

**DEATH RIDES  
THE SKY**



# DEATH RIDES THE SKY

## THE STORY OF THE 1925 TRI-STATE TORNADO

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By

Angela Mason

**Black Oak**  
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*Death Rides the Sky: The Story of the 1925 Tri-State Tornado*

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Cover photograph is of a National Guard soldier walking the deserted streets of tornado-ravaged West Frankfort, Illinois, c. 1925

Cover and interior design by Michael Kleen

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[www.blackoakmedia.org](http://www.blackoakmedia.org)  
[orders@blackoakmedia.org](mailto:orders@blackoakmedia.org)



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# The Rooster and the Storm

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“There was an old farmer and his old wife who had survived the great tornado of 1925, and some of their animals had come through surviving, too. One of these was their old rooster.

“The only problem was, the old rooster had lost all his feathers in the big blow. He was runnin’ around the chicken yard, nekkid as he could be, and boy, was he miserable! That rooster used to really be a goer with the hens, and now, the ones that were left, even the ones that had lost their own feathers in the big blow, wouldn’t give him the time of day.

“So the old farmer’s wife took pity on him and decided she was going to make him his own pair of bib overalls. She sewed and she sewed and made ’em just the right size for the old rooster, and finally, she gave ’em to him and he put ’em on.

“Boy! That rooster strutted and crowed and bobbed up and down the henyard. He just looked so fine in those new bibs, and he knew it. He was a goer again, even without feathers!

“Well, he worked his way all through the old farmer’s henyard, and, since there weren’t that many chickens left after the big storm, he took off down the road to the next farm, where there was a young farmer and his young wife. And the old rooster just went to town on those hens there, much to their delight, ’cause they’d lost their rooster to the big blow and were in need of male companionship.

“After a few days of this, the old farmer’s wife was paid a visit by the young farmer’s wife.

“The young girl was just a-splittin’ her sides laughing and giggling. She was laughing so hard tears were running down her face, and she could hardly speak to the old farmer’s wife.

“Finally, she was able to say, ‘You know, that rooster in those bib overalls, that’s got to be the funniest thing I’ll ever see!’

“The old farmer’s wife looked at her laughing, and said, very seriously, ‘No, that’s not the funniest thing you’ll ever see.’

“‘It’s not?!?’ she cried, puzzled. She still couldn’t stop laughing. So she asked the old farmer’s wife, ‘Well, then, what could be more funny than a rooster in a pair of bib overalls?’

“‘The rooster *in* his bib overalls isn’t the funniest thing you’ll ever see,’ said the farmer’s wife. ‘The funniest thing you’ll ever see is the rooster

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holding down one of the chickens with one claw, and trying to get *out* of the bibs with his other claw.

*“That’s the funniest thing you’ll ever see.”*

— Courtesy of Adrian Dillon, 89 in March 2000, Waltonville, Illinois, former resident of Parrish, Illinois and survivor of the Tri-State Tornado of 1925



# Foreword

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Did you know that the wind doesn't blow the feathers off chickens in a storm?

I didn't, either, and I was raised on a farm all my early years and right through my teens, helping tend to daily activities that included "chores," where chickens were just a way of life.

I believed the "old wives' tale," if you will, about the wind plucking the chickens clean in a big blow, as that was never disputed in my family of farmers that stretched back generations on the same southeastern Illinois soil as those before them.

However, during the course of research for this book, I learned that it's not that chicken feathers can't withstand 200 mph winds while the little chicken body somehow does, claws dug into the ground and hanging on for dear life while their feathers abandon them like, well....a chicken.

Instead, chickens (hens *and* roosters; there's a difference, you know) have what could be considered a fowl's version of the human "fight or flight" reflex. In chicken terms, it could be known as "flee or be food."

Anyone who's ever plucked a chicken (and that's not a whole lot of people these days, I realize) knows that the pores (follicles) out of which the pointy-end of the feather (the quill) are pulled kind of pucker once that bird is plucked... it's that "gooseflesh" appearance. Those follicles *hold* the quill of the feather in place. When the quill is no longer there, the follicle kind of 'sits up,' and looks knobby. There's a reason for that.

It's because that flesh is literally "holding" the feather in its place. And if a chicken gets scared—such as if a predatory critter like a raccoon or fox or even another bird, like a hawk—is after it, that flesh has a reaction. The reaction is to loosen up and let go of the feathers at the quill. That way, if a raccoon is able to get close enough to close his mouth over that hen's tail feathers, he's not going to be able to yank her back—he's going to get a mouth full of feathers, because her follicles simply "let go" of the quill, and that hen is off and running, flapping and squawking and alerting the other chickens that there's a predator in their midst.

The same thing, animal science has concluded, happens in a big blow. It's not just the wind that scares the fowl at times; thunder, lightning and hail, the frequent accompaniment of tornadic storms, also causes the chickens to believe they're in mortal peril. So when a massive storm blows over, and there are chickens in the barnyard or their own enclosure (like we always had), sometimes if that storm is bad enough, the chickens will

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'let go' of their feathers. The wind picks up the feathers and carries them away, leaving a huddling chicken with no feathers at all to be seen in the vicinity, and the result can be that the surviving chickens are naked... not the way God intended for them to be, and the feathers grow back, but it's a neat little trick designed for chicken self-preservation, and has grown to be one of those myths that surround violent storms sweeping across farms in the nation's Heartland.

You'd think that this would be something I would have learned, having spent my first two decades of life on a farm, but that just was one of those factoids that escaped me.

There were some other, bigger, facts and factoids that I didn't learn about until later, as well.

In the summer of 1981, I was a couple of months short of 19, and sitting in the dining room of my grandparent's house in rural Mt. Erie, Illinois, discussing with them how miserably hot the past few summers had become, and how, in my limited experience and memory, I couldn't understand why summers couldn't be like they had been even just ten years before. And why, I posed the question, had the spring and summer storms gotten so severe lately? Didn't weather used to be calmer?

My grandpa Ross Mason, 69 at the time and one of the finest men I'd ever known or have known since, was rolling a homemade cigarette and the scent of Velvet Tobacco wafted up from the can just before he sealed the lid on it.

"It's been pretty bad lately," Grandpa said and licked the rolling paper so it would seal the tobacco in. This was years before he was off the smoking habit per doctor's orders, when he eventually got down to one lung with partial function and only the top lobe of the other. He lit the home-rolled cancer stick, and the tobacco, which always smelled so delicious from the canister but not so great when burning, flamed briefly. "It's been so bad lately that it reminds me of 1925," Grandpa stated simply.

Grandma Mildred Mason, who had been removing dishes from the table after lunch, stopped in mid-reach and looked at Grandpa with an expression that could only be termed as instantly worried. My eyes narrowed as I gazed first at one grandparent, then the other. Grandma continued on with clean-up as though nothing happened, but there was suddenly something thick in the air...not quite tension, but darned close to it...more like heavy memories of something spoken of frequently, long ago, in hushed and somewhat frightened tones.

Chickens clucked loudly outside from the nearby henhouse and pigs noisily rooted their feeders.

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“What happened in 1925?” I finally asked, since I could tell Grandpa wasn’t going to offer up any more of his own volition.

“Big storm,” Grandpa responded in a somewhat flat tone.

Grandma was noticeably absent doing dishes in the kitchen. I couldn’t turn to her for assistance. Keeping with the two-word question-and-answer Grandpa had established, I continued.

“How big?” I asked.

“Killed about 700 people,” Grandpa broke from the established pattern ominously.

Apparently this was not something Grandpa was used to talking about, as he was clearing his throat nervously. But he could tell he had piqued my curiosity, and once piqued, that was an intangible that took on a life of its own—a monstrous life.

But not so monstrous, I discovered, as the storm about which my Grandpa was to relate to me on that summer Sunday afternoon.

The questions I have asked myself in the years following, and what drove me to produce this material you are about to read, is, naturally, ‘Why, in the age of burgeoning information and knowledge, did it take nineteen years for me to discover this storm? Where were the accounts, the annual memorials, the notoriety such an event could have and should have brought to the very area where I lived? (which was exactly one county north of some of the worst damage incurred by the storm).

‘Why, in nineteen years of living, had I not heard the term *Tri-State Tornado*?’

