

**NOTES ON THE TORNADO  
OF AUGUST 19,  
1890, IN LUZERNE AND  
COLUMBIA COUNTIES**

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Notes on the Tornado of August 19, 1890, in Luzerne and Columbia Counties by Thomas Santee

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# PREFATORY NOTE.

## To the Officers and members of the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society :

Animated, at first perhaps, by idle curiosity to see more of the effects of the recent tornado, I went out to examine its course. After looking over several miles of the storm's path it seemed to me that there were such indications of the laws governing its curious freaks as called for a more careful study. I therefore determined to undertake this task and by hard work was able to pass over its course in Columbia and Luzerne Counties before the close of my vacation.

I herewith place before your society some account of the storm, which, though with no attempt at style, may yet serve to preserve the facts for such as may wish to refer to them when interest is again awakened in the subject.

The extracts from Mr. Ashleman's letter will serve, in some degree, to show how deeply people who saw were impressed by the terrible appearance of the storm.

Mr. C. E. Smith's letter I consider of peculiar interest, because, at the vanishing of the storm, it offered a special opportunity to note the real nature of the phenomenon.

Perhaps I should apologize for inserting here an attempt at an explanation of this quick, wild fury of the elements, but a desire to do something to help solve the mystery will be my only excuse.

As the newspapers of the city have published extended accounts of the destruction in the city, and their files will doubtless be preserved, it did not seem necessary for me to touch upon the subject.

The note from Jno. Walsh is added because the exact time of the storm was a matter of doubt and has not before been accurately fixed.

THOMAS SANTEE.

Wilkes-Barré, Pa., Dec. 19, 1890.

# NOTES ON THE TORNADO,

Of August 19, 1890.

In Luzerne and Columbia Counties, Penn'a.

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Late in the afternoon of August 19, 1890, the attention of many people in the Wyoming Valley, and in that broad valley which stretches away to the westward of Wilkes-Barre and includes the western portion of Luzerne and most of Columbia County, was attracted by a peculiar movement and appearance of the clouds. The day had been warm, though not unusually so, and now a thunder-storm which had been sometime hovering in the north seemed almost to cover the lines along which the tornadoes swept a few minutes later.

Those who noted carefully the cloud movements saw that a low and very open stratum of clouds was moving rapidly to the north or perhaps a little west of north, while the heavier and darker stratum of storm-clouds was moving to the south above the first layer. Both these strata of clouds were open enough to give occasional glimpses through to the upper air where a third stratum of thin white clouds floated quietly as on a calm summer afternoon. The air at the surface of the earth was moving northward as a brisk breeze.

Doubtless there were many who felt an ominous dread of the coming storm, and not a few spoke of their fears, yet, had nothing extraordinary succeeded, all might have gone on as usual and all trace of forboding have been obliterated from the memory.

In a cup-like hollow of the hills on the northern rim of the Greenwood Valley, Theodore Lemons, who was sitting in his farm house, noticed a sudden jarring of the building and a noise at the platform between the main building and an out-kitchen. Stepping to the door he noticed a thick piece of plank torn from the top of the pump where it had been nailed, and two or three planks which had been over the well had been lifted off their places, a curious freak of the wind, but no damage done. Going eastward from his house the ground rises as quite a steep hill for near a half mile and then descends perhaps four hundred feet as a densely wooded hillside to Little Green Creek. Eye witnesses at this point say a small white cloud came over this hill and as it came down the creek it passed through the property occupied by Lloyd Freas and here a roof was torn off, out-buildings overturned and fences destroyed, while to the east some large trees lying in the field show that power was gained with progress along the track. After crossing another hill this white cloud was seen by Joseph Sickle, who states that it crossed Green Creek about a quarter of a mile above the Albertson school house, was low down, moving but little higher than the trees, probably not reaching more than two hundred feet high. He says that it looked like a fire but that it moved faster than a railroad train, roaring fearfully. As it passed onward it moved up a steep hill which lies between Green Creek and Fishing Creek. Coming in sight of Frank Bellas's home it was still a white cloud but suddenly changed to black and is described as funnel shaped. From this place onward, wherever any material offered a chance the storm left a clear line of destruction. Still climbing the hill to the eastward the storm retained its dark color and flashes of fire were noticed amid the volumes of dark clouds. As the storm approached Fishing Creek a strong and dis-

agreeable odor surrounded it and was even noticed by some before they saw the storm approaching. This odor was noticed by many persons in the tornado's track for a distance of six miles.

Near the point where the storm crossed Fishing Creek it struck the buildings belonging to Hilbert Hulme, unroofing the house and almost demolishing his large barns, sheds, ice house, out kitchen, etc. The damage to buildings was very great, and here occurred the first injury to any person. An aged lady, Mrs. Phoebe Hulme, was caught under a moving building and sustained a fracture of the leg and other severe injuries.

