

ADDITION TO CHUCK-WILL'S WIDOW

On March 29, 2000 Fort Worth and we or rather our small studio in the Cultural District had a truly frightening encounter with a tornado. It happened around 6:30 in the evening when the funnel touched ground in a neighborhood only a few blocks away and then proceeded roughly in our studio's direction. Scott and I were at home sitting in total darkness since our electricity had gone off. Outside, the skies were of course darker than usual but appeared no more menacing than any typical Spring storm.

Ralph Carr, our Fort Worth dealer, was there at the studio, however, doing some evening paper work, and the storm rapidly bearing in his direction presented an entirely different picture. Our building, though completely rebuilt in the early 1980's in preparation for the big bird book project, was only a small frame structure, no match for the 150 mile winds this force two funnel possessed. Only recently, in order to show our Aztec project to the curator of pre-Colombian art from the Los Angeles County Museum of art, I had assembled there all our original Aztec and Mixtec art, all Scott's temple models, all our paintings and drawings of Tenochtitlan - the product of twenty years of work.

Even Ralph, ever the optimist, could sense something ominous in the sudden, almost pitch-black darkness and in the sound of the approaching winds. Rather like a huge jet engine he later told me. He knew he had to do something and quickly. Oddly enough, our studio had in its backyard something that had been an object of humor ever since Scott, Dutch Phillips and I first acquired the place back in 1977. It was a 1950's era bomb shelter, but now it was the only place of refuge. Years ago I had our carpenter friend Steve Bennie build a door to cover the shelter that was so heavy it would require two people to lift it. I hadn't been down inside for at least ten years and one could only imagine what was living there. Ralph said he he couldn't stop thinking about hords of scorpions, centipedes and brown-recluse spiders.

But this storm was really serious. No time to be squeamish. Already branches and other objects were flying through the air as he slammed the back door shut and ran to the shelter. With that kind of adrenalin-spiked superstrength that sometimes allows little old ladies to lift cars off hurt children, Ralph somehow pulled the shelter door open and descended just far enough down the steps to close the heavy door over him.

He stayed there crouched at the top of the steps, immersed in complete darkness with the storm roaring overhead. In a few minutes the sounds diminished then subsided altogether. When Ralph finally decided it was safe to come out, he had no idea what he expected to find once he emerged. However, the strength that had gained him entrance to the shelter now failed him, and he could not get the door open. He remained trapped for an hour before he finally managed to pry the door open wide enough to slither through. It was probably thoughts of brown

recluses that gave him the needed motivation.

As he emerged in the darkness, leaves and broken branches were everywhere, but the studio still stood - minus a few shingles. Sirens were sounding everywhere throughout the city. Just a block away on West Seventh Street several buildings had been completely leveled, trees toppled and those trees that did survive were missing major limbs and the rest of their branches were filled with pieces of insulation and other debris. Major office buildings downtown were windowless and power lines were popping everywhere. Bill and Patty Meadow's house had been damaged, but my dear friend Bill Bostelmann's new two story flower shop and living quarters with one of the best views of downtown - and a place of beautiful art, flowers and hospitality was destroyed almost to the bottom floor. I had just had dinner there with Whitney More and Katherine and Warren Idsell three days before. So many beautiful things ruined. His building had stood in a direct line from our studio to downtown, so it was evident from the destruction that the storm was just picking up power when it passed over our place on its way to Bill's.

Thank God Ralph was safe and our studio which contained the blood and sweat of so many years work on our Aztec project was intact, but it had been a very close call indeed. Five people had died in that storm, one of them a homeless man killed from the debris apparently ripped from Bill's building. A half billion dollars in damage done throughout the city. When Nancy Ferguson and I were at last able to get past the police cordon to Bill's place, he was sitting forlornly on a naked stairway enjoying the sun where formerly there had been a rather dark entrance way. But he was in good spirits. He had been well insured at least.

When Nancy and I got out of the car he came over gave us both a big hug - he's a big teddy bear of a man. The first thing he said was that his copy of our big bird book had miraculously survived, though the box had some small areas of water damage. Both his delivery trucks had been carried off by the winds, but we laughed the bird book must have been too heavy.

I asked about the Mourning Dove that we had seen nesting in a candelabra on his back porch when we had dinner there the other night. Bill looked distressed.

"I just found it," he said. "Of all places, I found its remains in the dishwasher."

After having had such a close call and seeing my friends damaged, I'll never look at that painting of the Chuck-Wills-Widow quite the same way again. And I don't think we'll make any more jokes about our bomb shelter either.