

The Pomeroy Cyclone

The hot sultry afternoon of Thursday, July 6, 1893, was lazily drawing to a close. A fitful breeze from the east had brought some relief from the oppressive heat of the day. At about five o'clock people living among the bluffs along the west side of the Little Sioux River in Cherokee County looked up and saw beyond the hills two angry clouds, one in the northwest and another in the southwest. Ominous with deep rumbling thunder and sharp flashes of lightning, they rolled up rapidly, growing ever blacker and more threatening. A sinister greenish gloom spread like a pall over the face of nature. On the crest of the hills to the west the two harbingers of violence met, and the whirling tornado swept eastward, carrying death and destruction over a path fifty-five miles long and a thousand feet wide.

At the northwest corner of section thirty-five in Rock Township, Cherokee County, about three miles northwest of Quimby, lay the farm of Jerry Bugh and on the quarter-section to the north was the home of Elroy Cook. There the clouds joined, and there the destruction began. The buildings on both farms were wrecked, but members of the two families suffered only slight injuries. Just to

the east, however, the buildings on the J. H. McClintock farm were demolished and there the first casualties occurred. Mrs. Roy Wright and her child were very severely injured.

As the rolling, greenish bank swept on, the characteristic tornado cloud funnel appeared, particularly noticeable from afar. This swaying, bounding elephant's trunk of vapor picked up the Perry schoolhouse. The building burst like a skyrocket leaving no board fastened to another. From a drive well near-by the pump and about forty feet of tubing were torn out.

By this time people were seeking cellars and caves where with fear they awaited the approach of the tornado. Some heard the storm pass, "like a regiment of railway trains," carrying with it their worldly goods but leaving them practically uninjured. Others were not so fortunate. A short distance west of the Little Sioux River stood two houses which were completely destroyed and there the first human lives were sacrificed. In one of the homes three women and two small children huddled in the cellar. Suddenly the house was torn away and the cellar filled with ruined walls and flying debris. A spoke, torn from some wagon wheel, struck one of the women, Mrs. O. M. Lester, and she died instantly — probably the first victim of the Pomeroy cyclone. About the same instant and on an adjoining farm Mrs. Molyneaux was hit by some flying missile and instantly

killed when the wind demolished the house as she was in the act of opening the cellar door.

When the tornado reached the Little Sioux River, it ripped the heavy iron Pilot Rock bridge from its abutments and dropped the long span lengthwise into the river. On went the twisting cloud, climbing the bluffs on the east bank and continuing its destructive work. Houses, barns, and trees were blown down. Grain and farm machinery were scattered far and wide and live stock was killed. Yet at one farm where the barn was blown away, four horses in it were uninjured. A reaper wheel of solid iron was carried half a mile. Two men were caught in V. M. Grove's big barn when the storm struck. For an instant they were pinned down by the heavy timbers, but a second attack of the wind lifted the wreckage and they were left unhurt.

At another farm the man, his wife, and four children were killed when their home was destroyed. The bodies of the woman and two of the children were blown about sixty yards and were terribly mutilated. The little girl was found under a tree, her limbs swollen and purple and her body so surcharged with electricity, it is said, that it gave a distinct shock to the hand laid upon the flesh. John Peters and his family went to the cellar, but Mr. Peters, returning to close a door, was carried away with the house. His arm was shattered and he was badly bruised and cut.

On the next farm east Marian Johnson was killed in his house while his three children escaped injury. At that point the storm rose and passed over the home of Ellis Whitehead with only slight damage to the buildings but descended again to wage its fury upon the farm of William Slater. There Ida Johnson and Lulu Slater were killed. Miss Slater's body was dismembered, one leg being found two miles away. At the Horatio Pitcher place Frank Lord was killed. The storm then turned north for nearly a half mile destroying buildings and killing seventeen cattle.

At the Cherokee County line the lashing funnel again rose and for two miles no further damage resulted. The first place struck evidently did not feel the full force of the storm, but eighty rods east a house and barn were entirely demolished, while at the next farm the hired man, Barnard Johnson, was blown against a tree with such force that his body wrapped firmly around it. He died two days later.

