

# PATH OF DESTRUCTION



BY: DOUGLAS MAGINOT

EDITED BY: SAM BURRIS



# PRELUDE

**From:** "Samuel Burris" samuelu2001@yahoo.com

**To:** dmaginot@ig-hawaii.com

**Sent:** Sunday, June 22, 2014 2:43 AM

**Subject:** Pilger

Doug:

I suppose you are in Pilger now. I continue to look at photos of my old hometown and it is hard to imagine, even now what horror has hit.

I have numbers of relatives there, some named Burris (my last name, so if you run across Harlan Burris, he or wife Elaine, they have a house in Pilger, north side and I think it may have survived the storm.

Otherwise, all the best to you. Happy your mom had a great birthday. I always missed her after she left, as she was like a breath of fresh air in that Punahou Terrace place.

Sam

P.S. I authored a story about a baseball player, Bud Tinning, who pitched for the Chicago Cubs in the 30's. The story was framed and hung on the wall in the Pilger Café but there is a new owner so I don't know if it is still there. Please let me know.

Aloha!

Below, is an e-mail from a friend in response to the twin EF4 tornadoes that swept through his hometown of Pilger, Nebraska. Having known Sam Burris for a while now, I wasn't aware he was born and raised in Pilger – Population 346. And, at the time of his e-mail, Sam wasn't aware we were headed for Pilger.

Based in Boulder, Colorado for the April/May tornado season, ready to head out on a moment's notice to study tornado destruction for our building mission, it was in the month of June that tornado season struck on force – with the Pilger twin EF4 tornadoes being one for the books and the focus of our inquiry. We toured Pilger's aftermath one week after the event, followed by a visit to Moore, Oklahoma to study rebuilding efforts one year after their epic EF5 event in May of 2013. Beginning on Page-3, following Sam's e-mail, is the summary of our Pilger visit. No doubt, knowing Sam as a friend, and taking to heart the words in his e-mail, made this walk through experience more personal and informative.

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**From:** "Samuel Burris" samuelu2001@yahoo.com

**Date:** June 19, 2014 at 10:29:26 PM

**Subject:** **Born and Raised Near Pilger**

**Reply-To:** Samuel Burris samuelu2001@yahoo.com

Aloha:

Pilger is a small town of about 400 people located in northeast Nebraska. It is located about 18 miles from Norfolk, I was born and raised on a farm five miles northwest of Pilger. My father Cliff and mom, Elsa Burris, rented and farmed 160 acres of land prior to purchasing their own 160 acre farm in 1954. The family then moved to the community of Winside, 15 miles north of Pilger. Still, Pilger always felt like my real home town as most of our family, relatives and friends were there. My mom graduated from Pilger High School and my dad played baseball and softball on the Pilger diamond. My brother Ron and I played with the Pilger Pee Wee baseball team and swam often at the Pilger Pool. I have aunties, uncles and cousins in and around the town today.

As you may know, two tornados hit the region this past Monday, killing one child and hitting the village of Pilger. The two Lutheran Churches, that I and the rest of my mom's side of the family attended, were demolished. The Methodist Church where Uncle Will Burris and family attended services for so many years is also gone. Thankfully my relatives all survived and as far as I know, their houses weren't destroyed. My auntie, 86, and her husband, 97, were lodged in the basement of their house in south Pilger during the storm. They survived and their house was damaged but still intact. They are now staying with my cousin Leon and family north of Pilger. My cousin Lyle farms south of Pilger but was in the Pilger Café when the tornado came. He is fine but almost every other building on main street was destroyed.

Though I am on the other side of the globe from Pilger in Thailand, this event has had a major impact on me. When I see Jim Duncan, the mayor and a childhood friend of mine interviewed, my stomach wrenches as I feel the pain when he stated in an interview that he

had lost everything. I pity those folks, but feel hopeful when I hear the way the community, and people, have pulled together to help each other.

**Sam Burris, Pattaya, Thailand**



## *The Village of Pilger – The Sunday After the Storm*

We're back from Pilger, enlightened and aware like never before, of the wrath of these epic tornadoes. Glean what you can from national news and the internet – it's a limited view into the lives and circumstance of this humble village, a half mile square, that could ill afford to lose its industry, bank, and so much more. As they say, "You have to be there." We were, a week after twin EF4s targeted, dead-center, a unique little town with a culture and history dating back to 1887.



