UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Radio Service
OFFICE OF INFORMATION

CHATS WITH THE WEATHER MAN

RELEASE Friday, June 26, 1931

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Speaking Time: 10 Minutes.

ANNOUNCEMENT: Now let's hear from our old friend, Ob. Server. You know, Station ---- in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture, presents his "Chats with the Weather Man". He talks with the specialists of the United States Weather Bureau and then passes on the good word to us ---- Well, Mr. Ob. Server? ----

****

I guess you all heard about that train that was blown off the track.

That was one of those things that do happen. As you recall, the crack "Empire Builder" express from Seattle to Chicago was breezing along through Minnesota at about sixty miles an hour when it ran head-on into a tornado swirling along at close to the same rate.

Well, that crack storm blew the goggles off the engineer. It also lifted six steel coaches off the track. One of those steel cars was set down 80 feet from the track. One man seems to have been blown out the window and killed when the train fell on him.

Prof. A. J. Henry, meterological editor of the United States Weather Bureau, tells me that is the only case on record where a twister has actually lifted a train off the track. It is not often twisters and trains cross paths on the same schedule, or meet on the same road.

But he was showing me a report of that same tornado by one of the observers of the United States Weather Bureau who followed the trail of damage and interviewed some of the people who had a passing acquaintance with that particular storm. And that tornado did a lot of other queer things besides blowing that train off the track.

Of course, you know, a tornado is one of the most local storms we have. The path is usually not very wide. Sometimes not more than 40 to 50 feet wide. From that on up to a mile or more. Prof. Henry says the average width is about 1,000 feet, but many are only 500 to 600 feet across. And the length of the path is short. On the average, the tornado peters out after going about 25 miles. However, some tear on their course of destruction for 200 miles or more.

Even the most local tornado seldom escapes the watchful eyes of the Weather Bureau. With its more than 5,000 observers scattered throughout the United States, it is almost bound to hear of any tornado that occurs.

You understand, the tornado is that fiercest of all storms commonly called a "cyclone" and even more familiarly termed a "twister". Prof. Henry says "cyclone" is a perfectly good word used by all weather experts every day to describe the regular wide-spread "low pressure" general storm area. For that reason, meterologists prefer that we refer to these more occasional, violent storms, with their typical funnel-shaped clouds and terrifically spiraling winds, as tornadoes. ----

But I started to tell you about that train-wrecking tornado, and some of the other things it did.

A farmer was standing in the door of his barn when that same tornado passed his place. He was actually watching it as its snout-like funnel of clouds swept by apparently about 200 yards from where he stood. Then ----

Then the barn arose and left him.

One side of that barn was found on the north side of the farm-house. Another side was found on the south side of the farm-house. Another on the east. But the farm house was undamaged. The top of the barn had been carried up and over some trees fifty feet high. And the man who had stood in the doorway was left in his tracks unharmed. ---- Just another of the many freak things that happen near the path of a tornado.

At other points along its path chickens were found stripped of all their feathers, but running around naked and unhurt. Straws were driven like nails into the bark of trees. In fact, said Prof. Henry, it would take many volumes to hold all the seemingly marvelous but well-attested stories of bizarre tornado damage.

Most of these miraculous happenings seem to take place on the edges of the twister.

Unfortunately, not all are as lucky as that farmer who had his barn leave him. Seldom, if ever, does anybody caught in the direct path of the tornado live to tell the tale. The tornado path is a path of death and destruction.

As a rule, a tornado moves along across the landscape at a rate of 25 to 40 miles an hour, just medium auto tourist travel. But the swirling vortex of winds which make up this storm, move at a terrific velocity of tremendous destructive power, while there is updraft of air inside the funnel of swirling winds which moves at a rate of 100 to 200 miles, judging by the way it carries up timbers and other heavy objects.

Prof. Henry points out that there are a lot of things about tornadoes we don't know. It is impossible to predict just where and when these storms will strike, or to forecast their path except in a very general sort of way.

Nobody has made a close-up study of a tornado and lived to tell the tale.

Just what the conditions are which produce these intensive storms and their sharply defined paths are uncertain. They seem to originate high in the air.

Of course, you know the United States Weather Bureau has for many years made upper-air observations by means of kites and sounding balloons carrying recording instruments. But such records are scanty, and only a very few of those, of course, have ever been made near one of these very local storms very close to the time when the storm started. So you see, our meterologists don't yet know just what the conditions are aloft which cause the formation of the tornado with its wiggling finger of cloud and wind which reaches down and blots out houses and people in its path.

Of course, they have accurate records of conditions on the ground, before, after, and during the passage of the twister. In a general way, it might be possible to say when conditions seem ripe for the appearance of a tornado somewhere in a wide area. But such forecasts, Prof. Henry says, would serve no useful purpose. They would create much unnecessary alarm over a wide area, and be of no practical value to any of those people who might be along the narrow unknown path which the twister would take.

However, the scientists of the United States Weather Bureau continue to grope for every new fact which may help solve the secrets of that terribly destructive force we call the tornado.

****

ANNOUNCEMENT: You just heard the Chat with the Weather Man. Before we breeze along to something else, let me say that old Ob. Server will be back with us two weeks from today with another of these talks which Station —— presents in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture.

###

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

ERRATA NOTICE

One or more conditions of the original document may affect the quality of the image, such as:

Discolored pages
Faded or light ink
Binding intrudes into the text

This has been a co-operative project between the NOAA Central Library and the Climate Database Modernization Program, National Climate Data Center (NCDC). To view the original document, please contact the NOAA Central Library in Silver Spring, MD at (301) 713-2607 x124 or Library.Reference@noaa.gov

HOV Services
Imaging Contractor
12200 Kiln Court
Beltsville, MD 20704-1387
July 23, 2010