

Cape Girardeau's 1949 Tornado



By Kathrine Porter Russell Lamkin
In a letter to her mother after the storm

[Click here to read the whole story
at CapeCentralHigh.com](http://CapeCentralHigh.com)

1949 FEBRUARY 1949

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

Saturday

① 19
February

1949 MARCH 1949

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

Dearest Mommy,

I'm too tired to look for my stationary, but I thought I'd tell you about our "storm." Saturday was a funny day all day - It was hard to breathe and very windy - a tree in our front room blew

Sunday 20, FEBRUARY

down, I went down to Bess' for supper and while we were eating we talked about the impossibility of Cape ever having a cyclone because of its position. It began to get terribly windy and then began to thunder and lightening, but not very hard. Then it began to hail a little

February 19 and 20

and we went to the window to watch it. Her apartment is on the second floor so you can see pretty far. Bess wanted me to look at the roses on the west side of the house so we were standing in the southwest window when it started to rain. Bess went to the other side of the apartment but I stood at the window and looked at the sky - everything outside was sort of yellow - an awfully peculiar color and I started to call Bess to come look - then I heard that awful roar I knew immediately it was wind, but I still didn't realize it was a cyclone. I just stood there and watched stuff fly through the air. Then it was all over and we heard the people downstairs talking excitedly.

1949 FEBRUARY 1949

Monday

1949

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

21

② February

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

We ran down stairs and only then did your stupid daughter realize what had happened. Someone said that it had hit out north Sprigg and I wanted to see so Bass and I started out. We got a few blocks out and a horse went by sort of dazedly. We could see tremendous trees uprooted and pieces of kindling on the ground, but it still didn't dawn on me that any thing beside trees and telephone poles had been hit. After we had gone another block though I knew. Mommy do you know where

February 21

Emerald street is? It's
a mixture of white and
colored houses - all poor, but
all nice and respectable. It was
down in a valley - where Codeen
lived. We got far enough out on
Sprigg to see it. There were about
20 houses there and you couldn't
tell where even one had been. Live
wires were all over. The first ambu-
lance came and cars were taking
people out. A group of women ran
by us screaming & we could hear
people yelling in the distance. I
knew I was only in the way so we
turned around and went up to Newmore
where Floy was eating dinner with
the other Paker "widows" while their
husbands were at Clear Lake. Floy
has always been afraid of storms
and was completely stunned. She
knew Codeen had been killed and

1949 FEBRUAR

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

Tuesday

22

February

1949 MARCH 1949

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

wanted to get to her. Mrs. Newman went down to Emerald Street and Floy waited about 15 minutes then started out alone walking down there - we thought she had gone up stairs. She got about half way down when some one told her that sunset where Bob and Skeeter live had been hit the worst. She ran back to the Newmans ~~to~~ and told me to drive her out there. She was really hysterical by then. If you don't think that little drive was pleasant you're crazy. Bess was pretty calm afraid only of an accident, and yelling directions at me the whole time. Floy didn't know what February 22

She was doing, West Broadway
and North Perry Street had been badly
hit we found out then. Too we had
to go past South east hospital so you
can imagine what the traffic was
like, Floy kept saying hurry - take a
side street - which I couldn't even get
to, we had to stop for traffic right
in front of a man directing it and
he told us his family lived on
Emerald and he couldn't get to them.
We found out later his 6 year old
son had been killed. We finally got
to Bob and Skeeter's. Their house
hadn't been touched and they weren't
at home. We finally got back to the
Galloway's, picked up Jack and Clyde
who had gotten home from work by
then and went back to the Newmans.
Floy still wanted to find out about
Cadeen so Jack took her back to

1949 FEBRUARY 1949

Wednesday

1949 MARCH

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

23

February

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

Emerald Street. Someone told her that she was hurt - but not killed - didn't know where she was. Jack and I then went to wire you and Jack joined the Red Cross. I drove back to the Newmans and Flay was in worse shape than ever. She couldn't get a call through for about an hour. Finally did, but still couldn't find Codeen. Finally she got hold of a cab to go to the school where the "colored refugees" were. She had just left when Bob called. Fortunately he met her there. They made the rounds of the hospitals and funeral homes until they found someone

February 23

who told them that Codeen's house wasn't any more, but that she was alright and with friends. We got home to Flay's about 2 o'clock - Flay still in bad shape. We had just gotten to sleep when Jack came in at four. He had seen Codeen at three looking for stuff at her house. Some man was helping her. She had hidden her money in a tin can under the rug in her living room. The rug was gone - the living room was gone but she found all but 10 of her money. The money and her icebox were all that was left of her house. She had been sitting in a chair in the living room when it hit. The chair's gone and Codeen has no idea what happened to her.

Jack was called back to duty at 7:30 Sunday morning for awhile and then again Sunday afternoon late.

1949 FEBRUARY 1949

Thursday

1949 MARCH 1949

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

24

February

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

We had practically no sleep. Sunday night he was out at the arena setting up an emergency place for people to stay. Flay and I went out to help. There were only 2 families there - the rest I imagine had gone to friends, but the Probsts with their eight children and 2 other relatives were there. They were from the Red Star addition which is just north of the shoe factory and which was the worst hit. The family had gone to the basement and when one of the walls had started to collapse after the storm had hit the 15 year old son had held it up til they could get out. The mother is a cripple and

February 24

had to be carried. They are a very nice family - all the children are adorable. Floy took them home yesterday and gave them baths. The littlest boy 2 years old had never seen a bath tub and was scared to death - he threw a fit and it took three people to bathe him.