What Grandpa spent the next hour and a half relating to me stuck with me until this day and will no doubt last into the decades to come.

He told me how his family, living north of Ellery and east of Massilon, a rural area of Edwards County just across the river from Wayne, had watched nervously the black-and-blue storm system barreling across the horizon to the south, moving southwest to northeast and directly away from them, to their great and inexpressible relief.

He told me about how several area people, my great-grandpa Willie Borah (Grandpa’s future father-in-law) included, took off for the area of devastation out of curiosity but returned to send word that hundreds were in need of help, a call to which many in Wayne and Edwards counties responded.

He told me how a few days later he and one of his brothers, both of them in their early teens, had been wandering around the family property near the Little Wabash River and had come upon an entire bolt

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of red calico fabric. The bolt was on a roll as was the standard back then, and the fabric was in pristine condition—there was not a stain or a tear on it, and the pins that held it in place had not been disturbed. The boys took the fabric from where they had found it in the field and brought it to their mom, who, as was the habit with people back then, attempted to discover the owner of the fabric instead of just assuming it was now hers. Weeks went by before they came to the conclusion that not only was the owner probably not local, but that owner might not even be alive any longer. The bolt had likely been driven into Edwards County by prevailing winds that had kept it aloft in the hours following the storm, and had been deposited gently in the prairie grass that edged the riverbanks; there was no way of telling from whence it had originated.

Great-grandma Mason allegedly made dresses out of the fabric after all was said and done.

Throughout the month of March, 1999, the 74th anniversary of the devastating storm, working for a local newspaper, my journalistic curiosity was piqued. I formally interviewed a handful of survivors for a well-received anniversary article at that newspaper, and informally interviewed many survivors of the storm, all from within about an hour's radius of my home. I found several survivors even in my hometown. I compiled so much information and spoke so frequently of it to folks that I was repeatedly invited to speak at civic club meetings as a guest, conveying the important message of storm safety and preparedness. Somewhere along the line, someone suggested I write a book about what I had discovered. I said "Nope. I have three kids and a demanding job; somebody else can do it."

During the Doppler Hearing in Evansville, Indiana on June 15, 1999 during which a panel of 'experts' and politicians was receiving input on whether or not to place Doppler Radar in the location of Owensville, Indiana, I had not planned to speak but had brought along the information I had compiled over the last few months, as well as one tattered copy of the well-received news article, to present to the panel (by my recollection, we had exactly NINETEEN of those issues in the archives, of 13,000 printed. It was very, very popular). Sitting through hours of horror stories of little FO to F2 twisters that had struck the tri-state in the years following the removal of Doppler from Evansville, I felt compelled to at last speak. One of the last to come to the microphone, I held up the tattered copy of the paper and told the panel that they were sitting just south and east of the worst tornadic disaster to ever strike the United States, and I wondered aloud why no one had mentioned that yet. Once again, the Tri-State Tornado was being overlooked.

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The panel chastised me, indicating that national radar would without a doubt pick up a storm of the magnitude of the 1925 one, and that it was almost a moot point to have brought it up at all.

I retorted that the Tri-State storm hadn't started at the F5 (and possibly F6) that it eventually became, and had to drop *somewhere*, and wouldn't the folks outside Ellington, Missouri, (where the storm began killing people at an estimated F3 magnitude) have appreciated some kind of warning at all?

Following the hearing, I was descended upon by people who wanted to speak to me about my knowledge of the Tri-State Tornado, many of them meteorologists, some from far-off states (one from Florida) who had come for the Doppler event to witness the arguments and results first-hand, the issue was of that much importance to them. Many of them discussed the outcomes of a possible book project, when I mentioned it; all input was favorable. They were content to settle for the fact that I was still reluctant to write a book, and that I had folders full of information, but all agreed that *something* should be written about the disaster.

At the insistence of those who continued to show interest, not only in the idea of a comprehensive product of what happened that March day 1925, but at the idea that a complete book could be produced and bring attention to the stricken areas even though it was almost 75 years past, I picked up the telephone one night when the calendar changed from June to July 1999 and made a phone call at about 11 p.m. to a lovely motel in Ellington, Missouri.

The result of the ensuing conversation is what you are holding in your hands.

You will be taken on the quest I made, with my children in tow, to track back across the damage path of 219 miles (an astute group of researchers, operating shortly after this book was written [2002], are now saying that number may be as high as 224 miles, as it's possible the storm dropped an additional 4 to 5 miles further to the southwest than previously believed) to chronicle reports from those who lived through the event, and back and forth between 1999-2000 and 1925 in the twinkling of an eye. I have often wondered if how I did what I did would be of interest to those who are purists and devotees of the Tri-State Tornado. I came to the conclusion long ago that perhaps it is....and perhaps there is another disaster out there, one that happened in a young person's backyard, that needs chronicled, and if I can inspire someone else to get out and do what I did, with the obstacles I had, it was worth it to write it in just that way.

This book was written between 1999 and 2001, so the accounts will all begin with roughly the phrases "in (mid-, late, etc.) 1999" and the like. The ages of those interviewed will be given in their account at roughly

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what they were on the date they were interviewed; but for perspective, I ensured that their ages when the storm struck was also listed within their accounts, and early on within each chapter so the account will show it if the age makes an impact. The average age of survivor I interviewed, when the tornado affected their lives, was eight. Therefore, most of the stories are worded somewhat simply, as they are told from an 8-year-old's point of view. There are photos of these lovely people as they either allowed me to have them, or to take them myself. There is a lack of photos in some locales, where these beautiful elderly people simply didn't want their photos taken. I wish I had been able to capture each and every one of them on film, if for no reason other than my own remembrances of them, for many are now long gone in the time that has passed between the creation of this book, and the actual production...something I feared early on.

The original intent was to publish through a university press. Given the time frame of the finalization of this tome (around 9/11, which should give you an idea of financial opportunities at the university at the time, as those were based upon grants), you might be aware of what pulls the strings of many university presses and what suddenly became 'unavailable' in the weeks and months post-terrorist attack. Self-publishing, once a consideration, became a non-issue with a December 2002 diagnosis of multiple sclerosis and a February 2003 advisement that Systemic Lupus Erythematosus was back after years of remission, along with some more serious and rare conditions with which I suddenly had to contend. I had to put this book on a back burner and concentrate on learning to live with debilitating and disabling conditions, the beginnings of which I had felt the twinges of when the idea of this publication was being formed in early 1999.

Another note: I am not a meteorologist. I have never aspired to be one. So the weather references within this book are merely 'observations': observations made by people mostly who, when their age was in the single digits, experienced something that was a defining moment in their lives and it affected them from thence forward. They aren't meteorologists, either. Between them and I, we're telling you, in layman's terms, what happened and how it looked, sounded, smelled and felt. I wish I could explain better the meteorological and scientific terms the esteemed weathermen at the end of the book use. I am honored and somewhat overwhelmed that they took the time to grant me interviews and bring their expertise to this book. Their work has been hugely important to the overall impact tornadic events have on our lives in the United States.

Never could I have imagined that this project would take on the life of its own that it did. My only regret was that there were so many more survivors out there whom I would have liked to have interviewed, and get

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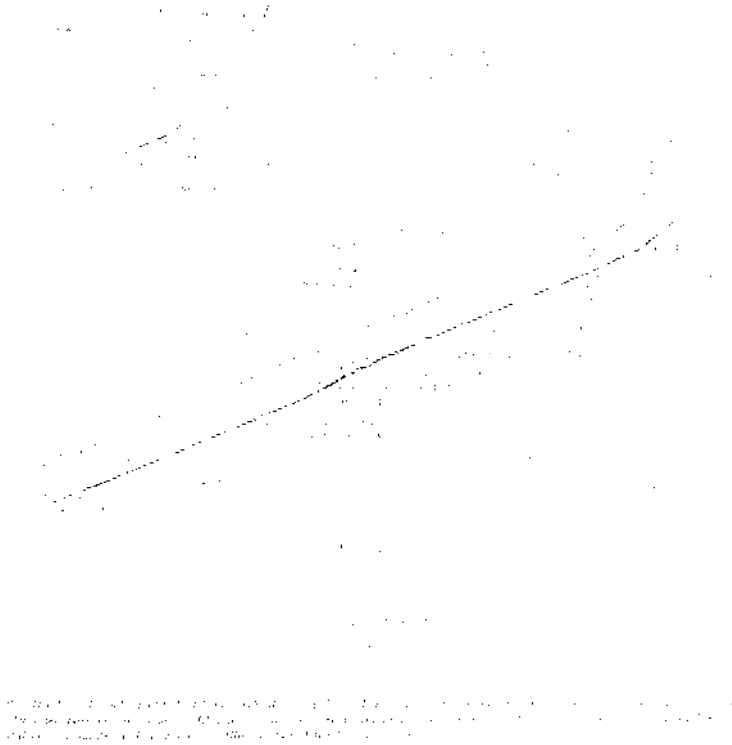
their stories, and chronicle for posterity and for generations to come, and due to other responsibilities I was unable to accomplish this. The magnitude of the regret became evident in April of 1999. A survivor, Anna Mary Bilberry, of Crossville, who was twenty at the time of the storm, had been suggested by a friend as one whom I should definitely interview for the story, as she was still quite cognizant and could speak coherently about the event and the impact it had upon her family (she had lost a younger brother in the storm).

