

Tornadoes

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louder.”
Patty Hansen can still hear the tornado’s sounds howling all around them.
“It sounded like bowling balls falling over us,” she said. “The storm took our shed, and debris was flying. A rafter from the shed hit our propane tank, cut the line and our house filled with propane. We had to get out of the house, in the middle of the storm.”

As the family tried to flee the house, they found their escape blocked.

“We opened the door, and our garage was half-gone and the roof was down on our vehicles,” she said. “The electricity was off, so we couldn’t open the garage door. Paul drove through the garage door to get out.”

Once outside, Hansen said she was stunned by the brightness. “The lightning was so bright that it was like strobe lights. There was constant light everywhere,” she said.

The Hansens headed for the home of Paul’s parents, just across the road. However, they found the short distance littered like an obstacle course.

“There was so much debris that it was tough just getting across the road,” Patty said. “By the time we got over (to the in-laws’ house) it was so dark.”

Marlette remembers a feeling of safety upon reaching the other home.

“Their house was actually built into the side of a hill, so we were mostly underground, even on the top floor, so it was safe,” she said. “I feel really lucky that we left (the Hansens’ house) when we did, or we may not still be here. I was told that, after the tornado, I said, ‘Uncle Paul is my hero.’”

The Hansens couldn’t return to their home for three days because of the damage and the propane leak. They stayed in a hotel for a week until their house was habitable. Besides the roof damage, the basement flooded when the sump pumps stopped running because of the power outage. In addition, new siding was needed for the house.

The Hansens found some bizarre sights when sizing up the storm’s aftermath.

“In the shed, all of our vehicles were pushed to the middle and swirled around. It was like the storm just spun everything in a circle,” she said. “Wood from our shed went two feet down into the ditch. It was like it was drilled into the ground. Collin’s battery-operated car was twisted in a tree. And we couldn’t walk through our ditch because of all the debris.”

The Hansens realized their dog had been caught in the storm. They located the canine two miles to the west, but it suffered head injuries and was put down.

The tiniest find was perhaps the most unusual one, Patty said. “My daughter kept rubbing her ears, so my sister took her to



COURTESY PHOTO

This house was badly damaged by a tornado that struck in Nebraska ten years ago. A powerful F-2 tornado struck near parker on June 24, 2013. Next week will mark the 10th anniversary of that storm, as well as the F-4 tornado that struck near Coleridge, Neb., on June 23, 2003, killing one person.

the clinic. Here, they found two little rocks in Elizabeth’s ear,” she said. “The wind was so powerful that it had blown the rocks into her ear. For three or four days, this baby had tiny stones implanted in her ear.”

The Hansens went camping the following weekend at Yankton but still couldn’t escape a tornado. “We sat out at the (Missouri) River, and people were freakin’ out in their tents,” Patty said.

A couple of years later, Marlette saw the formation of a funnel in the distance, which prompted memories of her own tornado experience. “I thought it was cool but also how scary it was,” she said.

For the most part, though, she doesn’t relive the Parker memories a decade later.

“I don’t really think about it, unless somebody mentions tornadoes, or Mom and I watch (the television program) ‘Storm Chasers’ and there is an episode about the South Dakota tornadoes,” she said.

Patty Hansen teaches middle school in Sioux Falls and uses her experiences as a teaching moment.

“Our seventh and eighth graders study the weather unit, and I bring my little scrapbook and let them look at it,” she said. “The students think it’s cool they can study a tornado, and a lot of them remember (the Parker tornado) because they were 4 or 5 years old at the time. But they just can’t wrap their heads around it.”

And how does Hansen feel about her experience on the tornado’s 10th anniversary? She admits she takes bad weather more in stride than her husband.

“In my mind, of you survived once when a tornado hit, you’re not going to get hit again,” she said.

A FATAL STORM

Growing up in Connecticut, Sally Schroeder was terrified of tornados as an unknown quantity when she moved to Nebraska. For the most part, though, she had little experience with twisters.

Until that June night in 2003. As she went into her house, Schroeder experienced an eerie feeling.

“I remember it getting completely calm. It was the most humid evening I ever experi-

enced in my life,” she said. “I had worked in the yard all day, so I took a shower. When I got done, my husband said I should come downstairs because the weather wasn’t looking good — and he never said that.”

John Schroeder’s instincts were on target. The couple and their 12-year-old son, Seth, were listening to weather reports after taking shelter in the basement.

“All we had was an old earphone AM-FM radio that someone won at a post-prom party,” Sally said. “Seth was listening to it, and they said a tornado was in Coleridge and to become aware of it.”

