

Published May 7, 2006

## Tourists in times of trouble

### Bystanders snap shots and marvel, but do we stop to think?

STEVE McNUTT

You're at home on the couch when the long wail of a tornado warning siren interrupts your thoughts. The power cuts out. You run for the basement. The front door blows across the darkened room, tumbling down the stairs after you. Windows explode into a glassy mist.

That's what happened to Ron and Gloria Walsh when the tornadoes hit their 134-year-old home on Iowa Avenue in Iowa City April 13. Their tenant and his girlfriend sprinted down from the apartment's third floor as the roof and walls turned to confetti.

I'd lived in that apartment less than a year before. The house has a quirky charm — the right side, where the Walshes live, is white, and the left side, reserved for tenants, is raw brick. Purple window sills on the right side, white ones on the left. The paint job gave it a lopsided, schizophrenic look, topped off by a mailbox constructed from old Coca-Cola cans. A koi pond in the backyard. Lots of tulips.

Gloria Walsh estimated that the tornado passed over and through their home in no more than 30 seconds and that they stayed in the basement for only two or three minutes before coming out to assess the damage. When they emerged, they found darkness cut by the pop of flashbulbs.

"Fifteen minutes after it hit," said Gloria's husband, Ron, "there were 60 to 70 people in the street."

"A hundred," Gloria estimated. Many were taking photographs.

"No one was talking really," Ron said. "They were pretty quiet. A few people asked if we could shine our flashlight up on the house so they could get a better picture. It was kind of irritating, but I'm a people person and took it with a grain of salt. The next morning, though, I was tired of people pointing and asking questions."

When the storm hit, I was a half mile to the west, huddled inside the Englert Theater, eating a cookie in the women's restroom. Aside from enduring a few moments of inconvenience, I was unscathed. So was my current home, a half mile southeast of the Walshes'.

An unavoidable fact of living is the ease with which events measured in seconds redirect the future. Often, we resist this notion. We respond in predictable ways that separate ourselves from the event. We make jokes. We take photographs. We transform trauma into entertainment. We become tourists to trouble.

Today's technology makes this easy. There's no need to contemplate. Just flip open a camera phone and record reflexively.

Novice about tornadoes

Before I get too preachy, I offer this quick confession:

Everything I know about tornadoes, I learned from the movies.

I'm an East Coast guy, having moved to Iowa for graduate school at the University of Iowa. I know a little about hurricanes, a bit about snow and a lot about traffic. If you'd met me before I moved to Iowa and asked me what an F-2 was, I'd have said it was a military fighter jet. The extent of my tornado knowledge was limited to viewings of "The Wizard of Oz." I've never even seen the 1996 Hollywood blockbuster "Twister," but from seeing the movie trailers I knew that tornadoes were bad, very bad and that they had a tendency to toss cows and trucks indiscriminately.

ZOOM



**STEVE McNUTT/SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER**

Ron and Gloria Walsh's 134-year-old Iowa City home, which was destroyed in the April 13 tornado. Steve McNutt had rented the left side of the house a year ago.

#### Trail of destruction

At least a dozen tornadoes touched down in eastern Iowa and far western Illinois April 13. One woman, Christine McAtee, 48, who lived with her husband in a mobile home near Nichols, was killed.

More than 1,000 homes and apartments, mostly in Iowa City, sustained some damage, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Of those, 320 were classified as destroyed or heavily damaged.

Initial estimates for damage to public property alone, including University of Iowa facilities, were \$12 million.

Appropriate then, that as the tornadoes were touching down in Iowa City, I was inside the Englert. I had company in the women's restroom — a few dozen other thumb-twiddling filmgoers in attendance for a documentary film festival, all of whom had been ordered by an usher to seek the sturdy structural center of the building: the bathrooms.

Ten or fifteen minutes before, we had responded to the sirens by spending all available ready cash at the snack table. In times of crisis, one must have chocolate. We passed the time fiddling with cell phones and joking:

"What's always destroyed by a tidal wave or stomped by Godzilla in every disaster movie ever made? A historic landmark. And where are we? In an old-fashioned movie theater with a cool marquee."

"KCRG is reporting multiple tornadoes."

"So, what's the correct term for multiple tornadoes? A pack? A gang?"

"I think it's a gaggle."

When we emerged, it was to streets filled with broken glass and twisted metal. Hundreds wandered the crowded streets, marveling at the storm's power. I joined them, then went home to an intact house, having never considered anything else might have happened.