Miss Bilberry died in a nursing home in April 1999 before I could get around to contacting her.

My thanks are to the 54 men and women interviewed from the original inception of my informal research, (February 1999) to the later, more difficult to find interviewees (the McClurkin sisters in Princeton in December 1999, and Lee Rauscher in May 2000). Their information and some never-before-published photos have been invaluable. Thanks to Rosetta Adams, the West Frankfort Genealogical Society, Old National Bank in DeSoto, Illinois, the incomparable and beautiful Lola Jones and to the many others who donated photos for reproduction, such as the McClurkin sisters in Princeton, who told me that the photo of their relatives and neighbor standing on their ruined property had been stowed away for years and hadn't seen the light of day until I came to interview them; they trusted me with the photo, and I appreciate that beyond words. Thanks to Margaret Russell and Mary Belle Melvin in Murphysboro, who, with their own hands several years ago, compiled accounts from that town and handed them to me for review. Thanks also to the National Funeral Directors' Association in Brookfield, Wisconsin, who went the extra mile to ensure that I had the somewhat obscure accounts of their entities' efforts, post-storm. Extra super thanks to Stan Changnon, Ernie Kern, and the most recently-contacted weatherman, Charles Doswell, for the input about the technical aspects of storms and meteorology. Thanks to my darling family, which has expanded considerably since the three hyper little kids everyone thought were so adorable (because, face it, they WERE) were dragged with me all over three states in the summer heat and winter rain to gather the information so important to this book.

And thank you, Michael Kleen, for departing from the ghosts long enough to do some history. Southern Illinois had been waiting 12 years to read this book...I hope it was worth the wait.

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*This is the long-accepted diagram, created by Stanley Changnon and John W. Wilson, showing the track of the Tri-State Tornado. Recent evidence uncovered by Dr. Charles A. Doswell III, however, may mean an additional four to five miles, and perhaps more, could become part of the tornado's track at the outset, prior to Ellington, Missouri; this theory will be explored in Chapter 18. The Tri-State Tornado remains the single most devastating tornadic storm in American history, and holds the record for number of deaths (695), number of injuries (2,027), highest estimated wind speeds (over 318 miles per hour), damage path width (estimated one and a half miles in Hamilton County, Illinois), path of destruction (219 miles at the present) and time on the ground (almost three and a half hours) for a single tornadic storm. It is hoped that no tornado will ever again wreak the kind of devastation the Tri-State Tornado did...but if one does, this book may be a valuable guide if for no other reason than for the examples of the kinds of resiliency the human spirit can display, and ultimately prevail over any adversity.*



**Part One**  
**The Sound and the Fury**



# Chapter One

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**Ellington/Redford, Missouri**  
**March 18, 1925**  
**between Redford and Ellington, Missouri**  
**11:50 a.m.**

The horse Samuel Flowers regularly used to ride the rough terrain every couple of days or so to his brother's house was all geared up, but Sam was worried about the saddle.

The girth strap was rather worn; its cinch was frayed in the way only leather can be when being sweat upon and constantly rubbed to and fro by the motion of horseback riding. It had made a whispery sound when Sam had pulled the band through, not the usual healthy squeak of a leather strap being locked in place by the cinch rings. Truth be told, the entire saddle was going to hell; saddles were generally made to last the lifetime of a horse and then some, but this one had seen several lifetimes, including not only Sam's horse, but also an old mare that belonged to John Flowers, whom Sam was going to visit about seven miles away down in Dry Spring.

John had a young'un down with a sickness that had puzzled the normally ailment-wise old woman midwife who lived in the local holler. She had been called in two days ago. Now the family was at its wit's end over the child. Sam felt pressed upon to go and receive a status report on the little boy, and bring back such news to his own family so that if there was anything more to be done, perhaps it could be discussed and arranged. Options were to take the child on over to Perryville to a very good doctor who had recently set up shop there, a long and arduous trip to the west, but one that might be worth the effort; or maybe hold a prayer vigil to ensure a cure beyond what was normal for an illness that itself appeared to be somewhat beyond what was normal. Maybe the family would seek a little bit of both.

Whatever the choice, Sam would be involved in it, for he had the sturdiest mare and the friends down in Ellington to whom his trusty mare would take him. And those friends had a good automobile that could make the trip on up to Perryville if necessary.

The morning itself had been misleading for mid-March. There wasn't the slightest hint of a breeze down in the holler near Logan's Creek, where the Flowers had a homestead. There was a bit too much warmth in the air for March 18, and this always rattled Sam, who was an early gardener and knew better than to trust Missouri's spring weather. But

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there had been years where there was a lot of odd weather to be seen when the winds of March were this warm—rain being the greatest hazard. The runoff in the hills and hollers of the Missouri Ozarks was notorious for being unpredictable. Some rains seemed to soak the ground and nurture it, while other rains were rejected by the limestone and shale formations that were the underlying strata of the fine loam soil. Rejected rains wreaked havoc on the sparse patches of farmland and sustenance locals cultivated. A heavy rain this early could mean replanting and a diminished harvest of crops many families and livestock needed for their very existence.

Worn saddle aside, Sam Flowers climbed up and took the reins, and his fine mare followed its lead, trodding down the rutted track that served as a road for those venturing into the hollers through which Blair's Creek and Logan's Creek snaked their way. A little dog, a terrier mix with black-and-white colorings on its short hair, ran yipping after the horse.

"C'mon, then," Sam yelped. The little dog jumped and barked happily at its master's voice coming to him from high above; "let's go if'n ya have to."

The dog fell in behind the mare's stride and let go a series of sneezes. Man's best friend shook his head. His ears flopped in a hapless manner. He didn't like the feel in the air; this was, in fact, the primary reason why the dog opted to follow his master as opposed to staying behind at the clapboard house with the many other members of the family. Though the dog couldn't voice it in any manner other than to rattle its ears until they popped along the side of its head, the canine felt it and put forth a mighty effort to stay within barking distance of the horse. Something told him he didn't want to be far from his master.

**July 2, 1999**  
**Fairfield, Illinois**  
**5:45 p.m.**

It was the beginning of July, 1999. It was hot, the hottest weekend of the summer so far, and this was the one we chose to take off and take a road trip back through time.

The motivation of myself and my three children, ages 11, 8 and 3, was simple: It was a holiday weekend, the Fourth of July to be exact, and everybody's going to be around the old home place because that's the kind of holiday it was—stay at home, barbecue, have little family reunions or block parties or church get-togethers. Finding people to talk to under these circumstances, I figured, would be easy. Therefore, even though it

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was hot to the sulfuric degree, we were going on this trek in an air-conditioned vehicle to see if we could catch some of these folks at home. I was seeking survivors or relatives of survivors or those who knew survivors of the worst weather disaster ever to hit the central United States.

Nobody really thinks of spring storms when the temperature hovers in the upper 90s. In fact, a thunder-boomer would be welcome relief in this insufferable heat. But there was not a cloud in the sky on the evening we left our comfortable, air-conditioned abode on the eastern side of Illinois heading west. The weather reports had been warning all week that we were in for some serious sun and humidity.

