

A Tornado Threatens Gilbert

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an unofficial web site for the community
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Yes, I am passing the Gazette onto Lauris Olson to be the new publisher of the web site. But the transition is a gradual one, and I still have access to posting material. And I couldn't resist adding my perspective of the news of the day in the area—the tornado that nearly hit Gilbert. Of course, football fans would tell you that the news of the day is Iowa State's football win over Colorado.

Well, let me begin. It's already an hour past midnight, so don't expect me to do a lot of precise proof-reading before posting this piece—what might be called a blog by some.

I had few commitments today except to provide a hamburger meal for my brother and father when they arrived from northwest Iowa on their way to the Iowa State vs. Colorado football game. And later I was to go to a dinner party in north Ames. Otherwise, it was a lazy day.

A Change in the Day's Weather

This morning, the weather looked dreary and no good for a football game. At 3:15 this afternoon, I donned warm clothes for a walk to the post office and then around the track at the high school. But I discovered the weather was warmer than it looked outside. Actually, the temperature was in the 60s, and the conditions seemed balmy. I got back from my walk and called my sister-in-law in Rolfe to find out what time Charles and Dad had actually left. She said they departed at 2:20. That meant they would be on the doorstep of my apartment building around 4:00. Gloria said the weather in Rolfe was bad but wondered how it was here. I said that it seemed like the sun was beginning to poke through and that it might turn out to be a great evening for a football game.

Charles and Dad got here on time. I served the meal, and there seemed to be no problem with the weather. However, as we were finishing the pumpkin pie, I noticed a few times when the lights flickered. And there were some raindrops on the window. At 4:55, I told Charles and Dad that they should be leaving for the game. Just then, my sister Clara Hoover called. She lives in Omaha but had arrived in Ames for the game. She reported that there were tornado warnings for the area.

I turned on the transistor radio. I had to be rather stern with Charles and Dad to get them moving toward the lower level of the apartment building. We took folding chairs and sat in the small hallway near the laundry room. Earlier this summer, there had been a least one occasion when the radio aired a tornado warning from the National Weather Service, advising that people take cover, but when the weather warning siren in Gilbert (just a half a block from my place) was silent. I wondered if it would make any sound for this storm. Actually, I had already heard it once earlier today, but that was at noon during the weekly test of the system.

Waiting out the Storm

As we sat at the bottom of the stairs, we were joined by Hong and his two-year-old son, Henry, from across the hall. Finally, we all moved into the small room with the washer and dryer. The electricity had gone out. The room was dark. I wished that I had my flashlight, but I knew I didn't dare risk going to my car to get it. I was surprised though that my cell phone cast a bright light that helped us see a little and that was reassuring to Henry. Fortunately, he was in a sleepy mood and not too rattled while held in his dad's arms in a small dark room with strangers in strange circumstances. Soon we heard the siren.

We also heard on the radio that spectators at the football stadium were being ushered to the Hilton Coliseum for shelter. And we heard that a tornado had touched down in the town of Woodward southwest of Ames. And we heard that the tornado might also have done damage on the northwest side of Ames.

Sometime nearing 5:30, the radio announcer said that the tornado had moved northeast of Roland and out of Story County and that the weather warning was over for our area. We emerged from the bowels of the small laundry room and stepped out the front door. There were still dark clouds and lightening, but Dad could hardly wait to get to his car to head for the game. I told Charles that they needed to be cautious. He said that they would. It's interesting how the tables turn when one's parents get older and a person feels like she has to be a good parent to her father (at least on an occasion such as today with the tornado warning.)

Taking Stock

Charles and Dad drove off. I talked to Gary, a neighbor that I had not met before. He had a neat transistor radio that he could wind-up for power. I asked where he got it. He said, "Walgreens." Apparently, the store also has wind-up flashlights. I am going to get my own wind-up radio and flashlight for next time, if there is a next time.

Gary said that he had just driven back into Gilbert and that the tornado had created a mess of wires that were strewn across Mathews Drive south of the baseball diamonds. Mathews drive heads out to the Casey's corner a mile east of town on Highway 69. Gary said that it would be impossible to drive through that area. He also said that the tornado hit a farm that is on the gravel road (Gretten) three-quarters of a mile south of the Gilbert High School.

