



Waco, Texas History in Pictures

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Randall Scott, Editor

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Remembering

The 1953 Waco Tornado

May 11, 1953



*This photo was taken just a few minutes after the tornado hit.
 From "Waco, Texas: A History and Photographic
 Retrospective of the Late Forties Through the Mid-Fifties"
 (2009) by William Lannie Bursal, Jr.*

MOTHER'S DAY 1953!

By Virginia Plunkett

From her book "Around Again"

In 1953, Mother's Day on May 10 was a beautiful day with a lot of love and caring, but on Monday, May 11, the afternoon skies turned black as night as a deadly tornado unleashed its fury on Waco's Downtown area, taking 114 lives, crumbling and disfiguring buildings in its devastating path.

When Juanita Willis got word of the raging storm downtown, she was in the studio on Washington Avenue at Twenty-Sixth shooting a portrait of a young girl named Sondra Witt. Juanita didn't know where Jimmie was, but grabbing cameras and film, she jumped in her car and sped to the scene. Because of the debris and downed wires along Austin, she abandoned her car and continued on foot to Fifth and Austin.

"The first shot I made was the First

National Bank clock that had stopped at 4:40...the time the tornado hit,” Juanita said. And then, glancing up at the Amicable Building, she saw Jimmie hanging half way out a fourth story window with camera focused on the collapsed Dennis Building.

The devastation continued. Rain poured and winds howled as the dead and dying were dug out of the debris and ambulances screamed their way to area hospitals.

One of the strange facets in the tornado’s catastrophic mosaic was that during the four tragically sad days that local and area funeral homes buried the dead, no deaths were from “natural causes”.

The pictures Juanita and Jimmie took, along with others in the area and those shot by the national network, TV, newspaper, United Press, Associated Press, and magazine photographers were preserved on videotape. The video “THE 1953 WACO TORNADO...TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH” was the gigantic work of Harry Provence, Tommie Suits, Wilton Lanning and Jimmie Willis. Other local photographers whose original work has been preserved in the videotape were “Whayne H. Farmer, Jr., Windy Drum, Bill Cagle, Al Grauer, Homan Easley, and Jim Jasek. The Waco Chamber of Commerce Community Development Foundation holds the copyright.

Through a Cooper Foundation grant, copies of “THE 1953 WACO TORNADO...TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH” were given to Baylor University, McLennan Community College, Texas State Technical College, The Waco-McLennan County Library and its branches, and to all schools in McLennan County.

On that hideous May 11th, and for days afterward, many heroes were born. These were the Waco and area ambulance companies and personnel; the Waco physicians and other medical personnel who worked around the clock in hospital emergency rooms filled with wounded and dying people.

When the emergencies slowed down, a grateful city learned that all of them who had given their 100%, also had given their services without charge.

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RECOLLECTIONS OF “THAT DAY”

By Paul Holder

“It is worse than you can imagine.”

Memories fade with time; however, some are more deeply etched than others. Eventually most will be lost to the cosmos in the fires of cremation or perhaps captured under the very earth upon which we experienced life. With some faint hope that the printed word may transcend this lifetime, I posit the following memories of May 11, 1953. These are the recollections of a seventy three year old man filtered by sixty seven years of life since the occurrence of “that day.”

My full name is Robert Paul Holder; however, my South Waco “street name” was “Bedo.” With the passage of time I grew to love the name. Today, when I hear someone call the name I know a friend from the past is present again, and memories will be shared. In the early fifties the Bell’s Hill section of South Waco was essentially a low to lower middle income grouping of Anglos and Hispanics. We knew we were poorer than most of the kids on the north side of town; however, they lived in their world, and we lived in ours. Austin Avenue was a magic demarcation line separating the “haves” from the “have nots.” There was little “conspicuous consumption” on the “south side” of that marker. Neither my friends, nor I, were embarrassed by our station in life. Our universe was measured in terms of city blocks and the denizens of that area bore a striking “economic sameness”. To this day, I admit to having some difficulty tolerating those who consume to draw sharp demarcations glorifying their economic status. We were “blue collar kids.” Life has been kind to me economically, but I will maintain a blue-collar mentality until my demise. The tale I’m going to weave reflects the reaction of that neighborhood to the events of May 11, 1953.