Spring storms? That was a few months ago, an eternity from when the dog days drag on endlessly in the summer. Yes, a big blow came up in early June and knocked over a few trees in the backyard. Sure, my neighbors down the way had a sidewalk uprooted and lost the underpinning on their mobile home. "Don't like those spring storms, but, ya gotta live with 'em," they'd say.

These same folks had only a vague idea of the type of storm I was chasing almost seventy-five years after the fact. These folks who bemoaned the blow that came through in June lived north of the path of destruction left by that earlier killing force, a force I was now seeking tales about. They knew a few of the relatives of folks down south affected by the tragedy; they heard from some hearty souls who went to view or to help about just what a "catastrophe" and a shame it really was, and what the size of the twister or twisters had to be in order to create such devastation on that level.

Their elder relatives knew devastation, many decades ago, and they died after passing the information to their children and grandchildren. Those, in turn, grew and briefly mentioned the same story to their children but left the grandchildren out of the loop because it was "a little too much for them to handle at such a young age."

So those folks, one of whom was I, didn't find out about such a monumental event until they were a little older. I had heard stories and had asked around to see just what the reality of it all was.

Others simply didn't care, as they grew up, because they didn't want to consider something as hideous as a bad, a very bad, storm, something that, in the day and age of control freaks and of making your own destiny, was a very undesirable thought...because one couldn't control the weather.

Our destination this evening, the second day of July nineteen hundred and ninety nine, was Ellington, Missouri. We didn't know how

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long it was going to take to get there; all we knew was that it took about two and a half hours to reach that western edge of Illinois.

Chester, Illinois, was where we crossed the mighty Mississippi and entered the eastern part of the next state, Missouri. As we drove in the fading sunset, the clear, gorgeous sky made it difficult to imagine, as we passed that point on the Illinois part of Interstate 57 where the tornado of 1925 crossed over the flat farmland, just what the sky looked like on that day. I wondered what the surroundings had been and where the people had stood wondering just what the hell was going on as this murderous beast of a storm barreled out of the southwest. Oddly enough, our route, in order to reach a crossing point into Missouri without going too far out of the way north (St. Louis) or south (Cape Girardeau) took us along the very path the twister took. It was not a feeling of terror or morbidity that overtook me as I drove along the tornado's path (backtracking the direction the twister took), rather, it was sheer awe, wonder, and the utmost respect for one of the most unpredictable and unbelievable forces on the planet.

\* \* \*

We arrived in Ellington, after a harrowing and accidental tour of the foothills of the Ozarks (and just south of the highest point in Missouri), a little after one a.m. It took us five hours of drive time—two were spent backtracking our backtracking and getting lost, until we stumbled upon Ellington.

Ellington, Missouri was a very sleepy backwoods town nestled like a jewel in a valley of the Ozark foothills. Our motel room awaited us. So did a noisy gang of Pre-Fourth of July revelers, with a cooler full of beer and a truckbed full of those partaking in spirits.

“For me?” I shouted, putting my hands to my face in mock surprise as I emerged from the SUV, rattled from the road of ups and downs and all-arounds in the mountains. “You guys must have known we were coming!!! Really, you shouldn't have!!!”

The revelers greeted us with big grins and open arms, noting how funny it was for a harrowed-looking mom and her three sleepy kids to pull into the motel parking lot at one a.m. In my typical way, however, I ignored them and instead of a beer, I opted for the room and the chance for the kids to sleep before the events of the next three days, and consequently, the next nearly two years, unfolded.

We were going to need it.

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Just north and east of this little burg, with its beautiful view of the hills and rock crags all around it, sat the location where the first of 695 was killed when the tornado began its high-stakes roll of the dice across the Ozark Mountains of Reynolds County.

My intent with the rising of the sun was to discover who this person, from reports a farmer, was, and hopefully, where exactly he was when the tornado reached out of the heavens and claimed him for its first victim. With success, I hoped I might even find someone who knew him...what he was like, how old he was, was he married with children and did he always take his Saturday night bath or did he blow it off once in awhile. It was an ambition of epic proportions, like finding a needle in a haystack. So I thought, as I drifted off to sleep in the comfort of the fine motel room I'd secured just over 24 hours before.

Little did I know what the next 24 would bring.

**March 18, 1925**  
**Dry Spring, Missouri**  
**12:30 p.m.**

As it had turned out, John's baby boy was going to be just fine. The fever that had held the child in its grip had broken, leaving relieved parents, siblings and others to feel gratitude to the Lord for watching over them.

"He works in mysterious ways," John was heard to comment on his God as Sam mounted the mare for the ride home.

A low rumble of thunder, more felt than heard, caught the attention of both men.

"Maybe He's speaking to us," Sam muttered, not convinced. "Telling us this might just have been a sick boy whose time it was to get better."

John laughed a derisive snort toward his younger brother. He knew Sam was not the most religious of men; likely, the most religious his brother had ever been was during a stint in the Jefferson City Prison. Sam's eyes had been opened over those few years; the crime he had committed had been attempted murder, the conviction decisive, punishment quick, the jail time more of a following of "old rules" than of punishment. In fact, the crime had been committed more by a following of those "old rules" than out of malice, in the ways of the hills people. When a man had a grudge against somebody, he didn't walk around it. He met it head on. And Sam had met with that somebody head on, and had tried to put a bullet to the head of that man. Dealing with that fact generally made

## Angela Mason

men hard or softened them to a higher power that they allow to take hold of their lives a little more once jail time had been served.

Sam hadn't been out of jail too long, a little less than two years, in fact. He'd been more of the latter; his faith hadn't been restored fully, but what was left had been refined into a healthy respect for the Creator, and not much more. John saw his brother glance over his shoulder with hesitation as a second low rumble issued a report across the hills that ringed the Ellington area outside Dry Spring.

"Blue skies," Sam muttered wonderingly as his eyes searched the azure above him. "Must be quite a ways off."

John followed Sam's gaze. His eyes narrowed, and he felt something kick over inside, something that his old momma would've called intuitin', and he placed one gentle hand upon the flank of Sam's mare.

"Why don't ya stay here," John offered. The tone in his voice was more of insistence than of invitation. "It's still such a piece down there to the holler. It might come up a storm afore ya make it back."

John Flowers moved around beside the mare's head and took hold of the bridle. From here he looked up to his brother and once again voiced his concern.

"Stay here, Sam," he repeated.

Sam Flowers glanced back up at the stunning March sky and shook his head once, briefly.

"Gotta get back home," Sam said as he lifted the reins.

The mare tossed her mane, her forelock flipped and she rolled her eyes at the little dog that had appeared from an outbuilding to join its master.

"Got baby Sam to look after," Sam spoke of his year-old son by way of excuse.

And without further conversation, Sam Flowers took out down the dirt road away from his brother John's place in Dry Spring, and headed for the hard road that lead over toward the holler where his family awaited him.

The little terrier mix threw one glance over its shoulder at the brother Sam was leaving behind, as if to invite him once more to insist that Sam stay. But John merely frowned and bit the inside of his lip, a habit he'd never been able to break. He walked back the short distance to his own home and to his family waiting inside.

To accompany the men as they went their separate ways, thunder grumbled again from an unspecified direction.



## *Death Rides the Sky*

**July 2, 1999**  
**Ellington, Missouri**  
**12:50 p.m.**

At the Queensway Restaurant in Ellington, I discovered that everyone in town knew the story of the tornado.

Not one of them, however, confirmed that it struck Ellington but rather an area outside of it, to the north and east, near a little burg called Redford. In order to follow up on the lead, I took the advice of some of the locals and went to talk to Marvin and Lucille Fox, who lived up in the hills outside Ellington and in the Blair's Creek area, not too far from where Sam Flowers had once had his homestead.

Their homestead wasn't much; that's putting it simply and mildly. The house had obviously stood there for many a decade, balanced, it seemed, on top of a little rise known as a 'hill' as opposed to a 'holler.' To get to it, one was best outfitted with a compass, or at least a keen sense of direction once directions were given. The locals were able to deftly give highway instructions as in 'Take K road to whur it runs inta CC, an' cross 21 afore ya get to the iron bridge; if ya cross the bridge, you've gone too fur.'



*Lucille (Gore) and Marvin Fox at their home outside Ellington, Mo., July 1999.*

## Angela Mason

That was a bit too complex for mountain terrain; in order to find the Fox residence, I was best advised to seek out and find the first 'hard road' that turned off State Highway 21 as it snaked its way north into the mountains.

