

THERE'S NO FURY LIKE A TORNADO

By Dorothy Rieke

Many of us have, at times, been young and foolish, making snap decisions that influenced our lives in the worst ways. My husband Kenny and I have, in a time of extreme duress, made a decision that eventually changed the direction of our lives. In looking back, we both realize that our decision to “stay above ground” during that violent storm could have ended our lives.

After a long dry summer, Kenny and I were feeling discouraged. We still had the eternal optimism of the young, but we were seeing what the lack of moisture was doing to the crops in our fields, our garden, and our yard.

On that eventful day, July 31, 1957, we were experiencing another day of high temperatures promoted by a blazing sun. Late in the afternoon, I heard Kenny's green John Deere tractor and plow slowly returning from the north field.

For newlyweds, we had been extremely fortunate in obtaining a rental farm. The 160 acres of farmland had a good set of buildings. In fact, in Nemaha County, Nebraska, at that time over 50 years ago, that farm would have qualified as a “showplace” farm. The five-room white painted house was all that I could have

wanted with its hardwood floors, bathroom, electricity, and a full basement. Farm buildings included a well-built, white painted hip-roof barn, corn crib, machine shed, cattle shed, two houses and a one-car garage.

When I heard the tractor nearing the farm yard, I ran outside. Immediately I noticed that the once bright sun had disappeared behind stark gray, angry-appearing clouds.

After Kenny drove the tractor into the machine shed and shut off the motor, I questioned: “What's it going to do, Mr. Weatherman?” Kenny always took a great interest in the weather as most farmers do. He often predicted weather fairly accurately.

He answered, “We'll get .10 of rain, and it will blow like the dickens!”

As we did chores, his predictions, to some extent, proved true. Angry gusts of wind stirred up dust, whipping our faces. Suddenly rain began falling.

My first thought was “run for shelter.” However, when I saw my foolish spring chickens ignoring the rain and wind, I ran toward them waving my arms and screaming peculiar sounds. Most started running to the brooder house. It was then that I felt the first rock-hard pelts of grape-sized hail.

Kenny shouted, “Get to the house, Dorothy!” The shiny

white particles pelted my head and shoulders then bounced off to strike the ground. By this time, most of my chickens had found their shelter.

Once inside, we heard the wind roaring around the house and hail beating on the roof. The wind, more than a gale, clawed at the windows, tore at the sides of the house, and swept rudely across the roof.

As I walked past one of the open bedroom doors, I noticed a stream of water running across the floor. That strong wind was driving rain in around the window casing. I thought of the damage it could do to that lovely hardwood floor. I ran to get towels. Kenny joined me, grabbing towels to soak up water as it entered the room.

This room was where Kenny and I warred with a mouse. Kenny was swishing a broom under the bed when the bristles caught the mouse, flinging him across the room into a set trap.

At times we had problems with mice in that house. I finally discovered they were coming up through the furnace grates. After I put screen wire in the grates my problem was solved.

As Kenny and I continued wiping up water, the whole house seemed to "tremble". I gasped, "Oh, Kenny!"

Still, we did not go to the convenient cave just outside the back door. In the ignorance of youth, we did not realize we were experiencing a full-fledged tornado. We had no experience with such a storm. In this case, ignorance was not bliss.

That roaring wind and alternating slashing rain and pounding hail seemed to last for hours. Later, we measured five inches of rain in our rain gauge. Because of the strong winds, we thought we received much more rain than the gauge indicated.

Finally, all was calm and quiet, the storm had passed. I rushed over to the east door to look out the glass pane. What I saw could not have terrified me more!

The well-built henhouse bolted to a cement foundation was gone. My drenched leghorn hens were still sitting on the roosts. Nests were in place, but there were no walls or roof. The structure was now in slivers, pieces and sticks scattered north.

I cried out, "Kenny, come here!" As we both viewed the scene of destruction, we saw more damage. Sections of the cattle shed and the machine

shed were now gone. Wreckage was strewn everywhere. In all our lives, we had never seen anything like it!

The first thing I did was call my parents. When I grabbed our party line phone, our bachelor neighbor Matt and his sister were talking. Evidently, his farm had no damage. Known to talk for an hour at a time, I asked to use the phone, explaining we needed to get in touch with our parents because a tornado had hit our farm.

With tears in my voice, I swiftly related what had happened. My parents were very concerned and soon arrived at our farm. Moments later, Kenny called his folks. They, too arrived to survey the damage and assure themselves we were all right. Truthfully, as I think back, our well-being was the most important thing that day. What was destroyed could be replaced.

We called the owner of the farm and told him what had happened. Soon, he was parking his Cadillac near the driveway.

As Kenny and owner Wood Hopkins carefully walked about inspecting the damage, they discovered more destruction. The southeast corner of the house foundation was gone. The garage had been moved, and the corncrib was damaged. Luckily, the barn was untouched. Mr. Hopkins assured us he had insurance on every building.

After the storm and for the next few days, traffic was heavy on our country road. No stranger stopped to offer assistance. However, our neighbors the Kuhlmanns arrived on the day of the destruction, with sympathy and offers of help.

Truthfully, walking around in the barnyard was next to impossible. The yard was covered with nail-studded debris.

I discovered a lone hen huddled near the henhouse foundation. I wrapped her in an old T-shirt, put her in a bucket, and carried her to the house. She later recovered and seemed to be all right.

It was amazing, but we did not lose one egg. The unbroken eggs were still in the nests, but each one had many cracks throughout. We could not sell them, but we ate all of them in the next few weeks.

Our cornfields were filled with naked stalks without any sign of green glossy leaves. In the days to come, we smelled sour corn as that was cut for silage. The

owner thought that there would be a crop, but with the wind, rain and hail, those stalks could not produce an ear.

The cleanup was horrendous. The owner's insurance paid Kenny 35 cents an hour to clean up the debris which was strung a quarter of a mile north. Cleaning up was a time-consuming, difficult job.

That house had a cave entrance just outside the back door. However, we had no knowledge or experience with storms of this sort. We should of immediately headed to that shelter.

Even going to the basement would have been a good idea. Though truthfully I detested that basement. That summer was so dry that snakes had a tendency to enter the basement around the water pipes.

We had stored a few large boxes in the basement after moving there. One day, accompanied by our little rat terrier, Sporty, I went downstairs to wash clothes. As I stepped down from the last step, Sporty rushed to the boxes and began frantically barking and prancing around. Soon, a long horrible-appearing snake slithered out from between those boxes. I screamed in terror as I hated snakes above all things. I jumped up on the bench that had held my wash tubs. Here I had a ringside "seat."

Sporty grabbed the snake and shook it hard. The snake continued to move, but I knew I could use the hoe to pick it up and carry it outside. Nearly every time we went to the basement, Sporty discovered another snake, some big, some small, all ugly. Kenny separated milk down there and never once saw a snake.

Like other young people raised on farms, Kenny and I dreamed special dreams. Kenny, from his farming ancestors, inherited the magic of "men born to the soil." I enjoyed gardening, canning, cooking and baking.

We dreamed special dreams of owning our own land. There, Kenny would milk his Holstein cows and raise purebred red shorthorns. I would fix up the house to make it a home.

Above all, we wanted to leave a legacy of the "good farm life" for our children and grandchildren. Today, years later after that horrid, destructive tornado, we can see that those dreams have come true. ●