As the cyclone crossed from Maple Valley Township into Hayes Township the destruction and casualties increased. At the Jacob Breecher place everything except a corn-crib was wrecked, Mr. Breecher and his daughter were killed, and the hired man, Joseph Slade, died from his injuries the following day. Mrs. Breecher found herself sitting on the floor several rods from where the house had stood.

The improvements on L. A. Clemons' place were wrecked, although the house was only unroofed. The escape of several women who were spending the afternoon with Mrs. Clemons seemed almost miraculous. A little farther east stood the home of W. R. Clemons. He had just returned from town and, seeing the storm coming, hurried his wife to the cellar and followed her. Just as he reached the last step he threw up his left hand to steady himself and at that instant the house was torn away and with it the muscles of his arm. Although the bone had been laid bare Mr. Clemons helped his wife, who was also severely hurt, out of the cellar and over to his son's home.

The fury of the storm constantly increased. Unlike the usual balloon-shaped tornado cloud with its tail sweeping the earth, the Pomeroy cyclone developed four descending vortices which twisted, swayed, and bounded up and down as they swung along. Another schoolhouse was swept away completely. Barns were ground to splinters and mixed with horses, cattle, hogs, and poultry. As the *Storm Lake Pilot* expressed it, there was not enough left of several farm homes to build a pig pen and the ground for a mile around was stuck full of slivers and strewn with farm machinery. Chickens, completely stripped of feathers, walked about with an air of consternation and amazement.

Residents of the town of Storm Lake watched with fear and trembling the approach of the storm clouds. Never before had they witnessed such a display of electricity. The air was filled with dust and grass and it was too dark to read.

Then the hurricane struck. The spires on the German Methodist and Catholic churches were torn away. But the center of the storm crossed the lake, whirling the water up into a tall column that moved swiftly forward in a most spectacular manner. A steamboat was the only victim of the typhoon's destructive mood. After the wind had passed, a high tidal wave rushed back across the lake. At the southeast corner of the lake the storm wrecked some barns, killed about seventy head of stock and scattered a hen house, much to the confusion of the chickens within. After passing the Albert Scharm home, however, no material harm was done until the tornado reached section twenty-six in Providence Township where a stable was destroyed. Almost directly eastward it took its course with little damage except to crops and buildings until almost to the Pocahontas County line where John Slayman's buildings were all blown away and every member of the family injured. Crossing into Pocahontas County, the storm took toll only on buildings until, about a mile and three-quarters west of Fonda, it claimed the lives of Mrs. Amos Gorton and her child.

There the storm again veered southward and the town of Fonda was saved from the fate which Pomeroy met a few minutes later. But the cyclone was not to be denied its sacrifice of human life. Almost every farm and home between Fonda and Pomeroy was visited by injury and death.

Like their neighbors to the west, the people of Pomeroy, with mingled curiosity and fear, watched the approach of those threatening clouds welling up in the west. Many remarked that it was "good cyclone weather" but few made definite preparations to seek shelter in caves or cellars, for strangely enough no one thought of telegraphing ahead that a tornado was moving eastward. "The sky was a fearful sight to behold," wrote the editor of the Pomeroy *Herald*. Clouds of inky blackness filled the entire west, "rolling and surging in wild commotion" and pierced by jagged lightning. As the storm approached, the clouds took on a greenish hue, the lightning became continuous, the thunder reverberated incessantly, and the rumbling roar of the wind could be heard above all.

And then, at about six forty-five, the storm struck the town! A heavy rain accompanied by a high wind lasted some ten or fifteen minutes after which there was a perceptible lull — a lull which brought from their caves with a false sense of security many of those who had sought shelter. A moment later the town was literally blown away.

One of the survivors told of remarking to a neighbor that a cyclone was coming. He replied, "Well, let 'er roll," and in telling of the incident the narrator added, "After the promptitude with which his permission to 'roll' was acted upon on this occasion, Mr. M. will doubtless hesitate before again speaking flippantly of a tornado when it is likely to be within hearing distance."

As the storm hit, it was travelling in a southeasterly direction parallel to the Illinois Central railroad track. After taking the full row of houses on the west side of Seneca Street, south of the tracks, it veered southward a block then turned again sweeping clean a path about four blocks wide through the most populous residence district of the town.

