Bridge Street: After the Tornado

Excerpts from *Oral Memoirs of Lonnie Belle Hodges*.
(click on title for the full text of the interview transcript)

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Lonnie Belle Hodges was a secretary for the Knights and Daughters of Tabor and she and her husband both worked for the *Waco Messenger*.

Interviewed by Vivienne Malone-Mayes on August 30, 1990, in Waco, Texas

Malone-Mayes: . . . I guess the tornado destroyed, just destroyed all of Bridge Street.

Hodges: The whole, oh, you didn’t see it, did you?

Malone-Mayes: No. I was in Nashville at the time.

Hodges: Oh, honey! It was the most pitiful thing. We went up there. They wouldn’t let you go any further than the bridge. You couldn’t go on the other side.

Malone-Mayes: The swinging bridge—

Hodges: No.

Malone-Mayes: —or the Elm Street Bridge?

Hodges: Both bridges. You couldn’t cross there because all those houses were down and you could hear people crying, Get me out of here, get me out of here. Oh, it was so sad! But we, Mack and I, walked across the bridge and all around the city hall. But they had guards all around there, you know, for you not to go in. And you know, I just missed that tornado by twenty minutes. I was working at North Seventh Street School then.

Malone-Mayes: Oh.

Hodges: We came home; it was raining and dark. Miss Lee Etta Carr was driving. And she said, “Oh, I can’t make it, honey!” I said “Yes, you can. (unintelligible) Come on,” you know. She just got in her house and closed the door when it hit, and I didn’t know it was a tornado. I knew it was raining hard. I went over there to stay with Loyce’s children and let Mrs. Walton go home. She had a boy at home. . . . And when I got there, the hail started falling about that big. So Miss Roselind, she’s always been a fast one in the family. “I want to see it. I want to see the hail. So I opened the door for her to see the hail. And it was just coming down like that. And I closed it right quick. And I just couldn’t understand. And Loyce finally had to go all the way around LaSalle Street to come home. She said, “Mother, didn’t you know we had a tornado?” I said, “No, what kind of tornado?” She said, “Oh, Mother, we had a tornado!” Says, “The trees blewed down over there in your yard, on that house over there on Taylor Street.” I said, “No.” I said, “I knew it was raining hard and
heavy, but I didn’t know anything about a tornado.” Loyce said, “We couldn’t come to Bridge Street. We had to go around LaSalle Street.” After it’s, you know, died down, we got in the car and we drove around to see the sights. It was so pitiful. And those people—I think one hundred people got killed in that tornado, in that section right around the Square.

Malone-Mayes: Right. Seemed like it hit Bridge Street and that area there worse than it did on the Clifton-Simpson side.

Hodges: Yes.

Malone-Mayes: It didn’t hit city hall that much.

Hodges: It leveled everything, nearly everything on Bridge Street. And all around that Square.

Malone-Mayes: Oh, yes. I know the whole Square was hit but it just leveled Bridge Street, didn’t it?

Hodges: Yes. Leveled it. Yes, it was leveled.

Malone-Mayes: It just leveled it. I remember that Dr. Sorrelle told us that he was working on a patient. And he and the patient, chair, and everything went from second floor down to the first floor during the tornado. He walked home, sat down, and didn’t walk for about a year or two after that. He did walk later.

Hodges: He did walk. Yes, uh-huh.

Malone-Mayes: But that tornado was something else.

Hodges: It really was.

Malone-Mayes: And it seems as if that was the turning point of Bridge Street.

Hodges: It was.

Malone-Mayes: For everyone.

Hodges: Everyone. I don’t guess, maybe—I guess they didn’t want to go back there. You know.

Malone-Mayes: I know.

Hodges: Maybe they thought about that tornado and they were afraid. I don’t know.

Malone-Mayes: Um-hm. And you’ve been in Waco a long—you were born in Waco.
Hodges: Um-hm. Been here ninety-two years.

Malone-Mayes: All right. You’ve been in Waco ninety-two years.

Hodges: Ninety-two years.

Malone-Mayes: Had you ever heard of a tornado ever being in Waco before?

Hodges: No.

Malone-Mayes: Or since.

Hodges: No. Everybody would say tornados won’t hit Waco because the Indians laid out Waco.

Malone-Mayes: Yes, I heard that.

Hodges: But you see that was wrong.

Malone-Mayes: Yes. And they hadn’t said anything about a warning, or anything about it?

Hodges: Not at our school. Fred Batts was our principal then. I believe he knew it. Because I could hear him talking to himself going up and down the hall, “Tornado’s going to hit Waco.” Then he’d say, “Tornado.” But I didn’t know what he was talking about. But I believed they notified him from the office, but he did not tell his teachers. And we had those children there, too. And it was just lucky several parents came and got their children. But they didn’t say anything about a tornado. They didn’t know.

Malone-Mayes: Well, don’t feel bad. My father was out doing yard work, doing his lawn. He was eight blocks from Austin Avenue. And R. T. Dennis ran. And he had no idea what was going on.

Hodges: No.

Malone-Mayes: Searcy Richardson walked from downtown and told him what had happened. He had no idea. That’s a strange thing about those tornadoes.

Hodges: It is. Be right there.

Malone-Mayes: How they can be so destructive in one little area. And people otherwise never even know what’s going on.

Hodges: Well, you know Cameron Park was stripped, too.

Malone-Mayes: Yes.
Hodges: And Paul Quinn. I know some people that I worked with at Paul Quinn, whenever it got dark, they would almost have nervous breakdowns.

Hodges: It was something, I’ll tell you.

Malone-Mayes: But none of the buildings were affected.

Hodges: Some of the houses in that area though were affected.

Malone-Mayes: Were they? Kind of up and down. You just kind of spot touch. And also city hall. It’s amazing that nothing happened to city hall.

Hodges: I know.

Malone-Mayes: And it was right in the middle of it.

Hodges: And wasn’t that strange?

Malone-Mayes: It is. See, I’ve never heard of city hall even being repaired from the tornado.

Hodges: I haven’t either. I’m listening to you. (laughs)

Malone-Mayes: And it was right in the middle of it going all around it.

Hodges: All around it. All around the Square. . . .