In 1953 Texas was in the midst of a drought which would not break until 1957 (The Time It Never Rained-Elmer Kelton-1973); however, for a few days in May of 1953 there would be massive flooding in Waco. It all started on Monday May 11 at about 4:35 in the afternoon. The dew berries were ripe. About a block from our house was a shed in which old lumber was stored. Next to the “lumber shed,” stretched out across old bricks and steel girders was one of the finest dew berry crops in the world. While I may be prone to exaggeration, I suspect I am on target with that statement. Armed with a Folger’s Coffee can and my dog “Rivets,” I was carefully working my way through nature’s bounty. Unfortunately, the snakes residing in the area also enjoyed the berries. So, if I could avoid twisting my ankle, falling on the bricks and steel, and getting snake bit, I could collect this “manna” from the gods. I envisioned those berries being crushed in a bowl of milk and sugar. Surely, they would find their way to my stomach in a couple of hours.

There is a theory among some psychologists that childhood builds not only a recognition of childhood dependency upon adults, but it also produces a level of envy. Surely the purchasing of material goods to satisfy both “needs” and “wants” is dependent upon the adults in the child’s life. Additionally, the child’s universe is restricted by a parent’s willingness to transport their child and the degree of acceptance they demonstrate toward the child’s friends and potential friends. If the maturation goes properly, childhood dependence upon the adult world

will be exchanged for a world of their own independence. The degree of my dependency upon my parents came hurling at me that afternoon.

The sky had turned a greenish color. I had never seen that before. There was no lightning yet. I kept picking, but, my eyes frequently scanned a sky that looked worse than Edward Munch's painting of the orange sky in the 'Scream.' Lightning! "One and, two and, three and.... I thought I still had some time. It was HOT. It was Humid. But most of all it was Still. There was no breeze. It was framed by that menacing green sky. Something told me to leave and leave quickly. Whether it was Providence or not, I do not know, but I knew I had to leave. My house was a block away and it was "uphill." In that moment of haste, I realized I was a child. I could not deal with this. I needed my parents. I had never been afraid of storms. In fact, to some degree I relished the electrical displays presented free of charge by "mother nature." Frequently in rain storms I would go next door to Mr. Oat Beard's house. He was my "eightyish" year old neighbor. He would sit on his porch with me and "Rivets" and discuss the world we knew. Mr. Beard explained to me that thunder was the noise made by clouds "bumping heads". Meteorologists might not have understood that, but Rivets and I did. It was a three-way symbiotic relationship. You see, plenty of attention was paid to a "young boy, an old man, and a little dog." Not bad, not bad at all.

Rivets and I ran into the house just as the hail started. Our house was attached to our small grocery store. Mrs. Bufkin was shopping at the store when "all 'hail' broke loose." Mom, grabbed a cardboard box and ran out in the storm to get our baby ducks in their coup. Fortunately, she escaped injury and the ducks had some protection. The coup was essentially a worn-out doghouse. We watched in horror as the coup tumbled across our back yard, and a chinaberry tree was literally "halved." The hail storm was producing stones the size of softballs. Car windows cracked and roofs were destroyed, and then.... The hail subsided but the rain was coming down in sheets. We heard the roar as the wind intensified. The sun was shining over most of Texas, but it was dark in Waco. There was no electricity but there was that roar. It sounded like the MKT had sent a freight train down Clay Street. We heard the cracking noise of trees succumbing to this demon blow, and we watched as shingles were flying off Mrs. Bufkin's house. Suddenly, her garage collapsed into a pile of splinters and my dad opined we were in a tornado. None of us ever saw the funnel. If it passed over us, it was wrapped in rain. Fortunately, in our immediate neighborhood the small frame houses withstood the storm. Amazingly, every one of our ducks survived. Indeed, there was plenty of damage, but this neighborhood had only received a small taste of the storm. Within fifteen minutes our neighbor, Clarence Smith, found his way from the downtown area to his Bell's Hill home. He reported there was massive damage in downtown Waco, but we still didn't know how terrible it had been.

Mrs. Jasper came over to the store and declared that she wanted to walk down Clay Street and access the damage. I was allowed to walk with her. It was a dangerous trek. There were power lines down and massive puddles of water. About four blocks down the street there were two consecutive houses with considerable damage. Mrs. Jasper knew the residents of one of the homes. We walked to what remained of the front door. At that point a voice told us to come on in the house. We walked into the living room. The room had no roof. The house had no electricity, but there was a woman ironing. She said, she needed to iron and she could do nothing about her roof. God Bless. I'm sure she was in a state of shock.

My uncle, Bob McKamie, lived in the neighborhood. He worked for General Electric. Their store was within two blocks of the R.T. Dennis building. This is the building where most of the deaths occurred. He had escaped severe injury or death by crawling under a desk. Bruised, battered, worried about his wife Wanda, Bob hurried home. Bob realized that after he left the downtown area, the damage was not quite as severe. When asked about downtown Waco, he simply replied, "It is worse than you can imagine." Bob, who had been involved in combat less than ten years before, said, "It is worse than anything I saw in the war. "

We had no electricity. Obviously, it was well before cell phones. We did have candles, kerosene lamps, and car radios. We would go out and listen to the Buick's radio until the electricity was restored. Much of the north side of town got nothing more than a good rain on "that day"; however, for several days after the tornado Waco was hit with one deluge after another. In the hours immediately after the storm, airmen from James Connally AFB, the 12 th Air Force Command center, and Baylor students joined with other Wacoans to try to save those trapped in the rubble. Our little store lost three customers. Bell's Hill Elementary had part of the northeast side blown off. Several young men in their prime died at the Sun Pool on 15th street.

It is strange what one remembers or chooses to remember. I will never forget the stillness of the air or the "meanness" of that green sky. I will remember my sudden realization of how little control I might have over my very existence. Somehow, I knew I had to get home. I will not forget four little ducks unscathed and "unfeathered" by a storm that blew their coup away and destroyed mighty trees. But perhaps most of all I remember a woman ironing in a room without a roof because she could do nothing about her situation. Thus, are the memory snippets stamped into my being "that day."

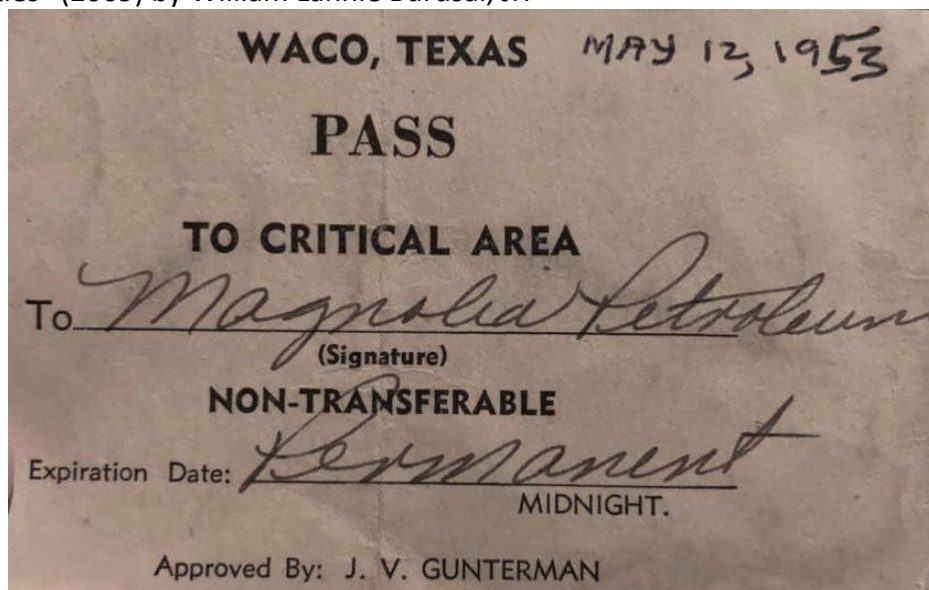


Photo on previous page:

