

Western Kentucky University

TopSCHOLAR®

Folklife Archives Oral Histories

Folklife Archives

4-6-1997

Interview with Henry M. "Monk" Ross (FA 201)

Manuscripts & Folklife Archives

Western Kentucky University, mssfa@wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist



Part of the **Folklore Commons**

Recommended Citation

Folklife Archives, Manuscripts &, "Interview with Henry M. "Monk" Ross (FA 201)" (1997). *Folklife Archives Oral Histories*. Paper 413.

https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_fa_oral_hist/413

This Transcription is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Folklife Archives Oral Histories by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

1

Interview with Henry "Monk" Ross at his home
in Brandenburg, Kentucky on Sun., Apr. 6, 1997
Kester

002 This is an interview with former mayor
Brandenburg Henry "Monk" Ross. I'll be talking
to him at his home in Brandenburg. The
interview is being conducted on Sun., Apr. 6,
1997, in the afternoon and we will be dis-
cussing the Brandenburg tornado of 1974.
I'm Jonathan Kester, and I'll be the inter-
viewer.

Kester I'm talking with former mayor Monk Ross
of Brandenburg, who was mayor of Branden-
burg when the tornado struck in April 1974.
First I'd like to ask you Mr. Ross, just give
me a kind of background, if you would,
where you kind of were in your life in
1974, just kind of thinking back.

011
Ross I'd had just been elected mayor three
months and four days prior to the tornado, &
I promised the people when I ran for
mayor that I would clean the town up.
They were three open land fills in the city
of Brandenburg. Of course you know that
draws rats and all kinds of insects. So the
first thing I started to do was to clean up
those open land fills. Then, when the tornado
came through, I was at the high school
w/ Mr. Stuart Pepper, the principal of the
high school. And we were looking up of
cleaning up a bottom in the back of the
high school. And he looked over to the southwest

2

saw a big black cloud and he said, "We'd better get under shelter." I said, "No, it's going up the river, it'll miss us." He said "No, we better get in the shelter. So we went up to the high school, and when we got in the high school, it was there. And the roof went off of the portion of the building we was in and all the windows caved in and I got a cut on my left hand [displays scar to me], the only scratch that I got that afternoon. Then the rest of the afternoon we were busy picking up bodies all over Brandenburg.

25 J.K. Well, let's return to that in a minute but let me ask you first, kind of reflect if you would, you said you'd been elected mayor, and were serving when the tornado hit, what do remember most about life in Brandenburg before the tornado? What stands out in your mind?

M.P. It was a quiet little town, and I was raising up my four children in Brandenburg, it was a quiet little town with a good school system and one grocery store
30 [the IGA] and people were all friendly & neighbourly and it was just an outstanding little town but I thought when I ran for mayor, as I said, it needed a bunch of cleaning up to be done. So that was my main object to run for mayor. I wanted to see the town cleaner.

JK How long had you lived here in Brandenburg?
A few years, or was it all your life?

MR '51 to '74. I'd been in Brandenburg from
35 '51 to '74.

JK Describe your activities if you would, on
April 3 before the storm hit.

MR We were busy hauling and cleaning, and
filling dumpsters with trash out of these
three places that were open to dump in & we
had organized a solid waste plan to pick up
everybody's garbage.

JK So, you were in the process of getting them closed?

MR Yes sir, I was closing them
40

JK OK, you told me just a little bit but let's
kind of just think over when the tornado
struck, where were you? Kind of go over that.

MR I was in the James R. Allen Elementary
School, on the floor. We grabbed a post
wind picked us up in the air & brought us
back down two or three times and then when
it left, my car, the back end of it was up
45 on top of another pick-up truck.

JK And you were with Mr. Pepper?

MR I was with Mr. Pepper.

4

JK And his roll was?

MR He was superintendent of the school system in Meade County.

JK: OK, and what kind of warning did you have that the tornado...

MR None. None. Well, when we got real busy, of course, later on, we got real busy getting the siren system set up. Now there one all the way around Brandenburg.

JK But not at the time?

MR Not at the time. We didn't have any.
50 Had one that went off at twelve noon when the noon whistle blows.

JK Did you recall anything about the weather beforehand?