On a sunny Nebraska Sabbath morning, six days after the storm, as church services commenced in the nearby towns, we approached the Village of Pilger from the Wisner side. As we passed the road sign, 'PILGER, 1 MILE', we could see what looked like parts of a town and deceased livestock scattered in corn fields on the outskirts ahead, a warning of sorts, to turn back now if we had second thoughts. Cruising ever so slowly, respectfully, reverently passed each guarded entrance into town, we wondered if the National Guard would let us in. A courteous guardsman vectored us over to the temporary command center stationed on the north perimeter of town where temporary ID badges were issued to family, volunteers, and those with a reason to be there.

Temporary Command & Control Center





Though we had come to Pilger to research tornado damage for our building mission, it was the email of our friend Sam Burris, who was born and raised in Pilger, that we presented to the powers-that-be, as they read Sam's words and took to it to heart, acknowledging that we had come to inquire on friends and relatives of the Burris family, Jim Duncan the mayor, and the status of the Pilger Cafe. With our badges in hand and permission granted, and an aerial printout of the town as it used to be, we scanned the carnage horizon for a place to park to begin our trek down the path of destruction.



Where to start? We parked our car on the east side of town, where the tornado exited, and stepped out into the surreal. First and foremost, we noticed Pilger Middle School, the familiar landmark we saw on CNN's broadcast. From our live-on-location vantage point now, we could see what was not so obvious from the media images. The demise of this large historic structure was mainly the result of a significant debris mass that was hurled from elsewhere onto the roof. Speaking with townsfolk, we came to know how central this school was to Pilger, and how the thought of rebuilding it in the sports rival town of Wisner was out of the question.

Pilger Middle School





Turning about-face to the east, a bell-tower stands proud and alone as the sole remnant of St. John's Lutheran Church. And, since this was Sunday morning, church was in session, under the red and white tent, with Eucharist altar placed alongside the bell-tower next to the old tire. Viewing this scene, and all that was before me, I made the cross of the trinity, bowed my head, and thanked God for the spirit that was alive and present at St. John's Lutheran Church this Sunday morning after the storm.

St. John's Lutheran Church bell-tower



Rotating further around, facing west toward town, we see the outline of a basement, a small church as it were, converted into a house eight years ago by the gentleman dressed in blue standing on the front porch by the American flag. Every day since the tornado struck, he stands on that front porch looking down over the edge into the remains of a bathroom (photo below on the right) where his wife, child, and two dogs rode out the storm. As you study the confusing image (on the right), you see several large chunks of masonry wall, a hot-water tank, and other lethal debris that had collapsed into this small bathroom and wonder how anyone could have survived down there. Well, they did! However, one of the dogs, a little dachshund, was sucked out and thrown some distance. He lived too! For every person who hunkered down as the devil passed over, there's a story to tell. I spoke with this gentleman for an hour, as he shared the history of this humble dwelling: This was the church he was married in. This was the church the kids were baptized in. This was a church so precious to him, he remodeled it into a home. This is where his family rode out the storm. This humble dwelling means more than words can say, and I thank him for sharing his story.





A stone's throw to the west lay the remains of another basement and all that's left of the home of Julie Richtig's sister. We met Julie at the Super 8 Motel in the town of West Point the evening before we visited Pilger. She had the night shift at the reception desk, along with the only available room for miles around. As we checked in at midnight and got to talking, we told her we were headed to Pilger in the morning, and she shared her photos with us. Once again, it's another amazing story of survival.

Experts say the best place to take shelter in a tornado is in a basement, if you have one. Perhaps they're right - if everything else above is ripped away. When you examine these basements, however, they're so full of lethal debris that collapsed down inside, you wonder how survival is possible. Consider the red bunk-bed frame positioned amongst the mayhem in the photo below, on the left. Imagine mother, son, and daughter sheltered under that red bed frame, the mother (Julie's sister Jodie) with her arms wrapped around son and daughter, holding on for dear life to the underside of that frame. There appears to be as much debris under the bed as there is around it. How did this family manage to get out from underneath all that debris after the tornado passed? Well, they did! Their story is among the many stories of survival in Pilger on that Saturday afternoon, June 16, 2014. This precious red bunk-bed frame was carefully removed, cleaned off, and set aside next to the house, as I pose next to it in a manner similar to the way that family might have been positioned as the EF4 passed overhead, as it stripped away everything else above. No doubt, Julie's family will keep this precious artifact for the rest of their lives, as they share their story and point to that lifesaving bed frame. I thank Julie Richtig for sharing her story and photos.