This was probably taken right after the tornado struck...it seems people are running toward a disaster that just happened. The 400 block of Austin Avenue and the devastated Harlik's, Hollywood Tailors, Chris' Cafe, Joy Theater and Dennis Building. This was from a 2012 brochure from Community State Bank, and the photographer was not named. Photo contributed by Dorothy Lindsey Scott.



"This photograph was taken only a few seconds after the tornado moved over the downtown area of Waco on May 11, 1953 at 4:34P. M. This photo was taken between Seventh and Eighth Streets on Austin Avenue looking toward the town square a few blocks away. The major damage occurred a few blocks down from the town square to Sixth Street. This may have been the first photograph taken after the wind stopped and it's never before been published." From the book "Waco, Texas: A History and Photographic Retrospective of the Late Forties Through the Mid-Fifties" (2009) by William Lannie Burdsal, Jr.



Pass to enter Downtown restricted area. From Paul Holder's Personal Collection.

LIFE Magazine Comes to Waco

By Ben Cosgrove, LIFE Magazine

On the afternoon of May 11, 1953, an F5 tornado made a direct hit on Waco, Texas. (On the scale for rating rotational intensity created by storm researcher Ted Fujita, an F5 twister is capable of “incredible damage.”) In a matter of minutes, in the face of cyclonic winds that likely topped 300 mph, hundreds of homes and businesses were utterly destroyed; thousands of cars were damaged or totaled; almost 600 people were injured and 114 were killed.

It remains one of the deadliest tornados in American history.

In the immediate aftermath of the tornado, LIFE’s John Dominis and correspondent Scot Leavitt, who had just recently moved to Texas, made their way to the devastated city. All of the photos in this gallery, many of which never ran in LIFE, are Dominis’s; in a note sent to LIFE’s editors in New York, Leavitt noted that “through virtually all [of Dominis’s] shooting, rain fell, the sky was dark and the mood was somber.”

For its part, LIFE wrote of the disaster in its May 25, 1953 issue:

“By May 11 the warm, close weather was uncomfortably routine to the people of Waco, Texas. The day before had been muggy and the day before that, too. The big news in the Morning News-Tribune was of a tornado in far-off Minnesota. At mid-morning the New Orleans weather bureau warned there might be a few tornadoes close to home. But an Indian belief that tornadoes would never strike Waco had always held true and no one in the city worried about the report At 1:30 .m. the Waco weather forecaster announced, “No cause for alarm.”

“Three hours later the skies suddenly darkened. people scurried for shelter from the hail and slashing rain, and at the edge of town a cemetery workman looked up to see a thick black wedge forming under a low cloud ... At 4:37 p.m. the black wedge in the sky struck Fifth and Austin [streets], gouged the earth for a block and left the heart of Waco a broken coffin for scores of schoolboys, housewives, motorists....”

All photos shown in the following pages were taken by John Dominis, and the text written by Scot Leavitt. LIFE Magazine owns the copyright to these photos.

All photos in this magazine are found in photo albums in our Facebook Group

“1953 Waco Tornado Memorial”

We invite you to join us at:

www.facebook.com/groups/1953WacoTexasTornado



(Left) "The American Amicable Building stands resolute over the devastation." This photo was taken from Fifth and Franklin, overlooking the collapsed Padgitt and Dennis Buildings. (Right) "Lillie Matkin is freed from the rubble, 14 hours and eight minutes after she was trapped and able only to wiggle her feet. Gently as they could, the men who had labored through the night to disentomb her carry her from wreckage to surface...Near the end of her entrapment, a worker removed her shoes and before she was lifted out she cautioned, 'Don't lose them. They're old but comfortable.' They were brought to her later at the hospital." She was buried in the rubble of the R. T. Dennis Building at Fifth and Austin Avenue.



