



The top photo shows the remains of the Philip Owens home where all six family members died. In the top right photo, a dog guards what is left of the Namon Terry home. Both scenes are from the April 3, 1974 tornado. The other two photos are scenes from the Feb. 6, 2008, tornado which claimed four lives.



Tornadoes devastate Lawrence Co.

By Brette Martin Burnes
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There are times in people's lives that serve as benchmarks, those occasions or events that are so significant that they are seared into people's consciousness, creating an indelible memory of where they were and who they were with at that moment in time.

Though not always, these moments usually are the result of a tragic or catastrophic event. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy is one of those occasions, as were the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

For many people in Lawrence County, the deadly tornadoes of February 6, 2008, and April 3, 1974, were so

significant and life-changing that they have become the kind of watershed moments that are etched into people's psyches.

The 1974 tornadoes were part of what the National Weather Service called the "Super Outbreak." Extremely volatile atmospheric conditions led to the formation of 148 tornadoes over a 24-hour period on April 3 and 4. The storms ravaged a total of 13 states, resulting in 335 deaths and more than 6,000 injuries.

Eight of those tornadoes swept across North Alabama, killing 86 people. In Lawrence County alone, two tornadoes took the lives of 16 people, injured 63 others and left hundreds homeless.

In terms of property loss,

100 homes, 40 mobile homes and 150 vehicles were destroyed. Dozens of farm and utility buildings were lost, as well.

Damage estimates totaled over \$6 million dollars in Lawrence County, yet the greatest cost came in the loss of lives.

Lawrence County's first encounter with the tornado first occurred in Mt. Hope, where it damaged the school and principal's home. Traveling in a northeasterly direction, the F5 tornado touched down next in the Parkertown Community off Ala. 24, where it claimed the life of Audrey Sue Latham, 32, a young wife and mother of two little girls.

The storm's next fatalities

were Billy and Lavenia "Tip-toe" Blankenship, who lived on Old Florence Road in the Landersville Community.

The twister continued its deadly path to the Mt. Moriah Community, where it claimed two entire families. Benard and Corine Letson and their 17-year-old son, Ricky, were killed, and their nine-year-old daughter, Sharon, died later that night during surgery at Huntsville Hospital.

A family of six from Mt. Moriah became the tornado's next victims. Phillip and Alpha Owens, along with their four children, Phyllis, 15, Linda, 14, Buddy, 13, and Terri, 11, all perished when the storm struck their home.

The Langtown Community was hit next. The home of Winford and Erin Glover was demolished and both were severely injured. Mr. Glover died later that evening at Decatur General Hospital.

The county's first 14 fatalities occurred as a result of the initial F5 tornado, yet another deadly storm was about to leave its mark, as well.

After obliterating the entire town of Guin in Marion County, a separate tornado entered the Lawrence County's southern border, wiping out thousands of acres of timberland in Bankhead National Forest before descending upon the Oakville and Speake Communities.

When this storm was finished, two were dead in Oakville: Ella Mae Poke and Marilyn Brackin, the 12-year-old daughter of Travis and Odessa Brackin.

According to old Advertiser reports, the devastation was so immense that Dr. Ted Fujita, the University of



Chicago meteorologist who developed the famous Fujita tornado wind-damage scale to measure the strength of tornadoes, visited Lawrence County to view firsthand the destruction resulting from an F5 tornado.

Although the loss of life wasn't as extensive in the 2008 tornado, the event was devastating by anyone's standards. Registering as an EF4 on the enhanced Fujita scale, the storm blew through Lawrence County in less than 20 minutes, taking four lives with it.

According to Advertiser reports from that time, the National Weather Service said the tornado first touched down at 3 a.m. just north of

Bankhead National Forest in the Pinhook Community and traveled northeast through Aldridge Grove, where it claimed the lives of Greg and Becky Coleman and their 19-year-old son, Gereck.

The storm then traveled to the Fairfield Community, where it blew 86-year-old Faye Nell Long McCulloch from her mobile home. She died at the hospital later that night.

The tornado continued to wreak havoc throughout the communities of Five Points, Midway and Caddo. Though the storm took only four lives, it took everything except life from numerous families. Many people lost everything and were left with only the clothes they were wearing.

Ocie and Dianne Trasher, Jerry and Michelle Chenault, Danny Way, Gail Alexander, Marie Stone, David Terry and Ben and Juanita Seabrook are just a few of the victims who had nothing left after the storm.

Dozens of other people and families suffered extensive property damage, as well. More than 20 people were injured, some critically, and over 100 homes were damaged or completely destroyed. The tornado displaced dozens of people, leaving many homeless.

According to the NWS, the storm's peak winds measured 170 mph. The tornado cut a 16.7-mile-long, half-mile-wide path through the county.

Modern technology has brought great advancements in spotting and predicting storms, which may be why more people weren't killed in the 2008 twister. However, this storm proves that technological advancements can do little to prevent the devastation once one of these storms touches down.



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