

The "Hesston" Tornado: Recollections from 20 years ago

By Kevin Darmofal A Storm Chasers Perspective

Although I have witnessed many tornadoes since March 13, 1990, the —Hesston|| tornado was the first I saw, and to this day, the most memorable, in the 20 plus years of chasing storms in my spare time. I was working at WeatherData, Inc. at that time, and got off the night shift the morning of March 13th. Ken Smith was the morning TV meteorologist at KSN, and I remember we both worked a bit of severe weather that morning. We knew it was going to be a potentially volatile afternoon, and we planned to head out chasing, if possible, after I got some sleep that morning. Having only —chased|| a few times since graduating a couple years before, we were relative novices back then, and had yet to witness a tornado on a chase. We had to gas up the car and get some film on the way out of town, and even then we only had 24 exposures in each 35mm camera. Little did we know of the monster tornado to come that afternoon, and to rephrase a famous quote from the movie *Jaws*, ... "we were gonna need a bigger camera" ... (ie. more exposures).



Photo by Kevin Darmofal: Initial tornado; about 8 SW of Castleton, KS (Figure 1)

We headed up K-96 toward Hutchinson, as a storm was already developing to the west of Wichita (in Kingman county). It was about 4 pm, when we arrived at a gas station in South Hutchinson, and called WeatherData to see what was going on with the storm developing to our southwest. I recall that Mike Smith was looking at the 74C radar, and relayed that the storm was quickly becoming a supercell and developing a hook. Since it was really the only storm in the area at the time, we

decided to head south of town on K-17. As we approached just northeast of Castleton, we began to get into a little bit of light rain and small hail. We could see the lowering and developing wall cloud to our southwest (Figure 1), probably 8-10 miles away, and decided to pull off on the dirt road to Castleton. It was soon after we pulled off about 200 yards west of K-17, that we experienced a brief period of nickel to golf ball sized hail. After the hail ended, it was only a matter of minutes before we saw the funnel cloud and a small tornado tail touch-

down (probably near Pretty Prairie). This being our first tornado, we were quite mesmerized and began snapping pictures.



photo: Kevin Darmofal – 4 s of Castleton(fig 2)

A woman came out the front door from the house behind us on the road, to ask if we needed to take shelter. We declined, thinking the storm would miss us to the south, and told her to call in a report of a tornado. This was before the days of cell phones, and was really the only way of relaying what we saw. It was



Photo by Kevin Darmofal: Tornado ; 1.75 SE of Castleton Rd. at K-17 (Figure 3)

not much longer that a sheriff's patrol car also pulled off the road where we were along K-17. From a chase perspective, we were not in a very good location (just north of the approaching storm), and as the storm grew closer and bigger in size, we did contemplate moving from our location, but instead stayed fixed on the approaching tornado (Figure 2). In our awe and amazement of this tornado, we used up much of our 24 exposures in the first few minutes of the tornadoes life. However, the last several photos are quite impressive, as the large tornado passed just south and east of our location (Figure 3). It was approximately 430 pm when the last few pictures were snapped and the tornado moved off to our northeast. After retracing the damage path, the tornado came as close as three-quarters of a mile as it passed to our south and east (Figure 4), and we could see multiple vortices at the base of the tornado whipping along the ground. Also being this close, we could hear the low pitch groan of the tornadic winds, not really a freight train sound, but more of a waterfall of wind! As the tornado passed by, a heavy curtain of rain and strong northwest winds to around 70 mph buffeted Ken's small Honda Civic, associated with the rear-flank downdraft on the back side of the tornadic supercell. We quickly lost sight of the tornado as we proceeded just east on the dirt road, east of K-17. We came upon damaged farm equipment and fencing strewn about the fields along the dirt road, and turned around. So awestruck by what we had just witnessed, we decided to jaunt south to see what damage the tornado caused along K-17. It passed near where the Ninescah River crosses K-17, and uprooted a row of large trees. Of course by then we were both out of film.

Looking back now as an experienced chaser, I would have done a lot of things differently on March 13th. Besides being on the wrong side of the storm, I am sure we would have tried to continue on to chase this monster tornado. Little did we know at the time, however, that this tornado would stay on the ground as long as it did, with the ferocity of an F-5, which eventually hit Hesston. After looking at a bit of the damage near K-17, we did head north and east and came to Burrton after the tornado passed through that location. I recall we stopped briefly at a house that was damaged where some rescue vehicles had converged. Someone said that they heard a person was trapped in that house. I am not sure if this was the location where the 6 year old boy was killed, but it was kind of sobering at the time. As we headed southeast toward Wichita along K-96, we could see the huge storm and a big dark blue cloud mass hugging close to the ground along the horizon. It was probably close to 530 pm by then, and little did we know at the time, that this tornado was about to become the Hesston tornado.

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Photo by Kevin Darmofal, Tornado; just E of K-17 at Castleton Rd. (Figure 4)