MR Yes, It was real calm, wasn't a leaf moving or ~~anything~~ wasn't sprig of grass or nothing moving. It was just as calm as it could be, till the... and of course
55 we saw the tornado. We saw the black funnel cloud, looked like, from where we were, it looked like a big black piece of plastic up in the air a dragging on the ground. That's what it looked like, like you'd hold a big black piece of plastic up in the air & drag it on the ground & that's the

way it looked like to me.

JK: So you watched it...

MR: Watched it, yes sir.

JK: Just briefly or...

60 → MR: We watched it, when it got to the dairy & we heard it get, just prior to it getting to us, we heard this awful rumbling & that was buildings going in air. The dairy farm, the dairy barn, the RECC building, where your grand father was manager of the RECC

[My grandfather, Leslie G. Jenkins, headed up the Meade County RECC, which covered a five county area in North Central Kentucky, from 1952 ~~until~~ his retirement in January 1974, less ~~than~~ three months before the tornado struck Brandenburg]

JK: So you saw a little bit, so you did have just a little bit of warning, if the fact that you could see it...

MR: See it, yes sir.

JK: Nothing before that.

65 → MR: No, sir. We didn't have a bit of warning.

JK: How did you respond to the threat posed by the tornado, I mean the immediate threat.

6

68 MR Wow! They... I worked all night that night & all day the next day & up till midnight the next night before I ever stopped & doing the necessary things that I had to do.

JK So, did you have any time to warn others?

70 MR No, sir, no, sir, no, sir. Didn't have a minute. Didn't... At midnight that night ~~a~~ state trooper came through with a radio that he could radio E-town [Elisabethtown, Kentucky] and they got the governor on the phone for me at midnight. Governor Bert Combs [actually it was Governor Wendell Ford]

JK And were you talking the midnight after?

75 MR No, the midnight of the tornado [they are one in the same]

JK Right after it at four that afternoon?

MR Yes, sir

JK Well, how do you feel like you were personally affected by the storm? By the tornado?

MR Well, it taken one side off my house and all my trees out of my yard, and then course the school system closed down. But my

80 main job that night was to identify the ones we picked up.

JK How was that done?

MR They brought them into the school with no top on it (the old elementary school. They brought them in, or the old high school, they brought them into the building & laid them on the floor & covered them with a sheet. Then they would call me to come over to identify them. And that was my job all night long.

JK As mayor, then.

85 MR As mayor.

JK How many & did you know everyone

MR Yeah, I knew them everyone. Some were hard to identify but of course I knew everybody in Brandenburg at that time.

JK: Who among your family or friend were killed or injured by the tornado?

MR Three of four real close friends, three or four real, real close, and course Mr & Mrs. Skilman were very real close friends. And then Mr & Mrs O'Brian were real, real, close friends. By knowing everybody in Brandenburg you know, in a small town I

8

knew everybody & where they lived.

JK So, none of your family...

MR: No, sir, no sir.

JK or injured...

95 MR No, sir, just close friends

JK What happened with your injury exactly?

MR With my hand? I guess a piece of glass cut it, I never did go to the doctor. It was cut deep, but I just wrapped it up & let it go. I kept on going, & it healed up made quite a scar but that was the only cut that I had on me.

JK What about Mr. Pepper?

MR Mr Pepper was scratched up some, but nothing serious

100 JK would you say that that is about a two inch scar?

MR Yes, sir

JK On your left hand?

MR Yes, sir.

JK What do you recall about the first few minutes after the storm had hit? Was over?

MR I could hear people screaming all over Brandenburg. Screaming for help. It was just as calm after the tornado as it was a little while prior to the tornado. You could just hear people hollering all over Brandenburg. Screaming for help

JK What one thing about the tornado stands out most clearly in your mind? About it hitting?

MR Well, I'd say the most... would be the families that were hurt from the tornado. Well see, in the city of Brandenburg, everyone that lived in this little town had ~~relatives~~ relatives out in the county and it was just terrible for the first two or three days after the tornado. It was just terrible. Sight-seers, you know. So finally we just had to close the town off.

JK Just seal it off to...

MR Yes, sir.

