

The Great Tornado of 1859

On May 24th, 1859, the area south of Iowa City was visited by a devastating tornado that left death and destruction in its wake. A resident of Iowa City, J. A. Wetherby, wrote an unusually graphic account of the tornado, and accompanied it with such fine sketches, that *Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* of June 18 gave it front page coverage. The descriptions by Mr. Wetherby which follow were not overdrawn, those appearing in the local Iowa City press carrying fuller and more harrowing accounts. According to Mr. Wetherby:

On Tuesday, the 24th of May last, a tornado, which has seldom been exceeded in violence and destructive power, passed over the strip of country which lies to the south and south-east of Iowa City, laying waste all the tract over which it went.

The day had been fine, but rather sultry — a sort of foretaste of summer, but towards the evening the dark clouds piling up in heavy masses in the west, threatened that a stormy night would ensue.

But while the people of the town were anticipating the coming storm, the tempest separated at a point a little north of west, each part bearing away on opposite sides of the city, while at the point of division the first germ of the tornado was apparent in a small funnel-shaped mass of vapor.

As the mass moved on to the south-east, the formation enlarged and its spiral motion became perceptible in that retrograde whirling, like the back movement of the hands of a watch, peculiar alone to the tornado of the northern hemisphere.

During the progress of the tornado, two giant oaks, one measuring at least three feet in diameter, standing near together, were uprooted, one thrown to the westward, the other east. Another, probably two feet through, was snapped like a pipe-stem close to the ground. Another, larger than any of these, and probably sixty feet in height was stripped of its massive branches fifteen or twenty feet from the base, and its huge antlers strewn in every direction, with apparently as little effort as though they had been the twigs of a rose-bush. Many of these branches are reduced almost to firewood. Most of them split rail fashion. One stick, converted from the very heart of an oak into a capital fence post, was found imbedded in the earth so deep that two men were unable to stir it, the projecting part probably four feet long, and the balance doubtless six or ten.

Wherever the tornado passed, the houses are levelled with the ground, fences were stripped of their boards, posts taken bodily out of the ground, the prairie in every direction was covered with bits of timber and shingles, and every growing thing in the fields was stripped of its leaves, flattened into the earth or torn up by the roots.

Furniture, moveables of every description in and about the houses, were rent to pieces and scattered along the tract for miles; here the broken round of a chair, there part of a bedstead, here a bit of some once precious daguerreotype; whilst, worse than all, the bodies of those who fell victims to the violence of the storm lay amid the wreck of their once happy homesteads.

We have not yet learned how many were killed, but

from the loose accounts which have reached us, the loss of life must have been great.

As to the nature of this tornado, we have little to say. We are not so versed in the theory of storms as to account with readiness or ease for the wonderful variety and fearfulness of this phenomenon. That tornadoes and water spouts, however, are produced by the conflict of opposing currents of air, is supposed to be an admitted, as it is a rational fact; but whether those currents are necessarily diametrically opposite, or strike each other at various angles, is a matter of dispute.

The editor of the *Iowa City Republican* was appalled by the destructive nature of the tornado. He followed in the path of the storm, recording the loss of life and devastation to property. According to the editor of the *Republican* on June 1, 1859:

. . . There was not very much rain in the immediate vicinity of the whirlwind, not much more rain falling there than fell for a half a mile or a mile on either side of it. The cloud which bore the whirlwind, in appearance differed in no essential particular, as we could discover, from an ordinary thunder cloud. It was not blacker, nor was it moved to its place in the heavens with any greater velocity or force than we have witnessed an hundred times before. — It was not until the conical form of the cloud had descended, apparently reaching the earth, that the cloud looked black and assumed a majestic and threatening appearance. Then it looked like a moving column of black, dense smoke, such as is sometimes seen emitted from large furnaces. Coming in contact with the earth, the base seemed about of the same color, a little darker if any thing, and the base and the apex seemed to move in a

perfectly perpendicular direction. The fragments of boards, timber furniture, nearly all fell perpendicularly, so that hundreds and thousands of the splinters now dot the prairie and describe the path of the king-storm. The persons who were in the vicinity of the river say that the whirlwind lingered at the river for a few moments, and that the water was lifted by it in such large quantities that the bed of the river could be discovered. We cannot ourselves vouch for this. It may be true, probably is, as credible witnesses seem sanguine on this point.

And here is a little incident which may not be improper to mention, when first discovered and arresting attention from chamber windows and house tops, it was about due West, and Iowa City seemed to be exactly in the range of its flight. Soon after it became apparent that it was being borne to the South of the City. — Then it was that women ordinarily more fair than brave, more curious than wise, in the sweet innocence of their hearts and lives *audibly* wished that the water spout would not prove so coy, but would come where it might be seen and handled and petted. Innocent, yet dreadful wish! had it come directly over the City, the City in all probability or parts of it, would have been a pile of ruins, to-day smouldering and seething in the blessed rays of a Summer sun. Hundreds of thousands of dollars would have been stricken from the tax rolls, and hundreds if not a thousand lives would have been offered up to the insatiate spirit of the storm. As it is, five valuable lives have been lost, six very seriously injured, some dozen or more, more or less injured, and property to the amount of at least twelve thousand dollars has literally and suddenly taken wings. Thanks from ten thousand hearts and incense from fane and fire-side should ascend to Him who guides the whirlwind and holds the ocean in his hand, that He directed its journey away from the peopled town and sent it on its terrible

mission across the sparsely settled prairie. Gratitude, sympathy and acts of large hearted and deep pocket benevolence should be excited in behalf of those who mourn their loved ones, as well as of those who though they yet live nevertheless by an inscrutable dispensation of Providence are caused to suffer in mind, body and estate.

First hand descriptions of tornadoes and cyclones afforded exciting reading for the Iowa pioneers who differed little on their choice of literature from their Twentieth century descendants. Perhaps the recital of the misfortunes of others helped to lighten the seemingly endless toil and privation of the average pioneer. At any rate editors filled their columns with lurid accounts of crime and disaster, leaving the everyday happenings to the imagination of his reader, and of the historian.

It is comforting to record that for fully three quarters of a century Iowans have been protected from the heavy losses caused by cyclones, windstorms, and tornadoes. On March 10, 1884, Lorenzo Dutton of Fayette County took out the first policy in the Iowa Mutual Tornado, Cyclone, and Wind Storm Insurance Association. This policy, covering \$1,100 of property for twenty years, though modest in amount, is historically significant as we observe the 75th anniversary of the formation of the Mutual Tornado Insurance Association.

The establishment of the Iowa Mutual Tornado Insurance Association at West Union in 1884

marked the beginning of a new era in mutual protection that gained peak after peak during the Twentieth Century. During the seventy-five years between 1884 and 1959 this statewide association has grown from a small regional company to one with statewide coverage and tremendous assets. Its steady growth, due to its many fine agents and satisfied policy holders, simply reflects the strong leadership it has had over the years.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN