

Ten Seconds of Terror

This is Friday morning, May 17, 1968, a cold, rainy, gloomy day, seeming all the more so in the aftermath of the tornado which struck our community the evening of May 15, 1968 at 9:30pm. We are slowly returning to a state of normalcy after the shock. Seems like awaking from a hideous dream. I am gazing out the window at a desolate scene. To our north is the Methodist Church with a large, gaping hole in its steeple. Wreckage is strewn round about. A figure of Jesus on the outside wall seems almost life like, as He seems to be surveying the bleakness the tornado left in its wake. In the same block we see a pile of rubble, with a car squeezed in between. This has been a garage. Then a foot high stump, which was a beautiful shade tree before the tornado struck. The other homes, as far as we can see, are in shambles, most of the windows knocked out a maze of patch work, hastily done to protect them from further damage by the rain. Tree after tree has been destroyed. What use to be a shady drive, is now a wide open space. This looks so forlorn, in contrast to the scenery we have been accustomed to viewing the past 30 years. Along side of our house lies a steel girder, 3 feet wide and 30 feet long, one end imbedded in the ground. I shudder to think of the results, had this hunk of steel crashed through our kitchen door, which it came so very close to doing. Another one of those girders landed a block north of us, on the Methodist Church property, pierced an automobile trunk, standing upright with one end imbedded in the Koesterer's office, uprooting a section of sidewalk. Those were all carried from the Wiegman Electric Company Plant four blocks west of here. What was a nice walnut tree just north of our property line, has one limb remaining, pointing weirdly up to the sky.

Looking east across the street from us, we see the remains of the Freeburg Community High School. The industrial arts shop looks as though a volley of machine gun bullets struck it. The roof caved in on the upper story of the main building and most of the windows are busted. The inside of those buildings is a shambles. The garage, housing 5 school busses, caved in on those vehicles, which have been removed and fortunately suffered only minor damage. This poses a problem so close to the end of the school year, final exams and such. Obviously, it will take a couple of years to restore the school.

Our neighbor to the south, Frank Thomas has considerable damage to his house and his garage is completely demolished. South of that point, there was only minor damage. The Standard Service Station on the main highway in town was quiet severely damaged, but is back in operation. A tragedy occurred across the alley from this station. An enormous tree was uprooted and toppled over a trailer parked under it, upending the trailer. Edna Lurtz, well known by us, was pinned under a refrigerator and rescue workers removed her dead body.

West of here we find the greatest havoc of all. A beautiful maple shade tree in our neighbor, Don Borger's yard, the object of our admiration the past 30 years, while the Robert Brownings lived there is stripped down to half size. All three homes in this block are severely damaged. One travel trailer, belonging to the Edward Mobleys is almost a total wreck. Another one next to it has only minor damage. All that shows at the site of one garage is a concrete slab. Mrs. Xavier Heiligenstien was cut by flying glass and taken to the hospital, but that was not serious. The American Legion Hall across the

street from there was severely damaged. A considerable number of cars parked in this vicinity were caved in by flying debris, some of them practically pancaked. The streets were blocked by the disabled cars, posts, electric wires, trees, etc. This was hastily cleared for traffic, since it lay in the path of the most severely damaged area where most of the casualties occurred. The Renner's Mortuary and the owner's home were badly damaged. The garage housing their ambulances collapsed crushing the ambulances within. This complicated matters at a time when their services were badly needed. The Freeburg Milling and Supply Company is demolished. The largest building, formerly a flour mill appears to be a total loss. One grain elevator is lying across the street. The two others are twisted out of shape. One has another of the forementioned steel girders, carried in from the Wiegman Company, grotesquely twisted across the very top. Some of the elevators were full of grain, now in the process of being removed by grain trucks. The rain now falling will no doubt cause some spoilage there. Their office building and a large stock of merchandise was also badly damaged.

Looking two blocks west, across the IC railroad tracks, where the Wiegman plant is located. Their building about a block square is one third wrecked. Several trucks stored inside upended and a lot of the contents damaged. Two blocks west of there, we find the most tragic scene of all. Here the tornado struck in all its fury. A trailer camp accommodating eleven large size trailers. The trailers and occupants were picked up, twirled about like so many tops, landing more or less in one big heap, a pile of twisted rubble. The contents were strewn over a five acre field. Here four people were killed and many injured. The trailer owner's home, Louis Kehrer, was completely demolished. The complete tornado toll stands at fifty four injured and five dead.

