

## 100 Years after the May 20, 1917 Codell Tornado(es) by Nila LaRea Denton

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 every 680 years. The chances of a tornado of any strength striking within any specific square mile during the year is about one in 1,900 (Grazulis, Significant Tornado 1680-199, 1993). Therefore, a Kansas Township of 36 square miles, might expect a tornado strike about 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.

According to an article in the Plainville times, many thought there were several different tornadoes were in the storm of May 20, 1917, especially considering the storm struck at intervening points between the Cochran Ranch and Woodston in an hour. There were evidently two different storms or sometimes three, two miles apart as the storm cloud moved over the country. Eyewitness observer B. F. McCarroll explained the phenomena as follows:

As the storm passed over his place, it had the appearance of an immense hollow cone with a lower circumference of about two miles wide. As it passed over him, he ran to the top of the hill and saw it pass north after it had rolled up his fence, At times, he could see as many as three funnels drop down from the cloud at one time. Later he saw it unite into one. When divided into several parts, they did not do much damage, but when they united into one, the effect was devastating. Others would claim they saw the intervening places with such regularly of time that it was evidenced by all one storm. Its rising and lowering frequently gave it the appearance of different storms.

No matter the case, on this Sunday evening, around 6 P.M., a F3 storm (critical damage) hit the ground, considered one of the most extensive tornadoes ever visiting this area. The following is a collection of reports of May 20, 1917 tornado destruction taken from local newspapers:

1. Cochran Ranch - The tornado crossed the Saline River at the Cochran Ranch around 6 P.M. (The ranch located 9 miles south of Plainville or 12 miles southwest of Codell.) Big trees, which it took almost two to reach around, were blown down. The loss at the Cochran ranch as estimated at \$10,000. It was noted Mr. Cochran had always been strong on fire insurance, but not on windstorm so there was only a few hundred dollars of insurance against wind.
2. Swenson Ranch - All the main ranch buildings were destroyed. The destruction of the buildings, sheds and barns were "about as complete as could have been made."
3. Joe Lee - Not enough was left of the Lee house to be able to tell where the house stood. The furniture was scattered for two miles as far as where Bob Johnson lived two miles north. The family lost all their belongs and clothing except what meager apparel they had on. Fortunately, they had left the house and taken refuge in a cement chicken house partially built in a washed out place in the creek bank, thus protecting them from the fury of the wind. Afterwards, the Lee family went to stay with Henry Kleinschmidt who cared for them until they could once again "get a house."
4. O.M. Loveland - At the main ranch house, the roof and top story were blown off, even with the first story walls. The Loveland family fortunately were gone, but three men employed at the ranch took shelter in the cellar and escaped injury. The large 250 foot long barn was totaled. The 40 foot by 100 foot two story addition recently added was included in the destruction. As the bookkeeper, Lintner expressed it, they had "left the land the deed called for." All the sheds and outbuildings were destroyed. The steel 20 foot by 56 foot cement silo "stood in lonely vigil untouched." It was believed at the time that the storm could find "no place to get ahold so the cement silos were seldom phased by cyclones." (Cyclone was an old fashioned term for tornado.) Later, after the storm, three horses and a cow were found with broken legs.

Another account in the May 31, 1917 issue of the Plainville Times further details the losses and incidences at the Loveland and Lee home; unfortunately the descriptions given did not specific which farmsteads were being described: An eight foot galvanized watering tank was picked up, crushed, a sideboard of a wagon was split in two, and then one of the pieces was thrashed through the flattened tank, tank and board carried one-half mile and. One end of the board formed into the trunk of a cottonwood tree, and the tank was left dangling on the board.

The kitchen was lifted into the air and not one trace was ever found, but a large tea kettle that was near the barn was placed in the center of the round where the kitchen had stood. The cook stove was gone and never found.

One of the chiffarobes (defined as a closet like piece of furniture that combines a long space for hanging clothes, that is a wardrobe or armoire, with a chest of drawers) had set a small aquarium full of water with a gold fish in it. The aquarium was gently placed on the floor of the room, then the stone wall of the house was piled over it. Also the furniture was rolled up, twisted, crushed, and pitched into the yard.

