

Released upon receipt
but intended for use
November 25, 1931

A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed November 18, 1931

By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,
Authority on Meteorology.

FIRE FROM A TORNADO

Tornadoes often start fires by upsetting lamps and stoves, or through the agency of lightning, which is a common attendant of these storms, though perhaps never occurring in the funnel cloud itself. The question has been asked whether the mere grinding together of dry materials in the vortex of the storm might start fires by friction. It is not inconceivable that this should happen, but I know of only one case in which it was alleged to have done so. This was in Australia in 1889. A man named Hodnett was riding near Bourke, New South Wales, when he saw a small tornado (or perhaps merely a big dust whirl) traveling down hill at a rapid pace.

"A good-sized dead pine tree," he reported, "stood in its way, and I waited to see the effect the tornado would have on it. All the pines about had, like this one, been dead for years. The tornado at this time was fully twenty feet in diameter at the base, tapering upward to a considerable height, and was making a loud buzzing noise, throwing out from its circle sticks, sand, etc., and revolving with great velocity. In a few moments it was upon the dead pine, and almost instantly the top and branches were torn off, breaking up and grinding in the center. After it had passed, I rode up and to my surprise found fire and smoke at the butt of the tree. I put it out as quickly as possible to prevent it from spreading. I rode away puzzled, and after thinking it over returned to the tree and examined it more carefully. I found no other indications of fire except where I put it out; there was a good deal of broken wood about the tree but no sign of any previous fire; nothing in fact but the little fire that I had put out and that was only superficial. Indeed, if there had been any fire at the tree before the tornado reached it I must have seen it."

Perhaps the sparking of electrified dust, rather than the friction of dry wood, was responsible for this fire.

(All rights reserved by Science Service, Inc.)

SCIENCE SERVICE
21st and Constitution Ave.
Washington, D.C.