

Tornado Season

In 1958, a snarl of twisters ripped through the Chippewa Valley.

On the warm evening of June 4, 1958, a storm came from Minnesota to the Chippewa Valley. It traveled eastward at more than 50 miles an hour, nearly twice as fast as storms generally move in our region. It left almost no time for authorities and the media to warn the public. The storm came armed with a series of four tornadoes.

From the time the first twister touched down in Woodville, in St. Croix County, until the last one rose back into the clouds between Longwood and Withee in Clark County, the storm killed 28 people and injured another 350 (at least 120 of them seriously enough to be hospitalized). The tornadoes destroyed more than 160 homes, damaged at least 1,000 buildings, and caused \$10 million damage, in 1958 dollars. In tiny Cedar Falls, the storm left only one of 25 houses standing.

Three of the tornadoes were classified F4 on the Fujita

damage scale. The funnel cloud that ripped through Colfax was classified an F5 by the National Weather Service. As any storm chaser can tell you, the scale stops there; no twister rates higher. The “Colfax Tornado,” as it’s known, was one of sixty F5 tornadoes in the U.S. during the past half-century — and one of only three in Wisconsin over that period (the other two were in Barneveld in June 1984 and in Oakfield in July of 1996). Its path ran five miles long and nearly a half-mile wide.

Like all such storms, this one has its freakish stories: a neatly folded insurance policy was discovered in a Sheldon field, 75 miles east of its rightful home in Knapp; two dozen eggs lay undamaged near a crushed highway bridge; people had splinters driven through their bodies.

The following excerpts tell a few human stories from the storm.

excerpt from the Milwaukee Sentinel, June 5, 1958

At least 25 persons were dead or feared dead and more than 100 injured after a tornado, accompanying one of the most disastrous state storms of recent years, tore into Wisconsin about dusk Wednesday.

Hospitals at Menomonie, Eau Claire, and Chippewa Falls received casualties, and the Dunn County sheriff’s office appealed for additional ambulances and trucks to transport the injured.

Wreckers were called out to clear roads so the search for the injured, many of them trapped in buildings at Colfax, could go on...

TAKEN TO HOSPITALS

All available ambulances, trucks, station wagons and private automobiles were pressed into service to transport the injured to area hospitals.

Authorities issued a call for physicians and nurses to report to hospitals as the extent of the damage became apparent.

Civil defense officials moved in to aid the storm victims, stationing guards at damaged farmhouses to

prevent looting and opening up the National Guard Armory at Menomonie to shelter the less-seriously injured and homeless....

Gov. Thomson ordered National Guardsmen into a 100-square mile area Wednesday night because he said he was “afraid of looting.”

PROBE FOR BODIES

Civil Air Patrol and civil defense workers roamed the countryside, probing wreckage of farm homes for more bodies.

Albert Traxler, a farmer who lives about five miles west of Menomonie said he, his brother, Ed, and Ed’s son, Gordon, were milking in the barn on one of two farms they operate together.

They heard the tornado approaching “like a tremendous whish” and dashed into the house. They, together with Mrs. Gordon Traxler and two small children, lay on the floor.

A huge vacuum seemed to suck all the air and dirt out of the basement. Sheets of rain poured in there for three to five minutes.

When they came out of the basement the barn was demolished, and the carcasses of several dead cows were scattered about the farmyard.

The garage had been moved 50 feet from its foundation, otherwise apparently undamaged. A car was 200 feet from where it had been parked.

PINNED UNDER CAR

The Traxlers heard a man screaming. They found him pinned under his overturned car in the road in front of their roofless home. They extricated him and he was taken to the Menomonie hospital.

The Blue Diamond Dance Hall, a popular dine and dance place five miles west of Menomonie, was crowded when the tornado struck. Several trees were thrown through the walls of the dance hall, but only minor injuries were reported.

Across the road from the Blue Diamond, the barn on the Oscar Erickson farm collapsed. At least 15 cows, some still living, were caught in the wreckage. Neighbors pitched in to help get them out after they discovered the Ericksons were uninjured. Similar scenes were commonplace all along US Highway 12 from Woodville to Menomonie.

MOTEL LEVELED

The twister struck the north side of Chippewa

Falls. It leveled the Glen Loch Motel and collapsed the Chippewa Rendering Plant, a one-story structure of brick and concrete.

Mrs. William Kukuk and her three children, 8 to 11 years old, arrived at the plant about 7:25 to wait for her husband, who works there.

They were in the plant office when the tornado struck. "All of a sudden, bricks came tumbling down," Mrs. Kukuk said. "My husband emerged from a door and shouted, 'Get up against the wall'."

The family survived, but two of the three children were treated for injuries suffered from falling walls....