Photo on previous page:

“A crowd around an ambulance in the aftermath of a deadly twister.” Group members identified the first policeman as George “Red” Francis. Tom Dickson told us: “The man at the back door of the ambulance is A.D. Sherrill. He managed and later owned an ambulance company in Waco. He worked 30 years in the ambulance business in Waco. We used to sit around and listen to him tell stories about the Waco tornado.”



These men are in the City Hall Building on the Square, looking up Austin Avenue.

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This is the collapsed Brazos Fish Market on the Square, in the 100 block of South Second Street.



The National Guard helping with the rescue effort and protecting property.



(Top) The Texas Seed Company in the 400 Block of Franklin. (Bottom) The Torrance Pool Hall, also in the 400 block of Franklin. "In the downpour which followed the twister, a group of volunteer workers stand aside as another body is found in the ruins of Torrance Pool Hall, where 25 players, mostly teenagers, were trapped and killed when the roof caved in."



"Vigil without hope was kept by Mrs. Beth Parten, 25, whose husband, Cecil, was missing. She alternated between listening to reports coming in by portable radio in store and keeping watch in a car parked outside the Red Cross Headquarters. After two nights of waiting, workers found her husband's body."



"Respite from horror came for Seaman Howard Wilkerson, 18, after a dreadful moment, Just before this picture was taken, he had helped to remove bodies of a dead man and woman from a car which had been crushed by a falling wall. Shaken by the sight he said, 'I wonder if I will ever sleep again.' "



Looking down South Second Street from Franklin. Waco Grain and Seed Company was at 200 Franklin; Higginbotham Hardware Company was in the building behind it, between Second and Third on Mary Avenue.



Unknown Location.

FOR MORE PHOTOS FROM THIS COLLECTION VISIT OUR FACEBOOK GROUP.

The Photography of Mr. Larsen

All of these photographs were contributed by Roy Larsen. Roy's father was a mechanic at a garage at Eleventh and Webster on May 11, 1953. He took these amazing photographs a few days later. ALL OF THESE PHOTOS ARE COPYRIGHT PROTECTED BY ROY LARSEN. All of the locations given were determined by Roy Larsen. He said, "Dad was a mechanic at a garage at 11th and Webster as the tornado went through. He took these photos a few days later. Some locations from my memory, some from Google Maps, many derived from 1948 Waco City Directory, some unknown." We are so thankful that Mr. Larsen captured this moment in time.



On the northeast corner of Fifth and Franklin, looking across the collapsed Padgett and Dennis Buildings. There was much loss of life here.



One of many crushed automobiles.



The North side of the Square, between North Second and North Third.



The South Side of the Square, between South Second and South Third.



Katy Park grandstand destroyed in lower right of the picture, with the now famous silos in the background.