The 'hard road' gave way to gravel shortly after the turn into the Fox's drive. Winding around to the back of the house, we could see it was lined with pecan, apple and peach trees, all of it bearing fruit, to the delight of my children. Up ahead, and forming the periphery of the property before it dipped into a holler, was a row of thornless blackberries, of which Lucille Fox was understandably proud, as they were beautifully maintained.

Fuzzy, playful kittens of all colors and designs prowled and leapt about the underpinnings of the clapboard house in which the Fox's had lived all their married lives. Marvin, 83, and Lucille 71, were sitting outside on the back porch (indeed, the only porch on the house). There was no air conditioning.

"We've never needed it," Marvin insisted when I asked him about it.

I sat down next to them in the shade of giant maple trees. He was probably right. The breeze that drifted steadily through the woods and across the hilltop was adequate, even though the mercury was reading 94 an hour after noon. In a house as well constructed (though aged) as theirs, I could understand how air conditioning could still be considered a luxury by these fine hills people and not a necessity. Except for a few gnats, the side yard was quite comfortable.

Marvin knew the Flowers; seemed he was related to them by proxy, as his sister, Edith Fox, had married a Flowers, one of Sam's nine children. But Marvin, who was hard of hearing and not in the best of health, didn't say much about the tornado nor the Flowers. He left that up to his wife, Lucille, who knew the story well and proceeded with what, to their family, was a tale that was known and had been told and retold for the past seven and a half decades.

**March 18, 1925**  
**between Ellington and Redford, Missouri**  
**12:45 p.m.**

The mare was growing skittish.

"Hesh, Babe," Sam Flowers told her, calling her by the only name he or anyone in his family had ever given her.

## *Death Rides the Sky*

Babe gingerly stepped over the hard-packed dirt that grew rutted from rain and wagon wheels as it approached Blair's Creek. Oddly enough, for every few steps she'd take forward, she'd do a little jog to either the left or right, as if to indicate that she wanted to backtrack—Sam wouldn't let her.

"C'mon, now!" he said, and noted with a lurch in his stomach that his words had come out in a growl.

He knew a horse could detect how its rider was reacting to circumstances affecting him; and right now Sam was growing concerned. The sky had taken on a steel-blue cast to the southwest, which was directly over Sam's left shoulder as he headed north and east on the wagon road. Not only did it not look right, but it didn't feel right either. Sam found himself gulping or gasping more than one breath in a row. He thought fleetingly that maybe it wasn't the air; maybe it was just him, his 49-year-old lungs perplexed by his reaction to the odd tint of the sky behind him.

But the mare knew it too. She began adding an erratic pattern of snorting and blowing to her sidestepping, an accompaniment that gave Sam the jitters. She emphasized her discomfort with several tosses of the head, her mane and forelock flying as a result. There was no denying it. The horse was getting spooked.

Sam reached up and patted her neck firmly. As he did he noticed a thick trickle of sweat crawl from his armpit, running down his ribcage before meeting up with and soaking into his broadcloth shirt. Sam jerked his arm back, the sweat bringing to mind a fat spider that crawls lazily across the landscape of skin before biting once, twice, three times. But there was no spider. There was only the trepidation of a force that no human could control and further, could not endure without some innate response.

The mare didn't like Sam's reaction one bit, and literally jumped along with him.

"Easy, Babe," Sam tried once again, attempting soothing but conveying more apprehension than anything else.

The terrier set up a yapping that rattled Sam's nerves instantly.

"Stop it!!" he hollered more in desperation than insistence.

Babe could take no more.

At the sound of Sam's voice, she panicked and reacted as if she were being pursued by the devil himself. Her head suddenly stretched forward, her neck craned against the reins, and she broke into a dead run, a difficult and somewhat unwise move on the rutted wagon road.

## **Angela Mason**

He let her run. Sam knew Babe knew the way home, so he held the reins loosely and afforded himself a backward glance over his left shoulder.

The sky stared back at the man with its icy steel cast, as the heavens directly above the hills seemed to become impenetrable. It was as if there were a blanket about to descend and conceal the just-budding treetops, perhaps even the trees themselves. Sam couldn't see whether or not they had begun to bend, a telltale sign that a storm was swooping down into the holler. All he could truly ascertain was that a tremendous rumbling, almost a growl, was building just beyond the hills, perhaps down in Ellington. He hoped his brother had gotten himself and his family to safety.

Sam hoped he could do the same for himself.

Despite fighting valiantly to stay up with the horse, the little dog was being left in the dust of the wagon road. For the canine, keeping up was an impossibility. Babe had urged herself from a run into a full gallop. Sam did not look down at the wheel ruts beneath his mare's somewhat haphazardly shod hooves. He hoped only that she had enough confidence in herself to obtain the footing it was going to require to maneuver across the hard-pack until it gave way to loose rock just before his homestead.

He did, however, chance one last look back over his shoulder, to determine whether the rumble, something more akin to a locomotive passing by in close proximity, such as he'd heard frequently down in Ellington, was descending upon the tree line at the head of Blair's Creek. It was as if it cheated in an effort to ensure there was no warning him of its presence.

Sam Flowers gripped the saddle horn in awe and terror, losing the reins entirely. As they flapped haplessly to the sides of the mare, and dangerously near her feet, Sam watched, horrified, unable to do anything but moan softly as he began to tremble. A shudder welled from deep within and grabbed hold of Sam's heart as the trees behind him were uprooted and tossed about, possibly hundreds of feet, into the air.

It was 1:01 p.m., March 18, 1925. The shadow of night had descended upon the sleepy mountains of southeastern Missouri from a fabled blue afternoon sky. A killer screamed toward Sam Flowers, and there was nothing in heaven, hell or on earth that could stop it now that it had begun.

**July 2, 1999**  
**Residence of Marvin and Lucille Fox**  
**outside Ellington, Missouri**

**1:15 p.m.**

Walter Fox felt compelled to speak.

“My parents stood out in the yard and watched it go over,” he proclaimed, with not a note in his voice to indicate that his parents recognized the foolishness of that act. Yet, that was just what Roy and Mary Fox did, and from their vantage point at the head of Blair’s Creek they could see the apocalyptic storm sweep down into the hollow and begin its devastation as it moved away from them, to the north and west.

The wind was so powerful, however, that it did not leave the Fox property unscathed.

“It moved the house and barn around on their foundations,” Walter said. His parents, he remarked, were likely relieved to be outside of the house at that point, as, from inside, there would be no telling what was actually happening.

However, the buildings were shifted as opposed to demolished, due, no doubt, to being closer to the powerful vortex of the storm as it began building in the hollow, instead of falling victim to straight-line winds.

“Storms can get bad down here,” Walter observed calmly. “There’s hills all around. Storms are hard to see; they boil up. They can be on ya all at once.”

According to Walter, his parents noted the storm started at the head of Blair’s Creek, in a valley, and then moved down into the creek bed itself, following it closely. The hills and hollows didn’t deter the brutal weather in the slightest. In fact, commented Walter, “Storms raise and lower here in the hills. It helps them build.”

The fact was the storm took on an initial ferocity in southeastern Missouri that was not rivaled until it met its end in Indiana several hours later.

On an eerily straight heading of N 69 E degrees, the killer storm began with a forward moving speed of 72 miles per hour, and winds estimated to be in excess of 250 miles per hour, according to data obtained in the days and weeks following analysis by engineers and meteorologists alike. Emerging and continuing research beyond the year 2000 has indicated that the touchdown in the area between Ellington and Redford may actually have been 15 additional miles *before* the originally-pinpointed spot (south and west of Ellington), causing the length of the continuous track, previously believed to be 219 uninterrupted miles, to now possibly be 234, the longest tornadic track on record.

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At its terrific rate of speed, the Missouri tornado blasted through the foothills of the Ozarks plowing a path between Ellington, just to the south, and Redford, to the north and east. Those in the path of this storm who lived to tell of its fury had described their accounts to Lucille Fox:

“My aunt and uncle, Carrie and Johnny Chitwood, lived a little further up Blair’s Creek. The storm blew away half their house and left the other half standing,” Lucille began.