Julie's photo of her relative's basement



Red bunk-bed frame removed & preserved





Turning our eyes toward the industrial heartbeat of Pilger, in dead center of town, where the Silos of Pilger once stood full of grain, lies a confusing scene of destruction begging for a 'before' photo to make sense of it all. Video footage from storm chasers show a furious celestial blender approaching town from the west, passing over Hwy 15, and digesting all buildings and foliage within reach as it entered town. What began as a vicious EF4 tornado with topsoil and corn stock in its grip, has morphed into a mighty super-auger containing shredded trees, cars, and building materials swirling through the air at unthinkable speeds. Full loaded and ready for bear, it's not so much the tornado's wind speed, but "what's in the blender" that shreds the sturdy grain silos and all heavy industry in the center of town - hurling the tops of silos great distances over town into the corn fields beyond. And finally, shaving the east side of town clean off on the way out the door, except for the bell-tower of St. John's.

Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vpO7SolpvM>

Silos of Pilger – BEFORE



Silos of Pilger - AFTER



Bended together in the vast dunes of spilled grain are mangled scraps of industry and household effects that testify, metaphorically and literally, to the inseparable mix of family life with a town's industry. As it stands at the moment, the industrial essence of Pilger is gone, which makes the prospect of rebuilding challenging, indeed.

A confusing mix of industry



The largest trucks are thrown in the mix

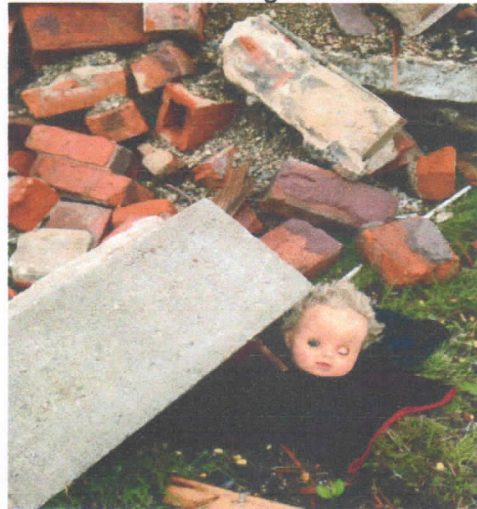




Balls of knitting yarn mixed in with the grain



A child's doll among the bricks



A tree comes to rest on the roof of a house



A car is pulverized right where it sits



In his email, Sam Burris mentioned the Pilger Café, his cousin Lyle who was in the café when the tornado hit, and an article he wrote about baseball player Bud Tinning that hung on the café wall. The Midwest Bank, Community Center, Post Office, Pilger Café, and other structures located side-by-side on N. Main Street served as safe harbor for many folks, they all took a significant hit, and they will all be demolished eventually. There's an informative article on the Omaha.com website recapping the Pilger Tornado, with before & after photos and some local town history. Listed among the town's highlights is the Pilger Café:

*Owner Linda Oertwich bought the building 15 years ago. It had housed a bar and grill for as long as she can remember. She had operated another cafe down the street. The cafe and bar has been open seven days a week. Oertwich's signature sandwich is the VCB Burger: ground beef topped with bacon and Swiss and American cheese on a kaiser bun. The cafe also hosted monthly fish fries. During the storm, Oertwich, an employee and a customer took shelter between the bathroom doors near the back of the building.*