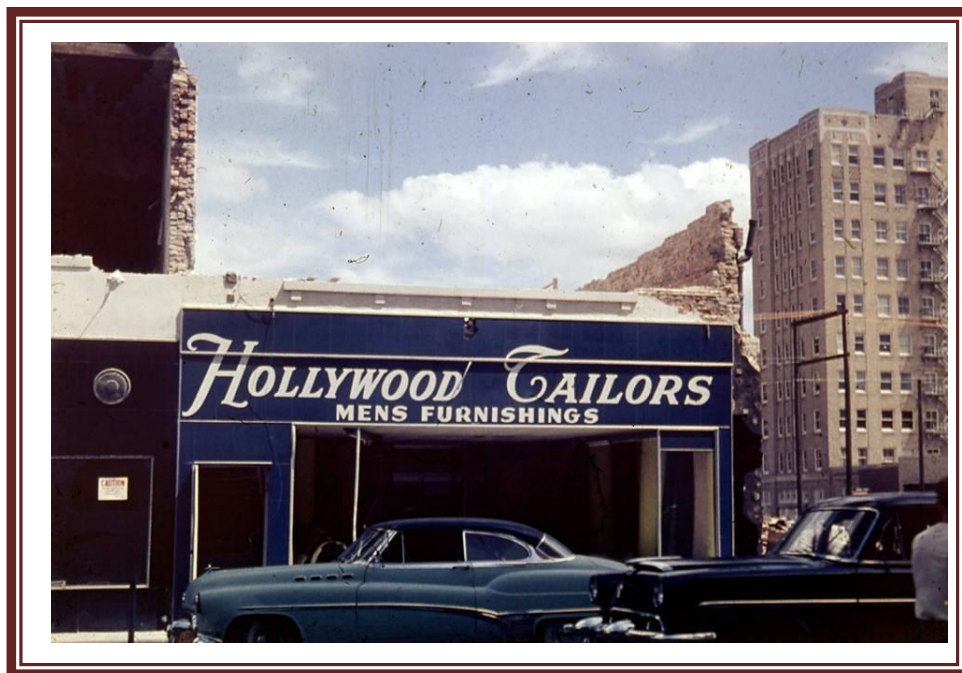


The force of the wind drove the smaller piece of wood through the pole!

The Photography of Col. Jack M. Cannon

Col. Jack M. Cannon, USAF Ret., was stationed at James Connally Air Force Base on May 11, 1953. He was a Lieutenant at the time. He was married to the mother of group member Teresa Lodise Braun. He took these amazing photos of the destruction left by the tornado, and Teresa has shared them with us. All of these images are copyright protected by Jack M. Cannon. We are so appreciative of Teresa sharing these here!

(Top) The American Amicable Building stands tall over the collapsed Padgett and Dennis Buildings. This area had been a huge pile of rubble. By the time this was taken, the area had been cleaned up. (Bottom) The Hollywood Tailors at 418 Austin Avenue.



The Photography of Tommy Crump

These photos were contributed by Tommy's son, Damon, who said: "My Dad, Earle Thomas Crump, took a bunch of color slides in the aftermath of the May 11, 1953 Waco Tornado that killed 114 people. My sister and I discovered them last year and had them converted & archived." The Crump Family retains the copyright on these photos.



*Cleaning up the Dennis and Padigitt Buildings on South Fifth between Austin and Franklin.
The two views below are from the American Amicable Building.*





Cotton Belt (Union) Station at Fourth and Mary.



Higginbotham Hardware Company. Present site of Ninfa's.

The Waco Tornado Memorial

The 1953 Waco Tornado Memorial is located on the northeast corner of Fourth Street and Austin Avenue in Waco, Texas. This memorial was a gift to the City of Waco by the Phipps Family, and is dedicated to remembering the 114 people who lost their lives in the 1953 Waco Tornado. It is engraved on a tear-drop shaped piece of "China Black" granite, and the "Scoop" font is used, allowing the print to pick up more light. Rather than a monument, they wanted a memorial to this event, and this is actually two memorials in one. On one side is an engraved tornado, and a memorial to the event. On the reverse side, the names of all 114 victims are listed. At the base of the, it says "We honor 114 people killed in the Waco Tornado. Their souls belong to heaven; their memories belong to us".





