

# IOWA HISTORY



*(Photo Courtesy Library of Congress)*

Midwest farmers in the late 1890s were often visited by cyclones

## 1896 Cyclone Causes Havoc

It had been a “fearfully hot and sultry day” in central Iowa on May 25, 1896. The storm started in two sections. The first trace of it occurred north of Ankeny and it picked up force as it moved east. The second front brought rain that moved from the northwest to the southeast meeting up east of Ankeny. As the two fronts met, people watched the formation of two funnels that swept across the sky. They described a roar and tremendous “electrical disturbances” as the two funnels combined and spun across the landscape.

In Valeria survivors said they saw a “great black funnel” hanging down from a “blacker heaven” and watched as it tore “across the prairie” at a greater speed than “the fastest express train.” As it travelled through a dense forest, oak and elm trees two feet in diameter were pulled up by the roots or completely twisted off. In the town of 600 initial estimates were that half the population was killed. Those who survived had managed to escape to cellars and caves. But there was little warning.

In Santiago, where several lives were lost to the storm, residents described a storm with “unprecedented fury.” Three miles west of town a house was “lifted bodily from the earth” and carried some distance and landing on the ground a “shattered wreck.” The entire family who lived there were killed. Roads were impassable as fences, outbuildings and trees were scattered everywhere.

Near Bondurant survivors described a tremendous wind and rain beating down in sheets just before the “awful roar” that “every prairie farmer” recognizes as “the dread forerunner” of a

cyclone. When the storm struck there was total “chaos” as residents scurried to take cover in cellars and caves.

The Bailey family tried to ride out the storm in their farm house located atop a high hill. Nine people were in the house when the storm struck. Four were killed and the rest were injured so badly that it was “doubtful if any of them would recover.” It was reported the funnel “dipped down into” the house and within two minutes there was “no trace” of the building except the cellar which held the remains of the chimney, cook stove, and some of the furniture. The house was “torn to pieces”—the boards “torn to splinters.” Pieces were discovered a mile east of the location. The bodies of the victims were found in fields surrounding the homestead. The bodies of the family’s farm animals were also found in the fields—a dozen horses, 40 cattle and about 100 hogs.

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#### Source

“Iowa Towns Wrecked,” *New York Times*, May 25, 1896.

“Many Are Needy,” *Des Moines Register*, May 27, 1896.