

The Camanche Tornado

It was sultry for the third of June. In the brick church of the Methodists, men dozed peacefully, while their Baptist brethren, in a "neat frame building," were equally soothed by the warm air and the voice of their minister. Even Reverend George D. Young, the Presbyterian pastor, found it hard to hold the attention of his flock.

Outside, the whole town of Camanche lay steeped in Sunday torpor. The brick schoolhouse seemed strangely quiet and empty after its winter's activity; the fine three-story brick Millard House, run by H. G. Sessions, was almost deserted; and Joseph W. Waldorf's large brick block, which he had built in 1858, showed no signs of the week-day bustle and stir that had characterized its two years of occupancy. No traders, with grain and pork, enlivened the market place; no land speculators proclaimed the virtues of the little town as a location for business and an ideal place for homes, beautifully situated on the level west bank of the Mississippi where the majestic stream sweeps around Beaver Island to the southwest.

The calm and peace continued throughout the long, hot afternoon. Neighbors came to call; men

talked of the prospect of a railroad bridge being built across the Mississippi at Camanche instead of at Clinton some six miles upstream. The women spoke of the prices paid for flour and sugar at Westphall's grocery store, or commented on the latest fashions. The darkening sky about 6:30, and the clouds along the southwestern horizon, occasioned no great apprehension. "A shower will cool us off," they said with relief.

And then, almost before any one realized it, the storm was upon them. The violent shower of rain, vivid flashes of lightning, and heavy peals of thunder sent people scurrying for shelter. It was nearly seven o'clock when out of the west came a menacing rumble and roar as of a heavy train passing over a bridge.

On his farm, three miles west of Camanche, Mr. Ralston saw approaching from the vicinity of DeWitt, a huge, black, funnel-shaped cloud, twisting and writhing with terrific velocity. "Quick!" he yelled at his family. "To the grove! A tornado is coming!"

In desperation they all ran to the locust grove, fearful lest the tornado should arrive before they could reach that doubtful shelter. Suddenly the whirlwind was upon them.

"Lie down on the ground and cling to a tree for dear life!" shouted Ralston above the deafening tumult. Automatically, too frightened to question his command, the family obeyed.

The tornado swept across the yard. The barn and sheds were demolished at once, but the house was picked up bodily and carried about twenty rods west, then brought whirling back to within a few feet of its original location, and finally, with one last vent of fury, "rubbed out as you would rub a snowball between your hands." Not a fragment remained.

On to Camanche rushed the diabolical fury! To a citizen who saw it coming, the tornado then appeared "not larger than a tree," a funnel-shaped "cloud of murky blackness, with the appearance of a thin white vapor revolving around it." Everything in the path of this phantom shape was obliterated. Even the grass was torn up by the roots, leaving the ground bare and black, as if a fire had passed along. The air was full of dust and rain and flying debris. Thus the tornado blasted its way straight through the heart of the town.

Pandemonium reigned! Buildings were sucked up violently by the whirlpool of wind and then dashed to the ground — nothing could stand before the savage onslaught. Through the crash of falling buildings and the frenzy of the storm could be heard the anguished cries of the wounded, the frantic screams of the terror-stricken people, the moans of the dying — and always, above it all, the relentless bellow of the wind.

Flashes of lightning revealed the air "filled

with fragments of lumber, furniture and trees flying in every direction with the force of cannon balls." Everything was in chaos and confusion — a jumble of shattered buildings, dead animals, and wreckage of all kinds. Bewildered and frightened, the residents of Camanche knew not how to escape the terror which had descended upon them.

But in less than three minutes the tornado had left Camanche and passed over the river to Albany, Illinois. "Darkness immediately closed over the scene." Soon, out of the general gloom, came the glimmer of lanterns as some of the survivors extricated themselves from the wreckage and tried to help those pinned under the ruins. Messengers were dispatched at top speed to Clinton and Lyons to secure aid.