“My cousin, Rosie Chitwood Dillard, had her two little kids with her that afternoon, and she was goin’ across a field when she heard it and saw it comin’. So she ran to the edge of the field, in a tree line, and lay down with those two young’uns underneath her! And she was a big woman. But she grabbed hold of a hickory sapling and she held on while that storm went over. She was able to stay down and those little kids were able to stay under her. But she said that hickory sapling ’bout beat her to death whipping back and forth in the wind.”

The memories didn’t stop there for Lucille.

“My mom was really affected by that storm,” Lucille admitted, a note of sadness touching her voice at the memory. “It scared her so that every time it’d come up a bad storm after that, if it was the middle of the night, Mom would get up and get dressed. She just wanted to be ready.”

Lucille had a considerable amount of family in the hills, and many of these kinfolk had plenty to tell about the storm that happened years before Lucille was even born. One storyteller was her father, Henry Gore.

“Dad always told about how he’d been riding a bay mare that he really trusted. He’d had her for years. And he was riding through the holler that day and the horse was right with him on trying to get out of the way of that storm. Dad said he just leaned over her and let her have the reins. She went really good. She leaped over fallen trees, and dodged trees lapping over in the path, or through treetops if they were flat laying down in the wind. I don’t see how he did it. But Dad always said that if it hadn’t been for her, he would never have made it home.”

And what of the other mare rider, Sam Flowers?

Walter Fox explained.

“His horse came in without him, back to his house. And a bunch of folks went out there looking for him.”

Jim Flowers, whose father, Clifford, was one of Sam Flowers’ nine children, was a kind gentleman and an avid rock collector, who lived in the hills on the north edge of the Ellington city limits. Jim added to the account of what happened to his grandfather, which was vivid enough to Jim’s dad Clifford at the time, as he was 21 when Sam Flowers became the first victim of the tornado.

## *Death Rides the Sky*

“A man named Irvin Barnes found him,” Jim said. “The horse had gone on home but that little dog stayed with Sam and set up a barking and that’s how they found him. My dad said the tornado either blew him off the horse or he got off and hung on to a tree and it fell on him.”

Walter Fox elaborated a bit further, as he was actually present at the time of the disaster.

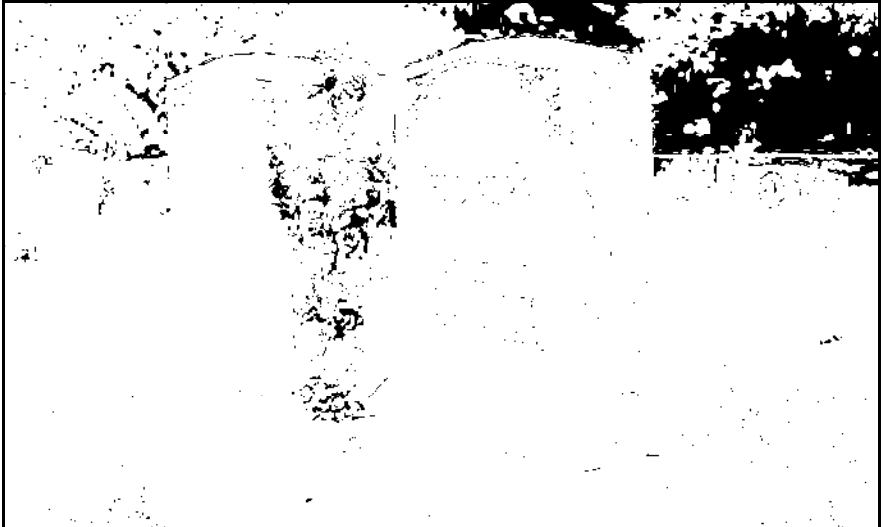
“Sam’s head was either between two trees or a fork in a tree,” Walter added categorically. “Either way, his head was mashed flat.”

“They had to have a closed casket at the wake.”

\* \* \*

Samuel Flowers had just observed his 49th birthday, March 16, two days before. He left nine children, including a year-old infant son, Sam, Jr., and a wife, Mary Adeline Flowers, “a little bitty ol’ girl, not over 100 pounds, a beautiful lady,” said Jim Flowers.

Sam Flowers was a farmer, as Jim Flowers put it, “like everyone was at the time. Everybody was either a farmer or a timber worker.”



*Sam and Mary Adeline Flowers’ gravestone located at the Redford Cemetery.*

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Although Sam had spent time in prison for attempted murder, he was not spoken ill of in the communities between Ellington and Redford. Rather, he was remembered by the old-timers, those eighty or older who might still be able to recall him, as a decent feller who thought a lot of his family and who worked hard to eke out a living in the rocky soil of southeastern Missouri.

Sam was buried in the Redford Cemetery, his wife Mary Adeline later interred next to him. Theirs was the first grave to the right past the entrance gate. Mary Adeline Flowers died in 1963, having lived out her years in St. Louis following the 1925 tornado.

She never remarried after Sam's death.

And on March 18, 1925, the tornado, blasting through one of America's most beautiful and scenic landscapes, left the Redford/Ellington area and barreled on toward Annapolis, Missouri. The toll thus far was one dead; two injured (this was three percent of the total population of Redford dead and injured in the storm); property losses: \$5,000 U.S. dollars circa 1925. These were the initial losses and there would be more—much more.



# Chapter Two

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## Annapolis, Missouri

The view from the winding roads as we made our exit from Ellington was phenomenal, even in the oppressive heat of summer, or perhaps because of the oppressive heat. The trees seemed so green, the sky so strikingly blue, that there appeared to be no way a killer like the tornado we were tracking could have wound its hideous path of mass destruction through here.

The rivers and creekbeds of southeastern Missouri were fascinating to me as a child of Southern Illinois. In Illinois, riverbeds were mud. It was fine to catch fish in, to boat upon, but to swim in was atrocious because the mud consisted of fine silt and good Illinois topsoil that washed off in heavy rains and floods and created a silky muck that bordered on slime. This was generally true of the lining of every creek and river in at least the southern third of Illinois.

But in southeastern Missouri, where the underlying foundation of the soil everywhere was composed of different kinds of rock, quite the opposite was true. Every tree and blade of grass and tuft of moss that clung to the soil did so tenaciously, because that soil clung with equal tenacity to shale, sandstone, and limestone. In the river and creek beds, the soil was consistently washed away and what was left was a stunning layer of stones and pebbles. Most were sand colored, some white, some with streaks of gray that indicated a high iron content.

Iron and other ores were the reason why Annapolis came into being. From Redford due northeast on K Highway, any map would indicate that it was almost a straight shot to Annapolis. Under no circumstances be fooled. There was nothing straight about the mountain highways (the locals refused to call these ridges in the midst of the United States 'mountains,' they preferred the term 'hills' instead, although the Redford/Annapolis area was just south of Taum Sauk Mountain, elevation 1,772 feet, the highest point in Missouri.) The road, a well-maintained, high-grade blacktop, wound perilously in and out, up and down and around, from the little four-way stop 'town' known as Redford. The road crossed deep gorges and high cliff-like mountainsides where the hills had to be blasted away in order to create a path. On occasion, the cliffsides occurred naturally, and the view then, as throughout the region, was truly breathtaking.

The roads continued on past forests and pastures where cattle, horses, mules and the occasional goat grazed, past farms and isolated

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houses, (both new and stunning, and old and decrepit). Cemeteries and gardens lay peacefully, until quite suddenly, a rise in the road appeared ahead and as it curved to the right ever so slightly, there sat Annapolis.

Arriving in Annapolis from the south, it was noticeable that almost the entire right-hand (east) side of the town was a mine. There were mine tipples, loaders, augers, and a host of other equipment that only those who were involved in the mining business would know the nature of. The mines were obvious in the immediate area of the hills surrounding the town; they were also within the county of Iron, as it was called due to the enormous deposits of the ore found in this part of Missouri. Directly north of Annapolis were villages and towns with names like Chloride, Ironton, and Graniteville. There was also at one time a tiny mining community by the name of Leadana, derived from the nearby Annapolis and from the ore that the mines produced.