JK ...the outside

MR Yes, sir

JK Well, what were you feelings while the tornado was striking Brandenburg. I mean, do you recall ~~what~~ anything going through your mind as

10

you were there in the school with Mr. Pepper?

MR Yes. My baby daughter was at home by herself! She was six years old. So she went over to the neighbour's house as it started to come in & my neighbour & her [Mr. Ross' daughter] crawled in under her house. So, when I got home immediately after the tornado, when I got home, they were crawling out from under their house

120

JK So you were think, what's the whereabouts...

MR Yes, sir.

JK That's very fortunate. How did you feel about... if someone asked you how you felt about tornadoes before this storm struck what would you say?

MR Before the tornado? I never... I had read about them in Texas and Oklahoma and others states but I never visualised anything like that ever happening to Brandenburg. I mean that just took me by, and everybody else, by a big shock.

125

JK How do you feel, ~~how~~ how did you feel about the tornado, how do you feel now about tornadoes after you've lived through the one that hit Brandenburg?

MR I go to the basement. When they're hollering

130 severe storms, I go ~~to~~ to the basement & get in a corner, the southwest corner of the basement

JK Do you have a full basement?

MR Yes, sir.

JK What psychological effects do you think the tornado left on you, if any?

135 MR Well, I think the worst thing that could happen to anybody is to lose that many friends just so quickly, you know. And you worried about the families, and you worried where they were going, the ones that was left, how they were going to do, and the mass funeral, it was just unbelievable.

JK Tell me about that

140 MR They had... they had a mass funeral at the high school on ~~the~~ a Sunday afternoon. This happened on a Wednesday afternoon [the tornado] at 4:17 and it was till Sunday before we could get the graveyard cleaned up enough to where we could have a burial. So, we worked day & night on the graveyard, volunteers did, setting up the tombstones that had blowed over. And of course we found about fifty ~~ones~~ that we didn't know where they went back to. So we 145 poured a concrete slab later on, & set them

12

just laid them on that concrete slab.

JK And this was at Cap Anderson...

MR Cap Anderson, yes, sir.

JK So after you did that, what happened with the service, can you tell me a little bit...

MR At the memorial?

JK Yes, sir.

MR Well, sir we... that Sunday afternoon [April 7, 1974], as I said we had priests, preachers, and all different denominations. They came in & they had this mass funeral on a Sunday afternoon. Course, there wasn't room, you know, for, in the school, for everybody that was there. There was more on the outside of the gym than they were on the inside.

150

JK So it was at the gym?

MR At the gym

JK How many people were...

MR Oh, I'd say 2000, maybe more.

JK And the service was for how many people?

MR Thirty-one. Thirty-one.

JK ¹⁵⁵ So it was all done at once?

MR Yes, sir.

JK Thirty-one. And then afterwards what happened?

MR Then afterwards, when they could get to them, or get time, they had the journals but not that afternoon.

JK Wow. Describe what you did in the hours after the tornado struck to respond to the disaster the storm caused, being mayor, you kind of alluded to, you went solid through the next day. Kind of tell me what you...
160

MR Through the next day?

JK Yes?

MR After the tornado?

JK Yes, sir. As mayor.

MR We were still looking & looking for any one,
165 you know that... three sisters were all killed in the tornado. They... one of the sisters walked up to the nursing home to get her other two sisters to come and spend a few days with her. So they came over to her house & all three of them... we found three ladies, but they wasn't

170 the ones we thought we'd found. One of the ladies' sons lived in Xenia, Ohio. He got hit, too. [Xenia, Ohio was hit by a devastating tornado the same day as Brandenburg that resulted in 37 deaths] Desperately. So I finally got him word. He came down to Brandenburg, and I told him I had found his mother. He said "All right, I want to go see." So that was my job, to take him to see her. So I took them over there & showed them & he said "oh, no, that's not my mother." Well I said "they was in the location of where your mother was a-visiting." He said "That's not my mother." So we started looking farther, we started looking all around, every where, and lifting up & looking, & finally, the next day, we found another lady & when I got a hold of him again he said "Yes, that's my mom. But we had found a neighbour lady of about the same age, who was there also."

180 JK So you found her body, too.

MR Yeah.

