

‘Like something out of the Old Testament’
1974 tornadoes devastated Limestone

By Rebekah Davis
Limestone County Archivist

Until April 27 of last year, I had never really felt afraid during a tornado warning. Growing up, I never understand why Mama buzzed around like a mosquito on speed anytime the tornado sirens went off. But then, until 2011, I had never seen what Mama had seen.

You see, I was born in 1978, when enough time had passed to clean up the mess of the April 3, 1974, tornadoes, and to heal many of that night’s scars... at least, the ones etched into the terrain of Limestone County. But for so many in Limestone, the loss and fear remained fresh, only to be renewed in the storms of 2011.

For weeks, months, and even years following the 1974 tornadoes, stories came out about brutal loss, close calls, changed lives and the many strange twists of a storm of such magnitude.

“I was in a shallow highway ditch and watched what I thought was sure death pass near Tanner,” Bob Dunnivant, at that time a news reporter, said. “It was like something out of the Old Testament, a pillar of clouds, black majestic and ominous moving across the farmlands of southern Limestone County.”

Across Limestone County, survivors did the seemingly impossible and emerged from the piles of rubble that once were their homes.

“We were listening to a radio reporter just south of us at the trailer park saying he was heading for the ditch, and about 15 seconds later our house exploded,” survivor Grady Swanner of Tanner said.

Many in Limestone County were not so fortunate. Locals lost in the 1974 tornadoes include:

1. Louise Cain
2. Thomas Lee Cain
3. Helen Carter
4. Teresa Carter
5. Tony Carter
6. Willie Alvis Carter
7. Novie Ruffin Ellison
8. Annaise Green
9. Lillian Green
10. Herman Lambert
11. Patsy Lovell
12. Hattie Ruth McGlocklin
13. Sandra Ruth McGlocklin
14. Walter James McGlocklin
15. Rosie MacLin
16. Mary Elizabeth Smith

But this story, like so many in Limestone County, ultimately is one of triumph and healing. Neighbors helped neighbors get back on their feet, and people who were there will tell you about strangers like the group of Amish from Pennsylvania who pitched in to help rebuild. Storm warning systems and shelters were improved, so that in years and storms to come, people have had hope for survival.

And many in this county have sworn not to forget. To that end, the Limestone County Archives is involved in an effort is under way to establish a memorial to honor the victims and survivors of Limestone County tornadoes. For more information, or to get involved, contact Kelly Kazek, at kazekfamily@knology.net or kelly@athensnews-courier.com.

(Sidebar if needed)

April 3 in Limestone County, by the numbers:

- 16 – People died
- 101 – People injured
- 26 – People hospitalized
- 75 – Homes destroyed
- 39 – Miles one tornado traveled
- 100 – Head of cattle lost
- 4,368 – Acres damaged
- 5,000 – Poultry lost

About the Archives:

Limestone County Department of History and Archives

Established: 1980

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