The Charlson Farm and the Jordan Tornado of 1976

I know that farm. It is the Charlson homeplace. I knew Rita Charlson (now Durham) who is a septuagenarian or perhaps octogenarian who lived on the place with her husband Jim Durham until the summer of 2004.

Rita and her son, Mickey Charlson, owned 160 acres of land just south of Gilbert's new housing sub-divisions that are being built by Rich Lepper Construction Company on the south side of town. Mickey had visited the Gilbert City Council in about 2002 or 2003 and said that he wanted to develop his part of the land and wondered about the town annexing it. But Mayor Bob Jaquis told Mickey that the city couldn't talk with him until the town's comprehensive plan was completed. The document was approved in December 2003. In the meantime, Mickey sold his

land to a Dr. Pollard, who is a dentist in Boone. Rita continued to own and live at the family homeplace on her 40 acres. In about June of 2004, she sold the property to Ev Cochrane, a big-name developer in Ames. Within a few months, Ev sold the property to Dr. Pollard. Rita and Jim moved to Texas to be close to Mickey, who had already moved south. And Ev died of cancer. The Charlson farm may have been his last big investment.

Currently, the Story County Assessor's web site says that the place where Rita lived is owned by the Pollard Family Farm, Inc. of Boone. I believe they rent out the house. I had photographed the place shortly before Rita and Jim moved. There was a machine shed, silo, two steel bins, a garage, a house, a windmill, and some trees.

I dug out my old-fashioned telephone that has a line that connects it to the socket. (Wireless phones are no good in a home with no electricity.) I found Rita's phone number and called her to tell her what I had heard. She said she was reminded of the tornado that hit Jordan, a town west of Ames. Later this evening, I looked researched that storm on the Internet and learned that it had 300 mile per hour winds but that there were no injuries. I had previously heard stories about how it moved along the west and north side of Gilbert, damaging farms such as the one where Dick and Letha DeMoss operate their pumpkin farm a mile west of town.

Rita said that the Jordan tornado blew away a farm on George Washington Carver Drive, a mile west of her place. It also carried away a large trailer house. During that storm, Rita had been watching a ball game, but then she stepped out the door and saw a panel of wood from the trailer house fly through her yard. She also said that all the wires were down and a tree fell on her kitchen. She also told about Junior Johnson, who had just finished building a new farm home northwest of the DeMoss farm. Apparently, the Johnson family had been playing pool in the basement and crawled under the pool table when they learned of the tornado. According to Rita, the tornado "wiped everything off the farm" but that the Johnsons rebuilt their place.

Operating in the Dark and Checking Things Out from My Window

I got off the phone and needed to change clothes to go to the dinner party in north Ames. But I was intrigued with what was happening. From my south window, I could see fire trucks and other emergency vehicles traveling east and west along Mathews Drive, the main highway through town. I could also see several cars traveling about. Maybe the people in those cars were simply trying to get home, but I suspected that there were a lot of people out site-seeing to determine the extent of damage.

There still was no electricity at my place. The street lights were on just north of my home, and the house north of me also had electricity. I was about ready to change clothes when I got a call from Jennifer, a reporter at the Des Moines Register. She called me "Mrs. Gunderson." I decided it was not a time to quibble over semantics and tell her why I think that courtesy titles such as Mrs. and Miss. are archaic. Instead, I told her what I knew. She wondered if I had the cell phone numbers for the mayor, other elected leaders, or fire department members. I could have told her that I was the last person in the world that the mayor or any council members would trust with their cell phone numbers. I did give her the names and home phone numbers for a few of the

firefighters, thinking that perhaps one of their spouses might be able to get Jennifer in touch with someone who could give her an accurate report on what had happened.

Then I got curious to find out more about what happened. I called Mark Vandenberg, who lives on Christian Petersen Drive in the new housing development on the south side of town. He said that he knew of no destruction in his area, but his family, too, did not have electricity. He also said that an emergency crew had driven through his area earlier, reporting there were no injuries.

Finally, I decided to change clothes. Moving from room to room in a dark apartment with only a standard flashlight made me realize how much I take for granted that the lights in a room will come on when I flick the light switch. It was awkward finding the right slacks in the closet, buttoning my shirt, and tying my shoes with the single source of a handheld flashlight.