JK So this man you're talking about had lived where, as we know, a bad tornado hit Xenia, Ohio...

MR Right.

JK What... did he recount what had happened up there to him?

MR He lost his whole business. He had a Toyota, I mean a Volkswagen dealership business and he lost every bit of it.

JK But no family

185 MR No family.

JK Other than...

MR Other than his mother here at Brandenburg.

JK That's very ironic.

MR Yes, sir, it sure is.

JK So then, basically you said for the next day you worked, you spent a lot of time looking for...

MR Yes, sir.

JK ...The missing?

MR Just about the rest of that week. Just about the rest of that week. Up to, I'd say, Saturday afternoon.

JK What kind of assistance did you have?

190 MR I had Memminiks that came in to help. I had

16

the Lion's Club came in, I had the...
 just all kinds of volunteers to come
 in & we approved them & they started
 helping us & getting the houses out of
 the roads, getting trees out of the roads &
 just working with everything that had to
 be done

195

JK It must have been overwhelming.

MR Yes, sir, it sure was.

JK Could you tell me a little bit about the
 Mennonites? What do you mean
 exactly?

MR The Mennonites, they came in here from
 up in Indiana. They're a religious group
 that wears, the women wear long hoods
 over their heads & long black dresses, &
 the men all wear black w/ black hats. And
 they came in & camped up at the grave-
 yard & fed their ourselves & they were
 just wonderful help.

200

JK And they just assisted wherever they...

MR Yes, sir they assisted wherever ~~it~~ ^{was} needed

JK As far as any of the... what other assis-
 tance did you get, for instance from the
 state?

MR The governor came down the next morning
 205 after the tornado. He flew to Fort Knox in a
 helicopter & caught a vehicle en down to
 Brandenburg. He said Burt Combs, I meant
 Wendall Ford. And Wendall came to Brandenburg
 he said "Monk, I'll help you anyway
 that you need help." So he sent the national
 guard in, and of course the Red Cross came
 210 in, and the National Guard stayed with us,
 for I'd say, a couple of months. The
 governor was a big asset to us.

JK So, basically, anything you wanted.

MR Yes, sir. They sent us water from Fort Knox.
 We didn't have any water, any electricity, and
 they hauled in the water from Fort Knox,
 the army did, and they hauled in food. And
 215 they brought in food & about anything
 ↳ we needed, came from Fort Knox.

JK Did you have what was your experience with
 the news media? at that time?

MR Aw, the news media at that time would run you
 crazy. Absolutely run you crazy. If they
 had of been stayed away, for a week, until
 you could get organised, & get a plan. You
 220 see, a group of us got together, we drew
 up a plan of where we're going start & how
 we're going to run it & what we're going to do.
 But, course the news media was right there in
 the middle of the streets, and every thing when

18

we was trying to do things. If I was the mayor of another city & that had a tornado to hit, I'd ask the news media to stay out of at least three days, 'till you could get organised

JK So did they interview you?

225 MR Oh, yes, sir. Every time you'd turn around they be asking you questions! Honestly, you didn't have time to fool with them

JK Let's see. You kind of told me what you did to respond to the disaster. What preparedness steps did you take after the storm to insure your safety & the safety of the town now that this had happened?

230 MR We'd taken sealed bids for sirens, to be put all the way around Brandenburg, and they got them now on all four corners of the town, out to the edges of town. Tied in with the radio station [WUMG 93.3 FM] & with 911 at the courthouse. Anyone out in the county spots one, and calls 911, they'll kick it into the radio station and they'll go off

JK Within moments...

MR Within moments. What saved people at the RECC building was one boy saw it coming & he told all of the workers in the RECC building said, "Go to the basement now!" & that's what

240 saved all of their lives out there. Two women right straight across the street in a little beauty parlour, they were both killed

JK But no one in the RECC...

MR No one in the RECC

JK Which was in the direct path.

MR In the direct path right in the middle of it. And it was the strongest building in the state of Kentucky at that time

JK Well, so the sirens, you said, were installed as a preparedness...

245

MR Yes, sir.

JK Anything else that the community did?

MR Yes. Getting the 911 into operation has been a big asset.

JK So the two kind of...

MR The two work together.

