

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed October 23, 1931

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AN AMAZING TORNADO STORY

The total area swept over by an average tornado is something like 10 square miles. In the state of Kansas, with an area of 82,000 square miles, according to highly trustworthy statistics collected during the 13 years 1916-28, there occur, on an average, 12 tornadoes a year. This means that any particular area of 10 square miles in the state is likely, in the long run, to experience a tornado once in about 680 years. Now, if you have taste for mathematics and big figures, work out the stupendous odds against the occurrence, in any specified 10-square-mile area in Kansas, of tornadoes three years in succession, all on the same date. The thing is not hypothetical. It has happened, and it is surely the most amazing coincidence in the history of weather.

The tornadoes occurred on May 20, 1916, May 20, 1917, and May 20, 1918. The first grazed the little village of Codell, in Rooks County. The second passed a little to the northwest of this village. The third hit the village squarely and nearly wiped it out.

Exaggerated versions of this tale have been published, stating that Codell was actually hit by all three storms and also that all three arrived there about the same hour of the day. There was really a range of about three hours in the time of occurrence of the tornadoes at or near Codell.

A mathematician would have pronounced Codell to be the safest refuge in the world from tornadoes on May 20, 1919; but the average superstitious non-mathematical mortal would have considered it a good place to stay away from on that date.

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