

TORNADOES

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Chapter 1

Lillie Matkin was a switchboard operator. She worked in the eight-story R. T. Dennis furniture store in Waco, Texas, in 1953.

May 11 was an uneventful day until the late afternoon. Matkin noticed thunderclouds when she looked out her office window, but she continued working, unconcerned. Suddenly, the lights in her office began blinking on and off. That was more of an annoyance than anything else.

Lillie Matkin did not know what had just happened in San Angelo, Texas. The sky had turned inky black and a funnel-shaped cloud called a tornado dropped from the rolling, tumbling

clouds. Eleven people in San Angelo were killed and sixty-six were injured.

A police officer in San Angelo tried to warn the authorities in Waco that the tornado was heading for their town, but the telephone lines blew down before he could get through.

The 90,000 people who lived in Waco had no idea what was about to happen. They were all going about their business as usual. Near downtown, Ira Baden was trimming wood for a garage door. The air was calm but muggy. It seemed unusually dark for 4:30 in the afternoon. Wind gusts started picking up, and then Baden heard a scary sound.

It sounded like several freight trains roaring through Waco at the same time. The clouds seemed to be growling as rain began to fall. The rain was unusual, too. It did not fall straight down to the ground. It moved sideways in a horizontal pattern, pelting the store

windows.

Ira Baden looked up and saw the dark clouds swirling violently, like a whirlwind. He knew what was coming—a tornado.

Baden grabbed onto a steel post in the sidewalk and hung on with all his strength. He saw the business district of Waco flying into pieces right before his eyes. The front of a large building was torn away, and he could see panicky people inside. The roof of the Joy Movie Theatre came crashing down.

Baden saw bricks, chunks of cement, lumber, and broken glass whirling around him. The tornado flattened a block of one-story shops. Then it hit the Dennis building, where Lillie Matkin still sat in front of her switchboard. The roof of the Dennis building collapsed in the powerful winds. A funnel cloud hovered right over the building, wrenching the top floors off the ground level. The Dennis building exploded

as if filled with dynamite. Dust and debris— broken, scattered remains— sprayed out over a five-block area.

Finally, the tornado raced from Waco, and the residents were left to search for survivors. Ira Baden and many others dug through stones and wood to answer muffled cries for help from trapped people. By 5:00 P.M., the police and fire departments were working furiously to dig out victims. The National Guard joined the effort.

Bright lights were brought in so the rescuers could keep working even after it got dark. A large group of men worked at the mound of debris that had once been the Dennis building. They searched for signs of life. They hacked at the rubble and then called for total silence so everyone could listen for any sounds of survivors. They heard something that might have been a cry for help, but they weren't sure. If there was any chance someone was trapped

down there, they would work nonstop to get to that person.

For five hours the men worked, digging a tunnel into the rubble toward the cries they heard. It was hard, painfully slow work that had to be done by hand. Bringing in large equipment could endanger anyone still alive.

So piece by piece they worked. As the tunnel was completed, the men shone their flashlights forward. They heard a woman cry out, "I can see the light! I can see the light!" Now they knew for sure someone was alive in that mass of wreckage, but it would be hours before they could reach the injured woman. By then, it might be too late.

Chapter 2

The trapped woman was Lillie Matkin. The switchboard toppled over when the tornado hit the building, and she was trapped under it.

There was a lot of debris between the rescuers and Matkin. Chunks of cement and wooden beams blocked their path. If they moved a timber the wrong way, the injured woman could be crushed to death.

It took another five hours of careful work before the men reached Matkin. They found her bruised but not seriously hurt. When the switchboard fell, it left her enough room so she wasn't crushed.

Speaking words of encouragement to her, the men worked for another four

hours before they got Lillie Matkin to the waiting ambulance. She was imprisoned under the Dennis building for fourteen hours, but she survived.

The tornadoes were on the ground for only a few minutes in San Angelo and Waco, but they wiped out vast areas. Two square miles of Waco's business district was gone. The few modern steel and concrete buildings had withstood the winds quite well. Almost two hundred older buildings were either totally destroyed or so badly damaged that they had to be demolished for safety reasons. In the ruins of Waco, 114 dead were found. Hundreds more were injured.

The funnel cloud that comes with a tornado brings destruction in many ways. The winds batter and twist, and the tornado can create destruction within structures that cause them to fly apart. Tornado winds can lift people and objects high into the air and then



NOAA Photo Library, Historic NWS Collection.

This May 12, 1896 photograph of a Oklahoma City tornado shows the funnel cloud.

hurl them back down to earth.

Tornadoes occur all over the world, but they happen most often in a part of the United States called Tornado Alley. One-third of all tornadoes in the United

States each year take place here. Tornado Alley is a 460-mile-wide strip of land that includes parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri.

In 1951, two years before the San Angelo-Waco tornado, another violent storm struck Texas. Roy Hall and his wife were sitting on their porch in McKinney, Texas. It had been a warm, humid spring, and now the couple watched thunderclouds building up in the west and south.

The clouds turned as dark as tar, and the two systems of clouds merged. Hall saw an amazing curtain of dark green rain and heard a distant roar. The roar grew louder and lightning flashed through the sky. Hailstones as large as baseballs started to crash down on Hall's roof.

Hall and his wife rushed inside the house as tornado winds slammed against the walls. Hall shouted for his wife and children to hide under the

bed. He was so fascinated by the awesome show outside that he risked taking one last look before taking shelter with his family.

Hall saw his neighbor's trees being ripped from the ground like weeds. Suddenly, Hall's house shook violently and the room brightened in an eerie way. Everything inside the house was bathed in a strange, bluish light.

Papers and magazines started flying around the room, and Hall was lifted off his feet and thrown ten feet across the floor. The house was torn off its foundation and then was hurled against a group of trees in the front yard.

Most of the roof was gone and one side of the house was caved in. Still, the bluish glow lit up everything. Hall was now lying on his back on the floor of what was once the living room. Since the roof was gone, he could look into the sky. He saw pitch-black clouds with a beautiful white light, like a fluo-

rescent light bulb, inside. Long blue streamers trailed from the clouds. Then came total darkness and the most violent winds of all.