

Gary and Deb Chapelle's account of April 3, 1974 tornado near Athens, Alabama:

Of course, the nationwide outbreak in 1974 was the most violent outbreak in recorded history, with 148 tornadoes spawned, and 30 of them F4 or higher.

I personally experienced 2 tornado systems that night, and saw 4 twisters on the ground.

We had originally gone in the hallway as we heard about the first tornado that was coming via our local tv weather guy in Huntsville. I still remember the time. It was 7:05 PM and "The Sonny and Cher Show" had just come on. Large hail had begun to fall and I could feel a tremendous pressure change. So my curiosity got the better of me. I had never seen a tornado before and felt helpless just sitting in the hallway wondering if or when the tornado would come. So I got up and went to our utility room and looked out the back door. I could hardly believe my eyes at what I saw!

It was a monster about a mile wide and it was headed straight for us!

I believe I yelled something out, although I don't exactly remember what, because my Dad had just joined me to see the massive funnel bearing down on us. He didn't hesitate to demand that my Mom and me race with him to our car to get the heck out of there, even though the so-called experts advise that you never try to outrun a tornado in your car. We raced west towards Athens, Alabama on Highway 72 and watched as the twister crossed the highway just a few hundred yards behind us.



As we sped back to our house, we soon realized how fortunate we were. Our house had remained standing, although our roof had been damaged when debris from our neighbor's house had been thrown into ours. Our neighbors were not as fortunate. Their house, as well as 2 others along the highway were completely destroyed to the foundations as you can see in the picture to the left.

The eerie part is that the debris that was thrown into our roof crashed into the hallway where we had been sitting. I'm quite convinced, based on where the damage occurred, that my Dad would have been killed, and my Mom and me may have been injured.

If you look closely at the photograph you can see the large hole in our roof.

That tornado was on the ground two hours and 23 minutes and covered 75 miles! It took several lives and caused massive destruction.

But that wasn't the end of our adventures that night, unfortunately.

A mere 30 minutes later, something unheard of occurred.

Another tornado system, tracking an almost identical course, had developed.

We didn't know it at the time. In fact my Mom and I were sitting in our car waiting for my Dad to return. He had gone inside our house to inspect the damage.

Nightfall had come, and with the power out, the only light we saw was from the intense lightning show that was going on.

Suddenly, I heard an intense roar to my right. As I looked to the west towards Athens, I had to blink several times to make sure I was really seeing what I thought I was.

I tapped my mother on the shoulder and said "I think we have a problem". That was an understatement.

The sky was an amazing green color and we could clearly see 3 funnels on the ground, just 1/2 mile up the highway. I haven't been afraid many times in my life, but that was certainly one of them. We felt helpless because we had nowhere to seek shelter.

That tornado system tracked for 53 minutes and 36 miles.

We eventually drove to Huntsville and spent the night in the basement of a friend as several more *Alabama tornadoes* hit close by. Before the night was over there would be 77 dead in Alabama, 838 injured, 223 hospitalized, 895 homes destroyed, 898 severely damaged, and 203 mobile homes obliterated and a quarter billion dollars in damage across 18 Alabama counties. The statistics were much higher nationwide.