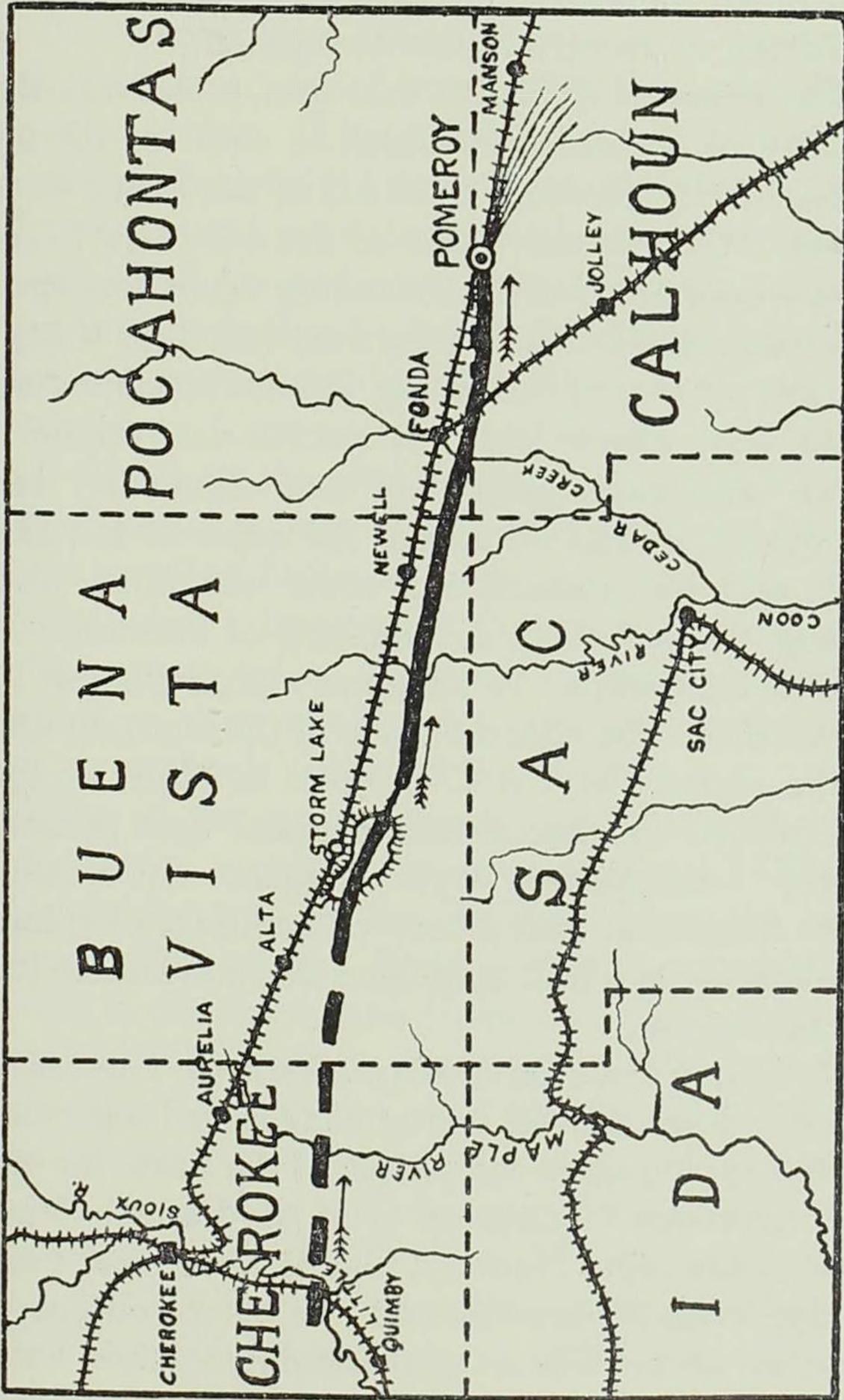
In less than five minutes the devastation was complete. Eighty per cent of the houses were rendered unfit for human habitation and the tornado passed on leaving a track discernible for a distance of two miles east of Pomeroy before the clouds rose and the whirling vortices dissolved. Nearly an hour and three-quarters had elapsed while the storm travelled fifty-five miles. The whirling velocity of the wind must have been terrific, but the forward progress was scarcely thirty miles an hour. An eastbound express train could have easily outrun the cyclone as it moved along the route of the Illinois Central railroad.

