anything had happened, we jumped in the car. Somebody was having a birthday party, and we had to run out and get a gift for them. We drove up the hill to the park, and we could see all this stuff laying around. As we pulled down, we could see that there were trees down all over the park. When we got down to Hartzell, there was insulation every place. All of a sudden, Jeff said, "I think there's been a tornado." My parents live right there, so we were just panic stricken and didn't know what to think. We were only several blocks from them.

M: What street do they live on?

W: Barclay, which is just two street this way from the cemetery. We got over there. My dad was out of town, but my mom was there, and she was fine. A tree had fallen into their garage, but everybody else was okay. We walked down to the corner, and we could see that it had gone through the cemetery.

M: By this time, did you hear anything? Did you know that there had been a tornado?

W: No, but we knew then, because we could see.

M: Obviously, right.

W: We could see that Convenient [Store] was gone, and a very good friend of our owns that. One of the places that I work for Troutman's is the Medicine Man, which was. . . .

M: [It was] damaged severely.

W: Yes. At that point, we left the kids at my mother's until Jeff and I got in the car to see if there was anything that we could do to help. I wanted to get to the drugstore. I'm the only one that works for Troutman's that lives in Niles. I could see from the hilltop that the side of the building was gone. I asked the police if I could go down. Jeff and I went down and loaded up all of the narcotics into our car.

M: Yes, we were just talking about that the other day, because there was one picture where--I don't know if it was a news clip where I had seen this--the whole building was boarded up. That was one of the things [that] my husband was saying, "They must have closed that up immediately, because of all the drugs in there."

W: Yeah. We went right down. It was just so strange. I guess I had no idea that a tornado was so localized, that you were either in it or you weren't. At the drugstore, the wall was completely gone, but the counter was still there, the drugs were still on the shelf in order, and the plug that the register is plugged into, was plugged into the wall, which was gone, and the register was still sitting on the counter. (laughter) It was just incredible. Anyway, we loaded up all of the narcotics, locked them in the car, and got those out of there, because my main concern at that point was that somebody would get in and get the drugs.

M: That was good thinking, because. . . .

W: As a pharmacist, the first thing you worry about is who's going to take the narcotics if the drugstore is standing open. They had a policeman down there already.

M: Oh, did they?

W: They had somebody posted there, so I explained who I was. I don't remember if it was somebody I knew that knew that I worked there or what it was, but regardless, we did get all of that taken care of. It was just such an incredible . . . I guess you just have no idea about the power of it, until you actually see it. You can see the cars piled up and into the telephone poles right there at the cemetery. It was just incredible!

M: This was immediately after?

W: This was immediately after, yes.

M: I guess, you did see everything first hand?

W: Right. Obviously, it's one of those things where, even if you have a little bit of medical training, the first thing you feel is that you have to ask if there's something you can do to help, which is why we had gone down. They certainly had everything under control immediately, I felt. Like I said, they had somebody posted right at the drugstore making sure that nobody was in there. They had people down trying to get through the debris at Convenient [Store]. It does come back to you. It's just very vivid. The whole evening was very vivid.

M: Where did you go from there?

W: At that point, we went up . . . it seems to me that they were using Washington School as a central location at that point. They were beginning to use that for people to bring blankets, clothes, and flashlights in. So, we collected some stuff to take up there for them that they felt they might be able to use. From that point, I can't really remember, just that we had several more warnings that night and no electricity, obviously. We had an old sofa bed in the basement. The kids had that all fixed up so that we could stay down there that night, because everybody was just petrified that something was going to happen again.

M: How did you get involved down at the high school with the Red Cross? Was that just volunteer work?

W: It was just volunteer [work]. I suppose when I had taken some stuff up to Washington [School], they were looking for people to help with whatever. I had talked to Mary Jane Dell, and said, "What can I do?" They said [that] they really needed somebody to help with the clothing collection. She asked me, "Would you be willing to do that?" I said, "Yes." I had done that before for stuff for the church. (laughter) It's one of those. . . .

M: "Sure, I'll do it."

W: Yeah. (laughter) Okay, "If that's what you need, I'll do it."

M: What did that entail?

W: The amount of clothing that people donated was . . . I think it filled three rooms with garbage bags.

M: I remember going down there and seeing it.

