



*Pieces of Iowa's Past*, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides weekly during the legislative session, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All historical publications are reproduced here with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

February 13, 2008

**THIS WEEK: "The Great Tornado of 1860"**

**BACKGROUND:** One of the pillars in Iowa journalism is Lieutenant-Governor B. F. Gue, of the Fort Dodge North-West. For a dozen years he has been a faithful servant of the people in various responsible offices. There are no negations in his character. Whatever he says or does, is said and done affirmatively and positively. He is an honest and earnest man, well balanced in his organization, intelligent, experienced, and popular. As a writer he is perspicuous and forcible, never dealing in any ambidextrous trope or metaphor. **From *Iowa Old Press* – article: "The Valley and the Shadow: Iowa Journalism"**

"The Great Tornado of 1860" By Ex-Lieutenant Governor B.F. Gue (Published in 1899)

From: *Biographies and Portraits of the Progressive Men of Iowa ~ Leaders in Business, Politics and the Professions Together with an Original and Authentic History of the State*

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**THE GREAT TORNADO OF 1860**

The greatest tornado that ever swept over Iowa was formed from a hailstorm that was first seen on the great prairies of Calhoun and Webster counties on Sunday, June 3, 1860, at about half past 3 o'clock. The day had been very sultry, with the exception of an occasional slight breeze which would spring up from some direction and in a few moments would die away. The next breeze would come from an entirely different direction, and after blowing for a brief time disappear. As the day advanced the heat became more intense, and not a breath of air was stirring. It was noticed that the cattle and horses in the pastures were uneasy, and kept walking around throwing their heads up in the air as though disturbed by some unusual apprehension. They would follow along the fences, seeking a place to get out. The birds gathered in the groves and shade trees about the houses. The dogs were seen sniffing the air, as though someone or something unusual was approaching. I was living on a high, slightly prairie elevation from which we could see several groves at great distances to the west and southwest. The air seemed to be unusually clear, and I could see the trees near Tipton, a distance of seventeen miles, that day, something that had very seldom been known. At about 5 o'clock, we noticed in the west, just above the horizon, banks of light-colored clouds, appearing in a long, irregular line from far in the north to away off in the south. Very slowly they arose, and in half an hour we could see below them the darkest, blue-black, continuous cloud, reaching the whole distance from north to south, that I remember to have seen. Soon after, a very light haze, of a bluish-green tint, began to be visible in the atmosphere. At

this time the air seemed most profoundly still and oppressive. The uneasiness of all domestic animals increased. Those running at large upon the great prairie ranges were seen to be approaching the settlements with a startled, frightened appearance. As the long line of clouds slowly arose, the lower portion, where it seemed to touch the earth, became of inky blackness. We could now barely hear the long continued rumble of thunder and for some time sharp tongues of lightning had been visible. The atmosphere, the haze and the rising bank of clouds had a weird, unnatural appearance, and the oppressiveness of the lifeless heat became almost unendurable. It was now noticed for the first time that the light-colored upper clouds, which resembled the dense smoke of a great prairie fire, were rapidly moving from the north and south toward the center of the storm cloud, and as they met they boiled like foaming water and descended in a rapid movement to the black cloud below. We were all now intently watching this strange movement, something we had never before seen. It flashed over me in a moment, *this is a tornado!* As I remembered descriptions I had read of their appearance. The cloud had now been in sight about three quarters of an hour, and the vivid flashing of the lightning and steady roar of the thunder were continuous, without any perceptible cessation.

The wind had come up in gusts from the east, then south and again suddenly veering to the north, then as suddenly dying away into a dead calm. The cloud was now rising rapidly and trailing below it seemed to be an immense waterspout, the lower end of which appeared to be dragging on the ground. We could hear a steady roar, very heavy, but not loud, like an immense freight train going over a long bridge. Looking off about three miles towards a grove in the path of the black, trailing waterspout as it passed through the timber, high up in the air great trees, torn and shattered, could be plainly seen thrown by the force of the whirlwind outside of its vortex and falling towards the earth. My family had been sent into the cellar, which was made of large rocks upon which rested our balloon-frame house. I stood close by the outside doorway, ready to spring in if the fearful, black, swaying trail should come towards the house. It appeared to be going about half a mile north of us. The sight, while grand and fearful, was too fascinating to be lost unless the danger came nearer. The roar was now awful, and a terrific wind was blowing directly towards the swaying, twisting, dragging, black trail, which seemed to be sweeping down into the ground. It was now coming directly towards the log house of my nearest neighbors on the north, and I saw them run out and down a steep bluff of Rock creek and cling to the willows. Suddenly the black trail raised up in the air, and I could see falling to the ground tree tops, rails, boards, posts, and every conceivable broken fragment of wrecked buildings. As the storm swept by no more could be seen of that devouring, whirling, irresistible, black trailing demon of air, water, and electricity that had wrought such destruction. We learned the next day that the whirlwind part of the storm did not strike the earth again until it had gone about seven miles, when it united with another branch coming from the northwest, when they tore on in a broad path for twenty-eight miles, sweeping everything from the face of the earth to the Mississippi river. Night came on and we could learn nothing of the terrible damage wrought until the next day, when the news came of the destruction of the town of Camanche.

It was nearly a week before the full particulars of the fearful ruin brought by this greatest of northern tornadoes could be gathered up. It first assumed the whirlwind formed in Hardin County, and the first loss of life came near New Providence. Twelve houses were destroyed in that village but most of the people were at a meeting some distance away and the loss of life was small. Seven miles south of Eldora Michael Devine's brick house was destroyed, four persons killed, and five terribly injured. Schoolhouses, barns, sheds, stacks, fences, were blown for miles across the prairies. Mangled bodies of horses, cattle and hogs were strewn in every direction. Corn and wheat was literally torn up by the roots and everything above ground was destroyed. The tornado crossed the Iowa River at Sanderson's mill, swept a clean path through the woods and passed on through the north of Marshall County. The number of those killed in Hardin County was seven; wounded, twenty-seven; houses destroyed, thirty-seven; estimated loss, \$75,000. It swept down through Linn County, destroying farm houses, barns, orchards and groves, horses and cattle. Eighteen persons were killed, thirty-five wounded severely, eighteen houses destroyed, and the property loss estimated at \$150,000. A branch of the main line of the tornado, which passed over a portion of Jones County, killed nine persons, wounded thirty, destroyed thirteen houses and did damage to the amount of \$30,000. In Cedar county three persons were killed, thirteen wounded, eight houses destroyed and a property loss of \$15,000. In Clinton County, after the two storms united, the destruction was awful. In many places the path of the tornado was from 80 to 160 rods in width and this track was left a desert waste. Scores of people were killed and mangled, and beautiful homes utterly swept out of existence. The full fury of the united tornadoes struck the village of Camanche at about 7 o'clock in the evening. One who visited the place the next morning gives the following description of the ruin: "Amid the devastation that met the eye and is utterly indescribable, wherever a few boards hung together, were gathered the survivors, some slumbering, others sitting in despair, mourning the loved and lost; some nursing the wounded, while many lay dead side by side in rough boxes in a building. The tornado had swept through the town a quarter of a mile wide, literally prostrating everything before it. The town was not a *mass* of ruins, but it

looked as though the houses and their contents were literally *scattered*. There were fragments of what had been houses everywhere. All that was left of Camanche was a few houses, and all of these injured. No houses were left in the direct track of the tornado, and those at the edges were riddled as if by cannon shot. In many cases broken timbers had been hurled through houses, carrying death and destruction. Eleven store buildings, fronting on the river, were piled in ruins, and much of them, with their contents, were swept into the river. There is not a business house in the town left uninjured, and nearly every one was totally destroyed and their contents ruined. The scene was appalling and cannot be described.

“Of the 350 houses in the town not 50 are left standing, and with scarcely an exception, those left are more or less injured. It is doubtful whether any attempt will be made to rebuild the town.”

In Albany, on the Illinois side of the river, scores of houses were destroyed and many people killed. From Albany the tornado swept on over Illinois, sometimes rising high up in the air and again swooping down to the earth, and sweeping everything before it, killing twenty-six persons and severely injuring more than fifty. It crossed Lake Michigan and finally disappeared, after having traversed a distance of more than 450 miles. Forty-three persons were killed in Camanche and eighty severely injured. Two hundred and three buildings were totally destroyed, and 113 more badly wrecked. Eight hundred and sixty homeless people were in the streets of Camanche on the morning after the tornado passed through that town. The total number of persons killed in the entire track of the tornado was 146, and many more died of their injuries, bringing the total fatalities to near 200. The destruction of property was over \$700,000. When it is remembered that in 1860 the larger part of the country over which the tornado passed was very sparsely settled, the magnitude of this greatest cyclone that ever visited the northern latitudes, can be realized. It traveled at the rate of about sixty-six miles an hour, and the velocity of its rotary motion was estimated to be not less than 300 miles an hour, or equal to a cannon ball fired by a full charge. The fact that all of the bark was entirely stripped from many live trees shows the wonderful power of the tornado.