Last night we finally got a good night's sleep, but I'm still tired. I haven't done a thing today - Mernexia's here and since it's another day like Saturday we've planned exactly where we're going if another one hits.

Going back to Saturday night. Bob & Skeeter were in the car when they saw the two funnels coming - (did you know that there were 2 which came from different directions and joined forces just outside Cape?) they just made it to a friend's basement when it hit about a block away. Bob later went to the hospital to

1949 FEBRUARY 1949

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

Friday

25

February

1949 MARCH 1949

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

take one of the doctors up. They put him to work Dr. Herbert was working on a little girl whose mother had been killed and whose father was working on a river boat. Bob said she was exactly like Ann - in fact that was all ~~she~~ he could think of was how much she was like Ann. He started to cut her hair off when Dr. Herbert said "Oh oh Brains" she died a few minutes later. Bob said he got out of the hospital before he passed out. You could tell it had really hit him. Monday morning the child's father was in the store to buy a dress to bury her in. Monday Poppo, Fay and I drove

February 25

around to look at the damage. The cyclone first struck just a little west of Frank Miller's house on the Gordenville road. His house is still standing, but I doubt if it can be repaired. They were in the basement and not even scratched. It wrecked a couple of other houses out there but no-one was hurt. Then it came in the highway. Cut across part of Sunset and Broadway. There's a house at the corner there which isn't touched except that there's a path about 4 feet wide through the concrete foundation. It looks so silly to see a house with part of its foundation - right through the middle gone.

It then hit up Parry Avenue and the streets around it. The Limbaugh house is wrecked, they fortunately were in Kennett at Rush Jr's wedding

1949 FEBRUARY 1949

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

Saturday

26

7
February

1949 MARCH 1949

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

It then went on over to North Sprigg
ruining Dr. Parker's house, touching the
Bautins house and knocking down a
dead tree at Libby & Jack Oliver's
on the way. After Sprigg & Emerald
it went on over to North Red Star.
That's where most of the people were

Sunday 27, FEBRUARY

Killed. 3 Walkers for instance were
killed - 3 others are in hospitals but
of them not expected to ~~be~~ live.
There are 7 Knapps in the hospitals,
after looking at the ruins though
I don't see how any of them lived.
Saturday night people were sending
messages out over the radio to
friends & relatives in other towns.

February 26 and 27

If you could just have heard the many that were "House demolished family all O.K." It just didn't seem possible. As of today 25 people have died about 70 are still in hospitals and about 50 are still missing. No one knows how many are in the river. One car full was seen to blow through the air and land in the river.

Crazy things happened. There's a car on Emerald - a 1949 Dodge that is ~~tot~~ literally no higher in any spot than my knees. A barn was completely blown away, but none of the livestock hurt. In one house all they've been able to salvage is a head of lettuce and a stack of victrola records. Another garage was blown away, but the car in it doesn't have a scratch on it. One woman was found in

1949 FEBRUARY 1949

Monday

1949 MARCH 1949

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

28

February

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

⑧

a tree a hundred yards from where her house had been. 2 trees standing right next to each other - one blown down toward the east the other toward the west. Trees without a leaf left on.

Skel-gas or Uri-gas tanks blown hundreds of yards but not one exploded or even caught fire. One of those

tremendous filling station storage tanks blown a mile. The new medical building wrecked, but none of the equipment

including the X ray machine hurt. Everything is covered with greasy mud. The

funniest story though is the one that one of the boys at the store told.

He's in the National Guard and

February 28

was sent out Perry on rescue work,
One of the houses there had been
split in two, half being blown away.
He saw a light in the other half and
went to see if he could help. He
called first and a man yelled back,
"Will you please stop bothering us we're
trying to sleep." He looked in and
sure enough in a bedroom with only 3
walls were a couple in bed.

I sure hope I don't have to go to the
Doctor's any time soon, because since
the medical building's wrecked ~~the~~
Elred and the other three have no
office - they are ^{seeing} taking patients in the
basement of Dr. Ritter's home.

I'm still amazed at the wonderful
organization of the Red Cross, National
Guard etc. By midnight Saturday - just
5 hours after it struck. Everyone had
been taken care of. All emergency

1949 MARCH 1949

Tuesday

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

1
March

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

operations performed. All "refugees" bedded down in the K.C Hall & high schools. The rest of the night they spent guarding property against pilfering - clearing the streets of live wires and looking for bodies. Jack helped pull one Negro baby out.

Yesterday we saw a negro man who wanted only to salvage his wood pile & gun - wasn't interested in anything else - which was fortunate because all that was left of his house was a pile of kindling and a pair of salt & pepper shakers.

At the moment I can think

March 1

of nothing else to tell you about our cyclone. Anyway I want to sleep.

We'll see you this weekend one way or the other - which do you prefer?

By the way Ruth Black has got ~~at~~ a 4 room apartment at the other end of the block from where Bess & Clyde live. If you pass the inspection of the College English teacher who has it.

With all my love to all of
you

Your Baby