

NET Television's "Devil Clouds: Tornadoes Strike Nebraska" Tells 1913 Storm Stories

One newspaper called it the "Devil Cloud" -- one of seven tornadoes that ripped across eastern Nebraska on Easter Sunday, March 23, 1913. The storms roared in with little warning, interrupting celebrations with friends and family on what was forecasted to be a warm, spring day. By nightfall, there was a path of death and destruction never seen before or since in the state. Nearly 170 people were dead, hundreds were injured and areas of Omaha, Ralston, Yutan and Otoe (called Berlin at the time) were devastated.

In the new NET Television documentary "Devil Clouds: Tornadoes Strike Nebraska," NET News Senior Producer/Reporter Mike Tobias tells the story of these storms and Nebraskans with the resolve to recover and rebuild. Developed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the tragedy, it premieres Friday, March 22, at 7 p.m. CT on NET Television's NET1/HD.

West of Omaha, one of the first tornadoes in the system struck Yutan, a farm village of almost 400 people. Tobias reports that it ripped through the residential part of the village, injuring dozens, killing 19 people and destroying nearly 80 percent of the town. A watch and a barn door from Yutan would later be found on the other side of the Missouri River in Iowa.

A few miles from the edge of Omaha, Ralston was a newly incorporated village and burgeoning rural community with industries like a stove factory and ice works. The tornado took the lives of eight people in and around the village. In his research for "Devil Clouds: Tornadoes Strike Nebraska," Tobias uncovered the memoirs of Ralston resident Ben Ballard, who recalled the storm in his writings, "In just a short moment the storm was upon us. The south half of the office was entirely blown away. Heavy timbers, brick and lumber began falling all around us," he said.

When the tornado finished with Ralston, Tobias reports that it took direct aim at Omaha. A quarter-mile wide tornado cut a seven-mile swath through the growing city, destroying businesses, homes and lives. Death was widespread throughout the city, but no area suffered more than the north 24th Street neighborhood, home to many African-Americans and European Jews who had settled in Omaha. Half of those who died from the tornado that day died there.

Teacher Beulah Adams was returning to her home in Omaha's Bemis Park neighborhood after visiting her friend. It was raining, but Adams had no idea the storm was coming. She described her experience in a letter to her mother. "The noise kept getting louder and louder and coming right at me. It was very bewildering," she wrote. Adams survived the tornado in an Omaha park.

The series of storms ended its wrath in the farm village of Berlin in Otoe County, where a tornado leveled the city, leaving behind only parts of the bank, a few houses and a church. A dozen people were killed in or near Berlin, while the tornado continued its 65-mile path of death and destruction into Iowa.

In "Devil Clouds: Tornadoes Strike Nebraska," high-quality photographs, newspaper accounts, letters, books, and the perspectives of historians and relatives of survivors, capture details of the disaster and provide a glimpse into the lives of 1913 Nebraskans. The documentary includes a song called, "The Omaha Easter Tornado." It was written and published shortly after the tornadoes by Hans B. Parkinson of Omaha. At the time, a ten-cent postcard produced to promote the sheet music described it as, "The Latest Hit, The Greatest Hit, The Hit that Hit Us All." The song is performed by two musicians/students

from Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln -- Zach Weir of Ralston, Neb., plays piano, while Cadie Jochum of Sutherland, Neb., provides vocals.

The documentary “Devil Clouds: Tornadoes Strike Nebraska” is complemented by a series of news stories on NET Radio that focus on the tornadoes and topics such as modern-day storm forecasting and preparation. These “Signature Stories” air Wednesday, March 20; Thursday, March 21; and Friday, March 22. “Signature Stories” air on NET Radio at 6:30 and 8:30 a.m. CT and 4:30 p.m. CT. In addition, viewers will have access to a robust website (netNebraska.org/devilclouds) and a social media presence.

“Devil Clouds: Tornadoes Strike Nebraska” repeats on NET1/HD Sunday, March 24, at noon CT. It repeats on NET2 World Saturday, March 23, at 9 p.m. CT; Tuesday, March 26, at 7 p.m. CT; and Friday, March 29, at 8 p.m. CT.

NET1/HD and NET2 World are part of NET Television. NET Television and NET Radio are services of NET. For more information about NET programming, go to netNebraska.org and click on television or radio.

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