The tornado hit the Coleridge substation, and the town lost power. For the most part, the Schroeders thought the brunt of the storm had missed them.

“We went to bed, and shortly after that, we got a phone call that John’s sister and brother-in-law (who lived outside of town) had their farm wiped off the planet,” Sally said.

The Schroeders quickly learned the tornado had covered a swath 13 miles long and 1,200 yards wide. “We live on the ‘main drag’ in Coleridge, and the storm hit exactly a half-mile north of us,” Sally said.

The Schroeders sped out of town to help their family, but they ran into tremendous obstacles.

“We were driving over huge trees and limbs. We blew out the tires on John’s pickup truck,” Sally said. “The windshield wipers quit working in a torrential storm, and we had debris all the way out there (to the farm). I remember saying, ‘This is ridiculous,’ going across all these tree branches.”

The Schroeders stopped at a friend’s farm to borrow a truck. They were stunned to see a portable sewing machine and television in the driveway, moved by the storm’s fury.

“We got out of the truck and heard the hissing of gas lines,” she said.

The Schroeders didn’t find anyone at first but eventually made contact with someone for assistance. Then they learned the worst — a friend had been killed at his farm because of the tornado.

“I was just heartsick,” Sally said.

While Coleridge residents were coping with the storm’s full fury, Cedar County, Neb., emer-

gency manager Kevin Garvin was working with state and local officials to assess the situation and implement action.

He gained an early indication of the damage’s extent when one of his deputies found Nebraska Highway 57 impassable because of a tree and debris blocking the road.

Arriving in Coleridge, authorities were hampered by the darkness of night and the power outages, Garvin said. The northwest part of town took the biggest hit, with indications the tornado had picked up and then dropped down on the other side of town before dissipating two miles later.

“Two homes were destroyed for sure, and others were severely damaged,” he said. “The tornado picked up and lifted over the top of the nursing home. Trees knocked windows out, and shingles were off. The tornado was low enough to cause damage, but high enough that it didn’t take the building.”

Authorities sealed Coleridge because of the dangerous conditions with downed trees and

power lines. Roadblocks were set up at each entrance to town, with access limited to local residents, the media, law enforcement and first responders.

State and federal officials arrived in Coleridge, coordinating efforts to ensure safety and security, Garvin said. Coleridge was declared a disaster area, and volunteers arrived from a wide area to help with clean-up.

“We had the first onset of volunteers, and we had organizations such as the Civil Air Patrol,” he said. “Then, that first weekend (after the tornado), we had church groups and even busloads of people.”

Much clean-up work remained to be done, Garvin said.

“The storm picked up farm implements and tossed them around. You had a 16-row John Deere combine head that was tossed two miles. We knew there were some issues with storm debris come harvest time,” he said.

“I remember three or four cows that were picked up by the tornado and taken elsewhere. And they could tell by the spin of the ground that crops had been pulled out of the ground.”

Meanwhile, the Schroeders tried to help their family members any way they could. Because their house had escaped relatively unscathed from the storm, the Schroeders fed and housed relatives with no place to go.

“We became a safe haven for all these people. We converted our three-car garage as a place for them,” Sally said. “I was planning how to feed them, then the Red Cross just showed up from Sioux City. They asked how many people I was feeding. I said I didn’t know — 50, 60, 100. Then they brought all these hamburgers and other food.”

Sally said she developed survivor’s guilt, as her home escaped major damage in the midst of others who were suffering.

“I had these beautiful hanging plants that I had always babied them along. But when our relatives arrived, I took them down and put them away,” she said. “I just couldn’t leave those plants hanging up, showing I had something pretty when others were struggling. I thought to myself, ‘Wow, how did I become so lucky?’”

Coleridgers grieved the loss of the farmer killed by the tornado, and they gathered for a community event. Ten years later, they will mark an anniversary reminding them of the devastation they faced but also their resiliency and strong bond as a community.

For Garvin, the Coleridge tornado marked one of his first major incidents as emergency manager. He said he hasn’t seen another storm of its nature in his 12 years in the position.

One thing has changed since the Coleridge tornado, he said. Technology has greatly improved storm detection and public warnings. He noted improvements such as the radio control on the siren and a battery backup. Other things include a new cell phone tower near Coleridge, along with personal devices such as cell phones and weather radios.

But the Coleridge tornado also showed nature’s wrath and the need for vigilance, Garvin said.

“I have always been fascinated by storms,” he said. “I was a volunteer firefighter for 20 years, and I learned early on that you watch for storms. It taught you to respect them and the way you look at them.”

You can follow Randy Dockendorf on Twitter at twitter.com/RDockendorf

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