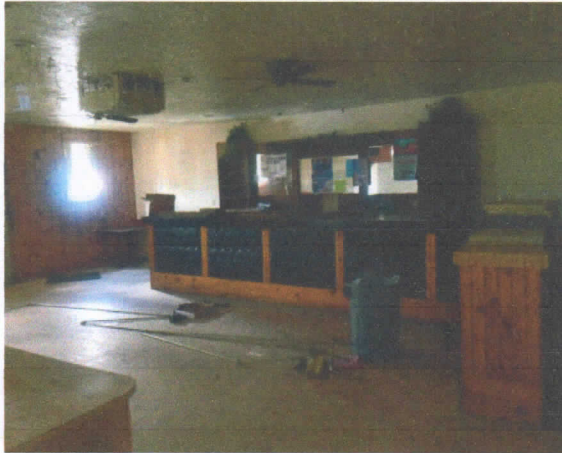


The article mentions that *the owner, an employee, and a customer took shelter in the back of the café*. Perhaps that *customer* was Sam's cousin, Lyle, mentioned in Sam's email. In speaking with a gentleman outside the café, who lived in Pilger for 35 years, he said that all memorabilia hanging on the café walls, including the framed article on Bud Tinning, was taken down for safe-keeping and likely moved to the Pilger Museum on the north end of town. In our conversations with townsfolk, despite having lost everything, there was no topic more electrifying and uplifting than baseball. No doubt, Bud Tinning's break to the Chicago Cubs in the 1930s put Pilger on the map and created an enthusiasm for baseball that transcends tragedy.

Outside the café

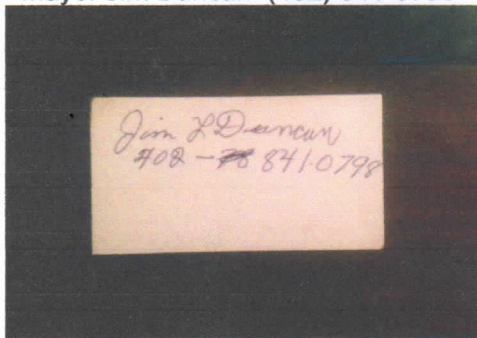


Inside - memorabilia removed from the walls



Toward the end of the day, getting ready to leave, I had hoped to speak with Sam's childhood friend, Mayor Jim Duncan, and hand him a copy of Sam's email. To my surprise, the gentleman I was speaking with in front of the fire station for 20 minutes was Mayor Jim Duncan, which I didn't realize until he wrote his contact information on the back of my business card. I didn't feel comfortable, in the moment, handing Jim my business card, but I did hand him my card so he could write his contact information on the back. Since Jim doesn't use email, or have texting capabilities on his phone, his phone number is how people get in touch. When he finished writing with his red pen, he noticed me looking at the four red pens lined up on his shirt collar, and he gave me one. Thank you Jim Duncan, for taking a moment out of your hectic day to speak with me about your friend Sam Burris, the loss of your home, allowing the town to pile debris on your property, and your affiliation with the volunteer fire department - as it states on the pen you gave me.

Mayor Jim Duncan (402) 841-0798



The mayor's pen from Pilger Fire & Rescue

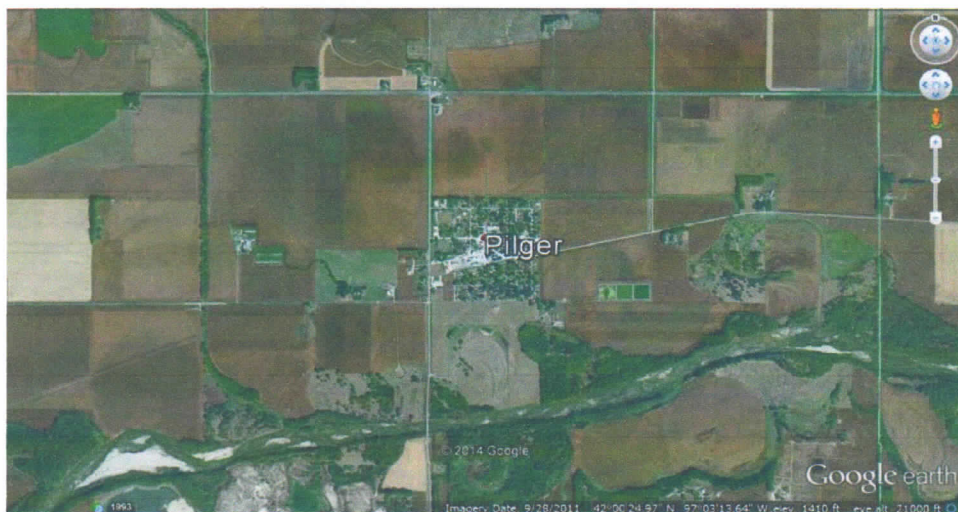




There are circumstances that set the Pilger tornado apart from other tornado events. The Pilger tornado is the story of rare 'twin' tornadoes, twin EF4 tornadoes - a rare meteorological occurrence that make it a worthy entry in the Tornado Hall of Fame.



