

## RUBBLE OF THE NIGHT



By Frank Oliver/Journal and Courier

Ann Partin hugs her dog, Gizmo, while the ruins of Roy Hipes' modular home in rural Montgomery County burn in the background.

# Montgomery tornado ripped apart 3 lives

By JOHN NORBERG

Journal and Courier

Roy Hipes walked slowly to his blue couch, sitting with an apple and a small knife in his 94-year-old hands, his palms and fingers rough from a lifetime working on the farm. His small modular home near Whitesville in rural Montgomery County was alone in a field of corn, green sprouts just peeking out of the black earth.

A quarter-mile down the county road, the gray-white buildings of the Nucor Steel plant rose above the horizon, blending with the color

of the cloudy sky.

Hipes used his knife to split the apple, as old men do.

It was Thursday afternoon, May 11. As he sat and slowly ate, he thought about the spring wind that was blowing outside. He talked with his caretaker, Ann Partin, whose tiny, old dog, Gizmo, was napping on a pillow Hipes had placed for her beneath a footstool.

"You know, the wind has blown pretty hard out here," Hipes said. "But this house has never budged. It never shakes or anything."

He was proud of that. He had

mentioned it to other people, too. Three years ago when his old white farm house proved too big for him, he had personally overseen the foundation work on this new, small modular home.

He was quiet for a full five minutes, eating his apple, lost in his thoughts on his blue couch.

"But you know," he finally said. "Someday something might come along and blow this place all to pieces."

### Inexplicable destruction

On Sunday, May 14, three days

after that May 11 afternoon, a tornado bounced along a 9½-mile path through eastern Montgomery County, ripping trees in half, blowing siding off buildings, crushing barns, businesses, a school and homes.

Just minutes after 12 a.m. in the darkness of that Sunday morning, with rain pouring down on him like a waterfall, Hipes sat on the floor of his shattered home, blown 50 feet off its foundation. The mementos of his life lay scattered and broken as he clutched the pillow he

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New vaccine approach may eventually lead to f

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had slept on moments before.

Four days later, Hipes died at Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis. He had suffered several injuries — a deep gash to the side of his head, a broken vertebra in his neck and a broken leg. But it was an old problem that finally ended his life: His old heart gave out.

Hipes became the third fatality in a storm that swept through in the shadows of night, killing and destroying with an unexplainable, random whim.

## Unforgettable experience

Montgomery County Sheriff John Dale was on duty that Saturday night and Sunday morning. He likes night duty and assigns himself to those patrols, answering calls in the darkness when he believes he's needed most.

On the night of Saturday, May 13, he had his 15-year-old son with him in the brown and tan patrol car as he drove through Montgomery County.

There was a tornado watch for the area, a situation that means conditions are right for a violent storm to develop. Dale and his son drove to a high spot in western Montgomery County and watched the sky from the parking lot of a school. They saw nothing unusual but felt the rapid change from the warm evening air to the cool night.

Dale knew tornadoes. He was a boy in the 1960s when a storm ripped through Montgomery County. He remembers grabbing his baby brother from a bed and running into a shelter. A big sheet of glass would fall on that empty bed. Buildings were blown down. Pieces of straw were left embedded in telephone poles. And Dale never forgot.

As he watched the dark horizon that Saturday night, radio reports came in about hail in the area. Dale and his son went to the county jail to check conditions there. When they arrived, lightning struck, knocking out power and a radio system. It was almost midnight.

Ten minutes later, the power was back on and a bondsman at the jail got a telephone call from home. A tornado had passed through and damaged his home on Ladoga Road near County Road 300 South.

Dale rushed to the scene and began tracing a line of destruction that would reach east to the Montgomery County line and pass seven miles into Boone County.

When Dale reached the first site of damage on Ladoga Road, Hipes' home a mile further east had already been destroyed, leaving gifts from a 50th wedding anniversary celebration scattered and broken in the mud.

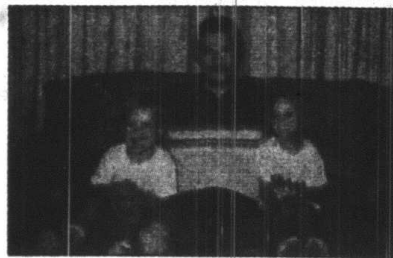
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## Shattered lives

A Montgomery County tornado cut a path of sorrow through the lives of three families when it hit early on Sunday, May 14. Linda Kelp and Gary Heimbach, an engaged couple planning a summer wedding, were killed when the storm hit their modular home. Kelp had a daughter, Amanda, who was not home at the time. Heimbach had two children, Telicia and Chance, who live in Florida. The storm also took the life of Roy Hipes, who died of heart problems several days after his modular home was hit. Hipes and his wife, Josephine, would have celebrated their 69th wedding anniversary this summer.



