

Tornado Eyewitnesses



Will Keller's encounter with the forces of nature left a lifelong impression. This Kiowa County farmer offered a rare eyewitness account from inside a Kansas twister.

The Keller family farm was located about three miles east and one mile south of Greensburg. Around 4 p.m. June 22, 1928, the family was in a wheat field inspecting hail damage. Will Keller spotted an umbrella-shaped cloud in the west that looked suspicious.

Keller noticed the "oppressiveness" in the air that signaled the coming of the storm. "I saw at once that my suspicions were correct, for hanging from the greenish-black base of the cloud was not just one tornado, but three," he recalled. "One of the tornadoes was already perilously near and apparently headed directly for our place. I lost no time therefore in hurrying with my family to our cyclone cellar."

The approaching tornado fascinated Keller, who returned for a last look after making sure that his wife, Myra, and young Will were safe in the cellar. Across the flat, unbroken horizon Keller saw an unobstructed view of the three funnels. The one nearest was much larger and more active than the other two.

"As I paused to look I saw that the lower end which had been sweeping the ground was beginning to rise," Keller said. "I knew what that meant, so I kept my position. I knew that I was comparatively safe and I knew that if the tornado again dipped I could drop down and close the door before any harm could be done."

Soon the tornado was directly overhead and Keller noticed an odd stillness. He smelled a strong gassy odor and found it difficult to breathe.

"I looked up and to my astonishment I saw right up into the heart of the tornado," Keller said. "There was a circular opening in the center of the funnel, about 50 to 100 feet in diameter, and extending straight upward for a distance of at least one half mile, as best I could judge under the circumstances. The walls of this opening were of rotating clouds and the whole was made brilliantly visible by constant flashes of lightning which zigzagged from side to side."

As Keller looked up he saw small tornadoes forming around the lower rim of the vortex, but in the center of the large tornado he saw a hollow opening. The slow moving storm gave Keller enough time to examine the view from inside and out.

"I noticed that the direction of rotation of the great whirl was anticlockwise, but the small twisters rotated both ways—some one way and some another," Keller said. "The opening was completely hollow except for something which I could not exactly make out, but suppose that it was a detached wind cloud."

The tornado headed east and next struck the Evans family farm. Like the Kellers, the family was in the field. With no time to reach their storm cellar, the family lay flat on the ground, clutching at bushes. They felt themselves lifted from the ground. Their 17-year-old daughter's clothes were torn, but the family was unharmed. Inside the

tornado, Evans could see wreckage from his house, including the kitchen stove.

Keller lived to tell his story again and again. Sixteen months later he traveled to the weather bureau in Dodge City where he related his dramatic tale. Keller recalled hearing other tornado stories, including one told by a hired man who took refuge in a barn.

Keller's story can be found in the newspaper collections of the Historical Society.

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