The size, shape, and location of Pilger add to circumstances that set this event and this down apart. The village is precisely a half-mile square, resembling a postage stamp in the middle of endless corn fields that are parceled in a similar size and shape. For one of the EF4 twins to have plowed directly across the center of this densely inhabited parcel, the Parcel of Pilger, would seem to defy odds. Adding further to circumstance is the fact that Pilger is located precariously close to the Elkhorn River, placing it officially in a federal flood plain, making flood insurance, home financing, and home rebuilding in general, challenging compared to other towns that have been hit by epic tornadoes like Joplin, Missouri and Moore, Oklahoma. Though most townsfolk we spoke with were optimistic about the future, there were those who were aware of various technical obstacles that make Pilger's rebuilding somewhat uncertain. Certainly, the Farmer's Cooperative Complex and Midwest Bank must rebuild, as a starting point, followed by the usual buildings that make for a town - like a post office and a grocery store. Can a town that loses 75 percent of its essence recover? Such is Pilger's circumstance and challenge, different than other towns, as they may very well demonstrate they are, "*A Town too Tough to Die.*"





Another odd circumstance, is the fact that Pilger's tornado alarm system is not automatic. It was manually activated by a volunteer fire-fighter just minutes before the tornado hit town, with the turn of a key in a key box, located on a pole in the center of town. Folks we spoke with mentioned how the tornado alarms went off in the town of Wisner, 7 miles to the east, before the alarm sounded in Pilger. No doubt, a few minutes warning is precious little time to find a safe place to shelter when you're in a panic. How remarkable for a town so ravaged to have lost only two lives, when there were few places to hide and so little time to get there. How remarkable, the attitude of the folks we spoke with - they were thankful, not bitter. No one we spoke with blamed God for this tragedy. Who's to say, perhaps this event is the work of a sinister force. Not to sound overly superstitious, but here are a couple of images that cause us to wonder.

Is that a face in the cloud?



What's that tree trying to say?



Having toured the rebuilding in Joplin, Missouri and Moore, Oklahoma a year after those events, it was surprising to see how fast homes and businesses were rebuilt and how large those rebuilt homes and businesses were. Joplin and Moore, could and did, take the occasion to 'super-size' reconstruction. Today, the rebuilding mantra on T-shirts and signs reads, "*Bigger, Better, Stronger.*" As we examined new construction in those towns, the *Bigger* aspect of the rebuilding mantra is quite evident. Whereas, the *Better* and *Stronger* virtues of this battle cry may well be tested in the years to come. Going *Bigger* seems to be the reaction to these epic events, in towns that are in a financial position to do so.

There's another rebuilding paradigm that struck us odd about the nature and scope of rebuilding in Joplin and Moore. It's understandable why so many residents in Moore, who were so frequently tormented by destructive tornadoes, left town and property behind. What struck us odd, though, a circumstance we could only have discovered having been there to see it, was the substantial number of abandoned properties that were rebuilt and for sale by real estate speculators. The question begs, "Who out there, knowing Moore's history with tornadoes, will be buying all those properties?" And, our question for Joplin is, "How can a humble town of 50,000, the population that it was before and still is now, support the myriad of large hotels, banks, car dealerships, and retail businesses that weren't there before?"



In the meanwhile, back in Pilger, the shape and scope of rebuilding isn't so clear. It's likely that any rebuilding to be done will fit into the humble half-mile square that has defined Pilger from the beginning. On the other hand, it's unlikely you'll see a speculator's for-sale sign or a retail outlet on the scale of Home Depot. Due to its history, due to its faith, due to unique circumstances that set it apart, Pilger will address rebuilding in their own way, different than other towns. Unlike towns that endeavor to go *Bigger*, we get a sense that Pilger is merely hoping to restore what they've lost. Based on the potential for another EF4, along with their flood plain stipulations, Pilger would best heed the *Better* and *Stronger* virtues of today's rebuilding mantra. It stands to reason; structures that are truly built *Better* and *Stronger* have a better chance of weathering-the-storm.