#### Acts of kindness

A week later, Gloria stood in the rough dirt where a towering Linden tree and its stump had been removed after karate-chopping the roof. The tree, native to Europe, was planted by her father when he bought the house. She was a high school student at the time, having arrived in Iowa City as a child via Chicago and a refugee camp in Canada, where her family had landed after leaving their native Czechoslovakia.

Over Gloria's shoulder, the Iowa sun burned hot on the blue tarp covering what used to be my bedroom as she offered a tour of the house.

"Could have been you," she reminded me as we climbed the stairs. She was responding generously to my curiosity. It wasn't me. It was them. That sentiment was reinforced as we climbed the stairs and passed the closet where I had stored my vacuum cleaner and where the previous tenants hid as the winds removed most of the top floor.

While we looked around the upstairs bedroom, both Ron and Gloria said that progress had been slow, but there had been surprises and acts of kindness. A next-door neighbor — an undergraduate from the university — appeared the day after the tornado and went to work, no questions asked. A preservationist found a team of volunteers who have worked to gather and save anything that can be used to return the house to its former state, going so far as to collect and save the original brick that was knocked loose. In what remains of the attic, the Walshes have discovered artifacts from another era: a hoop-skirt bustle, a decade's-old article about marriage and a woman's shoe. While recounting these details, Gloria peered into a heap of insulation, exclaiming "Holy Buckets!" before pointing out an old Johann Sebastian Bach record.

I confided that the only reason I knew their house had been hit was that I saw it on several newspaper Web sites (the Register, other Iowa papers and the New York Times). Gloria replied they have heard from people who have seen photographs of the house from Iowa to California. Channel 9 News showed up.

"We're celebrities, I guess," she said, her voice betraying exhaustion with the entire mess.

It's the dozens of amateur photographers who click then disappear that have been the most tiresome. For several days afterward, they arrived, clicked away, promised to bring copies and left, never to be seen again. The Walshes themselves have yet to take any photographs.

#### Gawking made easy

It's tempting to chastise myself and others who wandered around Iowa City with our jaws gaping alongside our clicking cameras. The gawking phenomenon is not new. People are curious creatures, and we find it hard to turn away from the fantastic and the tragic. Photography was introduced into the mass market more than 150 years ago — so it, too, is not new, although the relative affordability and vast array of recording devices now available have done nothing but feed the need to observe and record.

We are awash in images, and as the crowds that gathered in the aftermath of the tornadoes suggested, we are becoming a culture of amateur documentary filmmakers. The simplicity of the recorded image, usually free of overt commentary or layers of context, allows a quick digestion. We apply this imagistic thinking throughout our lives: We want information quick and easy and pleasingly composed within a frame. The Linden tree planted by the immigrant father becomes ... a big tree.

But it's worth thinking about who we become when we take these photographs and how it alters our relationship with our neighbors and friends. Not long after leaving the Englert Theater, the streets buzzed with rumors of "one car on top of another." I arrived and, yes, it was remarkable. The crowd was six people deep, and three young men knelt in front of the two vehicles, thumbs up, while friends clicked away. Then one of the owners arrived. Her frustration turned to fury at the flash bulbs and the crowd dissipated — until she left.

#### Reflection suspended

The arbitrary quality of natural disasters seems to absolve us of the obligation to reflect. Especially if we don't know anyone injured or killed, we feel free to marvel in the moment, avoiding consideration of the forces that have wreaked a quick renovation upon our lives. We forget that believing humans have dominion over the Earth may be a debatable idea.

Or do we instead seek evidence of our own smallness?

The day after the tornado, I gathered with friends, and one of the primary topics of talk was Overheard Tornado Conversations, the best being one person's request that everyone "Be patient with me. This is my first tornado and I haven't collected any good debris yet."

I laughed with embarrassment, recognizing myself in the comment as someone who had briefly viewed disaster as entertainment, as a sightseer who saw debris as a collectible.

Steve McNutt is a graduate student in the University of Iowa's Master's of Fine Arts program in Nonfiction Writing. He is co-editing an anthology of travel writing and is at work on a book-length manuscript of both memoir and journalism exploring the desire for external validation through media.  
test

■ **[Click here to go back to article](#)**

Copyright © 2005, The Des Moines Register.

Use of this site signifies your agreement to the Terms of Service (updated 1/3/2003).