

Joel Russell – Codell Cyclone Day - 2

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

“We can't always control what happens in our lives – things will go well, things will go poorly - but what we can control is our response to those events.” - Ken Blanchard.

Last week we learned about a rural Kansas community which was devastated by tornado strikes which, amazingly, came on the same day, three years in a row. Now we'll learn how the community is seeking to recognize this disaster today, in a way that honors its ancestors and the spirit of the community. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned the story of Codell, Kansas which was hit by a tornado on May 20 in 1916, 1917, and 1918. Joel Russell shared the story of this incredible fluke of weather.

Joel grew up at Codell. After college at Wichita State, he became a supervisor with Union Pacific Railroad. His job allowed him to move back to Codell, while his work took him around the western U.S. He met and married Amanda who is from Hays. Amanda works at Plainville High School. She and Joel have four children.

Joel grew up hearing the stories of the three tornado strikes. He and other local residents recognized that 2018 would be the 100th anniversary of the third and final tornado that hit in 1918. Roger Hrabe, the Rooks County economic development director, called with an idea. “He wondered if we could make a sculpture or memorial to recognize this event,” Joel said.

At the time, Rooks and other northwest Kansas counties were going through a strategic doing process with support from the Dane G. Hansen Foundation in Logan. As county residents thought about projects to benefit their communities, the memorial in Codell caught on.

Joel Russell and other citizens came together to work on this project. They contracted with two Fort Hays State faculty artists to design and build this memorial. Danielle Robinson and Tobias Flores are the contemporary sculptors who have designed and built the metal sculpture. To raise funds, donor names are being stamped onto the steel strips which are used to construct the sculpture.

The sculpture itself is a striking, 12 foot tall representation of a funnel cloud. On May 20, 2018, the one hundredth anniversary of the final tornado, the Codell Cyclone Day Memorial will be dedicated.

“We have two local people who actually lived through the tornado,” Joel said. “Ellen Hockett is 105 and her brother Lee Smith is 103, and we think they'll attend.” Many families are lending artifacts which will be displayed at the dedication.

The story of this incredible weather event has attracted national attention. Sculptor Tobias Flores has even been contacted by Good Morning America.

“A meteorologist from Seattle told me that every meteorologist in the country knows Codell, Kansas,” Joel said. “It's in the books they have to study.”

“I've had articles (about Codell) sent to me from all over the country,” Joel said. “One guy was at a bar in Boston and saw the story about Codell posted on the wall.” That's impressive because Codell today is a rural community of about 50 people. Now, that's rural.

“We’re the keepers of this history,” Joel said. “We feel a responsibility to honor the history of these events. That’s our heritage too,” he said.

Not only did Joel Russell’s ancestors survive the tornadoes, his and Amanda’s residence has a direct connection to that time. “The main portion of our house was built from lumber that was strewn around from the lumberyard when it was hit,” Joel said.

After this natural disaster took place, families, friends, and neighboring communities rallied around to help the people of Codell. Now all of that history will be honored, one hundred years later.

“We can’t always control what happens in our lives – things will go well, things will go poorly - but what we can control is our response to those events,” said author Ken Blanchard. We commend Joel and Amanda Russell and all the people of Codell who are making a difference by commemorating this history. I think it is an excellent response.

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