Leadana was developed, in the early part of the twentieth century, by miners for miners. There had been a grocery and other modes of trade for those miners residing there with their families. As well, there'd been a small schoolhouse set up by the mine company for the children of the miners. There was even at one time a doctor's office to treat the resident mine employees and dependents. The workers and their families had resided there in somewhat substandard housing, as the information available these days related. The miners used to work long, hard hours and got to see their families in the light of day for only a few hours at a time. It was a hell of a way to make a living.

However, it was an incredible way for the miners to have lived, as they did, through the worst weather disaster ever to strike the area, as many of the miners might not have survived the day had they not been underground, hard at work in their chosen vocation. The death toll, being at a minimum in the Annapolis area, would no doubt have been higher had the storm struck in the hours when the miners weren't working. There was a good possibility that it would have permanently affected the town's population.

The Annapolis at the turn of the 21st century had a population of 363. One of those 363 was Mrs. Clara Brown, whose family in 1925 lived on a farm four miles west of Annapolis.

*“It was like a curtain came down over the sun”—Clara Brown, age 16 on March 18, 1925*

## *Death Rides the Sky*

Clara Brown was a mere child of sixteen at the time, but in 1925, sixteen was an age when young girls finished their education and set out for a life of their own with husbands if they so chose.

This was Clara's intent, to do as her two sisters had already done and start families with their husbands, building homes in the city limits of Annapolis. Both brothers-in-law and her fiancé, Carl Brown, were miners who worked in the Leadana area.

From her cozy brick home in Annapolis, the town where she had spent all her life, Clara, at the age of 90 in the summer of 1999, recalled with devastating clarity the events of March 18, 1925.

Clara remembered it was a beautiful day, warmer than most mid-March days in southeastern Missouri.

But for her family, it was a day just like any other.

"My dad and mom and I were out at the farm back then, and that day we were all sitting inside, just after lunch. Dad was reading the newspaper and I remember he looked up and said something about seeing a 'very black cloud.'"

It was one-fifteen in the afternoon.

It had taken the southeastern Missouri mountain storm just fourteen minutes from its rapid development more than twenty miles away, traveling over incredibly hilly terrain, to reach the burg of Annapolis—with a forward moving speed since calculated at 72 miles per hour.

"Dad said, 'Oh, it's storming,'" Clara recalled, not at all understating the gravity of the statement in its simplicity. Instead, the words her father spoke, issuing from Clara, carried with them all the dreadful seriousness of a storm the magnitude of the one that was approaching the town, outside of which their farmhouse sat. Clara provided a fine replication of her father's tone. That unpretentious sentence was turned deadly by that tone.

Their particular farmhouse escaped serious damage, as it was to the south and west of the heading of the storm. But Clara and her family watched in frozen amazement as the black, monstrous clouds skipped over the hills and swept down into Annapolis with an undeniable, evil fury.

"We'd never seen anything like it," Clara remembered softly. "The one thing I can say about it is that it went through really quick."

Clara nodded at this point, obviously in agreement with herself as she made a rather astute observation about the storm.

"It sounded simply like a train coming through," she mused.

"It was like a curtain came down over the sun."

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*“It was like this...It was dark and it was light and it was over” —Alice ‘Peachy’ Jones, age 10 on March 18, 1925*



*Alice Berniece “Peachy” Smith Jones, at her home, July 1999.*

Alice Berniece Smith Jones carried a lot of names for such a little lady, but there was one more, a nickname, added to that list. Born Oct. 15, 1914, she was the apple of her father’s eye—or, as the case may be, the ‘peach.’

“My dad owned a sawmill,” she said, “and for years he would come back to the house and feed the men who worked for him. When I was a baby and Dad was home for dinner with the men, I might be a little fussy so he would pick me up to keep me quiet while everyone else had their dinner. And he sang a song to me that went ‘You be the peaches, I’ll be the cream.’”

Alice Berniece Smith Jones smiled.

“I was the peaches,” she said, hence the nickname she acquired from Dad that stuck with her to this day, almost 85 years later in the hot summer of 1999—Peachy.

She, like Clara, was a mere child, not quite eleven on March 18, 1925, and was in a school that was called, simply, Annapolis School.

## *Death Rides the Sky*

“It was a four-room brick school,” she said, “two downstairs and two upstairs. I was in the downstairs room on the left, the one for the second grade.

“We were getting called in from noon recess, so I know that this tornado had to have hit after one o’clock,” Peachy noted. “The kids were screaming and hollering when they saw that black cloud and heard that awful noise. So the teacher got us and gathered us up around the desk, near the inside wall, like a bunch of chickens.”

There were quite a bunch of chickens in that schoolroom, 25 to be exact, and their cries and wails could barely be heard above the racket as the storm roared overhead. Traveling at the end of its 72 mile per hour forward moving speed, it showed no signs of slowing down, although that’s just what it was about to do. It was as if the killer storm made a conscious decision to take more time with its next victim. But moving at 72 miles per hour made this simple impression on young Peachy’s mind.

“It was like this,” she indicated and ticked off one finger per conjunctive phrase as she said, “It was dark and it was light and it was over.”

Peachy’s measurements were accurate, for in about the time it took for her to speak those words, that would have been the amount of time of the duration of the storm as it passed over Annapolis School at 72 miles per hour forward moving speed.

What did a storm moving that rapidly and ferociously leave behind?

“Everything was just flat,” Peachy remarked. “There were a couple of big boys upstairs, and their mom was sickly and they got scared for her.”

What weren’t flat in the schoolhouse were the doorframes, which still stood with the doors practically intact. Amusingly, these ‘big boys’ pushed open the doors, as if that were the only escape from the rubble that the brick schoolhouse had become in the aftermath of the powerful storm.

“And when they got out, all the kids then poured out” of the rubble, according to Peachy, and all began running into town.

\* \* \*

Clara Brown’s two sisters were living in town in 1925, and Clara’s parents loaded up with her in the family’s vehicle and attempted to get into Annapolis, but were stunned—and their progress halted—by the amount of debris blocking their passage. Not to be deterred, they got out

## Angela Mason

of their vehicle and walked into town, like so many others were going to be doing.

Amazingly, both sisters, one of whom had small children, were found to be okay.

“My sister, Shirley Johnson, had heard the roar before she saw what was coming, and she knew, so she had an iron bedstead and she went and put those kids behind the iron bars, and that, with them being up against the wall and those bars in front of them, was what saved them,” Clara said. “My other sister, Macey Slusher, had had a fine house in town, and it was blown down, with all the furniture damaged.”

Clara and her family continued on into town, more in a dazed manner, she noted, than with any specific purpose. The wreckage was almost beyond comprehension.

“Outside of town, we could see where the storm, if it was tornadoes—’cause we didn’t know for sure at the time—had cut a swath of my dad’s good timber, across Bear Branch, as wide as a big house.

“And when we came into town...oh, we found such a terrible, terrible thing...children crying, they couldn’t find their mommas...”

Clara took a moment and shifted thoughts toward her own family instead of the memory of injured children who thought, and fairly so, that the world had come to an end.

“We helped get our folks home, helped take care of our family’s kids. Because, it was such chaos. The people who had people went to their folks—when they finally found them.”

Those in the mines in the Leadana area, while spared the sight and sound of the storm, were in no way spared its eventual wrath, however.

“The storm tore the mines and machinery right up. There weren’t very many men above ground, but my cousin’s husband was killed there, when the tornado went through Mine’s Hollow,” Clara said. Mine’s Hollow was what the Annapolis folk called the area of Leadana.

“There were up to 450 underground in the lead mine,” she pointed out.

Those men climbed to the surface only to find their mine operation, grocer’s, doctor’s, and clapboard homes destroyed.

Women had escaped serious injury by taking cover; children had been in school. The latter structures were somewhat sturdier than the clapboard houses.

Seventy-five years later, “there’s nothing there now,” Miss Clara Brown related of the ‘town’ of Leadana. “They went ahead and rebuilt the

## *Death Rides the Sky*

mine offices and equipment and it ran for a little while after the storm, but after a time, it shut down.”

\* \* \*

Peachy Smith ran into town as fast as her ten-year-old little legs could carry her.

“I saw folks I knew,” she said, “and they said I ought to wait right there (in town), but I knew I had my mom and brothers in the house, and I wanted to get to them.”

When she reached her house, which was on the north part of town and up a little rise, she was stricken by what she beheld. Basically, she saw a house torn inside out.