Having reviewed the aftermath of tornado destruction, or flood devastation, who could rightfully argue in favor of wood-framed construction ... of any kind? The truth is, we are a home-building nation stuck on a wood-frame tradition dating back to colonial log cabins. Residential building consultants point to; the unlikely odds of lightning striking in the same spot twice, insuring the dwellings that are rebuilt, and installing underground tornado shelters or above-ground saferooms. Lightning striking in the same place twice? It seems to be happening more often these days. Insuring what you rebuild? Yes, certainly, if possible. However, we do have a question about these underground shelters, having studied the debris piles that are distributed across the property, especially thick over and around the house foundation footprint. Where on the property would you best locate this underground shelter, knowing that it may require a demolition crew to remove the debris piled on top of the sliding hatch in order to escape? This, we predict, will become an issue in the future, with the many underground shelters now being advertised as a solution for survival.

Below-ground shelter



Above-ground saferoom



Emerging from a storm shelter, with nothing left in sight, in a financial position to rebuild, it's certainly understandable how one would take the opportunity for a fresh start and go *Bigger*, in whatever traditional wood-framing manner one was presented, built as quickly as possible. That is, in fact, the response today to these epic events in the larger towns we visited; to build back bigger, in the same typical wood-frame tradition as before. In what regard is this new construction *Better* and *Stronger*? In what manner could traditional wood framing stand up to the next event? In truth, those homes aren't expected to survive – that's what insurance is for.



The townsfolk we spoke with in Pilger, on the other hand, mentioned how thankful they would be to have a home to come home to, if at all possible. Those are the hopes and dreams we'd like to address.

Is it possible to build *Better* and *Stronger*, in such a way, that there would be something to come home to after the storm? As we peer down into those basements filled with debris, then up at those mangled silos, we thought, "how arrogant of us to think we could design anything that could stand up to an EF4." What is evident and certain, in any event, is that wood-framed construction has no chance at all. Is there a way to improve on traditional wood-framed construction? Having built homes for the rich and famous in Hawaii, we notice straight away how strong and commercial-like those homes are. Can steel-reinforced concrete design be applied to humble single-story dwellings, at affordable prices, while blending in with the prevailing architecture? In light of a changing planet that's serving up destruction like never before, we suggest building *Better* and *Stronger* is well worth pursuing; for the sake of the homeowner, FEMA, insurance companies, state and federal government, or any party faced with the prospect of replacing a home. This is the challenge we've set out to demonstrate, as summarized in our mission statement:

*Utilizing existing technologies wherever we can,  
Develop a home that can weather-the-storm,  
Affordably priced, quick to build, and built to last.*

Here are the guidelines we begin with on the way to better and stronger designs:

- No wood.
- No basement.
- Foundation is structural two-way construction (not slab-on-grade), pinned to the ground, in a manner, so it can't lift or float.
- Exterior walls are constructed of steel reinforced concrete with special consideration to size and nature of window and door openings.
- Roof is structural steel framing, hip design, with metal decking diaphragm at both ceiling and roof plane.
- Centrally-located, concrete master bedroom walk-in closet serves as the go-to room for emergency shelter.
- Homes located in flood plain have a means of evacuating water - like boats do.

We are currently prototype testing our design concepts in Hawaii, kicking the tires and abusing our structure in as much as possible, realizing that there are no test facilities that can duplicate the forces of a tornado. We came away from our Pilger walkthrough enlightened and aware. It's not about wind speed. Once a tornado starts digesting trees, cars, and bits of construction ... the question becomes:

***"What's in the blender?"***

A state trooper from Oklahoma stationed at checkpoints leading into the town of Moore after their recent tornado told me that, "Nothing can stand up to an EF5." He's absolutely correct with respect to wood-frame construction. Perhaps, it's time to take a closer look at the way the Romans built. They invented concrete. We know the Romans through their *Better* and *Stronger* building methods - as their work stands to this day. The time has come to consider and implement *Better* and *Stronger* residential building methods.



## **Reflections:**

I would like to thank Doug Maginot for his time and effort during those days after the twin tornadoes that hit Pilger and surrounding areas!

Both Doug and I live in tropical environments, Doug in Hawaii and myself in Thailand. Though we live where other natural disasters apply, tornadoes seem to be thought of as especially vicious.

As I look back to my boyhood on the farm five miles from Pilger, I remember a cave that was dug near the farm house where my family lived. Mostly, my mom used it the cave to store canned foods and other things of that nature in a cooler environment. That is also where we went when storms threatened. Over the years, it seems that most of those caves have not survived. I am hopeful we will find better ways to improve the situation. Yes, education is needed, for as climate change continues, action and more awareness will be a necessity.