The course of the storm from Fishing Creek was a line of almost total destruction to trees, fences and buildings. It followed in a waving course about  $15^{\circ}$  north of east and near the main road from Maple Grove school house to Cambra. About a mile east of Fishing Creek the tornado column separated into two distinct funnel shaped clouds, moving onward side by side. At this point the storm is described by Mrs. Mary Siegfried as consisting of two fully formed columns surrounded by fine debris which appeared like a swarm of bees. This seems to have continued but a short time and the storm is again described as one column. Mr. J. Bruce Ash's house was directly in the storm line and was totally destroyed, but as no one was home there was no one hurt. Striking the buildings occupied and owned by Hiram Ash, it unroofed the house and ice house and destroyed the barn. The line passed about 300 yards south of Hamline church and between the residences of J. C. Wenner and John Ashleman.

Mr. J. C. Wenner, in a letter describing the storm, a portion of which appeared in the *Bloomsburg Columbian and Democrat*, says: "About half past four o'clock this afternoon one of the most terrible and destructive wind



storms ever witnessed in this locality swept over this place, leveling everything in its tracks. It was, at this place, about a quarter of a mile in width. A few rods in the center no building could have survived its ravages. Many neighbors sought shelter in their cellars. At this writing but few reports have reached us. The house and barn on the Runyan estate are nearly ruined. The house on Kase's estate is said to have been blown to pieces and the barn much damaged. To us who lived in a hollow it looked like a dreadful conflagration approaching with terrible velocity, roaring like a cataract, tree tops, limbs and wrecks shooting up into the air as though shot out of cannons. We commanded the family to take refuge in the cellar as quickly as possible. Its path is strewn with debris, shingles, boards, parts of iron roofs, carpets and pieces of plastering lath which were torn from dwelling houses. At this place the above remnants were found. In the center of its path it tore up sprouts by the roots and removed stones from the ground, and the field through which it passed (on my farm) looks as though it had been swept by a flood. We have not yet heard of any lives having been lost. The cyclone was preceded by terrible thunder and lightning and those on either side of its track thought that buildings were struck by lightning and burning. This, however, was not the case.

"All buildings from this place to Harveyville are more or less damaged, and Harveyville nearly demolished. One death reported and three others in a precarious condition. My daughter who was at the time of the storm at Judge Krickbaum's, about a half a mile distant, and from which place a good view was presented, made the following observation:—'It whirled in fearful rapidity and was shaped like a funnel and when it came over the hills it dipped in the hollow (where I reside) and fearful flashes of lightning

shot down through the funnel, and when the cloud rose with the opposite hillside, shingles, boards and all manner of wrecks and debris shot and whirled in all directions with fearful rapidity.'"

The storm passed just to the north of the cross roads at Cambra doing great damage to the properties of Ezra Wilson, Clinton Hughes and Cornelius White. Mr. White recalls a similar storm which occurred here about 56 years ago, though not as severe as the present, which passed within 100 yards of the track of this. At Mr. C. M. Callender's place only two little girls were at home. Though much frightened they tried to hold the doors against the wind which took the roof from the kitchen and the barn, and carried a hay fork with rope and tackle one-half mile to the east.

Geo. Kline, who lives near Pine Creek, says the wind was accompanied by a strong sulphurous odor, that the storm moved faster than a railroad train and thinks it was all over in two seconds.

At the top of the steep hill which overlooks Pine Creek on the west, was a small house occupied by Geo. Smith, a well digger, and a large family. This house was taken up and carried about 200 feet over a ledge about 15 feet in height where it fell as a mass of debris, while household goods and members of the family were scattered all around. George Smith, aged about six years, was reported as having a fracture of the skull, but no others were seriously injured.

Mr. Ambrose Bonham, who lives a short distance east of Pine Creek, and whose buildings were destroyed, says that before the funnel cloud reached the place everything was sucked toward it.

At D. L. Chapin's place near Harveyville, occupied by

Lanning Meyers, a room used as a parlor was closed entirely, and the door was burst outward tearing away the entire paneling and throwing it into the next room, leaving only the stiles of the door.

At Harveyville, the house of the Methodist minister was blown to fragments. Mr. Hamline's library was destroyed with furniture, clothing and household goods. A hall carpet was found one-fourth mile to the northwest, while clothing and tinware were blown one-half mile to the northeast. The M. E. Church was unroofed and nearly destroyed, while the brick school house was left as a mass of rubbish. A barn in which many people had taken refuge was destroyed, but fortunately only one person, Thos. Brickle, was killed. Mr. A. N. Harvey's general store was badly wrecked, and much additional damage was done to his stock by the following rain. His flouring mill which was one of the finest in the county was moved on the foundation causing much damage to gearing and machinery.

The total width of the storm's path at this place as shown by wrecks, was 600 yards.

Mr. Pennypacker who was in the mill at the time of the storm says the place seemed as if filled with steam.

The Gregory school house, about a mile and a half east of Harveyville, was totally destroyed.

Mr. Martin Gregory's buildings were much damaged and unroofed, and portions of his iron roof were scattered along the course of the storm for miles.

Mr. Roland Wilkinson's buildings were entirely destroyed, even the cellar wall being blown down, and one horse was killed. Mr. Wilkinson and wife were in the house when the storm came and it seemed to be lifted up from the foundation, then thrown down in a mass of wreck. He found his way out of the wreck, carrying Mrs. Wil-