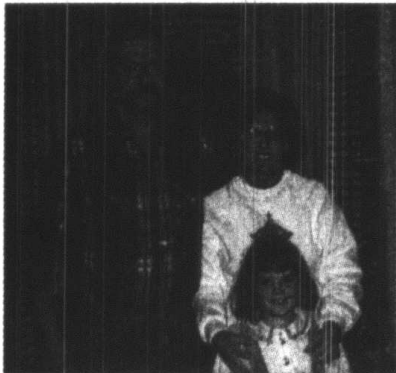
Linda and Amanda Kelp



Chance, Gary and Telicia Heimbach



Gary Heimbach, Linda Kelp and Gary's mother, Jean Heimbach.



Gary Heimbach, Linda Kelp and Amanda



Josephine and Roy Hipes

tiny china dishes.

He maintained a farmer's schedule — up by 5:30 a.m., in bed by 8 p.m. each day. He passed the days listening to the radio, reading the newspaper and watching ballgames on a portable TV. His 3-year-old dog, Sue, followed him everywhere, even while he mowed the spacious, green lawn. He loved to cut grass with his riding mower and let no one do it for him.

A woman nearly 40 years his junior with a clear, honest voice, Partin visited Hipes every day. They went on long rides together. She drove. Every week they went to Noblesville where Hipes sat with his wife. Sometimes Hipes and Partin just drove his old, red pickup along the county roads watching men work in the fields. Hipes called it "road farming."

Sometimes, too, he snuck out and drove the old truck himself, although he knew he wasn't supposed to.

Partin always stayed with him through the night when the weather turned bad.

The weekend of May 13 and 14, her brother invited her to visit with him at Raccoon Lake

amid pieces of roofing and insulation.

"I wouldn't be here today if I had come back," Partin said. "I would have been in that front bedroom." She pointed to a pile of rubble.

"I'd be with him."

In the hospital before he died, Hipes told his family he had been asleep when the storm hit. He remembered sitting on that broken foundation, holding his pillow, waiting for help in the pouring rain.

"I was cold and wet and I almost gave up," he said. "But then I thought — only cowards give up."

"And I'm no coward."

## Lives intertwined

Ed Heimbach — Gary's father — knew Hipes the way farmers know one another, waving as they passed in their trucks on country roads.

It was three or four years ago when Linda Kelp and Gary Heimbach had fallen in love and joined their lives together, living at the end of a long stone lane on County Road 550 East. Across the road was the white farm house where Heimbach

from the foundation. Searchers were sure they would also find Amanda in the ruins in the field.

## Moving ahead

A 1970 graduate of the last class from New Ross High School, Heimbach had grown up a happy boy in the farm house with his parents, his younger brother, Steve, and sister, Linda. Linda had been born deaf. In 1988, she was killed by a drunken driver. The memories still hurt this close family.

Steve and Gary tussled as boys do until Gary grew bigger and stronger. Gary became a welder after graduation and then ran his own trucks before selling them in the late 1980s. He started driving for others.

He moved more and more into farming, with his fathering working as the "gopher" and his brother, Steve, helping out. He had put together about 700 acres of land, some of it his father's, some of it rented.

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By the time Dale knew what had happened that morning, Gary Heimbach, 42, and Linda Kelp, 36 — a young couple planning marriage, a summer of fun and a lifetime of hope — already lay dead in the darkness of a freshly planted cornfield. They lived a mile and a half east of Hipes.

## The rural life

Hipes had started farming near the little town of Whitesville in 1934, using mules to pull his plow. He loved to tell people how he once hoed fields by hand in the days when farms were small and days were long.

But those days were long behind him. His wife, Josephine, broke her hip several years ago and was moved to a nursing home in Noblesville near Don, one of their two sons. The Hipeses would have celebrated 69 years of marriage on Aug. 26.

With his two sons grown and gone, his farm land rented out, Hipes moved to the modular home. He kept an upright piano, although his wife was no longer there to play it. He kept collections of tiny dog figurines and

tiny china dishes.

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Partin always stayed with him through the night when the weather turned bad.

The weekend of May 13 and 14, her brother invited her to visit with him at Raccoon Lake in Parke County to the south. The spring fishing would be good. Partin said she'd go, but she couldn't stay overnight. She had to get back to Hipes.

She called Hipes at 9 a.m. on Saturday.

"Don't come back, I'm all right," Hipes said. "Have some fun. Catch some fish."

## 'I'm no coward'

It was Sunday morning at breakfast when Partin heard there had been deaths in a Montgomery County storm — one of them near the Nucor Steel plant. She rushed back. When her car got past a stand of trees and she looked across the field toward's Hipes home, it was gone.

All that remained were piles of furniture, the broken floor, scattered papers and broken walls.

Partin stood near the piano, which lay upside down amid shattered glass pieces that had once been a Golden Wedding gift. Slippers and brown wingtip shoes and clothes were piled

amid pieces of roofing and insulation.

"I wouldn't be here today if I had come back," Partin said. "I would have been in that front bedroom." She pointed to a pile of rubble.

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Kelp, who grew up in Hillsboro 30 miles west, loved the peaceful, quiet life among the farm fields where the nearest site was the horizon and the sun setting on a warm summer day.

She lived with Heimbach and her daughter, Amanda, a fifth-grader at nearby Walnut Township Elementary School.

Their refrigerator was covered with papers marking Amanda's achievements and those of Heimbach's children — Telicia, 13 and Chance, 11 — who lived in Florida. Heimbach and Kelp planned a trip to Florida in June to pick up the children who would visit for the summer. The wedding would probably have taken place then.

The couple planned to attend the Indianapolis 500. They planned and they dreamed.

In the early morning darkness of Sunday, May 14, Sheriff Dale and a search crew looked for hours to find Heimbach and Kelp. The biggest pieces of their house had been blown 250 yards

from the foundation. Searchers were sure they would also find Amanda in the ruins in the field.

## Moving ahead

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The family loved Linda. Ed Heimbach remembers Linda's voice calling to him. She would walk up the road and shout "Hi Ed!" The sound of it used to make him smile. Now, the memory of it makes him cry.

"We counted Linda as one of our own," Ed said.

By Saturday, May 13, Gary Heimbach's corn was planted and he was working on his beans. But he spent that day mowing the roadsides because an aunt was coming to visit.

The father saw his son that evening. "See you tomorrow," Gary said.

"You never know, do you," Ed Heimbach said days later. "You just never know."

Ed and Jean Heimbach went to bed that Saturday night in their wood-frame farm house. A few minutes before midnight, the dog, Goldie, became fussy, and Jean woke up. She put the



dog in the bathroom.

Minutes later Heimbach, a World War II veteran, said he heard a noise that sounded like an artillery shell exploding. The windows all blew in. Parts of the roof came down, along with bricks from a chimney. They fell on Mrs. Heimbach, cracking her ribs.

Heimbach helped his wife and went to the kitchen to get a flashlight. Looking out the window he saw someone approaching. Thinking it was Gary coming to check on them, he waved the flashlight to signal that they were all right.

But it was someone else coming up the drive. And when Ed Heimbach went across the road to check the house where Gary and Linda lived, it wasn't there.

## **Weekend celebrated**

Kelp was branch officer administrator at Edward D. Jones in Crawfordsville and her job kept her busy. When she wasn't working it seemed like she was always taking her daughter, Amanda, to one activity or another.

She loved to exercise and taught aerobics. She walked for the March of Dimes. She gave clothing and toys to a family crisis shelter.

Kelp had called her mother, Rita Jo Hoskins, in Hillsboro, at 8 p.m. that Saturday night. She was checking on a family party planned for Sunday and wanted to know the time.

"She wasn't feeling real well," Hoskins said. She had just had three teeth pulled.

There had been several family gatherings in recent days. In early May, all the women in the family — grandmothers, daughters, granddaughters, aunts and nieces — had gone to a mother-daughter banquet at the Sterling Christian Church.

"It was crazy when the girls all got together," Hoskins said. It was a wonderful time.

The weekend before the storm, Hoskins and Kelp had celebrated Amanda's birthday. They went to a movie in Lafayette, had dinner at Burger King and went home for a Dairy Queen cake with an Indianapolis Pacers theme.

The weekend of the storm, Amanda went to stay with her father in Rockville, as had long been planned. He picked her up Friday at school.

That Saturday night, Hoskins couldn't sleep in her Hillsboro home. She sat up in a chair and watched television until 1 a.m.

It was 5 a.m. on Sunday when she heard a pounding on her front door. Her heart raced as she went to see who it was. When the lights came on and the door opened, she saw Montgomery County Sheriff John Dale. His face was solemn. He had done this too many times.

It was Mother's Day.

It was Mothers Day.

## 'How lucky I am'

Ten days after the storm, Hoskins told the story of a card her daughter sent not long ago. There had been no special occasion. Kelp just sent the card to her mother because it said what she felt.

Hoskins read the writing on the front of the card, which featured pastel-colored spring flowers in a water can. "I'm lucky to have a mother like you," it said.

But that's all Hoskins could read — out loud. The rest was too hard.

Inside, the card said: "So many times I stop and think how lucky I am having you for a mother. I remember the wonderful things you do for me, the advice you've given me, the support you've always shown. I remember how you've always listened to me, worried about me, rejoiced with me.

"But mostly, I think about how much you love me and how much I love you. And today, I thought I'd tell you so."

It was signed "Love, Linda."