Surprisingly, there was not a single fire anywhere, seemingly incredible, considering the fact that every power line in the path of the tornado was down, a tangled mess of wires, posts and tree limbs. Our son in law, Les Herman, who is a State Farm Insurance Agent, was soliciting a family in one of the trailers shortly before tragedy struck. The prospect being undecided as to which one of two policies to buy, requested that he call the following day. Noticing a bad storm approaching, Les hurried home. By the time he drove the twelve blocks to his home the trailer camp had been wiped out. Similarly, I was in our alley loading the camper, preparatory to going on a fishing trip the next morning, five minutes before the alley was a mess of fallen wires, limbs, posts and a transformer, which just grazed the camper putting a slight dent in the boat on top of it, and breaking one of the two oars along side the boat, in half. Obviously life often hangs on a thread. But for the grace of God, both Les and I could have been among the casualties.

Concerning our own loss, we consider ourselves extremely fortunately, since we were in the path of the greatest destruction, to emerge as we did. Our total loss amounts to approximately sixteen hundred dollars, covered by insurance, as I assume everyone is. Most of all we are grateful to escape injury, even death. Most of the windows in our home were knocked out. The back porch was pulled off the house and badly damaged. The brick arch on the south east corner of our house was clipped off, the bricks strewn all over the front yard. The front door awning hood was ripped off and deposited on the side walk. The car garage raised off the foundation, a few boards torn off, but it kept standing and the car inside didn't have a scratch. Most of the cars parked in the area now look like junkers. A few limbs on four nice shade trees in our yard need pruning out. Outside of that the trees survived the blast. Our

camper has the windshield caved in and some front end damage, besides the slight damage to the boat and oars. Seems miraculous. I expected the top heavy camper to be blown to kingdom come. The Thomas' garage two feet in front of it disappeared completely, only a concrete slab remaining. Our own tool shed a couple of feet to the side of the camper was obliterated. I had the camper loaded with fishing equipment and a supply of food and drinks for a week's stay. How it remained upright I'll never know, with utility poles strewn all around it and a transformer missing it by inches. Another oddity is a one by six inch pine board sticking in our front lawn at a fifty degree angle, buried so deep, it's impossible for one man to pull it out. Another is a leaf rake with a broken handle lying in the middle of our kitchen, not our own rake. The clean up job is tremendous and we'll be working many a day.

While on the subject of oddities, we've been wondering why our house on the west side is all splattered with mud. We just discovered that there are dead fish scattered around, which came from a farm pond a mile west of town, where most of the water was sucked out and that's also where our mud came from.

So much for the aftermath. Now I'll attempt to reconstruct the beginning. Wednesday night May 15, 1968 was a hot, humid night. A light drizzle was falling. Consequently, we had the front and back doors and windows wide open. I'll always contribute the fact that our house did not collapse, to that, since it's the suction created by a tornado that causes that. All was peaceful and calm. I was relaxing in my favorite easy chair, watching TV. Tornado warnings were flashed on the air, for our area. I remarked to my wife that we were in the path of the warnings. Still we were not much concerned, since that had happened on previous occasions and bypassed us. The old bromide you know, "IT can't happen to us." But this time it did happen. My wife went into the basement to attend to some chores. About this time out little pet pooch, Pal came tearing into the room where I sat. He jumped in my lap and emitted a frightened whine. Now I sensed that something was wrong. Jumping to my feet, I rushed into the hallway, where I met my wife rushing up the steps. She heard the storm approaching in the basement, where some windows were also open. I grabbed hold of the basement door and said, let's go down, but we were too late to move. We heard a screeching, howling whine, hard to describe, but somehow we knew it spelled tornado. I hope we never hear it again, but I've heard it many times since, in my sleep and in my memories. This was followed by a low, eerie, moaning sound, creepy to say the least. Now comes a terrific gust of wind, almost lifting us off our feet. This tore the door I had clutched in my hand right out of my grasp and slammed it shut in our faces. Here we began to realize that we were helpless. There we stood, huddled together, Pal in between us, pressing ever so tightly against my leg and I'll never forget her pitiful whining. Windows were popping all around us. A full length mirror on one of the doors exploded in our faces. They don't seem to break, they literally explode. Glass was spraying us like falling hail, as we stood with our faces buried in our arms. My wife was screaming and I remember speaking a few words of reassurance, although I was not unconcerned myself. The prayers came automatically. It's surprising, all that races through one's mind in so short a span. At any rate, that was my personal experience. Expecting that house to crash down on us, I wondered what it was like to die, among other things. Standing there with our heads in our arms, these words flashed through my mind, "You shall bow your head and bend your knees." Now I feel like I can interpret the meaning of those

words. At such a time I believe everyone will heed them, whether he's a believer or not. Always I could feel the dog shaking and pressing against my leg.