THE 114 LIVES LOST IN THE 1953 WACO TORNADO

MELAD ABRAHAM
JACK DOWNMAN ADAMS
RAYMOND C. ANDERSON
MILDRED JEAN BAILEY
CECIL BERRY EDWARD BERRY
RUSH BERRY BILLY BETROS BERTHA BLUME
ROBERT WILLIAM BOERNER BEVERIDGE C. BOYD
CYNTHIA BRITT EDWARD M. BRITT
FOY BROWN MRS. GEORGE W. BROWN
CECIL WALTER BUHL THOMAS BUSBY JOHN W. BYRD
MARIE JONES CARTER JERRY DAVIS CHILDRESS
J.W. COATES ELIJAH E. COFFELT OPAL COLLEY
RAY LAURENCE COMER ESTEVEN PEREZ CORTEZ
BERTHA COTTON TOM COURTNEY CLEE DEGRATE
WILLIAM JAMES DOBROVOLNY MRS. AUTIE MAE DUNCAN
C.J. EISCHENBERG DAVID FRANKLIN FARQUHAR
IRVING GINSBURG MINNIE OLA GRAVES
W.V. HARDIN EARL HARRIS SAM HAYNES STEVE HEATH
ARCHIE HENDERSON WILLIS HIGHTOWER EDWARD T. HOARE
SUSIE HOARE SAM HORNE TOM HURST HELEN JAMES
KEITH JAMES VIRGINIA LEE JENKINS BARBARA JOHNSON
RUBY LEE JONES JOHNNY B. KING MRS. W.A. KUNZE
EDWARD LEWIS OLA CALVARY LLOYD WILLIAM HENRY LYTLE
BILLY MAHARES HARRY M. MAHONEY OLLIE MANN
IRENE REED MATTHEWS GUSSIE MAYFIELD VERA MCCARVER
ALBERT MCCRARY JIM MCCUINN EUGENE MENDOZA
JOYCE MARIE MIERS LONIE JAMES MOTTEN CHARLES B. MULLEN
J.P. NEAL, JR. JOE C. NEELY MRS. JOE C. NEELY
FRANCES NEMMER GARFIELD NEMMER GEORGE PAPPAS
CHARLIE PARKER REV. CECIL MARION PARTEN EARL PATTILLO
BOBBIE JEAN PEOPLES DENNIS PEOPLES CLARENCE POTTER
VERNON POWELL VADA PRATHER CHRISTINO CASAREZ ROMO
WILLIE JAMES ROQUEMORE ARTHUR LEE ROSS
GEORGE CONRAD ROTH RAYMOND S. RUIZ DANNY SANCHEZ
E.A. SERMAS VICTOR A. SERMAS ROGER K. SHARBUTT
HAL E. SHELTON EUGENE COOPER SHERROD GUY SIMS
STAN SKYLES JOE SMITH LILLIAN SMITH DAVE SPERO
VERNON D. STARKS BETTY LOU STEWART W.R. STEWART
ANNIE MAE TAYLOR BILLY VERNON TAYLOR MABEL THAXTON
LLOYD TORRES KNOX TODD LUTHER TRISTAN
MRS. S.B. TURNER JERRY UTLEY WALTER VAN HOOK
FELIX VILLAREAL SAMMIE RAY WARREN
WILLIAM FRANK WATKINS EDWARD HOMER WILEY
ARTHUR WOODSON LOU YOUNES

**WE HONOR 114 PEOPLE KILLED IN THE WACO TORNADO.
THEIR SOULS BELONG TO HEAVEN; THEIR MEMORIES BELONG TO US.**

The Waco Tornado Memorial
Waco, Texas



We talk about them because we're proud. We talk about them, because they deserve to be remembered. We talk about them, because even though they are not physically with us, they are never far from our mind. We talk about them, because they are part of us, a part that we could never ignore or disown. We talk about them because we love them still and always will. Forever. Nothing will ever change that.

Kinetic Wind Sculptures

These sculptures are on the south side of the 400 block of Austin Avenue. The dedicatory plaque tells us: "These sculptures by artist Mark White commemorate the tornado of May 11, 1953 that devastated downtown Waco, and the heroic citizens who worked tirelessly to rebuild the city. Donated by Clifton and Betsy Robinson in honor of the Waco High School graduating classes of 1953, 1954, 1955, and 1956, whose lives were forever shaped by this event. Installed March, 2019 with thanks to Clifton and Betsy Robinson, Roosevelt Tower, LLC, and the City of Waco. Oscillator, 16'; Passion Flower, 11'; Oscillator, 15', all made of stainless steel. Creative Waco."



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