

CHATS WITH THE WEATHER MAN.

Friday, May 2, 1930

ANNOUNCEMENT: Here comes old Ob. Server breezing in! --- Well, Mr. Ob! Server, what will we get today? --- If I can read the signs right, you've had another one of your chats with the weather man. ---- Come on, let's hear about it! --- What have the specialists at the U.S. Weather Bureau to say about our old stand-by, the weather? ---

They tell me this is the time of the year that the tornado season begins.

Did you ever see one of those honest-to-goodness twisters? A friend of mine was sitting on a fence one day in May. He saw the clouds rushing together. He saw one of those funnel-shaped clouds dip down like a wriggling elephant's snout. It was coming toward him. But he figures it would pass on the other side of the field. He had heard that the path of a tornado is often just a matter of a few feet. He decided he would just sit steady and watch what happened. He didn't. ---- He heard the roar of what sounded like many express trains, and the next thing he knew he was picking himself up in the next field.-- He hasn't done any watchful waiting since

That is not surprising.. Prof. A. J. Henry, editor of the Monthly Weather Review of the U.S. Weather Bureau, has just been telling me that a tornado doesn't lend itself to first-hand study at close quarters. It is the most violent of all whirl-winds. That funnel that seems to hang down from the bottom of a much bigger mass of clouds above, is a mere collection of clouds just like those above but swirling at a terrific rate. The funnel itself may be 50 to a few hundred feet across. The whole tornado, including the main cloud, the funnel, and the destroying winds, generally moves from southwest to northeast at a speed of 30 to 50 miles an hour; just about average cross-country automobile speed.

But that forward movement of the tornado is just one of its motions. It has three. There is that whirling motion at a terrific speed which forms that funnel. Then there is a violent updraught of air of unknown speed inside the funnel. Chickens caught in the path of the tornado sometimes come out alive, but picked clean of feathers. From what Prof. Henry tells me, the tornado seems to work pretty much like a vacuum cleaner.

But it often does a queer job of it. Here are a few well-attested bits of evidence, gathered by experts of the U.S. Weather Bureau, and entered in scientific reports on tornadoes. I say that in advance; so you won't think they were gleaned from the writing of Baron Munchausen.

In one tornado in the Middle West, a heavy lumber wagon was standing behind a corn crib. It was lifted clear off the ground, carried one hundred feet through the air over a corn-field, and let down again without hurting it in the slightest. A heavy cultivator near-by was broken up and scattered in circles all over a twelve acre field.

The old Mother Goose rhyme about the cow jumping over the moon seems the height of absurdity. Yet a cow picketed in a farm yard was actually caught up in one of the whirling currents of air, carried over the tops of trees thirty to sixty feet high and landed in a cornfield three-eighths of a mile away.

Then there was the strange case of the three-gallon tin pail. It had a cover top and was full of water. The tornado picked it up, and set it down forty-five rods away, right side up and still full of water.

Another man thought he had his carpet tacked down securely. Along came the tornado, took up the carpet, and carried it out of the house without tearing it in the slightest. An iron kettle in the same room was broken into six pieces, and a big iron-bound trunk fastened with an extra-heavy iron lock was torn to pieces and the lock was buried in a rail fence.

Cases of roofs blown off and people being lifted through the open tops of the house seem to be fairly numerous. Kitchen utensils and gutters deposited by the tornado in yards six miles from the home from which they were taken are in the record. These twisting winds turn from right to left and it just takes an average of about ten seconds for the tornado to do its dirt and pass a given point.

I say "do its dirt" because the tornado often flings mud and has been reported to have lifted water out of creeks. After one tornado, a mother washed her children for four days to get them clean and then their bodies were still covered with specks of fine dirt driven into the flesh by the force of the wind.

But that's just the more playful side of the tornado --- and you could never call a tornado playful. Most folks, who get caught in the center of a tornado, Prof. Henry tells me, never come out alive. During the last thirteen years, from ninety to nearly eight hundred people have been killed each year in this country by tornadoes and the property damage has ranged from two and a half million to over forty-three million dollars a year.

There is no telling just when and where one of these all-of-a-sudden, death-dealing whirl-winds will form and run amuck. Even our weather forecasters can't say. There are just two good things you can say about a tornado. One is that the swath they cut is usually very narrow -- from 100 yards to say three-eighths of a mile wide. Folks just off the tornado's path may not even know any unusual storm has happened. The other good thing about the tornado is that you can often see it coming. Prof. Henry tells me if you will run at right angles to the direction in which the storm seems to be moving, you can probably dodge it. Usually, the tornado moves from west to east. It is safer to run north than south, because the tendency is for the tornado to swing south or to its right.

If you can't get away, get down. Go to the storm cellar if there is one handy. Hug the wall on the side from which the twister is coming. If there is no protection below ground, get in any depression you can find. Lie flat, face down. Hold on to anything handy.

We usually think of a tornado as a local storm. Its length varies from a few miles up to 200 or more, however, and Prof. Henry says it is really part of a big general circular storm. It usually happens in the southeast quarter of the general circular storm, and is caused by cold winds from the north coming in contact with currents of hot air from the south. The exact position of these sharply different-temperated air currents, when they meet, is a bit uncertain even to the experts. What happens is certain. A terrific eddy of hot and cold air is set up which sweeps down and forward spreading destruction in its path. May you all always dodge it.

ANNOUNCEMENT: Whew! That was some wind! ---- And old Ob. Server will be back two weeks from today to give us another of his chats with the weather man at the United States weather Bureau. This feature is presented by this Station ----- in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture.

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National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

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