

100 Years after the May 20, 1916
Codell Tornado

Kansas ranks 4th in the United States in tornado frequency per square mile. In Kansas, with an area of 82,000 square miles, the total area swept by an average tornado is around 10 square miles. Statistics collected from 1916-1928 showed an average of 12 tornadoes per year. This means that any particular 10 square miles, the chances of a tornado in any specific 10 square mile area is about once in 680 years. The chances of a tornado of any strength striking within any specific square mile during the year are about one in 1,900 (Grazulis, Significant Tornadoes 1680-1991, 1993). Therefore, a Kansas Township of 36 square miles, might expect a tornado strike about once every 50 years. The number of reported tornadoes increased in the north central region of the state compared to the entire state, upping the chances of a tornado strike to around once every 35-40 years. The chances of it happening on the same date, three years in a row, is astronomical. Yet, it happened three years in a row, 1916, 1917 and 1918, on the same date, May 20. And this article is about the first tornado of May 20, 1916.

On a Saturday night, around 7 P.M., on May 20, 1916, a F2 (considerable damage) tornado hit the ground around three miles south of Codell and traveled northeast for 15 miles, about a mile northeast of Chalk Mound, north of Laton, Kansas. The following is a collection of reports of the destruction taken from local newspapers and first hand accounts:

1. Arthur Hoskins (tenant) / Henry Overholser, owner) – The stables were badly damaged, and also his brother's automobile. The Codell Notes from the Plainville Times reported after the cyclone (old fashioned term for tornado), the Overholser boys killed 281 rats.
2. Werner Overholser (son of W.F.) – Everything was reported torn up – the windmill, chickens, chicken house, barn, cattle shed, the hayrack, and all the machinery destroyed, including three wagons. The house was torn to pieces, except for one room. All their clothing, bedding and household effects in the damaged portion of the house were swept away. Mr. Overholser and his family got to the cave (old fashioned term for the cellar), and were protected. Their washing machine and debris ended up dumped in the cave with them. Later, they reported after the cyclone passed over, finding a board with a nail in it and a chicken's heart sticking on the nail. A calf tied to a tree was found one-half mile away, dropped unhurt in a wheat field.
3. Willis H. Johnson (3/4 mile east of Codell) His step-granddaughter, Mary Netherland was living with him at the time. His wife, Mary, had died just a few months before. The cyclone took a few shingles off the roof of the stone house, tore down a stone cow shed 50-60 feet long. Mr. Johnson was "cooping" some little chicks and did not see the tornado until it was a rod or two away (about 30 feet). He threw himself down to the ground in the barnyard (as told by his granddaughter). Another account said the force of the storm pinned him there tightly. The barn, stables, corral, woodshed, windmill were totally destroyed, and a calf killed. Trees were uprooted. 14 year old Mary would later tell how she and her cousin, Agnes, who was visiting her at the time, were in the stone

house when the storm hit. When they heard the wind, they were scared, ran downstairs and tried to open the front door, but were unable to do so. Later, they were told, if they had been able to open the door, they probably would have been sucked out of the house and into the tornado.

4. W. J. Overholser (1/2 mile north of the Johnson place) - The tornado moved the barn off its foundation, twisting it considerably. It carried the surrey up in the air some distance and when it hit the ground, it was only a "pile of wreck". It took the windmill, and badly damaged their apple and cherry trees. The heaviest force of the storm hit east of the barn where it twisted large trees up. One of them came down top foremost and was driven into the ground.
5. George Otis – The tornado passed 10 rods east (165 feet).
6. John Hoskins – According to the Plainville Times, the Hoskins place had the most damage; the tornado described as being one-fourth mile wide. The house was right in the center of the path, and was spared, though large patches of shingles were torn off and the wrap around porch destroyed. The cement roof on the smoke house lifted off, and 400 pounds of meat attached to a ridge pole scattered about the yard. However, a basket of eggs in the smoke house was left unmolested. A tin can lid on a jar was later found in the tin roofed building. Both Mr. and Mrs. Hoskins were injured. The Natoma Independent further stated "Mr. and Mrs. Hoskins are both old people and rather large. In trying to make their escape were stricken down by flying boards. Mrs. Hoskins was hurt most severely, but not seriously... The garage was swept away and their car taken about two hundred yards and wrecked against a tree."