A Visit to the Fire Station

I left home and saw activity at the fire station. So I stopped to see if I could talk to someone. Two women were the only people there. One said she knew nothing about what had happened, and suggested I wait to talk to the other woman who was on the phone. I waited. Then the woman got off the phone. We introduced ourselves. She said she was Joan Ballard, and I am assuming that means she is the wife of fire chief David Ballard. She had just ordered eight pizzas from Papa John's Pizza in Ames and explained that the Casey's Store, where Gilbert people could usually order pizza in a timely fashion, was without electricity. Joan did not know much about the damage, either. I told her about the call from Jennifer at the Register and left a note for David to call Jennifer later in the evening.

As I left the fire station, I realized that the electricity was working along the very northern edge of town and in the northwest part of town.

Taking the Back Roads South to Ames

I headed west on Mathews Drive then south for a mile on George Washington Carver. I decided I was game to see if I could get near the farm that had been the Charlson homeplace. I drove west along a gravel road and saw that there were orange pylons blocking off the gravel road that goes past the Charlson place. Soon a rescue vehicle arrived at the intersection. A volunteer got out and moved the barricades for the truck to move through. I talked briefly to the volunteer (I wish I knew his name for sure, but it was the air was dark, and he was pretty well hooded with his rescue gear. So better not to mention a name than identify him incorrectly). I asked if he could clarify that the Charlson farm had been hit. He said it had but that the tornado had not damaged the house. It sounds as though the tornado blew away the steel grain bins and the machine shed. The volunteer also said that the tornado had struck the Merrill and Jean Swanson farm that is within the first mile east of the high school on the south side of Mathews Drive. There, too, the tornado apparently had not damaged the house, and no one was hurt.

Essentially, this storm was a close encounter for the town of Gilbert. The tornado hit the closest farm south of town and the closest farm east of town. Both are within a half mile of the city limits.

I called Jennifer at the Register again to tell her what I had learned. She said she had spoken with someone by the name of Jensen who was connected to the farm. Jennifer had also called Rita to confirm that the Charlson farm had indeed been hit. I reported that the Swanson farm had also been hit, and I said that I had left the note for Fire Chief Dave Ballard to call Jennifer. Then Jennifer told me that the tornado had caused damage at the town of Stratford (between Boone and Webster City). She wondered if I knew anyone there. I did not.

Then I was off to north Ames for my dinner party. On the way, I listened to the ball game. It was during the first quarter when the Cyclones took advantage of the wind at their back and made a terrific pass play and took a 10--0 lead over Colorado.

A Fine Dinner Party and Iowa State Football Victory

I got to my destination and joined my friends for dinner. We talked about the storm. My hosts, Wayne and Anita, had lived on North Dakota Drive on the northwest side of Ames prior to moving to their current home. They had heard from some of their friends in their old neighborhood. Apparently, one home along North Dakota had been completely flattened. I asked Wayne if he knew Ruth Shickell, an octogenarian whose mother Bessie Gildersleeve lives just north of Gilbert and turned 102 this past Monday. Wayne said that the Shickell home had sustained some damage, I believe to a work shed.

We finished dinner then had a great time watching Ginger Rodgers and Fred Astaire in the early 1930s movie, *Flying Down to Rio*, a show I had never seen before. We ended the party with apple pie for dessert.

When I got back to my car, the football game had just ended, and the Cyclones had chalked up a “huge” victory. It’s amazing how much the word “huge” gets used by sports commentators. For sure, Iowa State will go to a bowl game, and just possibly, it can earn part of the Big 12 Northern Division Title. (For the record, I used to be a diehard Cyclone fan and go to the games with Dad, Charles, and other family members. But I have weaned myself from the obsession to follow sports.) The opening of the Associated Press story about the game says, “The only thing stronger than the wind howling through Jack Trice Stadium was Iowa State's defense in the second half. Steve Paris, Brent Curvey and Tim Dobbins each made huge defensive plays to help Iowa State stay in the running for a share of the Big 12 North championship with a 30-16 victory over No. 22 Colorado on Saturday night.”

Back Home in Gilbert

I came back to Gilbert along George Washington Carver and into the west side of town. The electricity had been restored, and the street and house lights seemed normal. I drove along Mathews Drive to the east side of town, near the high school. The road was closed. I looked ahead and could see that at least one utility pole was leaning at about a 45 degree angle and held up by a crane. In the distance, it appeared that maybe a whole set of utility poles on the south side of Mathews Drive were leaning to the north. Indeed, the thoroughfare to the Casey's corner, a mile of the barricade, was impassible.