The storm was over at Clinton, and the air was soft and balmy, with a few stars peeping through the clouds, when up the street dashed a rider from Camanche. Scarcely drawing rein, he called out: "Camanche is destroyed by a tornado, and half the inhabitants are buried in the ruins! Send down all your doctors and materials to dress the wounded!" Then he hurried on, repeating the message wherever he saw a group of people.

In an instant, all Clinton was agog with the news and every one was eager to render every assistance possible. Superintendent Milo Smith immediately "despatched all the hand-cars at

hand, and gave orders for a train to at once be prepared to carry to the spot all who desired to go." The steamboat *Queen City*, loaded with sympathetic helpers, came from Lyons and stopped at Clinton to pick up additional passengers. Meanwhile, every available vehicle had been pressed into service and an advance force of nearly a hundred people were speeding along as fast as they could to aid the distressed town. By this time, the moon was out bright and clear, the sandy road was washed hard and firm, and it seemed difficult to realize that death and destruction could be so near. But when they reached Camanche quite a different scene met their eyes.

"God save us from ever seeing again such a sight as that village presented," was the prayer of one man. "To describe it would be impossible. No conception could be formed of the scene except by seeing it, and once seeing it would haunt the memory forever." Although nearly as familiar with Camanche as the streets of Clinton, he could not recognize "a particular quarter of the town."

With great difficulty the host of volunteer workers picked their way "over fragments of buildings, fences and loose materials of all kinds to the few shattered fragments of houses that still remained upon First Street. Here were chiefly gathered together the dead that were found and the wounded who still lived. Parents were weeping for their children and children for their par-

ents. Here a husband bent sobbing over his dying wife, and here a mother, with frantic joy, pressed to her bosom the child she thought was lost and found to be alive. Many seemed blessed with a calmness from on high; many were beside themselves and many were bewildered and overcome with stupor."

Seeing that they could be of no service there, the men from Clinton and Lyons "rushed on as a relief to join the eager souls who were toiling like giants, removing the rubbish in search of other victims." Hour after hour they worked frantically. "The ruins strewed around, the hideous distortions of the dead, the mangled bodies of the living, the multitudes of eager, grimy workmen, the peaceful summer night and the clear moonlight overhead," formed a scene "never to be erased from the minds of any who were present."

All night they toiled and by morning it was possible to take account of the devastation. The entire length of Front Street was in ruins. Every business building was destroyed, including Waldorf's new brick block, the three story dwelling and grocery store of Gottfried C. Westphall, and the Millard House. Churches, schoolhouse, and most of the dwellings were demolished, and the streets looked "as if a heavy flood had swept over them," strewing timbers, boards, shingles, cord wood, and trees all over the town.

"At about half past ten a rude platform was

erected" in the street, upon which were laid nineteen dead bodies that had been recovered and placed in rough pine coffins. These "bodies were so mutilated and mangled that it was utterly impossible for their friends to recognize them except by the placard that had been placed upon the coffins by the persons who laid them out."

Later that day, the list of the dead, as announced by Judge William E. Leffingwell of the coroner's jury, included twenty-eight persons. Eighty-one were estimated to have been injured. Hundreds were homeless and without food or clothing, but the good people of Lyons and Clinton and other cities of Iowa were prodigal in their donations and in their willingness to help the victims in every way possible.

Public funeral services were held on Tuesday and by ten o'clock in the morning some of the people had begun to gather, although the procession did not move to the cemetery until one P.M. The services were opened by the whole assembly of two or three thousand people joining in singing a hymn, after which "remarks were made by the several clergymen present, Rev. A. J. Kynett, of Lyons, taking the principal part." The simple ceremony over, "the coffins were loaded upon wagons and the procession formed, in which was nearly 200 teams. It reached from the place where the dead were deposited on Front Street to the grave yard" one mile distant.

An observer noted that "besides this, large numbers went to the graveyard on foot. It was an imposing spectacle, and certainly speaks well for the people in the vicinity of the catastrophe." All business was suspended in Lyons and about half the population attended the funeral, many of them having been at Camanche most of Sunday night and Monday as well.