W: We searched through it and found what was usable and what wasn't usable. Eventually, when the whole thing was done, they had trucks come in and take the stuff away that wasn't used, that the people didn't particularly need. People needed sheets, blankets, and clothing for people in the general vicinity that had been left with nothing. People were very generous with things. That was about it. I just helped out with a few other things. There were a lot of teachers that went down and worked on the food lines and so forth. I think that was. . . .

M: That was your main job down there.

W: Yeah.

M: How long did this last? How long were you down there?

W: I want to say it was about a week or so. That point, people had gotten what they needed in the way of immediate. . . .

M: Did a lot of people come in there and use the clothing and stuff, or was there a lot left?

W: There was a lot left!

M: Was that because there was such an abundance of stuff, or people just didn't bother?

W: Yes, there was an abundance of stuff! I'd say more of the lower income people that could really use the clothes, came and took advantage of that. [Jn] a lot of the areas, like the Shadow Ridge area, most of those people didn't have an immediate need for it. There was just an incredible amount of stuff, and some of it really wasn't used. People just ended up putting bags of stuff that really wasn't. . . .

M: I wonder what they did with all of that eventually, if it went to some of the other places that need them?

W: It did. I'm not sure about this, but it sticks in my mind that some church group came with a truck and took it some place down South. They felt that they could use some of the stuff [and] they were in desperate need for clothing. That's just kind of a vague memory. I couldn't honestly tell you that that's for certain what happened to it afterwards.

M: I wouldn't be surprised, though. They probably shipped it all out, rather than throw it away.

W: Right. I think that once everybody had gotten what they needed, that's what happened to it. The only other thing that I really did in an official capacity was to serve on the. . . . They needed a representative from our church to serve on the. . . . Initially, it was the churches that got together to form the coalition.

M: Right. What did that do?

W: They organized everything and structured it as to what needs there were, what priorities [there were], and collected and accepted donations. Many of the denominations donated large amounts of money. They were donated to the coalition so that they could, in turn, divide it up where it was most needed. I think that lasted for about a year.

M: Oh, really!

W: I think they kept it in official capacity for that amount of time.

M: How did they decide who got what, and that kind of thing?

W: If I recall correctly, we had monthly meetings. Each area that had been affected had someone that was their spokesperson, and they would come in and describe what needs they had, what individuals had in the way of needs, and what the area had in the way of needs. I'm real foggy on that. I just remember going to meetings.

M: Lots of meetings!

W: Yes, lots of meetings. I don't ever remember anything . . . you would expect that it would end up in arguments, that this group needed more than that group. I don't remember that that ever happened in the group. They were really very good about trying to make sure that everything was spread out on an equal basis. They helped some people with their applications for the Federal Relief.

M: There must have been enough money in the coalition to cover all of these areas, right?

W: Yes. As I recall, people were very generous with donations. As I said, I know that several of the denominations donated. Maybe, each individual church collected and they sent it to their main office or whatever. I know Catholic Charities was involved very



heavily with it. I just don't remember there being any great need that wasn't able to be met at that point.

M: I know some huge organizations, such as the B & O Railroad--I'm trying to think of one of the other big ones that donated. Was it to the Niles Coalition, or was it to the Red Cross? They gave \$40,000 or so. I know it was B & O, but I'm not sure. They said that they wanted to donate that large amount of money, because they came through Niles all of the time. They saw what had happened here. I wasn't sure who they donated it to. It might have been. . . .

W: I don't remember. I can't remember exactly what the relationship was between the coalition and the Red Cross. I know that they worked hand in hand on this. I don't remember whether they donated to Red Cross, or if it was donated to the coalition, or if they combined the money. I just frankly can't remember how that was all. . . . Have you spoken to Frank Bassett?

M: No, I haven't.

W: He was the chairman of that coalition. He might be somebody you might want to . . . even if you talk to him on the phone, he could give you some of the more specific details about what the coalition did. Do you remember that they hired Sue Heatherington?

M: Yes. Her name comes up every time I talk to somebody.

W: Maybe she was involved in the Catholic Charities at the time?

M: Yes, I believe she was.

W: That's how she ended up being a choice for that.

M: Do you think that accomplished much?

