

Joel Russell – Codell Cyclone Day - 1

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

What are the odds? What are the chances that a tornado would hit the same Kansas town on the same exact day of the year - not once, not twice, but three years in a row? It sounds far-fetched, but it actually happened a century ago in rural Kansas. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Joel and Amanda Russell live at Codell, Kansas, the community which experienced this incredible fluke of weather. Joel's great-grandmother is the late Celesta Glendening who lived through the tornado strikes on three successive years. Celesta and her husband George farmed and raised their family at Codell. She wrote about the tornados in a first-hand account which she shared with her descendants.

The first tornado hit Codell on May 20, 1916. "We called it a cyclone then," Celesta wrote. Exactly one year later, on May 20, 1917, a tornado hit Codell again. Community residents started referring to May 20 as Cyclone Day.

"I remember someone saying that they were joking around, wondering if it would happen again," Joel said. Unfortunately, it did, more seriously than before. The following is from Celesta's written remembrances.

On May 20, 1918, her husband went to work in the cornfield. Celesta, who was pregnant, worked at home with their two young children, Max and Worden. When Celesta went out to bring in the cows for the evening, she noticed clouds gathering in the southwest. By suppertime, the clouds had darkened and billowed up higher. A storm was brewing.

It started to rain. The wind blew harder and harder. Celesta and George hurried to get the sleeping boys. Max was only one-and-a-half years old, and Celesta wrapped him in a quilt. The family had a storm shelter in a nearby cave, but it started hailing before they could get to the shelter so they returned to the kitchen.

Celesta wrote: "There was a terrible noise beside the rain, hail, lightning and thunder....The roar we heard was a cyclone....I must have prayed...Thunder roared, lightning flashed, rain and hail beat against the windows with such force I knew they would break....Then I saw lightning between the ceiling and the wall, and I knew the house was tearing to pieces. We smelled wet plaster, heard nails pulling out of the wood and heard wood breaking."

The next thing that happened was even worse. Celesta wrote: "Max was still wrapped in the quilt and I was still holding him tight, when all of a sudden he was gone....He was just torn out of my arms...In a flash of lightning, we saw Max sitting up just a few feet off the floor."

In an instant, George grabbed Max and handed him to Celesta who held him close again. They huddled together till the storm passed.

When it was all over, they assessed the damage. George had bad cuts on his feet, Worden had a broken arm, and Celesta's leg was badly cut. She would nearly lose her leg, but it was ultimately saved. Each family member sustained injuries except for one: Max, who had briefly been suspended in the air.

Similar experiences were shared by other residents of Codell. Three persons died, including Celesta's brother's wife and their son. Celesta wrote: "Many buildings were

destroyed and most never rebuilt. Many scars still remain, parts of foundations, grim reminders to those who still remember.”

In times of crisis, rural communities tend to rally together. Help came to Codell from the nearby communities of Plainville, population 1,858, and Natoma, population 311 people. Now, that’s rural. The Red Cross provided funds. Family and friends made a difference by sharing clothing, bedding, food, and housing.

Celesta wrote: “I know I’ve forgotten a lot of things, but not the love shown to us in our time of need.” On September 18, 1918, Celesta gave birth to a healthy baby daughter. No tornado has struck the community of Codell since.

What are the odds that a tornado would strike the same community on the same day, three years in a row? More importantly, how does a community respond to such a tragedy? We’ll learn more about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.