Probably the great majority of those who visited Camanche were impelled by the humanitarian urge to help fellow humans in distress, but there was the usual influx of sight-seers also, and these persons found many strange phenomena to satisfy their curiosity. Among the exhibits was a cedar shingle of ordinary size and thickness which had been driven through Waldorf's store in the very opposite direction from the course of the tornado, and which was "forced through the clapboards, lathes and plastering without a fracture or a bruise."

The chimney of Mr. Anthony's house, "weighing nearly a ton," was blown off and deposited in a perfectly upright position in a garden about ten feet away, "without a single crack." One of the most singular effects of the storm occurred when the lower story of a building on First Street was blown into the river and the upper story simply dropped down into its place, almost uninjured. It was intriguing also to observe that "upon some roofs the shingles were stripped off in fanciful

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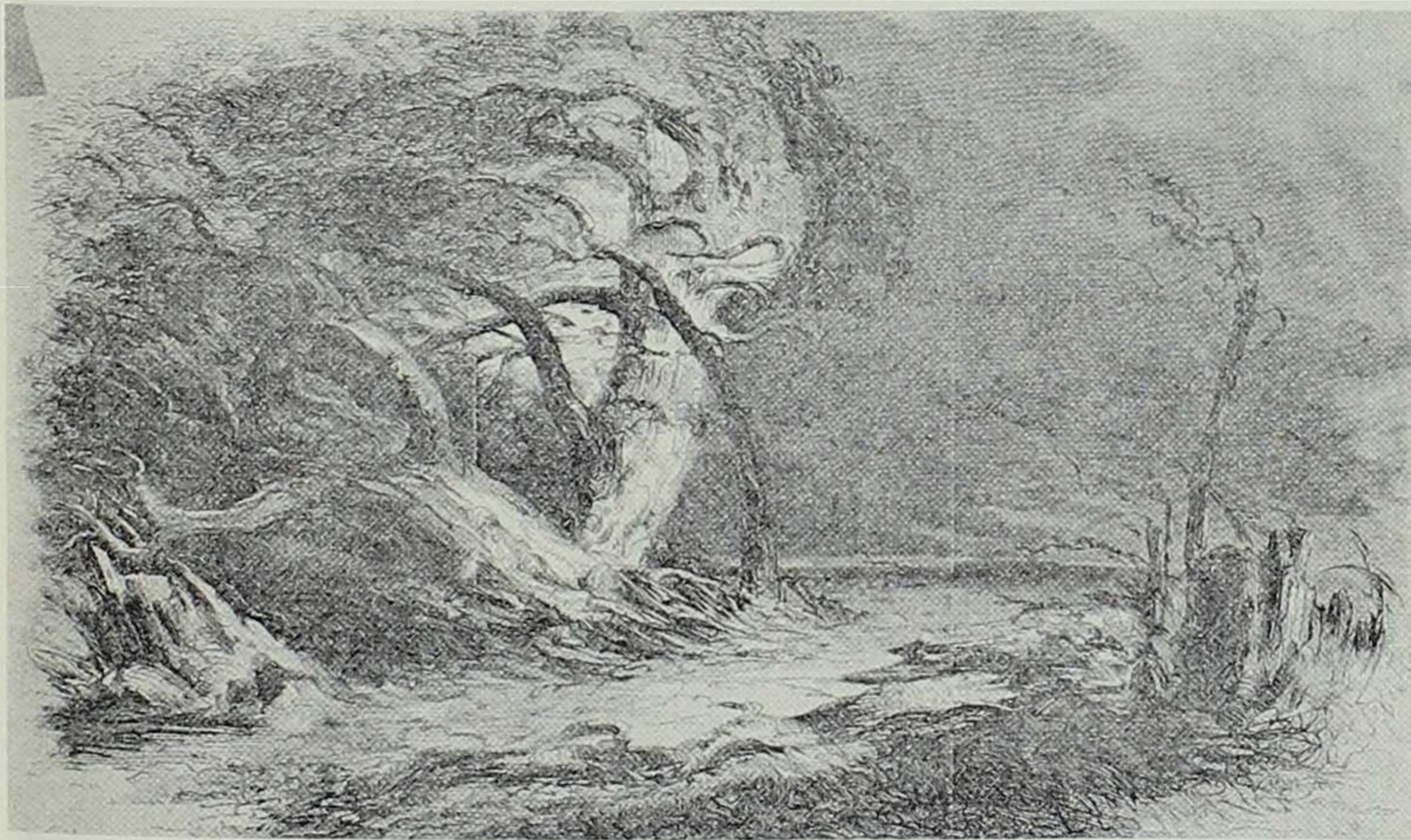
NEWSPAPER