Leave it to a dog to sense danger. She was the one who alerted me to start with. Pal is just a common pooch with no pedigree, but obedient to a fault. Since my retirement, she and I have had many adventures. She's my constant companion. She's treed squirrels, flushed rabbits and quail out of the brush for me. She's tangled with snakes she discovered in our trail and killed her share of ground hogs. That is quite a show to watch. Pal weighs 15 pounds. The average ground hog is heavier. Locating one, she stirs up a tremendous racket to alert me. I can just about tell by her bark what she's run into. The closer I get, the more courageous she gets, confident that with me there she can lick the world. She keeps circling the animal, barking, always moving in a little closer. Now she dives in, hitting him, rolling him over. Again and again she circles, then rolls him over. A ground hog puts up a tough battle when cornered, but I have yet to see one get his teeth into her. She keeps up this wearing down routine for a long time. She has very tough, sharp teeth. Now Mr. ground hog makes a mistake. She sees an opening. You see a black streak sailing through the air, she grabs him by the throat and that spells finis.

One cold day I had to rescue her from drowning. The Okaw river was on a rampage, overflowing its banks. Water was pouring into our lake close to the club house from a high bank, creating a five foot high water fall. I crossed over a roadway in back of the fall, a very strong current, the water reaching the top of my hip boots. Not giving a thought to Pal, who would follow me anywhere, I heard a splash. When she hit the current she was swept over the water fall. She swims like a duck, but floundering in the foaming water fall she got confused and could not fight her way out. I kept yelling at her, but every time she'd turn right back into the water fall. Time and again she popped up and each time the force of the fall pushed her under. I could see what she was about exhausted, so I plunged into the icy drink with my heavy clothes and hip boots on, not realizing my own danger, in my anxiety to save my dog. I found myself in ice cold water over my head. I waded under the water fall, with the water cascading down on me. I groped blindly with both arms. Luckily, I touched her body when she popped up, which probably would have been the last time. Grabbing one of her legs, nearly exhausted myself, with my hip boots full of water, I made it to shore. She lay stretched out lifeless. With her head down I proceeded to pump the water out of her and massage her. Finally her eyes opened. I set her on her feet and she started to wobble around very groggy. I poured the water out of my hip boots and we hurried home pronto. We had a very sick hound dog for a few days, but we called the Vet and with his advice we snapped her out of it. Seems like the little tyke realizes I saved her life. She sticks closer to me since that day than ever. She likes to roam around shore when I'm fishing a lake out of a boat, and keeps swimming back and forth across the lake. She detects food from afar. I need only unravel a sandwich for a snack in the boat and soon I see her black form bobbing through the waves, heading in my direction. So I lift her in the boat. After shaking the water off, giving me a thorough shower, she sits in front of me, patiently waiting for the last of my sandwich, which she knows is her allotment. Of course she knows I'm generous. At home she can sense what's in store for the day, by the way I choose my wearing apparel in the morning. If I put on the clothes I wear around the house she lies down contented. The minute I dress for the open spaces, she clings right to my heels. Open the door and she makes a bee line for the camper, never happier than we take off for the field and stream. Sundays,

when we dress for Church, or any other time we don our Sunday best, she knows her place. Long before we are ready she sits facing the basement door, to scamper down when we give the command and await our return. Coming back we hear her joyous greeting the minute we open the garage door. The relationship is almost human. How true it is that a dog is man's best friend. The average life span of a dog is approximately 12 years. She is 8 and at times I think of the parting time with misgivings. So much for the dog biography I got carried away with and back to my original subject.

