

ARKANSAS TORNADOES

While late April made it a horrible month for tornadoes this year, May is typically the big tornado month. The record for the most tornadoes across the U.S. in any month was set in May 2003, with 543 confirmed tornados. This month is the third anniversary of the tornado that hit Joplin, Missouri, just 40 miles north of Bella Vista, on May 22, 2011, and killed 161 people.

Tornadoes can hit in any month of the year, however. The earliest tornado on record in Arkansas was the January 11-12, 1898, overnight storm that hit Fort Smith, leaving 55 dead. On October 27, 1942, the town of Berryville was hit, with 29 fatalities.

In 1954, it was early spring, in March, that a tornado went through what is now eastern Bella Vista. It hit Lillian and Jack Murphree's 120-acre farm, which straddled the present day intersection of Kingsland Road and Euston Drive.

Lillian Bolain and her first husband, Louis Anderson, married in 1935 and purchased their farm a few years later. After Louis died in 1947, Lillian continued to live on the farm with their daughter, and wed Jack Murphree three years later. Lillian's daughter, Margaret Anderson Pinner, was still a child when the 1954 tornado struck the farm, but she remembers how it wiped out their barn and several outbuildings. She stated,
"When the storms came through that night, I know my parents were awakened but my stepsister Linda and I slept right through it, probably because the house wasn't touched. But the smokehouse behind the house was moved off its foundation. The storm took the roof off our feed shed and dropped it on the back of one of our cows, and that was the only cow that got hurt in the storm. We had calves, which we had just arranged to sell, tied by rope to the studs along the outside wall of the barn, and the barn was blown away. I remember crying until I found out they weren't hurt. It was a mystery how the barn was destroyed but the calves were not hurt."

After that experience, Lillian said she wouldn't stay on the farm unless they built a storm cellar. It was built that fall, in 1954, in the ravine down southwest of their house. Lillian, Margaret, and Linda took shelter in it several times over the following years. Jack never felt the need to join them, so the three of them would start out from the house in the dark with a flashlight, then the lightning flashes would show them the way down the driveway to the dirt road that went through their farm (and took a different route than Kingsland Road does today...it ran along the north side of the ravine, where a modern-day house now stands), then they would cross the road and go down to the storm cellar.

According to the Benton County Democrat of April 1, 1954, the county-wide damages totaled \$100,000 to buildings, crops, and livestock that night in March. Three people were hospitalized and fifteen families were given financial assistance by the Red Cross.

Margaret's parents decided to move to Bentonville in 1962 and sold their farm, but Lillian's storm cellar can still be seen down in the ravine alongside Kingsland Road beside the east entrance onto Dinton Circle.

Picture 1: This tornado shelter built in 1954 still stands down in the ravine on the north side of Kingsland just east of Euston