Printed according to Act of Congress in the year 1859, by FRANK LESLIE, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court for the Northern District of New York.

No. 185 - Vol. VIII

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JUNE 18, 1859.

PRICE 6 CENTS.



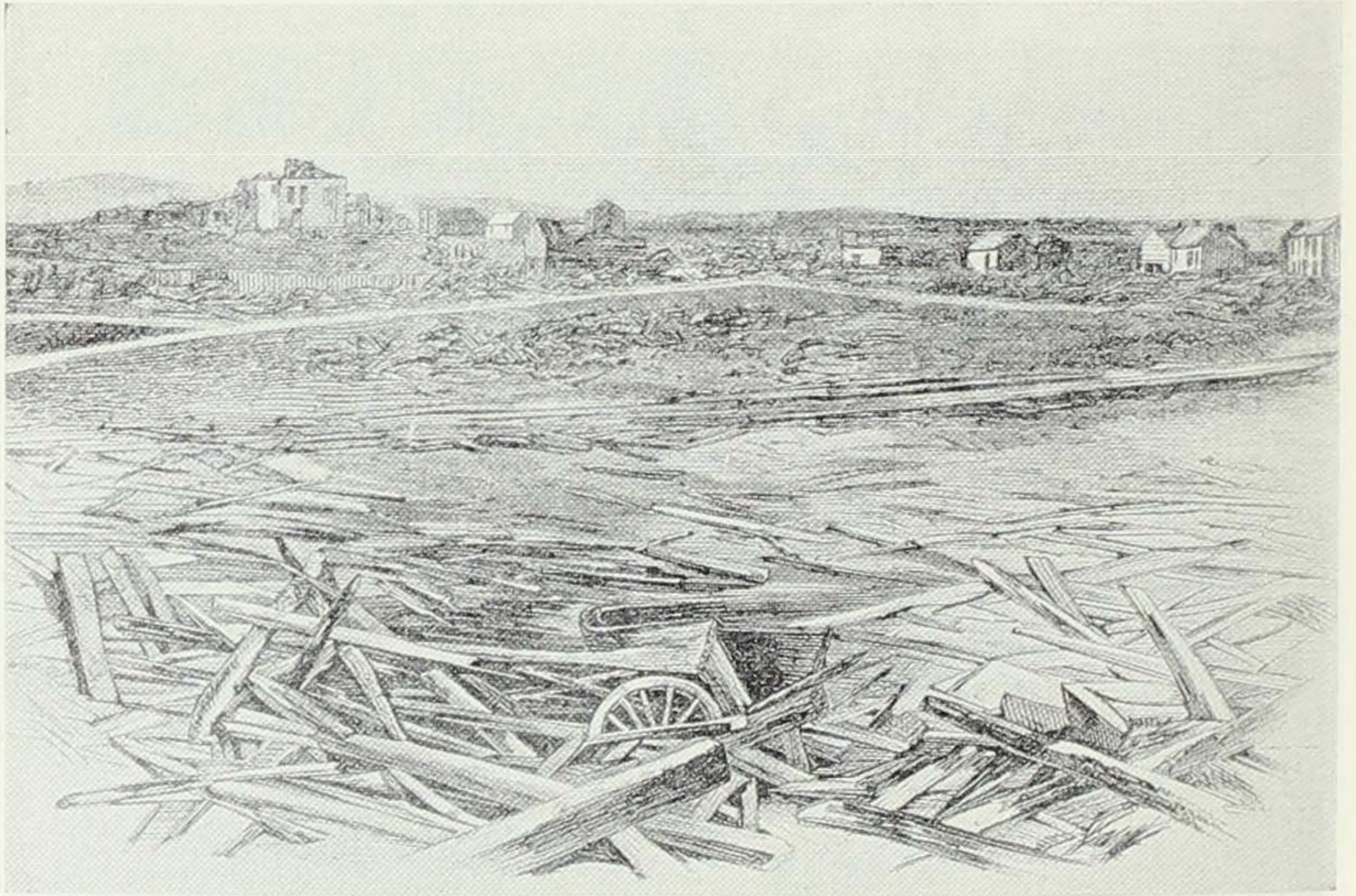
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The Great Tornado of 1859 Passing Over the Timber