CADOTT BYPASSED

The publisher of the weekly *Cadott Sentinel* Thursday asked the *Milwaukee Sentinel* to "tell the world that we're still here — halfway between the Equator and North Pole."

Walter H. Brovald said he didn't know how radio reports — that Cadott was "wiped off the map" by Wednesday's tornado — got started. "Cadott, which is just off the 45th Parallel, wasn't touched at all," Brovald said. "We were lucky, that the tornado jumped right over Cadott."

from the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 1958

OFFICERS DIVERT THOUSANDS FROM TORNADO-STRUCK AREAS

Menomonie, Wis., June 8, (Special) Thousands of Sunday drivers attempted to see the awful sights in Wisconsin's four tornado-stricken counties, but hundreds of law enforcement officers kept traffic moving under threat of arrest.

Only reconstruction workers and persons who still sifted through their ruined homes were permitted to get close to the devastation.

Realizing it wouldn't be easy to get past state traffic patrolmen and deputies in St. Croix, Dunn, Chippewa and Clark Counties, some persons went up in small airplanes.

About a dozen bussed low over tornado areas, but the practice was stopped when authorities notified the Civil Aeronautics Administration.

Four teenage youths from Hopkins, Minn., who sneaked back into Colfax after being ordered out of that hardest-hit community, wound up in the Dunn County jail.

Police checked their auto and discovered that a load of merchandise which it contained had been stolen from parked cars in Minnesota. So the four were turned over to authorities of that state.

Auto traffic was heaviest along U.S. Highway 12 in St. Croix and Dunn Counties, and on Highway 29 in the Chippewa and Clark County areas.

A National Guard plane kept flying over the routes to spot trouble areas. This information was relayed to ground squads, who handed out tickets to drivers who stopped or traveled too slowly. Other motorists soon got the point — stay away or pay.

As 1,000 laborers worked gratis in the gigantic rebuilding program ahead, more of the 28 killed in Wednesday's twister were buried Sunday. Last of the funerals will be Monday and Tuesday.



After the storm: Juel and Donna Stalson's 1956 Oldsmobile

The Colfax Tornado June 4th, 1958
 excerpt from a website at
<http://www.wx-fx.com/colfax.htm>

Donna Stalson, her husband Juel, and Earling Braaten were on their way to Eau Claire for dinner. Her memories of that evening:

“The weather was warm, the air was heavy. Radios blared static and rain fell intermittently. Juel was driving our beautiful 1956 Oldsmobile. Rain was falling as we approached Colfax from the east on Highway 40. The wind increased and to our right, a huge tree eased to the ground and the roots popped out. Then the wind was coming from everywhere and it was dark, the darkest dark I have ever seen. Juel turned into a driveway and turned around, heading east. Moments before, we might have

escaped but we didn't know we were inside the funnel cloud of a tornado. By this time, the wind was wild and Juel was pushing hard on the brake pedal. The car was rocking and things were flying through the air. It was a good time to be on speaking terms with the Almighty. We were all praying as the rear of the car lifted and began to roll end over end.

“When I regained consciousness, I was in a ditch on the south side of the road. Shoes and glasses were gone and there was sand in my eyes. An eerie yellow light prevailed. The stench of sulfur was sickening. The twisted and scarred landscape looked like the edge of hell.

“Juel came walking toward me from the north side of the road. He was holding a broken arm and his face was a mass of cuts. He looked like a walking road map and was later photographed for a Red Cross poster. Erling came from a field on the south. He had been rolled over and over in mid-air. His shirt was gone. We must have looked like visitors from another planet. Dirt in buckshot amounts was packed on my face and my hair stood straight on end. The car had been taken 400 yards. There was hardly enough left for junk. The devastation was mind boggling.

“Like sleepwalkers we stepped over power lines and debris in a world we had never seen before. Someone in a car stopped and took us as near as possible to the home of relatives. They didn't recognize us. Later, when chain saws had cleared the way, we were taken to hospitals. Erling had broken ribs, Juel just a broken arm and cuts and I had lacerations and abrasions. It was a day to remember.”



Tornado damage, Cadott, June 1958. Image from the Glenn Smoot Library and Archives.

\$50,000 Set for Storm Aid Red Cross Banks It

Menomonie, Wis. — UPI — An American Red Cross fund of \$50,000 was deposited Tuesday in the Bank of Menomonie to help repair tornado damage.

Kenneth Sass, Washington, D.C., a Red Cross accountant who deposited the fund, said, “If the money is spent by tomorrow, I'll deposit another \$50,000 and will keep doing so until the basic needs of all tornado victims in the five stricken counties are met.”

The newspaper clippings came to CVM in a scrapbook on loan from Jeanne (Kysilko) Andre. Andre lives in Eau Claire.