

Tornado of 1936

It's spring! The time of year when April showers will bring May flowers. However, spring can also bring with it the potential threat of severe weather.

The Thursday of April 30, 1936, was just another day to many, but would soon prove eventful in Martin County. In the late afternoon of that Thursday in 1936, what was a windy and dusty day gradually became ominous as menacing dark clouds began to appear in the sky. Soon, a part of Martin County would be ravaged by a devastating tornado, one that never left the ground from its point of origin near Sheldon, Iowa, until it finally blew itself out near Preston in Fillmore County. It traveled over 100 miles, and cut a wide, twenty-mile swath of Martin County that included Tenhassen, Silver Lake, East Chain, and Pleasant Prairie Townships.

The *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* editions of the following days, May 1 through May 7, 1936, carried numerous accounts of property damage, injury, and other strange events that seem to only happen as a result of tornados. The *Sentinel* initially reported significant property damage, numerous injuries, and several deaths. Reports stated that 200 farms in the four townships were hit by the storm, that 100 farms had extensive damage, that 300 farm buildings were wrecked, and that three people were badly hurt in the county. It was eventually reported that three persons died as a result of the tornado.

The storm tore through Hand's Park, completely demolishing the pavilion and hardwood dance floor, and scattering nearly 3,000 chickens from the Hand's Park farm over the highway and farmyard. In addition, the debris from the Gay Paree nightclub blocked the county road running from Highway 15 east to Ceylon. Also, the smell of beer, resulting from the destruction of the bar and tap, persisted in the vicinity of the Gay Paree for some time. According to the May 2, 1936 edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, Ernest Hand, owner of the amusement park, planned to rebuild as soon as insurance adjustments were made and debris cleared away.

The city of Fairmont reported minimal damage with flooded basements. The Augusta Hotel reported nine inches of water in the basement and several windows blown out. However, the May 2, 1936, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* also gave an account of what was called an irresponsible and

false radio report stating that Fairmont was wiped out. This in turn led to many telegrams to local residents from concerned relatives and friends.

The storm evoked a number of interesting “Storm Stories,” as reported by the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* during those dates. Some of these are as follows:

- A farmer, his wife, and their seven children seemed to be right in the middle of the storm near Silver Lake. The storm struck and moved the house about twenty feet off its foundation. The farmer’s comment to his wife about the ride in their house was, “It sure rides easy.”
- A horse was seen grazing in a pasture in Pleasant Prairie with its halter rope dragging a piece of the manger to which it was tied when the barn blew away.
- In another location, three horses were still tied to stalls, but the barn was gone.
- As one family took refuge in their basement, a horse was blown into the basement falling on the farmer’s wife and their small baby. She sustained minor injuries, the baby was unharmed, but the horse sustained two broken legs in the fall and had to be shot.
- One farmer watched his home and out buildings being destroyed as he hung unharmed from a tree.
- A barn was spotted in East Chain Lake.
- One of five lonely Billy Goats at a Silver Lake ranch was spotted in the basement of a house, gnawing on debris.
- It was reported that people living in the western part of the county didn’t know of the storm until they “rubbered” on the telephone, hearing others talk about it the following morning.
- At School District 15, Tenhassen, the school house was unscathed, although there were windrows of tree trunks and other rubbish piled up against it.
- A well known professional man from a nearby Iowa town was seen prowling around the Gay Paree ruins. When asked what he was doing, he replied, “Just trying to find the quarter slot machine I sunk all my dough in the other night.”
- Three young men from Elmore were heading east on Highway 16 in a gravel truck when the storm struck. They ended up on a farmer’s yard, but were unable to tell how they got there. Their truck was demolished.
- The storm prompted “old timers” to recall the “cyclone of 1892.

The May 4, 1936, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* reported that an estimated 15,000 cars and 60,000 sightseers came to the area to see the ruins. The crowd was said to be the second biggest crowd of outside visitors to Martin County, surpassed only by the 1934 National Corn Husking Contest crowd. Another report was that cars were lined up from the Hand's Park corner on Highway 15 nearly to Fairmont, and moving at a snail's pace. State highway patrolmen and national guardsman were called upon to help direct traffic and keep order in the area. Local citizens, the Red Cross, and others responded quickly and unselfishly to help their storm ravaged neighbors.

To find out more about the tornado of 1936, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.