

**JOAN  
GAY  
CROFT**  
**(1942-1947?)**



**VANISHED  
INTO  
THE  
NIGHT**

On April 9, 1947, Woodward had no contact with anyone outside of their town – the National Federation of Telephone Workers were on strike. They were not aware that a tornado was ripping across Texas and heading toward them. In the middle of the mayhem a mystery would unfold that would be unexplainable.

The massive F5 tornado, with winds ranging from 225 to 440 mph, destroyed 100 city blocks. By the time the two-mile wide monster storm had left the town, more than 100 people were dead and hundreds more injured. It still stands as the deadliest tornado in Oklahoma history.

The home of Olin and Cleta Croft was demolished. Cleta was killed when a wall fell on her and critically-injured Olin was pinned under the rubble. Four-year-old Joan Gay and eight-year-old Gerri were taken to the hospital with less seriously-injured victims. Their Aunt Ruth found the sisters safe in the hospital basement together on a cot.

Later that evening, two men in khaki Army clothing, asked to see the Croft children. Joan cried and protested when the men picked her up, saying “I don’t want to leave my sister!” The men told her they would come back for her sister next. Joan’s protests drew the attention of the hospital staff, who challenged the men. They said they were friends of the family and were simply taking Joan to another hospital where her family was waiting. Witnesses assumed the men were rescue workers or hospital staff.

When Aunt Ruth came the next day, Gerri told her what happened. Several people verified that they witnessed the abduction. Olin Croft, still recovered from his injuries, hurried back to Woodward. He and Joan’s grandfather Raymond Goble went from town to town posting fliers and placing missing persons ads on local radio stations. After months of searching, Olin remarried and moved to San Antonio later that year. He continued searching for his daughter, until he died in 1987.

In 1993, the NBC-TV series Unsolved Mysteries aired a story about Joan Croft. Within 48 hours, Joan’s aunt received more than 200 telephone calls with potential leads. None were verified. Many believed since Olin Croft ran a successful sheep operation in Woodward, and his family ran an extensive cattle and sheep operation in Kansas that Joan was kidnapped for ransom, but no demand ever surfaced. Perhaps it was because initially Olin was mistakenly listed as deceased. The fact that the men asked specifically for the Croft children raised a lot of questions.

In April 1999, Robert Lee, former news editor of the Woodward County Journal, received an email at The Daily Oklahoman from a woman claiming to be Joan Croft. She said she had been living in Oklahoma City since 1956 under a different name. In the second email, she agreed to meet him at Penn Square. Lee quickly responded but he never heard from her again. Was it really Joan Croft?

There are so many questions about what happened to Joan Gay Croft. Who were the two men? How did they know the Croft girls would be in the hospital basement? With the passage of time and no viable clues about what happened to little Joan, it is a mystery that will probably never be solved.