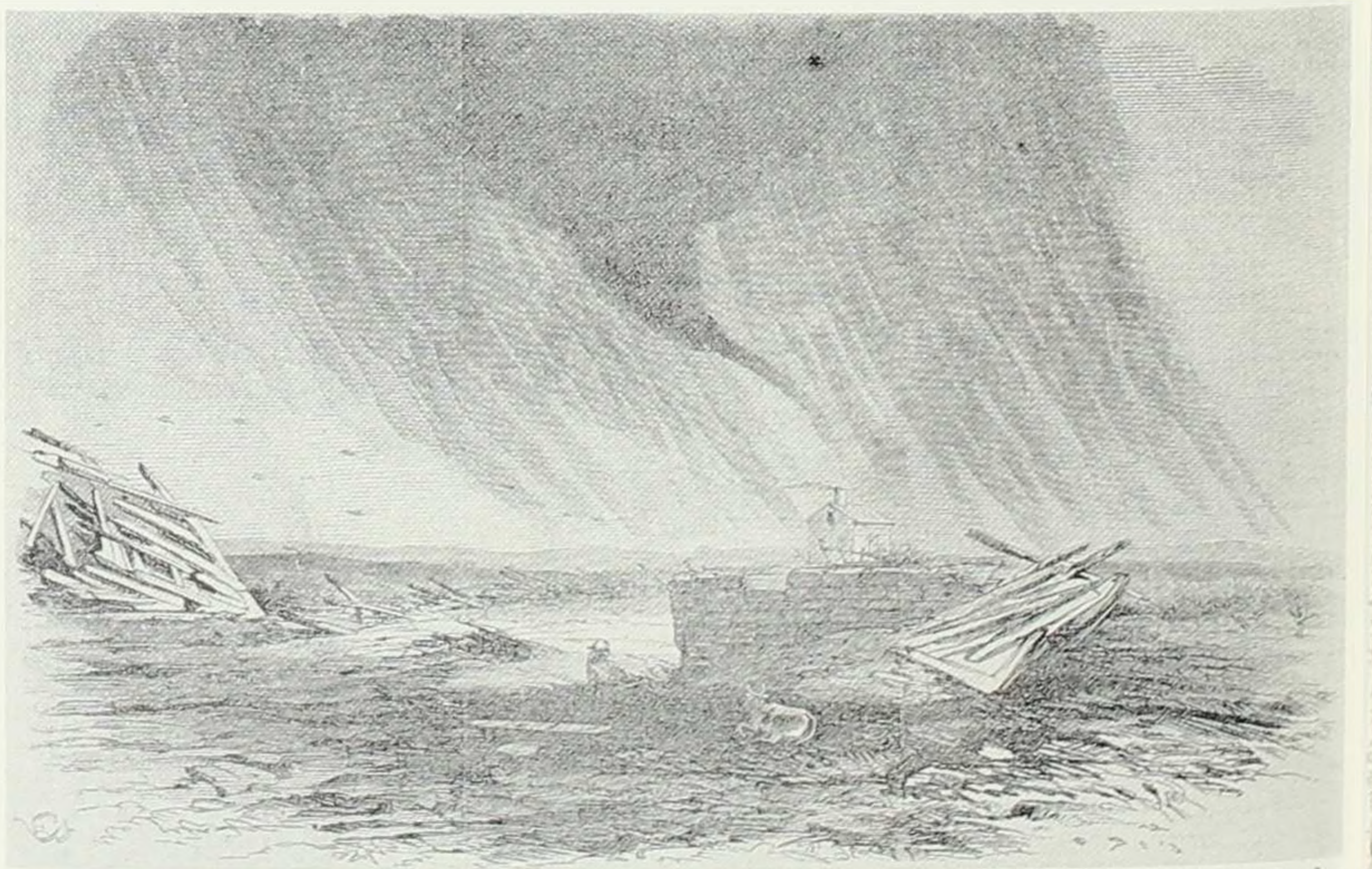
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Scene After the Tornado Had Passed