JK How do you think the town as changed as a result of the tornado? Thinking of the ^{over} twenty years since then?

MR Well, one major thing, I think, that has changed,

20

anyone that built a house after that had a basement. They all went to a basement. They built them a basement in the corner under that house. Because a house without
 255 a basement you're just asking for trouble in a disaster like that.

JK Other things, perhaps?

MR The changes? Yes, there's been bigger & better
 260 buildings put up and people are closer knit now than ever was before. People have worked together & helped one another better. They were really good to me while I was mayor.

JK How long were you mayor?

MR Three terms.

JK Three two year terms?

MR No. Three four year terms.

JK You were in until...

265 MR Until eighty... Well, I quit in eighty... I was elected three times as mayor but I quit in the third term to run for county judge

JK How has the community as a whole done anything to memorialise the victims of the tragedy

270 MR We built a big memorial & put it up, up at the courthouse

21

Put it up while I was county judge and gives all the names and we had a dedication up at the courthouse.

JK Was it in the 'eighties?

MR Yes, sir, it was in the eighties

JK Now is... would that be... that the new building...

MR Yes, sir, the new courthouse

JK So, there was a lot of rebuilding after...

275

MR Yes, sir.

JK Besides the courthouse, what other public buildings?

~~275~~

MR Well, the jail of course. It tore down the jail & the courthouse and it all moved up on top of the hill, out from downtown Brandenburg. And new law offices, and
280 new city hall and just about everything in that line was completely demolished

JK Who worked with you in the city government to get all that done because that was all during your terms?

285 →

MR I had a city councilman [sic] that worked at the RECC, still does. They let him, like Olin let me take off & just stay with the city & the RECC let this gentleman, Bill Corum, they let him take off & to help & to work with me, & he had worked with government agencies & he was a big asset.

22

JK How long a period are you talking about?

290 MR Six months. Olin Chemical Plant paid me for six months to stay in Brandenburg [at City Hall as mayor]. Sent my paycheck every Thursday

JK How well is this disaster remembered among the survivors in Brandenburg today?

295 MR Whenever a storm's a-coming, they'll go to a hole. [Laughter] They'll go definitely [Laughter]. I went to one last May & it blew eight trees down in my yard out here, and I was in that hole. I was in the basement.

JK So, but that wasn't a tornado. Just a severe thunderstorm?

MR Just a severe storm

JK So the memories come back

300 MR Yes sirc. That high wind, I've got to go. [Laughter] I've got to get in a hole somewhere

JK Do you find you recall it just as clearly now or when something like that is happening? Does it come back?

~~MR~~

MR Yes, sir. I guess it will always come back. Guess it will always come back.

JK How did your knowledge of tornadoes increase after the tornado?

23

MR Well, to be perfectly honest with you, I didn't
 305 know anything about a tornado until that
~~one~~ one hit. I couldn't believe the damage a
 tornado could do. I mean, over at your
 uncle's funeral home, [Jenkins-Sturgeon
 Funeral Home] for instance, there was...
 What is that thing that holds that
 310 thing up there, in the window, ...flimsy...
 curtain rod?

JK Curtain rod?

MR Curtain rod. It blew one through an eighteen
 inch in diameter tree, and we thought it
 was so odd, so when we cut that tree, we
 315 cut a block out + left that curtain rod,
 still through that tree. And you know, a
 little old flimsy curtain rod, you can bend
 with your hand. But it blew that thing
 through that tree so its just unbelievable...

JK What happened to it?

MR The block of wood? It's still at city hall
 Yeah, they've saved it over at city hall
 320 [Laughter] Because nobody in the world
 would believe it, you know, unless you saw
 it with your own eyes.

JK Are there any other things like that that stand out concerning what the tornado did?

MR Yes, sir. How it ~~top~~^{laid} the dinner bell down from on top of the court house & didn't break it. One boy, I'd say was about your same age, he was in downtown Brandenburg, & it lifted him up & brought him up over that hill & slammed him against a house. Then another man was in his basement, a-holding his mother-in-law & it sucked him mother-in-law out of his arms & lifted him up in the air & he lit on the next house over by your grand dad's, on top of the house. Cut the back of his head & all down his back, but he survived.

325

330

JK So you really learned the power...

MR Yes, sir the power of a tornado is unbelievable. I don't guess there is any power... you take a hickory tree, eighteen inches in diameter & twist it in two. You know, you could tie enough bull dozers from here to Brandenburg to a tree to twist it in two. You could pull it over or pull it out of the ground, but not to twist it in two. I mean, that's just unbelievable, to twist a tree in two. Say four foot in the air, above the ground, just twist it in two. They... you couldn't get up enough power - cut it down or pull it out of the ground, anything like that the wind would blow it over but not to twist it in two. Some 200 huge trees in the graveyard, twisted them in two.

335

340

JK And there's just a few there to-day

MR Just a few.

JK But most were a victim of..

345 MR Yes. Just a few trees in the graveyard.

JK ~~What~~ What was the main thing done, you talk about the trees, dealing with that after the tornado?

MR That was sickening. I love trees & that was really disheartening. And of course the federal government, they lied to me about the graveyard. They told me to go in & fix the graveyard back up like it was, they would give me assistance on putting the graveyard back. So I broke the city. When I went there the city had money. I broke the city immediately after the tornado. I put them broke, cleaning up the graveyard and things like that, thinking the federal government would reimburse me, some of it. But they said that was landscaping & they wouldn't pay none on landscaping.

JK Oh. I was going to say, why?

MR Yeah. They said it was landscaping & they wouldn't pay anything on landscaping. So at that time, I was with the federal government

360

kind of disappointed & disgusted, because I was spending the city's money because I thought we're going to get some of that back.

JK Did you... did the city receive assistance in other areas

365 MR Yes. ~~They~~ I got... we got assistance in putting our city hall back. See, the little lady that was setting in the city hall & we had bought two walkie talkies and paid \$1500 for them. I said, "My, my, that's a waste of money, paying that much for two walkie talkies."

370 She was setting on the first floor of the city hall. Well, when the top of the building left & the floor fell in, she went to the basement. A walkie-talkie hit her on the head. She picked up the walkie talkie & pushed the button & screamed for help. Some

375 guys in a helicopter at Fort Knox heard her, which normally they wouldn't carry over half a mile. They heard her & told her I'd say her name slowly. She repeated her name & they told her that help would be on the way. So that's why we got the helicopters down here so quickly. So after that I never

380 complained about paying... buying two high priced walkie talkies [Laughter] After that!

JK Oh, mercy. How much do you think you're

read or even maybe written yourself about the tornado or tornadoes in general since that happened.

385 MR

Well, I went to Cincinnati & I spoke at a convention on what I would do after a tornado & I told them that I would first block the city off and let emergency help in to locate the bodies. And to not to do anything until we got the bodies buried.

390

Then start there. But get organized. See, we weren't organized. We were as far from being organized as we could possibly be. We didn't

395

know. None of use knew. I think there should be more classes around through the school system providing people with information on what to do if a tornado does strike.

JK But as you said, that's been done since then.

MR Yes, sir. Yes, sir

JK For the schools?

MR Yes, sir. The schools are now... The ~~children~~ children are notified. Lord, I just thank God that the school children were all gotten away on their way home before that tornado came through.

400

JK An hour before.

28

MR An hour before, yes, sir.

405 JK Thinking back... what would you like people to remember about the tornado & just pull it all together. What would say is the lesson from it?
410

415 MR Well, I would call a meeting that night & the day & I'd ask the preachers & priests to all get together & pray for the ones that were lost & everyone pull together closely & to not get in a hurry. Not rush & take your time.

420 JK Well, I appreciate your help on this MR Ross. Do you have any other reflections you'd like to add about your feeling on the subject?

425 MR About the only thing that I could say was the people were really good to me. They worked with me & they helped me in every way that they could. The RECC, your grand dad, the telephone company, the... all the businesses they were just... outstanding to help in any way they could, & it just pulled the community together a lot closer
430

JK So the thing that stays with you most is you felt there was a lot of cooperation?

MR Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Then the older ones that are

29

still here, ^{like} ~~me~~ me, they remember it more
435 vividly than the ones that are just coming
up the ladder

JK Well, I appreciate you time to-day. It was
certainly interesting

End - 435
End of tape 581