In the stock corral, with the fence blown away, 25 head of mules and horses ran out unhurt. A large windmill tower was picked up, whirled into the air, mashed, thrown into the corral, and a “farm wagon was pitched in to keep the tower company.” A few 100 foot stock shed was wrecked, but an old shed as only “stripped of its ridge boards,” while the great stone barn standing nearby was demolished, leaving it “a pile of jabbed stones.” The forest located just west of the barn “seemed to have angered the storm,” for some of the trees had been wrenched from the ground, others twisted and broken, while some had been stripped of their branches. All of this forest wreckage had been left in the “middle of a little creek running nearby.” Hundreds of feet of barbed wire were torn from nearby fences, rolled into a large ball and left at the south end of the ruined barn. Five boys were in the cellar of the house, none hurt, and the incubator (for chicks) in the basement was not disturbed.

Further comment in the May 31, 1917 Plainville Times article “It would be easy to mention many other things this storm did to the ranch, but in order to appreciate it, make a visit to the scene of disaster, and then you will be able to learn what organized wind on a wild spree can do.”

5. Sam Groves - One mile west of O.M. Loveland’s ranch, the new bungalow and house where Sam Groves lived were untouched. Harold Carpenter, the 12 to 14 year old brother of Mrs. Roscoe Loveland, who was visiting the ranch at the time had started home on horseback across the path of the storm just about twenty minutes before it occurred. There was a great amount of worrying over his fate by those interested until the next morning when telephone communication was restored, and it was found he had made it back safe to the ranch and was with the others.
6. John Coleman - The tornado picked up a 1” x 12” board and drove it endways through a steer, killing it. Outbuildings were demolished.

7. Brison place (Ed Hageman, tenant) - The barn was destroyed.
8. L L. Huber - At 6:30 P.M., when the storm arrived, Mr. and Mrs. Huber, along with five children, had taken refuge in the cellar. Part of the house was blown away, and the other leaned way over. The cellar wall caved in on them. One of the little boy's leg was hurt. The house was so badly twisted it had to be completely rebuilt. The barn and outbuildings were destroyed, with the exception of a small granary. His farm machinery were demolished. Fortunately, Mr. Huber had \$1,100 insurance coverage. but this would not begin to repair the damage. It was thought the most damage in the vicinity was done, according to the Plainville Times.

Further comments in the Plainville Times: The cyclone rose and continued north from the Huber place to the end of the trees near Ora Benedick's house. There it arose from the ground and passed over the Benedict place. It lit again in the Hrabe district.

From town, there appeared to be three storms. The cyclone on the Saline was plainly visible and many were out watching it. Another appeared to form east of town, the third, north of town.

9. George Watkins - Four inches of rain accompanied the storm in the Watkins' vicinity. Over two inches of hail fell. It was piled up against the fence 18" high. So much hail fell that it dammed the lister rows and prevented the corn from washing out. (A lister is defined as also being called lister plow, middlebreaker, middlebuster, a plow with a double moldboard, used to prepare the ground for planting by producing furrows and ridges.) Parties coming up from the Saline River said that hail fell as large as goose eggs.
10. Norris grove - Evangelist Whiston, his wife and their invalid nephew, Frank Fisher, had been camped there. The water arose on both sides of the temporary house where they resided and threatened to carry it away. Hail went through the light roof, and Mrs. Whiston started to assist Mr. Fisher to the nearest house over a quarter of a mile away, wading in water nearly knee deep, as they watched fearfully, "lest the cyclone would strike them." Mr. Whiston had driven to Palco that morning to fill his regular appointment and was unaware of the storm until he reached Zurich on his return trip home after evening services.
11. Ben McCarroll - The garage was moved off its foundation, and the foundation of the silo cracked. His fences were badly blown down. At this point, the tornado was about an eighth of a mile wide. No rain occurred at his ranch, but it was noted the next day, "they got a soaker." The Natoma Independent described the damage done at the McCarroll place as slight.

Azel Cochran, who had been in Plainville, passed the path of the storm a little while before it occurred, and was at the bungalow about a mile west. He remained there to help get things straightened out. A “large gang of men” later assisted in getting the debris cleared out.