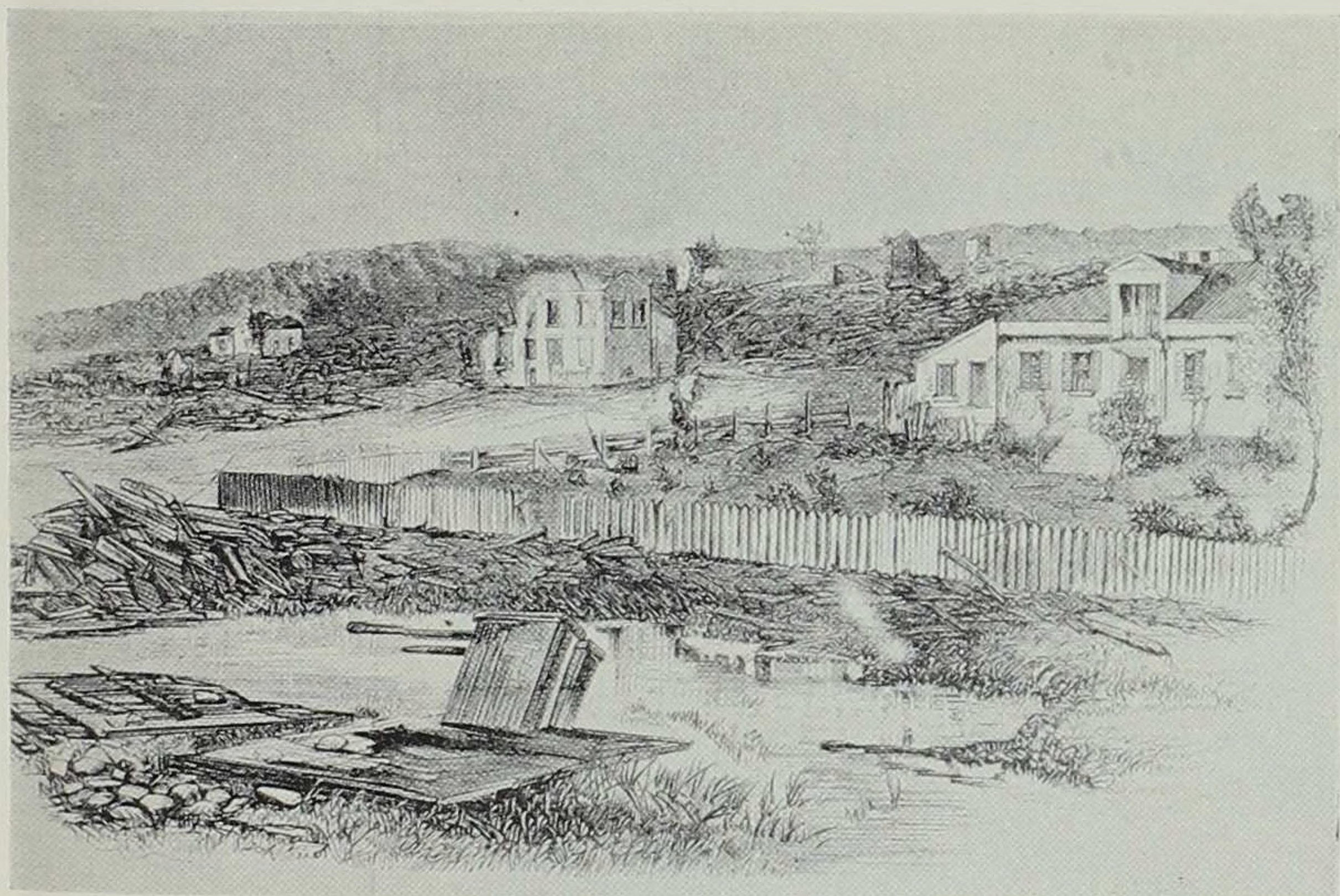
From *Harper's Weekly*

Devastation After the Camanche Tornado — 1860



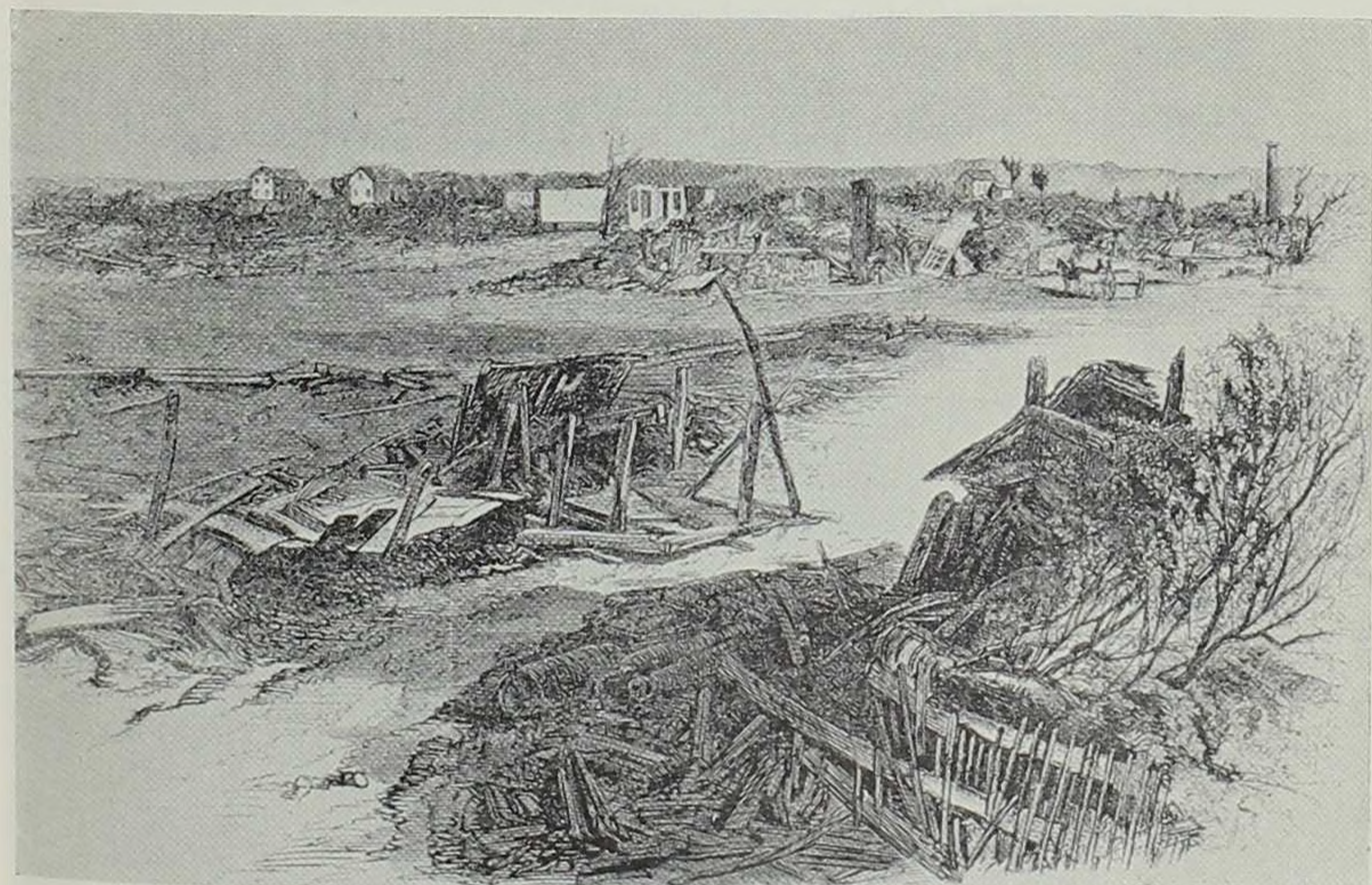
Sketch by J. A. Wetherby

An Eye-Witness Drawing of the Tornado of 1859



From *Harper's Weekly*

Ruins of the Camanche Tornado — 1860



From *Harper's Weekly*

Aftermath of the Camanche Tornado — 1860

"It would seem impossible, on looking at the devastation, to suppose it the work of so short a time."

THE IOWA CITY TORNADO — 1859



Sketch by J. A. Wetherby

Family Taking Refuge in a Cellar



Sketch by J. A. Wetherby

After the Tornado Had Passed

shapes, a bare spot upon one roof exactly resembling the figure eight."

But if a visitor to Camanche exhausted the visible evidences of the storm's caprice, he could always be regaled by the stories of eye-witnesses. One citizen related that "his first realization of the power of the storm was in seeing a horse come flying through the air at about twenty feet from the ground, followed by a cow at about the same height and which must have been carried over three hundred feet." Or Mr. Butler would tell how his stable was carried away over the treetops, and the horses left standing on the earth floor, attached to their rack.

Some of the tales, however, must have taxed the credulity of even the most gullible listener. For example, it was reported that "a child was blown from fifteen miles west of Camanche to that place and landed uninjured." Also that "a man was furiously borne some distance, caught in a tree and held fast desperately while the furious wind stretched straightly out his body and stripped him utterly of his boots and all his clothes."

