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A Tornado's Wrath

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The Tornado

John Steuart Curry

Provided on behalf of the John Steuart Curry Foundation & Estate,
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A TORNADO'S WRATH

From the August 19, 1985, Council Grove Republican

A tornadic storm swept across a hill in Wabaunsee County northeast of Council Grove Saturday evening and destroyed the home and nearly all of the other buildings of the Charles and Barbara Sommer farmstead.

No serious injuries occurred, which seemed almost miraculous because four members of the Sommer family were crouched in the basement when their home was torn away.

There were reports of two, and possibly even three, tornadoes in the area. Apparently it was one big twister that did the damage.

Amy Sommer said Sunday she saw the troublesome clouds and decided she should take her 3-year-old brother, Adam, to the basement. Her father, Charles, and another brother, Alan, who were at the barn, headed to the house for whatever protection the basement could provide.

As it turned out, that was the place to be, even though a shelf loaded with canned tomato juice overturned on top of them, and a pickup truck parked just outside was sucked into the basement and almost upon them.

The four escaped with only scratches and bruises. The truck also survived and was used in the cleanup effort on Sunday.

When the family members emerged after the storm, they found their dairy barn, a machine shed, a shop building, an old barn and grain bins gone. Left standing were one machine shed, in which the tractor appeared unscratched, and part of another building.

Most farm equipment was gone or damaged beyond repair. The tornado carried Alan Sommers' car into an adjacent field

and totaled it. Three calves, one cow, two pigs and a dog died.

Much of the buildings' contents apparently was carried considerable distance. Most of the furniture from the house was nowhere to be seen or damaged beyond recognition.

Trucks and trailers were on hand bright and early Sunday morning to move the herd of 65 Holsteins to a relative's farm near Alma so the milking schedule wouldn't be interrupted.

A bull in a pen adjacent to the dairy barn appeared unperturbed by all the commotion. Amy's bicycle, parked against a wall under the deck of the house, remained in place, undamaged.

Young Adam, who didn't say anything for considerable time after the frightening experience, was willing to be interviewed Sunday. He talked about the bad cloud and about the canned tomato juice that fell on him, but more important to him was the fact that his tractor, three-wheeler and tricycle had been found and were in good shape.

When the tornado hit, Barbara Sommer was at work at the Morris County Hospital, where ironically patients had been moved because of the storm warning. A neighbor had to find a functioning telephone to notify her. A daughter, Lori, lives in Alma, and the sheriff's office there notified her.

It was another tough blow for the Sommer family. About seven years ago, a fire destroyed their previous home in the Alta Vista community.

The family wasn't sure Sunday where it would now reside. Barbara Sommer said her grandmother's house in Alma was vacant, and they probably would go there.

About 80 members of the United Pentecostal Church of Council Grove were picnicking at the Kraus Picnic Grounds when the storm hit. Rev. Lee Muncy said the members lay on the ground and prayed. Their prayers were answered since there were no injuries of consequence or damage to their parked vehicles.

Muncy said they saw the tornado touch down across the creek some 80 to 100 yards away and then destroy the Sommer farmstead.

He said a baseball game had been in progress when the tornado hit. Afterward, he noticed a tree was missing near where one player had stood on second base.

Jack Givens, who lives 3 miles south of the Sommer place, quipped that he "stood with one foot in the basement" while shooting photos of the funnel as it proceeded on the ground and in the air. He was waiting Sunday for the photos to be processed.



Unsettled
Matthew Regier

Dozens of people were on hand Sunday to help in the storm cleanup. Most of what they recovered was "just pieces."

Excerpted from the Council Grove Republican, August 19, 1985. Written by Don McNeal and Craig McNeal. Edited for length and clarity.