Mr. Hoskins especially felt the loss of his 35 year old apple orchard, one of the finest in the county, according to the Rooks County Record. Great plum and apple trees, up to 18" in diameter, were torn up by their roots. One landed in a pasture one-quarter mile away. The garage disappeared completely; their automobile found sticking upon the side of a large tree, with only the engine, front axle and radiator left on it. There were deep furrows, five to six feet long as if plowed by a lister (a plow with sub-soil attachment) where the automobile first landed. A 200 pound stone, buried underground to which a wire brace on the garage was attached, was lifted and carried several 100 feet away. 25 tons of alfalfa in the barn was attributed to being saved only because the roof was partially taken and twisted out of shape. Practically all of their sheds, granaries, and various farm buildings were damaged. The blacksmith shop was blown away, and some of the tools never found. One vice bolted to a 2x2 plank blew away. The roof was torn partially from the house and the porch destroyed. All outbuildings were blown away. Total damage estimated at \$2500.

Two accounts were given of what happened to Mr. and Mrs. Hoskins. The Plainville Times reported Mr. and Mrs. Hoskins saw the "cyclone" was going to hit the house, so they started running out of its path, but only got 30 feet from the house. Mrs. Hoskins was so excited she fell and they hastily got behind a small shed nearby for shelter. The windmill crashed down a few feet behind them. The Rooks County Record gave further

details that Mr. and Mrs. Hoskins saw the tornado coming and ran out of the house to the west. A flying stick struck Mrs. Hoskins across the face and knocked her down. She crawled to some trees. Later when going back to look at the damage to the house, a loose stone from the house fell on Mrs. Hoskins' foot, mashing it badly.

7. Frank Jones – The main path of the storm seemed to go east of the house. A large 40 foot square shed was destroyed. The large barn with a stone basement was completely wrecked. Two windmills, two wagons, a surrey and buggy destroyed, leaving Mr. Jones “without a rig of any kind.” That evening, Mr. Jones had rushed his chores, attending to his horses first and turned them out of the barn and into the pasture without feeding them as was his usual custom. He had barely got to the house when his wife remarked “There is a cyclone coming.” She had seen it on the hill south of John Hoskin's place. Mr. Jones and his wife each took part of their children to the cave and ran back to the house after Mr. Jones' mother. They had just got in the cave when the storm passed over. A minute or two later when the noise had ceased, Mr. Jones looked out and saw the big whirlwind passing over the hill northeast of the house. He did not see any debris flying (probably because it was too high). He did not imagine any damage was done until his wife called his attention to the barn moved off its foundation and a shed destroyed. Mr. Jones was later quoted “He did not believe anything could have stood in the direct path of the twister that was a rod or two wide. At his place, he thought the main force passed between the barn and the pond. Later, Mr. Jones found his fields for several hundred yards wide all covered with debris. Many things were driven into the ground so deep, impossible to pull out. Since it was quite a problem, he used a harrow, dragging it into piles. He found the radiator cap of Mr. Hoskins' auto out in the middle of his field. Boards with nails scattered all over the fields, making it dangerous for his horses. Estimate damage \$500-600.
8. A. J. Yowells (Andreson place) The binder, three wagons and “other things too numerous to mention” were totally destroyed and dumped into a pond of 3-4 feet of water.
9. Art Bessey (owned by Mrs. S. N. Bessey) – The windmill was destroyed, walls of the house “spread out in a manner hard to fix.” Another article put it this way, “racked the house to some extent.” Tore up part of the fence and blew the roof off the milk house. Damage to header boxes and outbuilding. Mrs. Bessey carried insurance, and was thought to be about the only one suffering damage who did. She had some former cyclone experience some 20 years ago, at which time she had no insurance to cover the loss.

Pleasant Plains Area:

1. Tom Barnett of Corning Township – Everything was blown away except the house and the granary.
2. Harry Howe – No record of damage.