W: I think it did. I think that it was certainly a nice structure so that everybody wasn't going off on their own. I think that kind of pulled all of the areas together, and then they all worked together to help each other, instead of having each area try to deal with their own needs. This way, everybody combined their efforts and worked on it as a team. I think Frank could probably give you some more specific information.

M: That sounds good. Do you think that this could happen again in Niles, and if it did, do you think we're prepared for it this time?

W: I think it could happen again, and I don't think it's anything you can prepare for at all. I think that the emergency sirens are probably a step in the right direction. I've certainly bought a weather radio with an alarm. (laughter)

M: Every single person I have talked to has told me that, "I bought one!"

W: I wanted to make sure that each of the schools had one. Sure, I think it can happen again. I think if you're in an area like we are, that has had two tornadoes in them, there must be something with the geography of the area that makes it an area where a tornado is likely. No, I don't think that you can prepare for it any more than you can prepare for any natural disaster. It isn't like you can build earthquake-proof buildings.

M: It's still going to happen, right.

W: There are certain things that you can do to prepare for some [disasters]. You can evacuate when you know that there's a hurricane coming, but there's no way to really do anything with a tornado, other than get to a safe place. If you even have a few minutes warning you can get to a safe place, but you can't do anything to prevent the destruction, which you can with some other natural disasters. I think it could happen again, and I think that we're as prepared as we can be. I think we need to keep stressing it in the schools.

M: That's what I was going to ask you about.

W: Certainly, our kids were well-prepared.

M: I guess they were.

W: Frankly, [they were] much better than Jeff and I. I think they took it much more seriously than we did. I certainly would take it seriously now, having seen what it [can do]. I think, when you hear about a tornado, you don't have any idea what they're talking about destruction-wise, until you've actually seen the pieces of wood driven into the wall. You have no idea of the power of it.

M: Being on the board now, has there been any change in the schools now?

W: As far as preparing for this?

M: Yes.

W: No, because I think they were right on top of it at that point. I don't think anything additional needed to be done, because I think they were doing a really good job of training the kids as to what the correct procedure was and so forth. I don't think so, other than what I said. I wanted to make sure that we have weather radios in the buildings so that they would have that couple minutes extra warning.

M: Yes, which it important.

W: Right.

M: There's really just one other question I have to ask you. [It's] something that I ask everybody. What is your most vivid and lasting impression of this whole event, if there is just one that you can think of? [Is there] something that just stands out in your mind?

W: For me, it's the kids saying ahead of time that we're going to have a tornado. I will never get over that! It was just one of those things that I think about frequently. The other one is, of course, I just can't quit thinking or seeing the drugstore without the wall, because those two things were very personal to me at that point. I was so glad the kids had a feeling that they should be someplace safe.

M: Yes. That's good that you weren't all spread out all over Niles or anything like that.

W: I guess it's just a shock that I work here, and I could have been working here at the time.

M: Is that where you are currently? They rebuilt that, obviously.

W: Yes. Right. I guess those are the two most vivid things to me. I suppose most people have vivid memories of something that's personal to them.

M: Yes, oh sure.

W: Those would be the two most personal to me.

M: Is there anything else that you'd like to add that I haven't asked you? I'm trying to think of [something].

W: I've run through everything that I can think about. I think initially, you think . . . and some of it will always be very vivid. At the time, you think, "I'll never get over this. I will never quit worrying every time we have a black sky." Every time we went anywhere for the next year or two, I would be constantly searching the sky to see if it looked like the same kind of

sky that we had on that day. I do remember what the sky looked like that day. That's very vivid! But, it does fade with time. I suppose that's with anything. You remember specific things about it, but the overall thing fades with time. That's probably why it's a good reason to do something like this. If you can still catch people and what they still have, at least some vivid memories of it, then you will have an accurate report of it.

M: That's why I tried to get people that were involved, because everybody has an impression about it. Most of the people that I have interviewed, like you, you were involved for a week at a time. Most people had a couple of hours that they dealt with the experience, and then it was over for them. I tried to get people that were involved for longer than just one day.

W: I wish I could remember more specific details about what was done during the time. But, I think that's just one of those things that, they needed help and I was willing to help.

M: That's important, though.

W: I didn't think it was any big deal. It was just something I did. I just didn't think it was anything special. That's just it.

M: Thank you for the interview.

W: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW