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DAY OF DISASTER:

BRANDENBURG, KENTUCKY, AND THE TORNADO OF APRIL 3, 1974

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ORAL HISTORY

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### Brandenburg, Kentucky, and The Tornado of April 3, 1974

Why do historians conduct oral history projects? Well, in the case of this particular study, my aim was to go beyond the official written record and "collect [the] spoken memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews."<sup>1</sup> This classic definition of what oral history does emphasizes the fact that I wanted to present a more complete picture of the events surrounding the Brandenburg, Kentucky, tornado of April 3, 1974. By interviewing eyewitnesses to the event, I also sought to fill in any gaps in the historical record, record individual views of the history of the event, and perhaps learn new information on what happened. I spoke to six members of the community who had lived through the Brandenburg tornado. They were: publisher/editor of the Meade County Messenger, Jane Willis; former pastor of First Baptist Church, the Rev. Dr. Billy Marcum; Meade County Rural Electric Cooperative executive, Bill Corum; former Brandenburg mayor, Henry "Monk" Ross; former Meade County judge, James Greer; and former educator, Mary Louise Barnet Jenkins.

As bad as the tornado was that struck Brandenburg, it was, unfortunately, not an isolated occurrence. In the annals of weather history, according to Thomas Grazulis' book, Significant Tornadoes, 1880-1989, "Mother Nature provided the worst known

tornado outbreak in the planet's history on April 3, 1974. It produced 148 tornadoes and cut over 1,200 miles (1,920 km) of path<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 1). This fifteen-hour period between 1:00 p.m. on April third and 4:00 a.m. on April fourth saw forty-nine killer tornadoes spawned out of the total of 148 twisters. These forty-nine killed a total of 315 people--307 in the United States, and eight in Canada. There were 4,939 total injuries requiring hospital treatment, and three of the tornadoes stayed on the ground for over 100 miles (160 km) each. The twisters touched down in thirteen states: Michigan, New York, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, as well as the Canadian province of Ontario.

In 1970, Dr. T. Theodore Fujita, a meteorologist at the University of Chicago, developed a six-level scale that "relates wind speed ranges to various degrees of structural damage."<sup>3</sup> The Fujita Scale ranges from F0 (the weakest twister) to F5 (the most severe). F5s are known as "incredible tornadoes" with wind speeds between 261 and 318 miles per hour (420 & 505 kph). The same sources says this about F5 tornadoes:

Incredible damage. Strong frame houses lifted off foundations and carried considerable distances to disintegrate; automobile-sized missiles fly through the air in excess of 100 meters (325 feet); trees debarked; steel-reinforced concrete structures badly damaged.<sup>4</sup>

Of the 148 tornadoes that strafed the east central United States and Ontario, Canada, that day, six were ranked as F5, or the most severe possible, on the Fujita scale. They were the twisters that struck DePauw and Martinsburg, Indiana; Xenia, Ohio; the western suburbs of Cincinnati, Ohio; Mount Moriah, Alabama; Guin, Alabama; and Brandenburg, Kentucky.

In the spring of 1974, Brandenburg was a picturesque, quiet town of 1,800, and the Meade County seat. Much of the community was perched on two high bluffs overlooking the mighty Ohio River and the bucolic beauty of Southern Indiana across the river. Main Street led down the hill between the two bluffs to downtown at the bottom of the hill, where the courthouse, jail, and other buildings were located. Nearby was the site where the Ohio River ferry docked until it was put out of business in 1968 by the Matthew Welch Bridge two miles (three km) to the east. Around the edge of town on three sides, a recently completed by-pass had already lured a few businesses to the edge of town, as well as drawing some new ones. "In those days, we were still without shopping centers of major chains of any kind,"<sup>5</sup> notes Meade County Rural Electric Cooperative executive Bill Corum. "You had a predominate, downtown by the river established village. All your government entities were downtown."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the town was still focused on downtown and along the bluffs, rather than along the by-pass. Former Brandenburg mayor Henry "Monk" Ross, who had just entered office as mayor three months before the tornado struck, concurred. "It was a quiet little town with a good school system."<sup>7</sup>

The leading employer in town was the Olin Chemical Plant, and Brandenburg was enjoying a prosperous economy that milder and wetter than normal spring.

As early as April first, the stage began to be set for the "super outbreak" of tornadoes that would occur on April <sup>3</sup>third<sup>o</sup>. A strong jet stream began moving a powerful cold front onto the Great Plains. On the morning of Tuesday, April <sup>2</sup>second<sup>o</sup>, a strong, low pressure center had formed over Wyoming, and began its push out over the plains and toward the midwest and midsouth. At the same time, the jet stream began pumping up warm, moist air at a rapid rate into the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. The demarcation line between the cold, dry air behind the front and the warm, moist air ahead of it was sharp, and the potential spawning ground for strong thunderstorms. (footnote 3)

The National Severe Storms Forecast Center in Kansas City, Missouri, was not caught napping. Realizing the potential for bad storms, "Early Wednesday morning, the Center warned that conditions were ripe for severe thunderstorms within twenty-four hours."<sup>8</sup> The projected area covered all or most of Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama, as well as parts of nine other states (see Figure 2). Most of the 148 tornadoes to occur on April third and fourth would be within these parameters. The Center would end up issuing twenty-eight tornado or severe thunderstorm watch boxes during that period (see Figure 3).

In addition to the collision of warm, moist air ahead of the cold front with the cold, dry air behind it and the rapidly moving jet stream, two other factors combined with these to make the ideal conditions for severe thunderstorms and tornadoes.

The waters of the Gulf were warm for April, about 75°F (23°C), and the winds passing over were picking up an unusual amount of heat and moisture. Within the storm front, vertical air currents were observed up to 70,000 feet (25,000 meters). Usually there was a warm air "lid" on vertical motion in the atmosphere between 20,000 and 50,000 feet (7,000 and 16,000 meters), but on April third the lid was off. Tremendous energy concentration accompanies vertical movement to this height and surface air rushing in to replace the rising current creates the violent vortex of tornadoes.<sup>9</sup>

The stage was set for a natural disaster of immense proportions by the morning of Wednesday, April <sup>3</sup>third, and Brandenburg would be among its first casualties. But the day started out normally enough for most people in town. Citizens were going about their regular weekday routines with not much thought of the weather. Early that afternoon, Dr. Billy Marcum, pastor of Phillips Memorial (now First) Baptist Church, had already prepared his sermon for "prayer meeting" that evening, and had some free time. "It was a good day, I thought, to do the first mowing of the grass for the year. In the process of the mowing, it seemed just like a pleasant day. I had no idea that

anything was approaching that would make any problems."<sup>10</sup> Educator Mary Louise Jenkins also had a routine day.

I had taught school, and during the afternoon playtime, my husband came by the playground [about 2:00 p.m.] and said that there were storm warnings, the same as there had been two nights before when we had a small touchdown to one of the little communities outside Brandenburg, and a trailer was destroyed. We were conscious of this having happened, and we were probably a little more observant of the storm warnings than we would have been.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Marcum was home alone that afternoon without a radio or television on, so he didn't hear reports either first or secondhand, as Mrs. Jenkins did, that severe weather was developing in the area. At 10:30 a.m., a severe thunderstorm watch was issued for north central Kentucky and south central Indiana, followed at 2:30 p.m. by tornado watch #98. Shortly afterwards, the DePauw and Martinsburg, Indiana, F5 tornado touched down just north of the Ohio River and began wrecking havoc. For Brandenburg, Kentucky, zero hour was fast approaching.

The Brandenburg tornado was born at 3:25 p.m. when a funnel began to descend out of an ominous wall cloud in Breckenridge County, Kentucky. As one source notes, "Touching down five miles (eight km) southwest of Hardinburg, the tornado passed along the northern edge of that town (see Figure 4), with F3 damage to homes. Thirteen people were injured and thirty-five homes were

destroyed as the funnel moved to the northeast across Breckenridge County and into Meade County. The tornado gradually enlarged and intensified as it approached Brandenburg."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, by the time the twister reached the southwestern edge of town, it was a half mile (one km) wide and moving at fifty miles per hour (eighty kph).

The National Weather Service office in Louisville, Kentucky, was on the alert and issued a tornado warning for Meade County at 3:55 p.m. Many people did not hear the broadcasts and the tornado was less than fifteen minutes away. But some did. As Bill Corum notes,

We got permanent warning just before the tornado came, from our service person in Irvington, Kentucky. He called us on the radio, said 'a storm was just a little bit north of Irvington, just went by us and you'd better take cover--it's coming your way.' We got everyone in the basement of that cooperative.<sup>13</sup>

Thanks to his quick action, twenty-eight people were saved. The two people in the beauty shop across the road were not so lucky. Bill Corum found their bodies moments after the tornado had obliterated the small frame building they were in.

What did the tornado look like? Bill Corum and the other people in the Meade County RECC office on the northwest side of the town saw it first, out of the door of the basement. "It's a black wall,"<sup>14</sup> he noted. Mayor Monk Ross saw it also, from the nearby Meade County High School, where he took refuge with school



superintendent Claude Pepper. His description is vivid: "It looked like, from where we were, it looked like a big, black piece of plastic up in the air, a-dragging on the ground."<sup>15</sup> Most of the other narrators I spoke with did not see the tornado. They had already taken refuge in basements. Most had received a ten-minute or so advance warning. The exception was Dr. Marcum, who <sup>^</sup>left his house at 4:00 p.m. to pick up his wife. She was working part-time at a sporting goods store on the eastern edge of town. As he drove out to the store, he recounted,

I noticed on the right a cloud formation over in the area toward Ekron. It was a funnel cloud. I couldn't tell if it was on the ground or almost on the ground, but it seemed far enough away that I didn't feel threatened by it.<sup>16</sup>

The twister was moving parallel with his car to the northeast. When he and his wife returned to Brandenburg a few minutes later, they discovered that their house and the church had been destroyed.

Before going to the basement of the Meade County Messenger office, editor Jane Willis herded her staff down the steps and noted that "the sky was green . . . and we knew that it was a storm and it was bad."<sup>17</sup> As the tornado roared across town, it felled trees and tombstones at Cap Anderson Cemetery. It then wiped out the residential area on West Hill where Mary Louise Jenkins, her husband Leslie G. Jenkins, Jr., and their two children, Graham, age five, and Beth Helen, age twenty months, had

taken cover in the basement of their large, comfortable home on the bluff overlooking the Ohio River.

Due to the wind, we tried to move to the brick wall that goes from the basement all the way through our house. Before we got there, the swing set was sucked through the patio door. There was so much debris blowing in that I moved the children, but we only got as far as the U-shaped steps. We stooped under those stairs, which later I found out was probably the safest place we could have been.<sup>18</sup>

The Jenkins-Sturgeon Funeral Home, just down the street, was also destroyed, but Richard Condor and the other staff members survived by hiding in the building's basement as well. Many others were not so lucky, as the town's highest fatalities occurred on West Hill.

At the bottom of West Hill, where downtown Brandenburg is located, Jane Willis and her staff were under cover at the Meade County Messenger office, while Meade County judge Jim Greer and county employees at the courthouse had taken refuge in the County Court clerk's vault. Judge Greer had received a fifteen minute warning from the Breckenridge County Sheriff's department. He had time to warn his daughter of the impending disaster, but couldn't reach his wife. Both were unharmed by the twister. After entering the vault, while the tornado was at its height of fury, he peered through the vault door and looked out a courthouse window. "You could just see metal, lumber, everything, flying by.

I mean flying--it wasn't floating--sand, it was terrible. But it didn't last, it seemed, over ten seconds, and it was over."<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, one of the stunning things about the F5 level Brandenburg tornado was the quickness with which it killed people and destroyed property. As it crossed the Ohio River, clawing its way up the hill on the other side of the river in Harrison County, Indiana, it had wiped out Brandenburg in less than five minutes. The twister, perhaps weakened by crossing the wide Ohio, dissipated two miles (3 km) northwest of Brandenburg, near Laconia, Indiana. It had been on the ground for thirty-four miles (60 km). It was 4:15 p.m. CDT, on Wednesday, April 3, 1974. There would be forty more killer tornadoes, out of 148, with 258 more deaths in the following twelve hours, including the Xenia, Ohio, twister and three other F5 intensity tornadoes. But at least for Brandenburg, the ordeal was over.

Damage was immense in the town. As Dr. Marcum observed after they arrived at the site of their home, "Even in our front yard, we were disoriented, because nothing was where it was supposed to be. The trees were gone, the light posts were gone, the buildings were gone."<sup>20</sup> Bill Corum concurred:

All the buildings surrounding the [Meade County RECC] property were totally gone. That when I would look from the main road across, and I could see the old water tower [on West Hill] standing all alone, and before that, you could not have seen that water tower. There

were too many structures between you and there. But I could see a clear path (see Figures 5 and 6).<sup>21</sup>

In the minutes and hours after the storm, until darkness halted their efforts, townspeople worked to rescue the injured from the wreckage of homes, businesses, and automobiles. "Some of the men carried (the injured) with a board down to the Central Elementary School where some of the helicopters were beginning to land from Fort Knox (the Army base fifteen miles [twenty-five km] east of Brandenburg)." Thirty bodies were also recovered from the area of the tornado's path, twenty-seven within the city limits of Brandenburg. One person would die soon afterwards from injuries suffered in the tornado.

With so many dead, local officials decided to have a mass funeral at the Meade County High School gymnasium. As Mayor Ross described it,

That Sunday afternoon [April 7, 1974], we had priests, preachers, and all different denominations. Course, there wasn't room in the school for everybody that was there. There were more on the outside of the gym than were on the inside. I'd say 2,000, maybe more. Then afterwards, when they could get to them, or get time, they had the burials. But not that afternoon (see Figure 7).<sup>23</sup>

Among the incredible damage of the Brandenburg tornado was some examples of the power of tornadic winds. Many trees that were not uprooted were either debarked or "twisted in two," as

Mayor Ross observed. Also, a curtain rod was found impaled in a tree all the way through its trunk and out the other side. As Judge Greer noted, "You couldn't put that in there with a hammer in one hundred years!"<sup>24</sup> The section of tree with the embedded curtain rod is now on display at the Meade County Courthouse in Brandenburg. It is small wonder why people caught outside during a tornado are often killed or injured by flying debris, in the face of such accidents.

The tornado brought Brandenburg national attention for a short period. Soon after the disaster, the National Guard cordoned off the town to keep out sight<sup>2</sup>seers. But the news media did descend on the town en masse. Both Mayor Ross and Judge Greer had to contend with the occasional aggressiveness of the media. "They continuously wanted me to release the names of all the people [who were killed by the tornado] and I wouldn't do it. I told them I wouldn't 'till everybody was located. . . . They'd get mad at me. Some understood, though,"<sup>25</sup> noted Judge Greer.

Brandenburg was also visited by noted scientists who studied tornadoes and their damage to better understand them. They hoped to develop means to predict them better and give more advanced warning to people threatened by them. This research has led to the development of such things as the Doppler Radar, a sophisticated device that can pinpoint funnel clouds within thunderstorm cells with amazing accuracy. A leader in the field is Dr. Theodore (Ted) Fujita, meteorologist from the University of Chicago, who developed the Fujita scale of tornado severity

mentioned previously. Jane Willis recalls his visit to Brandenburg soon after the tornado. "He plotted where all the people were killed . . . and he went out and . . . saw how badly the trees were damaged. [Months later] he sent us maps and we kept them up on our wall [at the Messenger] for years after that."<sup>26</sup> (For a copy of the map, see Figure 1.)

Interestingly, Dr. Fujita called Ms. Willis around the twentieth anniversary of the tornado to see how things were going in Brandenburg. He still remembered well his visit to the small town on the bluffs.

What was the legacy left with the survivors of the Brandenburg tornado? There were several. One was a realization that material possessions can be lost. "It's here today, but it may be gone tomorrow. [We lost] a lot of the things we treasured. But immediately we realized that they were not very important,"<sup>27</sup> notes Mrs. Jenkins, whose family survived the destruction of their house by taking refuge in its basement.

A second would-be tornado preparedness steps to be ready if another twister was to threaten Brandenburg and Meade County. Within a year, the town erected sirens to warn the populace in the event of a tornado. Later, when 911 was developed, the system was tied into it. Mayor Ross noted,

They got them [sirens] now on all four corners of town. Tied in with the radio station [WMMG, 93.3 FM] and with 911 at the courthouse. Anyone out in the county spots

[a tornado], and calls 911, they'll kick it into the radio station and they'll all go off within moments.<sup>28</sup>

Other preparedness steps included the construction of sturdier brick homes with "mandatory" basements, the purchase by many people of weather radios, ("We have a weather radio. We'd never had that before,"<sup>29</sup> noted Dr. Marcum), and the familiarity with severe weather terminology. Brandenburg residents know the difference between a tornado watch (conditions are favorable for the formation of tornadoes in and close to the watch area) and a tornado warning (a tornado or funnel cloud has actually been sighted and is imminent. Take cover immediately).

A third legacy of the tornado is a persistent spirit of cooperation in the community that blossomed after the storm. "Everybody pulled together, everybody realized that we had a task and it was to make better what we had lost,"<sup>29</sup> Mr. Corum noted. Because of that initial effort, "the city and county worked more closely together. I think that has carried over,"<sup>30</sup> remarked Judge Greer. The general feeling is that it happened once and could happen again. The whole community is in the same boat, and cooperation is important, many narrators believe.

After the disaster, the townspeople, for the most part, picked up the pieces and went on with their lives. But some people left town, never to return. Over thirty homes were never rebuilt. Some businesses vanished forever. Assistance poured in from the federal and state governments, as well as family, friends, and even sympathetic strangers. But the town was

inexorably changed. "[The tornado] tore down the jail and the courthouse, and it all moved up on top of the hill, out from downtown Brandenburg,"<sup>31</sup> noted Mayor Ross. As a result, downtown declined and many businesses relocated to the by-pass.

"The main thing I miss are the trees. The trees made the West Hill,"<sup>32</sup> commented Leslie Jenkins, Jr., ten years after the tornado. Even today, twenty-three years afterwards, the trees are bigger, but not as impressive as they were before the tornado. But for the most part, the scars on the town and on people's lives have faded. A monument on the courthouse lawn memorializes the thirty-one dead, but other signs of the disaster are more difficult to find. After all, a whole generation has been born and grown to young adulthood since that terrible April day. Brandenburg today is a prosperous community of over 2,000 people. In the past decade, national chains have discovered the town, so now Brandenburg has its own Kroger and McDonald's like thousands of other cities and towns, big and small, around the nation.

Yet, while the outward evidence of the Brandenburg tornado disappears, the collective memory of it among the survivors remains strong. "We count time in before the tornado and since the tornado,"<sup>33</sup> said survivor Jane Willis. "I guess it [the memories] will always come back,"<sup>34</sup> declared Mayor Ross. That is a key purpose, then, of oral history: "to collect [and preserve the] spoken memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews."<sup>35</sup> Brandenburg was forever changed by the tornado. By preserving the oral history of



the event, we can perhaps better understand how and why the town is the way it is now, as well as preserve the history of a crucial time in the life of the community, for with knowledge comes understanding.

## Endnotes

1. Donald A. Ritchie, Doing Oral History (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 1.
2. Thomas P. Grazulis, Significant Tornadoes, 1880-1989 (St. Johnsbury, VT: Environmental Films, 1990), 146.
3. Ibid, 141.
4. Ibid.
5. Meade County RECC executive Bill Corum, interview by author, 10 May 1997, Brandenburg, Kentucky, tape recording, Corum home, Brandenburg.
6. Ibid.
7. Former Brandenburg Mayor Henry "Monk" Ross, interview by author, 6 April 1997, Brandenburg, Kentucky, tape recording, Ross home, Brandenburg.
8. April 3, 1974: Tornado! (Louisville, Courier-Journal and Louisville Times Press, 1974), 8.
9. Ibid.
10. Former pastor of First Baptist Church Rev. Dr. Billy Marcum, interview by author, 11 May 1997, Brandenburg, Kentucky, tape recording, Marcum home, Brandenburg.
11. Former educator Mary Louise Barnet Jenkins, interview by author, 10 May 1997, Brandenburg, Kentucky, tape recording, Jenkins home, Brandenburg.
12. Grazulis, 548.
13. Corum.
14. Ibid.

15. Ross.

16. Marcum.

17. Meade County Messenger publisher Jane Willis, interview by author, 6 April 1997, Brandenburg, Kentucky, tape recording, Willis home, Brandenburg.

18. Jenkins.

19. Former Meade County Judge Jim Greer, interview by author, 6 April 1997, Brandenburg, Kentucky, tape recording, Greer home, Brandenburg.

20. Marcum.

21. Corum.

22. Marcum.

23. Ross.

24. Greer.

25. Ibid.

26. Willis.

27. Jenkins.

28. Ross.

29. Corum.

30. Greer.

31. Ross.

32. Linda Stahl, "The Tornado and Ten Years After . . .  
Brandenburg," The Courier Journal Magazine, 1 April 1984, 4.

33. Willis.

34. Ross.

35. Ritchie, 1.

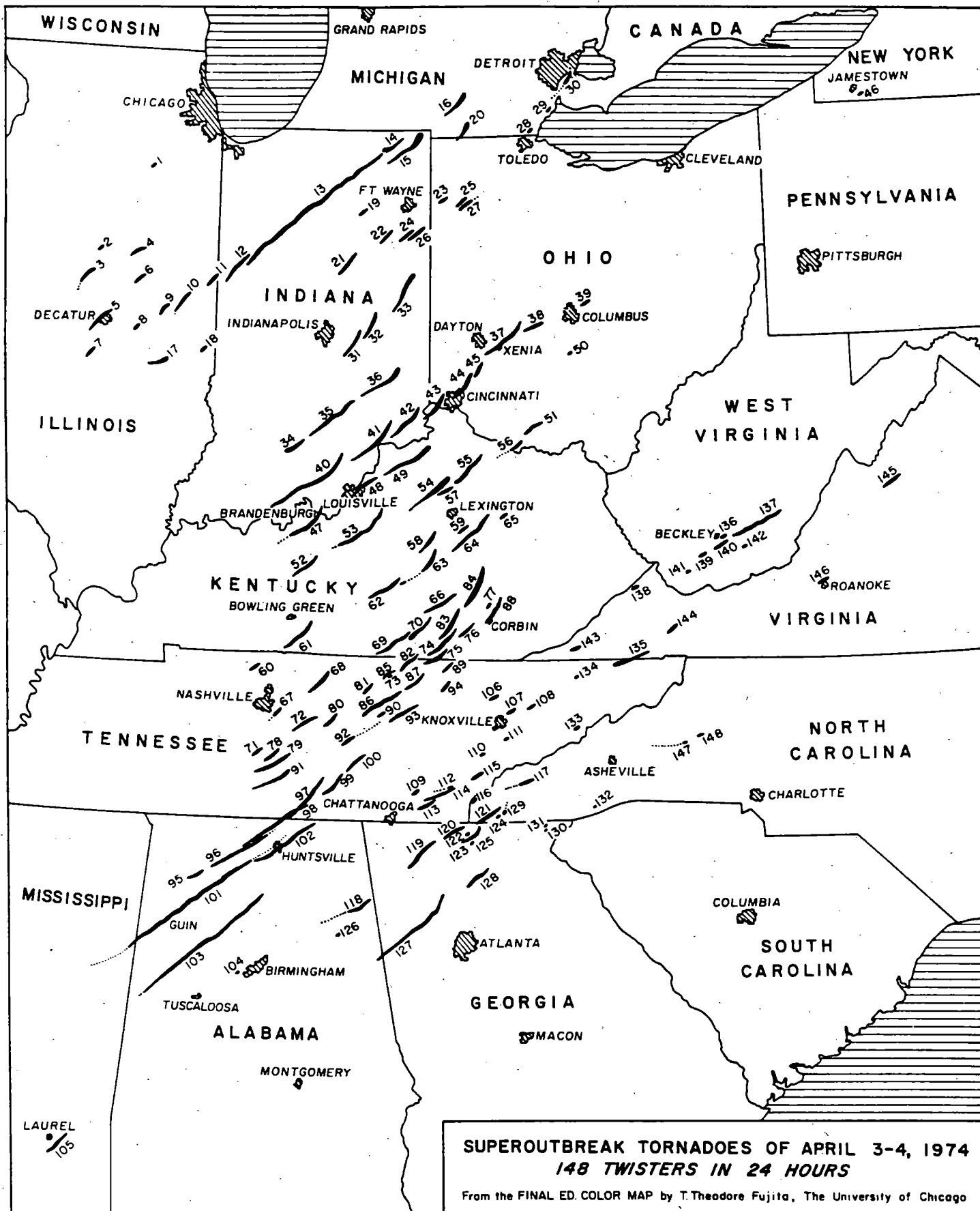
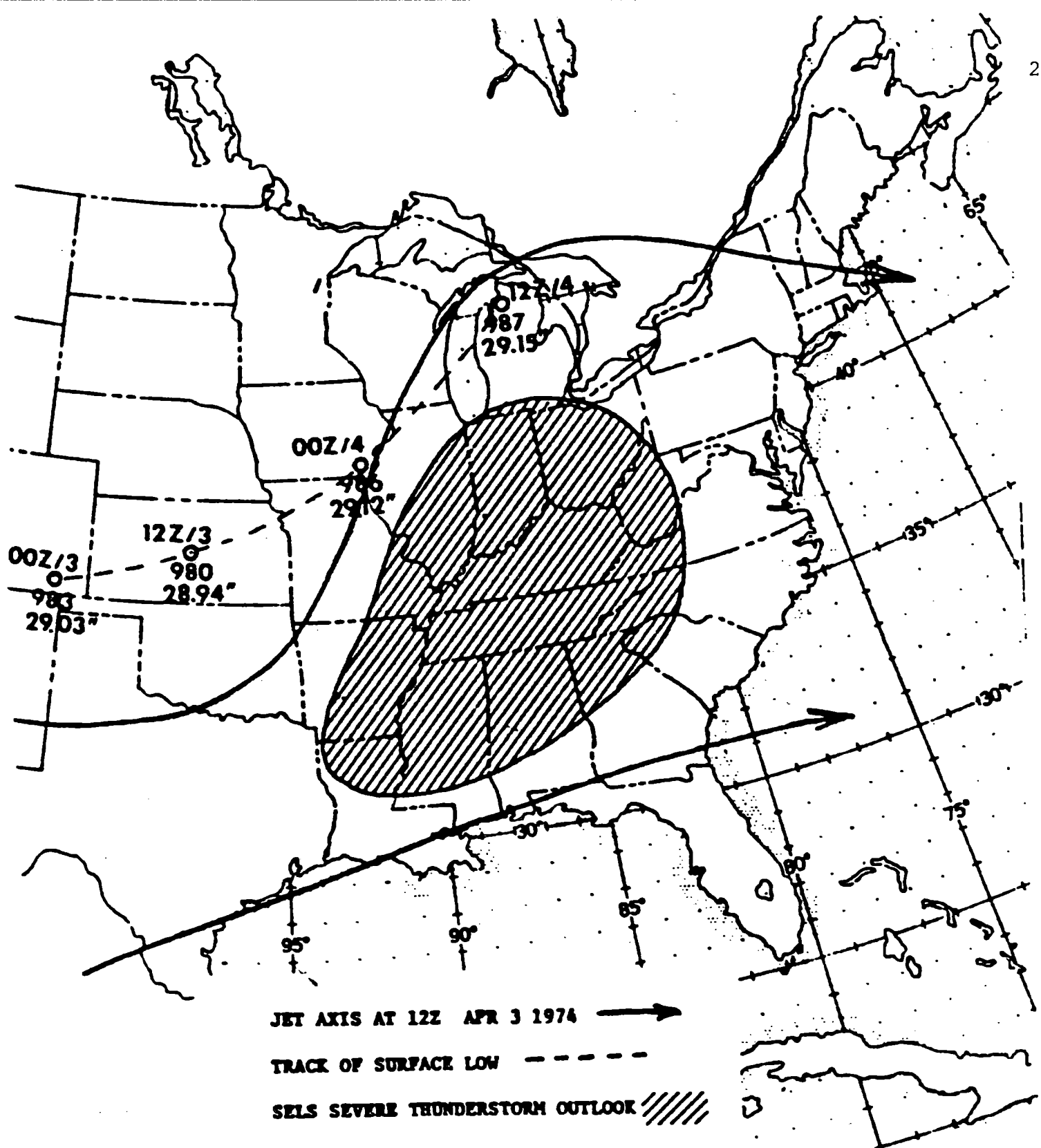


Figure one. April 3, 1974 The entire Super Outbreak  
The original 148 tornadoes are mapped here by Professor Fujita. The narrative descriptions are keyed to these map numbers.

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**Figure two** *The severe weather outlook for April 3, 1974, enclosed the eventual path of 145 of the 148 tornadoes which were counted that day. The jet streams and surface low positions are added.*



*Figure three A composite map of the 28 NSSFC watch boxes for the "Superoutbreak" of April 3-4, 1974.*

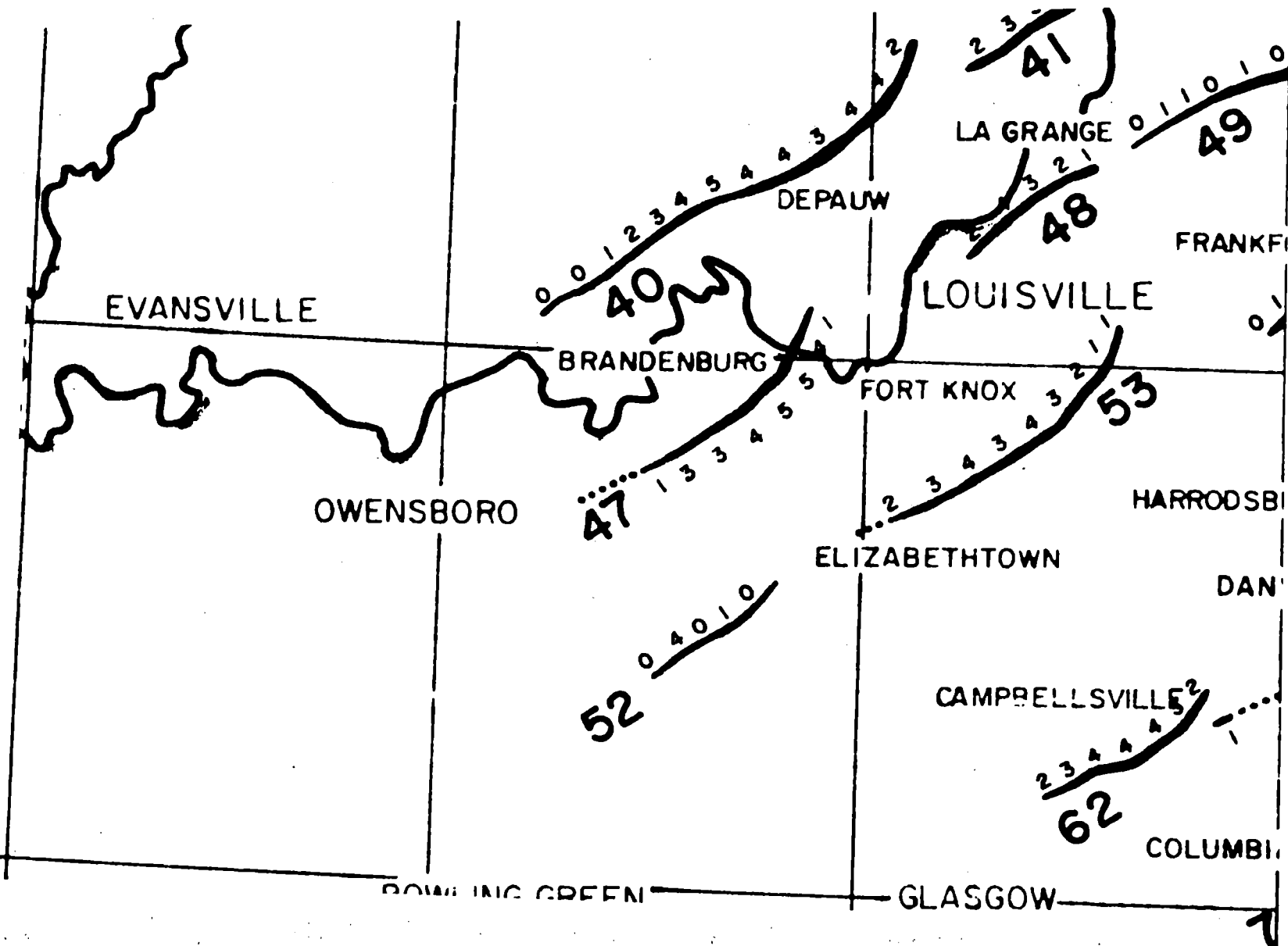


Figure Four. The Brandenburg tornado is labeled number 47. Numbers along the path note the twister's intensity, with "5" being the most severe or an "incredible tornado". Figure one through four illustrations courtesy of Significant Tornadoes, 1880-1989. by Donald Ritchie.

Figure Five: Tornado damage on West Hill,  
with the water tower in the  
background. Photo courtesy  
of the Louisville (Ky.)  
Courier-Journal from the  
book, April 3, 1974: Tornado!

**"I looked at it and I wanted to cry."**

*Governor Wendell Ford.*



Brandenburg.



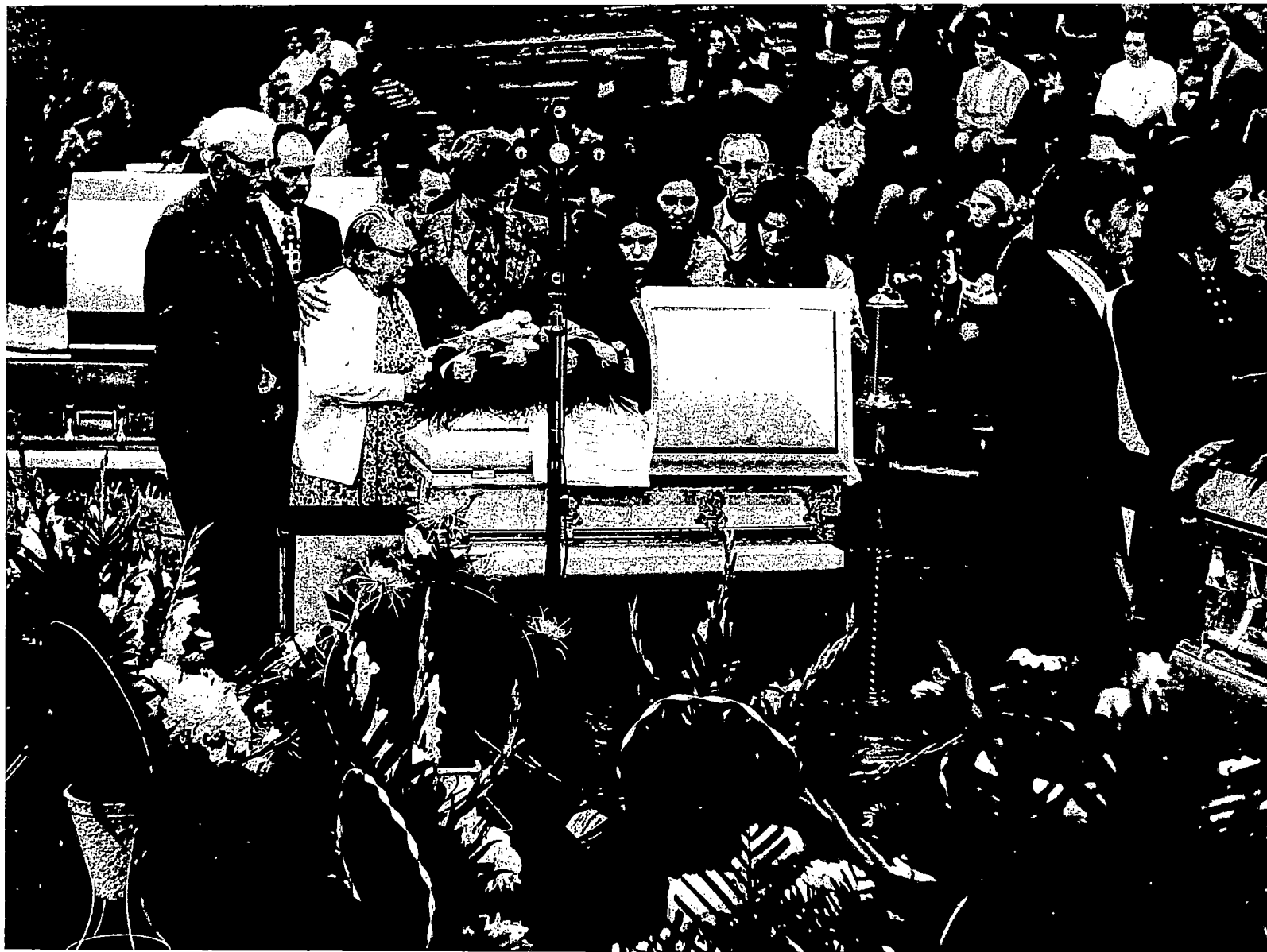


*Roy Padgett, Sr. near the foundation of his home at Brandenburg.*

**“This town was hard hit . . . a lot of people still haven’t grasped what has happened to them.”**

*Thomas Hall, a federal disaster official at Brandenburg.*

Figure Six. More tornado damage in Brandenburg. Photo courtesy of the Louisville (Ky.) Courier-Journal, from the book, April 3, 1974: Tornado!



Memorial services at Meade County High School gymnasium for the 30 who died in Brandenburg.

**“The body of Regina Yates, a 10th-grader who had shared many joyous moments with classmates there, lay in a shiny coffin on the gym floor. Teen-ager Glenn Adair was in the next casket. A few**

**feet away the body of Patti Wallace, 16, seemed to cradle that of her daughter, Angela, born December 20, 1973. In the next coffin was Patti’s 13-year-old brother, Richard.”**

Figure Seven. The service was held Sunday, Mike Brown, *The Courier-Journal*.

April 7, 1974. Photo courtesy the Louisville, (Ky.) *Courier-Journal*, from April 3, 1974: Tornado!