Probably the most amazing story of all, in some respects, was not revealed until some time after the tornado. It seems that the Tiler's jewel of the Masonic Lodge at Camanche had been blown to Ogle County, Illinois, "where it was picked up by a lady and worn as her breast-pin for some time,

before its identity was discovered by the skillful eye of one of the craft."

However exaggerated these stories of the storm may be, there is no doubt that the tornado which struck Camanche on the evening of June 3, 1860, was one of the most tremendous on record, "rivaling the cyclones of the Indian ocean, the hurricanes of the West Indies and the typhoons of the China seas, in the distance that it swept, from central Iowa to the interior of Michigan, and surpassing most tropical storms in the force of the wind."

The first appearance of the tornado in Iowa was noted about fifteen miles beyond Cedar Rapids, where it consisted of two wings. To the south an enormous waterspout was seen "bellying and surging down from the clouds, and twisting and writhing like a huge worm till it finally reached the earth and became an hour-glass-shaped column rushing wildly onward with the gale." Overhead the clouds were of a "purple hue bordered on the van by pitchy black, and the rear by gray and lurid white, constantly illuminated by flashes of lightning." To the north loomed "a mountain mass of heavy, inky colored clouds crashing along the surface of the ground." Somewhere beyond Marion and Lisbon, the two cyclones united and moved eastward together.

The form of the tornado varied at different places. "At times it appeared as an inverted cone,

with a revolving motion, which seemed to hang down from the heavens, and sweeping along, drew up everything in its course. At times it would rise and bound over spaces of half a mile or more, and then settle down again. In some parts of its path, its diameter was from eighty rods to a half mile; in others its main force was contracted to twenty or thirty rods." Once or twice the whirlwind seemed to divide and reunite. "At times it moved in straight lines, and at other times its course was zigzag. Its speed varied — at times moving for miles with the velocity of a train of cars; then stopping and revolving for several moments in one place; then shooting forward a mile or two in a single moment."

Although the storm wreaked the greatest damage at Camanche, it collected a toll of death and destruction all along its path. "The most reliable authorities estimate the total number of killed" in Iowa "at 134" and "over 2500 people must have been rendered homeless." Everywhere the newspapers proclaimed the "Great Tornado" as a national calamity.

DOROTHY WAGNER