Other Related Stories:

Charles Carmichael saw the tornado a quarter mile away, and he thought it was simply a whirlwind. He didn't even tell his wife about it. Afterwards some would report they did not see any debris or dust flying. Just prior to the tornado sightings, in places, some reported heavy rain, and the air filled with mud. – Plainville Times

Frank Jones was quoted having said he did not believe anything could have stood in the direct path of the twister that was a rod or two wide.” –Plainville Times

Guy Hockett, Blaine Hoskins and a boy were passing the Hoskins' place. The boy got out of the buggy and started to get behind a big cottonwood tree standing beside the road. They would not let him and pulled him back in the buggy and had just reached the top of the hill as the storm passed a few rods behind. The big cottonwood, about two and one half feet or more in diameter, fell across the road entirely blocking the way. If the boy had gotten behind it, he would have been killed. - Plainville Times

Reverend Robert Parker had been out to E. M. Sidwell's and was returning when he saw the cyclone coming. He had no time to dodge it, but jumped from his horse and laid flat to the ground. – Natoma Independent

At Tom Byrnes' place, a porch was torn off and out buildings destroyed. Some damage is also reported at Owen Smith's. – Natoma Independent

As of June 1, 1916, “the big tree has been cleared from the road past the Hoskins place but the auto is still sticking to the side of the tree.” – Plainville Times

“Jean Leshner called us down for calling the storm near Codell a ‘cyclone’, and makes a good case against us by quoting Webster's dictionary. We will compromise if when Jean gets his cyclone cave dug he will call it a twister cellar.” – Plainville Times

A cyclone visited the community Saturday evening. When first seen it was in the Plainville community and was traveling northeast. When about a mile northeast of Chalk Mound church it raised and disappeared. – Pleasant Plains items in the Natoma Independent

It seems almost a miracle that no one was killed. A heavy rain had just preceded the cyclone and the air was full of mud. – Natoma Independent

A week after the tornado, members of the Natoma Independent staff traveled by auto to visit the various sites. The Ford auto was still wrapped about a tree, and debris scattered about the yard. At the Jones place, they found a fourth of the barn had been “chucked” into the basement. A mule at the Jones place had one of its legs cut and was standing nearby tied to a tree. A. J. Yowell “took pains” telling the staff of his experience, including the fact he had “watched the

tornado practically all the time, dodging into his cave only while the storm was passing over.” He said that there was o wind either before or after the twister, and said it was “perfectly safe to keep an eye on it if you were just out of its path.”

In September, W. H. (Willis) Johnson had just finished building his new barn and thought it was a great improvement over the old one. – Natoma Independent

The Rooks County Record reported that “many people were damaged more or less by the storm.. All unite in saying it was the worst storm since the big cyclone of 1885.”

The Topeka Daily Capital reported “It was reported the funnel shaped cloud was plainly seen. No towns were struck and the damage, which was mainly confined to farm buildings, was estimated at \$12,000. No one was injured by the storm, tho there were some very narrow escapes.”

The Weather Doctor Almanac 2006 article, Three Strikes on Codell, stated, “When storm clouds gathered over Rooks County on the afternoon of May 20, 1916, it is likely no one was greatly surprised. This was, after all, Kansas and six tornados had struck the eastern portions of the state just a month previous. Indeed, according to some reports, Codell missed a strike in 1915 (Gazulis, however, has no mention of a “significant” tornado (F2 or greater) in that area in 1915.)

An April 9, 1995 article in the Wichita Eagle newspaper was titled, “Echoes of Cyclone Day, Codell still leery of the day the tornadoes came.” Later in the article, it said “the echoes of the Cyclone Day are that strong, after nearly 80 years.”

Personal Note by the author: During the mid-1960’s, I attended school six years at the Codell Grade School. And on May 20, the school recognized “Cyclone Day.” And I must admit that on those May 20’s, I remember apprehensively looking up in the sky over the red schoolhouse. I grew up hearing about the tornadoes from my grandparents. My grandmother, Mary Netherland Zeigler, who at the time was living with her step-grandfather, Willis H. Johnson, was in the 1916 tornado. And I knew the story of George and Lesta Glendening’s experiences in the 1918 tornado, an account my grandparents, Arthur and Lola Brown, shared numerous times. However, it was not until about five years ago, while doing research for a Rooks County history presentation on the Codell tornadoes, did I realize that the 1916, 1917 and 1918 tornadoes did not actually all hit the town of Codell each year. Also, in my preparation, I found, not just one account of what happened to Max Glendening on May 20, 1918, and the story my family told, was not what Max’s mother, Lesta, wrote down. Further, as I read the devastation and the various harrowing accounts, I had a better appreciation why my family went the “cave” anytime the wind picked up, and the clouds overhead looked threatening.