“That tornado had blew the roof off and took it away, and it lifted the walls and dumped everything outside,” she remembered.

Peachy had a fifteen-month-old baby brother, Archie Ray Smith, and an older brother whom Mom had ordered to stay put in the house after he had come home from school for lunch.

“He’d got home just after noon,” Peachy said, “and about the time he was supposed to go back, Mom had seen the clouds coming and told him to stay. He was blown out into a pile of wood. He wasn’t really hurt, just banged up.”

Peachy’s mother did not fare as well.

“Mom had a big timber fall across her back,” Peachy said. “Now, I didn’t see it at the time after it happened, but they told me that it tore a big hole in her back.”

In an attempt to shield their daughter from the horrors of the type of wounds the storm dealt, her mother’s injury was never revealed in full to her by her parents. Peachy did not have accurate knowledge of it even 75 years later.

“I didn’t see anyone else’s injuries, and I didn’t know of anyone injured badly except for mother. I didn’t see the place on her back. It took months for it to clear up.”

Baby brother Archie was saved by mother’s instincts.

“He was okay in Mother’s arms,” Peachy noted. “Mom said when the wind threw her through the house, she hung on. She always said, ‘It’s a wonder I didn’t squeeze him to death.’”

## Angela Mason

Peachy's father, by 1925, was now working in the mines in Leadana and was underground along with many of the area men when the storm tore through.

"Dad said they had to climb up the zigzag ladders because the power had been knocked out to the mine elevators. They would stop about every 16-20 feet on the landings so they could rest. They were climbing so hard and so fast that they were wearing themselves out," Peachy said.

"Dad said he just kept thinking 'They're all gone,'" Peachy recalled her father telling her.

The miners had to travel by foot into town, much as Clara Brown and her parents had done, due to the enormous amount of debris left behind in the destruction of the mining area. Along the way the miners were stunned to discover boxcars and other freight cars having tumbled off the tracks of the rail line that wound its way past the mining village and through Annapolis on its north-south route through Missouri. Many miners noted that the boxcars were not only lying on their sides away from the tracks, but many appeared to have been spun several rotations away.

Peachy remembered what her father said he experienced when he arrived in town.

"He saw a young man on our property. He'd been walking around in the rubble and Dad asked him what he was doing. The young man said he had seen a heating stove on top of a bed, and he didn't know for sure if there was anybody there in what was left of the house, but he went in anyway and got it off the top of the bed before it started a fire. He told Dad, 'I hated to mess with anything,' likely because he didn't know whose property it was, but, he said, 'I went ahead and took it out.'"

Peachy's father found his wife sitting amidst the rubble covered in blood from minor head wounds and with the hole in her back, the baby Archie crying in her arms.

"Her face was all scratched up," Peachy observed. "Archie Ray would look up at her and cry, and she'd wipe the blood away from her face and he'd recognize her and stop crying 'til the blood would cover her face again. They kept doing this until Dad got there."

Peachy told of people who were crawling out from under wreckage all over town.

"No one said 'Are you okay?'" she said.

"They were all too dazed."

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## *Death Rides the Sky*

Sixteen-year-old Clara wandered through what was left of Annapolis, calling and searching for her fiancé, Carl Brown. She eventually found him as he reached the edge of the town along with other men from the mine. Carl was shaken but unscathed by the nightmarish storm that had demolished the little mining town. Together, Carl and Clara discovered what had happened to members of his family during the storm.

“His cousin, Osro Kelly, had his wife Nell and their two little girls, and they had gone into town that day in their old car and had just come back to their house. Nell and the little girls had gone on into the house, but Osro had decided to wait on the porch and see what was happening,” Clara recalled.

“The little girls were okay. Nell was hurt real bad; she was laid up in the hospital for six months—they didn’t think she would live, but she did. Osro was killed because he stayed out on the porch. Carl’s mom took the two little girls in while Nell got better.”

Osro Kelly was one of four killed in the little village of Annapolis, Missouri. Two others from the mine village, who had not been below ground, were victims, along with another niece of Carl Brown’s.

The total dead, 4, numbered exactly one percent of the population of the 400 living in the village at the time. Twenty-five total were injured. Property losses totaled \$400,000. Little Annapolis, seated in the hills of the Ozark Plateau range, suffered 90 percent overall destruction, meaning that every building but ten percent of them was either obliterated or damaged in some way, a phenomenal number of structures harmed.

When the tornado left Annapolis on its heading of N 69 E degrees, it had slowed a bit from its entrance and was traveling at a forward moving speed of 67 miles per hour. Winds were in estimation of close to 300 miles per hour within the vortex.

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“I don’t think we went back to school that year,” Peachy reminisced. “Leadana lost the mining offices, doctors offices, lots of housing buildings, a store...but it wasn’t all necessarily rebuilt. The mine machinery was mangled.”

The lead mine, which had been in operation from 1918, had not ceased operation at that point but had continued in a limited capacity until 1941, when it finally shut down, or, in Peachy’s words, “it folded.” Coal and other ores, however, continued to be mined in the immediate Annapolis vicinity.

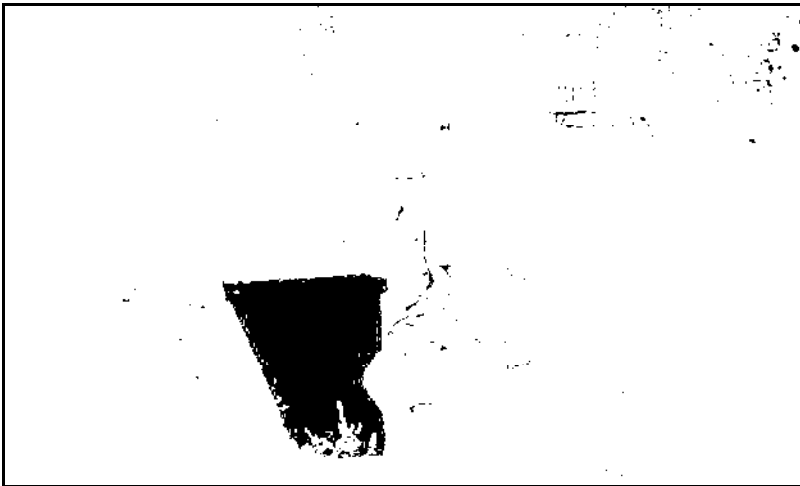
## Angela Mason

### July 3, 1999 leaving Annapolis

Something we noticed about K Highway between Redford and Annapolis—

There were homes along the highway, mostly few and far between. But whether poor shanty-type structures or rambling ranch-style brick houses, many bore a similarity. Within running distance of these homes were little grassy mounds, some built into the stone enclaves that bordered the homesteads, the stone being knuckles of the hills that were the edge of the Ozarks. Others had been deliberately formed by a backhoe in the middle of a pretty summer lawn. All of the little mounds had heavy wooden doors, hinged, with a pull handle of some sort that could be gripped easily and used even in the case of very strong wind.

In nineteen hundred ninety nine, and from years hence, the mighty storm that tore through the foothills of the Ozarks left an indelible mark on the memories of the residents and on many of their properties. It was not a mark left as a result of the crushing winds. It was the result of humanity's reaction to that wind—in the form of storm cellars that dotted the landscape as we cruised by.



*The author's son, Jesse Wingard, posing at a community storm cellar outside of Annapolis, Missouri, in July 1999, in order to give perspective on the size of the underground structure; in the background elements of a park setting, showing the importance of such shelters to the residents of the community, which disaster struck on March 18, 1925.*

## About the Author

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Angela Mason spent a quarter-century of her life in the music and performance fields as a vocalist, musician, actress and on-air radio personality while living in Illinois, Indiana, the Gulf Coast, Eastern Seaboard states and even Germany. But the love of writing and of history prevailed and she has been published with or working for various newspapers, magazines and journals since 1992. “Death Rides the Sky” is her first full novel, and the creation of it helped her get over her fear of tornadoes, which was developed over several years of intense storms sweeping across the woods and fields of Wayne County, Illinois (where there haven’t yet been enough earthquakes to warrant a book and subsequent facing of that fear...yet). She resides in her beloved Southern Illinois with her husband Jack and a passel of spoiled cats, is mom to three beautiful adult kids and grandma to (so far) two of the most amazing granddaughters on earth.