12. J. E. Garvin - The fences were blown down.
13. Will Smith - The stable and most of his buildings were destroyed.
14. Ed Madden Ranch - The tornado jumped “clear over.”
15. Ed Hockett farm (Ora Dougherty, tenant) - Everything was demolished. Not even a piece of furniture was left, with the exception of the head of a sewing machine. The Dougherty’s escaped by being in the cave (old fashioned term for cellar). It was said they saved nothing but a few clothes, a ham and their marriage certificate. The Natoma Independent said of the destruction at the Dougherty place: “the storm did its worst, destroying everything... Complete destruction prevailed here.”
16. L. B. Smith place - All the buildings were demolished except the house. They attempted to get chains on their auto to escape, but failed, and then laid in a nearby draw while lumber and sticks were driven in the ground around them.
17. Hi Keas - Three inches of rain fell at this place, and it hailed for nearly an hour. Mr. Keas thought from his place he could see plainly visible two storms. He thought the one that struck the Huber place was different from the one at Ora Dougherty’s. (Mr. Keas also referenced a previous tornado, on May 16, 1885, that swept past his place and Twin Mounds, ending at a bluff on the Solomon. One lady, Mrs. Grimes lost her life.)
18. City of Woodston - Heavy hail was reported towards Woodston, where the cyclone struck the northeast edge of town at 7 P.M., tearing up barns and outbuildings, but no residences, though shingles were ripped badly. (Later learned houses were damaged.) Several cars were blown from the side track and demolished. Part of the main line track was blown out so that the Missouri Pacific train had to use the side track in getting through town. The next morning, anyone going over the ground, would say it was fortunately no one was hurt, which appeared almost a miracle.

19. Will Morrisey - Struck there first in Woodston, tearing down buildings and scattering them in all directions. The wheel from his windmill was torn and carried north about a quarter of a mile and left in a cornfield.
20. Mattie Foss - The house was moved from the foundation, turned partly around and at the southeast corner, driven quite a ways into the ground, leaving it partly lopped over. Every window was broken, the chimney torn down, and part of the roof taken off. Mrs. Foss and her children were in the house at the time, though fortunately not hurt, but had to get out through windows as every door was wedged fast. The barn was torn down, but her cow received no injury.
21. Brogan place - The house was badly wrecked and partly unroofed, the barn torn down, wagons and other implements”scattered to the winds.”
22. Grandpa LaRue - The home was greatly damaged.
23. James Reeves - The house was carried away, and the chimney smashed down on the floor. The deck roof was rushed down to the floor. The storm picked up one of his horses and carried it about one-half mile and put it down without injury, except for a broken tail and a very “drabeled appearance.” (defined as to make or become wet and dirty.) Another account, said his horse was blown over 300 yards away. The bunkhouse at the stockyards was carried south across the siding and laid down on the side lengthwise of the main track.
24. John Haynes - The house was taken off its foundation, turned partly around and one corner driven into the ground.
25. The grandstand at the ball park - It was blown several rods south and landed in a very badly wrecked condition.
26. Lumber yard - One shed at the lumber yard was entirely demolished and the other badly damaged.
27. Morrow Stanley - All of his outbuildings were destroyed and the house roof injured.
28. Otto Bourbon - The barn was destroyed, along with three windmills.

Those receiving smaller damages to windmills, sheds, barns, roofs, outhouses, etc., were: A Still, Lista Peacock, Mrs. Brown, Tom Henshaw, Went Downing, Jack Michener, and Mrs. Cochell

Other storm notes from the Record (as quoted in the Plainville Times):

29. The old Yoxall house on the Medicine collapsed under the pressure of the wind.
30. Frank Murphy - Outbuildings destroyed. The wind "played many pranks." A house had all the shingles torn off, but a porch that ran around three sides of the building was not disturbed. The barn and a horse in it were moved 50 feet.
31. W. W. Murphy (in Ash Rock township) - The barn was wrecked, likewise the Jones' silo. Some 50 trees at Fred Jones' place south of Woodston were uprooted. A cement silo was blow over.

Other related Items in the Plainville Times: : The telephone company had 16 of their large poles broken down four miles east of town (Plainville) and running east.

West of Palco only enough rain fell to "properly lay the dust." Plainville received one inch of rain.

Additional excerpts from the Natoma Independent's article "Tornado Near Codell": W. A. Smith - the barn and granary gone. Dutton pasture - farthest east fencing blown away. The Reppert's - shingles torn off the house, Sheds torn up and a steel granary carried one-half mile away. Slight damage was done on the Stick farm.

Natoma Independent comments: Many from the Natoma area saw the funnel shaped cloud. G.M. Palmer was quoted as saying it raised and lowered as many as 20 times. The paper reported "over at Woodston three residences were reported destroyed and others damaged. No one has been reported injured, which was very fortunate, considering the violence of the storm."

Comment recorded in the Plainville Times: "In 45 years of western Kansas life this is the closest call we ever received from a cyclone and we were not extending any invitations to come again."