The tornado was spent, but there remained the

suffering and anguish of the survivors and the work of relief — a dreary prospect. Out of a thousand people but twenty-one families were left with no dead or wounded of their own to care for. Rain was falling in torrents, accompanied by hail. Night came, covering the town in utter darkness. There were few lanterns and the cries of those imprisoned in the ruins were the principal guide for the rescuers.

Ed Masterson, a Pomeroy banker, secured a horse and started for Manson to secure help. Picking his way over a road almost blocked with debris, he found the bridge over Purgatory Creek washed away and in attempting to cross on foot fell into the water. Swimming ashore, he had barely time enough to flag a west-bound train. Although Mr. Masterson must have looked like a maniac he convinced the vice president and division superintendent, whose special train he had stopped, that Pomeroy had been blown away and that surgeons and supplies must be obtained at once. The train was ordered back to Manson where all available help was taken on board. Another special train was dispatched from Fort Dodge and soon plenty of aid was started toward the stricken town.

Meanwhile J. W. McKeen had ridden on horseback to Jolley, seven miles southwest, making the trip in record time of about forty minutes. There he found Dr. J. R. Thompson who rode



The Track of the Pomeroy Cyclone

post-haste to the scene of the disaster, followed by fifteen or twenty fellow townsmen.

The greatest difficulty that first night was the scarcity of buildings in which to care for the injured, but by eleven o'clock all of the living were housed. Of necessity some of the dead had to remain where they fell until morning when a morgue was established. During the next two days thirty-one graves were filled in the Pomeroy cemeteries. In all, sixty people lost their lives in the cyclone.

No telephones existed in this community but the telegraph had broadcast the news of the disaster and by morning the town was filled with willing workers — to say nothing of hundreds of morbid sightseers. A temporary organization of the workers was effected early in the morning after the storm. M. D. O'Connell of Fort Dodge was placed in charge and surgical and general supply headquarters were opened. By Friday night fifty tents and plenty of bedding, clothing, bandages, food, and medicines were available for immediate use.

At four o'clock on Friday afternoon Governor Horace Boies arrived and at once issued a proclamation calling upon the people of the State for aid and donations. Company G of the Fourth Regiment of the Iowa National Guard came from Fort Dodge Friday forenoon, and was placed on guard duty at once. These guardsmen, together with Company C of Webster City, virtually ruled the

town for two weeks, aided during the first night by the firemen from Storm Lake.

A permanent relief committee was organized Friday evening. This committee was in session almost continuously for ten days after the storm. The money and provisions which poured in had to be receipted for and distributed, plans for aiding the survivors had to be outlined, and the July heat rendered immediate disposal of all dead animals imperative. County Attorney E. C. Stevenson took charge of this disagreeable task and burned the carcasses as fast as possible, using the debris of the wrecked buildings and coal oil as fuel. For several days a large crew of men under Thomas Miller continued to clean up the town, and the success of their efforts was apparent in the fact that no epidemic followed the disaster.

Fifty of the most dangerously wounded were placed on a special train, including two Pullman sleepers donated by the Pullman Company, and taken to Sioux City. Most of these patients were placed in the Samaritan Home and Saint Joseph's Hospital. Of the fifty, one man died en route and four others during the next ten days, but within two months the others were able to return home.

The storm was over, but the work of the committees went on. By October 12th cash contributions of \$69,761.23, exclusive of a donation of \$2000 by Webster County, had been received and acknowledged. Besides money, plentiful sup-

plies of medicine, clothing, and food had been distributed. The people of Iowa and friends from Pennsylvania to Nebraska had done their share to alleviate the suffering and to make it possible for the new Pomeroy to spring up, characteristic of the indomitable energy of the prairie communities.

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