I did a U-turn and came back to my apartment. The lights worked. I plugged my computer back into the wall socket. (I often unplug it when there is a threat of it being struck by lightning.)

Then I began some Internet research and made a map of my best guess of what the route of the tornado was like. In some places, the storm carried large hail and rain.

National Weather Service Report

Here's a quick synopsis of the timing and route of the tornado as reported by the National Weather Service.

4:31 pm

tornado is seen four miles southwest of Woodward

4:33 pm

tornado spotted three miles southwest of Ames

4:39 pm

damage reported to Casey's and nearby buildings near Woodward

4:40 pm

report that in a two to three block area of downtown Woodward, 12 or more houses were totally destroyed with one minor injury

4:47 pm

report of extensive damage on the south side of Woodward

5:02

a tornado is sighted one mile west of Ames

5:12 pm

the tornado moves into the Gilbert area

5:23 pm

the tornado is one mile north of Roland

5:25 pm

the tornado is six miles north, northeast of Roland

The Internet also carried the following announcement:

Two survey teams from the National Weather Service will assess widespread severe weather damage tomorrow across portions of central Iowa. Teams will depart early tomorrow morning... heading to predetermined locations based on specific tornado paths and heavily damaged areas. Upon completion of the survey... confirmed results including f-scale ratings and estimated maximum wind speeds will be posted to our website at www.Weather.Gov/dmx. In addition... preliminary information as well as updates and local storm reports can also be found on our website www.Weather.Gov/dmx.

Time to Close and Say Thanks

It is now nearing 4:00 am. It's time to close. But first I want to express a thanks to all those people who are in weather alert, emergency rescue, and disaster recovery work. I barely understand all that you do. I got a closer glimpse in 2004 when I prepared a report for the web site of my hometown alumni web site (www.rolfealumni.com) about a tornado that began at my father's farm a southwest of Rolfe and traveled east through Bradgate. And I kept my ear tuned to National Public Radio and the horrific circumstances during and after Hurricane Katrina and the other natural disasters of the past few months. I also had a friend, Sylvia, from my home county in northwest Iowa, who signed on for Red Cross volunteer training after Katrina and was deployed to Louisiana with her son to work for three weeks. And even at the dinner party tonight, there was a woman, Sue Ellen from Ames, who had also signed on with the Red Cross and had been deployed to Mississippi. There are people who seem to have the disposition and commitment to helping in behind-the-scenes ways. All I can think of to say right now is that they are salt-of-the-earth people.

Tomorrow, the newspapers will probably have stories of people who were directly affected by the tornado—whether their property was damaged, they sustained personal injury, or suffered other misfortune. It is hard to comprehend what those kind of experiences are like. But I am thinking about the people affected by this central Iowa storm. I also can't help but think of the thousands of people who have suffered from major natural disasters and war.

I am grateful for the luxury of being here in an apartment in Gilbert with lights, a computer that would make kings of old think I was a god, leftover pumpkin pie and other good food, a mattress that is new this past year and that is ready for me to retire for the evening, and plumbing that works.

Earlier this week, I saw the motion picture about Edward R. Murrow, the renown newscaster of the 1950s. In fact, I saw it twice. Murrow was a journalist, the best of his field. I am not a journalist. But it seems fitting, since there really is nothing else I could say, to end by using his classic television benediction, "Good night and good luck."

A Post Script

A statement on the Internet from the National Weather Service as of 3:25 am CST on November 13, 2005, says:

Preliminary storm reports indicate that six tornadoes occurred in central Iowa on November 12... 2005.

Tornado one... touched down at 427 PM near Boxholm... Boone County and lifted at 453 near Stratford in Hamilton County.

Tornado two... touched down at 428 PM near Minburn... Dallas County and lifted at 456 PM in eastern Boone County.

Tornado three... touched down at 502 PM in northwest Ames... Story County and lifted at 512 PM near Gilbert... Story County.

Tornado four... touched down at 520 PM near Story City... Story County and lifted at 428 PM near Radcliffe in Hardin County.

Tornado five... touched down at 527 PM near Williams... Hamilton County and lifted at 530 PM.

Tornado six... briefly touched down at 640 PM near Blakesburg in Monroe County.

Note: Typographical and other minor corrections made at 9:30 pm on November 15.

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