Just as abruptly as the tornado struck, that abruptly it ceased. It lasted no more than ten seconds. Suddenly all was calm, the deadliest silence we ever experienced. Or course, the minute the storm hit us the lights and phone were knocked out of commission, leaving us in pitch black darkness. We usually have a flash light handy. But this time one was in our car and one in the camper. So, we groped our way around in the darkness stumbling over various objects. After numerous head bumps and bruises we located some candles, then the flash lights. My first thought was, well this can't be too bad, it only lasted a few seconds. We took the first look outside, "Glory Be," how can there be so much devastation in so short a time? We could hardly find a path through the debris. We wandered around more or less in a daze, flashing our lights here and there, surveying the damage. The neighbors are doing likewise. Flashlights appearing every where. We yell at each other inquiring if any one is injured and needs assistance. Fortunately no one in our immediate vicinity is hurt, so we spread out. The further we go, the more destruction we find. People are all wandering around in a daze.

Meanwhile, our son in law, Les Herman and our grand son Stanley started out with their car for our home, since their area was not hit at all, to see if we were OK. They drove only a short distance, when they were blocked by fallen trees and such, so they ran the rest of the way. This was when we were still in the house. From a distance Stanley got a glimpse of us with our flash lights and remarked, they're alright Dad, I can see them. About the same time our neighbor Frank Thomas came pounding down the street out of breath. He was driving home from work, when suddenly all the windows in his car popped out, so he parked it and started running.

Soon help starts pouring in from surrounding communities. Ambulances, disaster units, fire trucks, first aid, food and hot coffee. They start the grim task of evacuating the dead and injured, having a tough time maneuvering, due to the terrible wreckage in the streets. I remember one ambulance driver in particular, rudely cussing several people who got in his way. This driver must have been a rookie. He'll probably learn in time. If he doesn't he's not qualified for the job. Those people were in shock and a decent person does not lose his cool and smart off. At any rate the language he used was unwarranted. Now everyone starts pitching. We never heard such a power saw racket in our lives, butchering up trees. Trucks of every description converge, hauling the debris away. There's a mountain of it a half mile south of town, where it will be burned. The fallen trees are fast disappearing. We collect the mess in our own yards, deposit it in the alley, where the trucks pick it up. A fine group of youngsters stopped by and proceeded to help us. They gathered the brick scattered all over the yard, stacked them neatly on the walk and quietly departed. What a contrast between those kids and the small minority who are bent on vandalism and destruction.

Our phone service has already been restored. Recalling the terrible mess of twisted wires and poles, those people certainly deserve a merit badge. The electric service will take a while longer, so we transferred our deep freeze contents to the Belleville Locker Plant. Lack of eclectic power is a handicap, since we are badly in need of a vacuum cleaner among other things. Glass is strewn everywhere, even between the rugs and the rug pads. The Village is short 25 transformers, thus the delay in restoring power. It's a bit inconvenient to read by candle light. Reminds one of the pioneer stories. We have practically forgotten about sleeping, not having had the pleasure of that luxury the past two days and nights. After such an ordeal it seems your nerves play tricks on you and you can't sleep, even if you try.

Many of our relatives and friends, even complete strangers have stopped by to check on our welfare and offer a helping hand. This we sincerely appreciate. Sight seers were barred from the area during the clean up process. Now there's a constant stream of cars, almost bumper to bumper, day and night. This will continue for weeks. Now that the ordeal is over, we feel sort of humbled by it all. We emerge from the holocaust with a great feeling of brotherly love for our neighbors, our relatives, friends and our fellow man, realizing that, after all, people do care. That is sometimes overlooked in the struggle and strive of every day living. It takes a disaster, such as this to expose the inherent good in every human being. Some how, in times of crisis, we human creatures can take a terrific beating without flinching. We thank all of those good people who helped, those who visited, those who contacted us by phone to inquire about our welfare and there were many. We certainly must thank the State Farm Insurance personnel, who were a big help by being so prompt and reasonable in making adjustments. Also, the utilities who did such an unbelievable job in restoring service out of a pile of rubble. But lest we forget, most of all we thank God for protecting and sparing us. From the bottom of our hearts, we have sympathy for those who lost their lives and pray for them and those who mourn their passing. Also, those who were injured.

This is the conclusion of the true story of, "Ten Seconds of Terror," as we lived it. We are now all the more aware that all of man's ingenuity combined has not and never will match the power that lies dormant in the universe, subject to the command of a Supreme Being. Material possessions add up to the sum total of "nothing." Be they great or small, they are a gift from God. He can wipe out all the earthly possessions we have accumulated in a life time and break us like so many match sticks in a few seconds. Thus it behooves us not to gloat over earthly possessions. The foregone experience is a grim reminder for us to heed the warning that, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away."

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