



COLBY  
FREE PRESS

10 pages

Colby  
tornado  
was not  
expected

By John Van Nostrand  
Colby Free Press

It was just a matter of moments after the National Weather Service in Goodland issued a severe thunderstorm warning Monday a tornado landed on Colby's south side. "There was almost no warning," said Thomas County Emergency Management Director Jim Engel.

The National Weather Service was informing Thomas County residents of a thunderstorm. A tornado was not expected. "We issued a severe thunderstorm warning at about 6:45 p.m.," said Scott Mentzer, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service.

"We had an idea there would be large hail. Then we were told about the tornado at about 6:50."

Mentzer said the National Weather Service was informed of the tornado from amateur radio operator Mike Albers in Colby. The tornado first touched down near Interstate 70 exit 53, near the Oasis Travel Center, Southwind Plaza and Comfort Inn. Damage was reported at all of those locations. Some Comfort Inn guests were injured from flying debris.

Engel said Colby was fortunate damage and injuries were limited. "It could have been much worse," he said.

"We were extremely lucky." That interstate exit has dozens of vehicles and people daily, considering the proximity to gas stations, restaurants, hotels and other stores.

A parked semi-truck was briefly lifted into another truck. As the tornado moved to the northwest it damaged vehicles at Taylor Motors car dealership and a number of highway signs.

According to the National Weather Service, the tornado was given a F1 rating on the Fujita Scale. The rating was based on damaged Southwind Plaza's sign, a 45-foot sign supported by three I-beams which collapsed plus other minor structural damage. An F1 tornado is considered weak but can produce winds of 100 mph.

Engel said after the storm was passed, there were some issues trying to assess the damage. "Everybody wanted to get out and look," Engel said. "There were some traffic control problems."

Engel emphasized for people to stay home after such storms have passed to allow emergency response personnel to have better access to the sites. "We had an ambulance run for some of the injuries," he said.

According to records at the National Weather Service, the last time a tornado was that close to Colby was July 21, 1996. That tornado was spotted a few miles north of town in open fields. Monday's tornado was on the ground for approximately 10 minutes. Its path length was approximately five miles. The tornado went in a northwest direction dissipating about three miles west of Colby north of U.S. Highway 24.

Mentzer said the storm was instigated by a warm front retreating across northern Kansas Monday afternoon. Humidity levels and unstable air at the same time also contributed to the formation of the storm.

"We knew it would be severe, but not a tornado," he said. "If there was not a warm front, there would probably be no tornado."

Colby received .10 of an inch of rain. Rexford received 1.2 inches, Hoxie received .64 inches.

The National Weather Service posted information and pictures from Monday's storm on its Web site. The Web site is at www.weather.gov/gld.

Tornado!



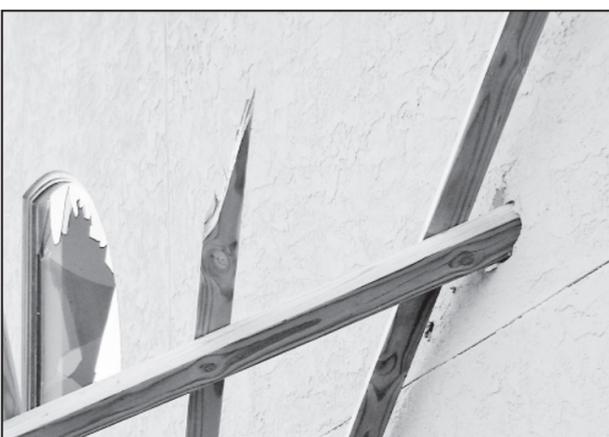
Photo by JAYLEA BLACK

A tornado Monday evening loomed over the south part of Colby. The tornado touched down at about 6:50 p.m. near the Interstate 70 and Highway 25 intersection. Damage and injuries were reported where the tornado touched down including Oasis Travel, Southwind Plaza, Taylor Motors and Comfort Inn. The last tornado close to Colby was July 21, 1996.



PATTY DECKER/Colby Free Press

Linda Taylor of Taylor Motors prepared to remove a metal pole that was imbedded in the windshield of a car after Monday's storm and tornado. Several cars were damaged by flying debris.



PATTY DECKER/Colby Free Press

Pieces of lumber were stuck in the exterior walls of the Comfort Inn during Monday's tornado.



PATTY DECKER/Colby Free Press

Debris and strong winds caused various damage to the Comfort Inn. The hotel is located south of the Interstate 70 and Highway 25 intersection where the tornado first landed in Colby. Some Comfort Inn guests were injured by the debris. Those guests were at the indoor pool at the time of the tornado.



Southwind Plaza's 45-foot sign was bent in half during the tornado that touched down Monday in Colby. The National Weather Service in Goodland rated the tornado an F1, the weakest level, based on its strength to damage the sign. Southwind Plaza is located near Interstate 70 and Highway 25 intersection where the tornado touched down.

Twister  
spins  
people

By Patty Decker  
Free Press Editor

Monday's tornado took people by surprise, but fortunately no major injuries were reported and the majority of damage was confined to Southwind Plaza and Comfort Inn's pool.

Both locations are near the Interstate 70 and Highway 25 intersection where the tornado touched down at 6:50 p.m.

Tuffy Taylor, co-owner of Southwind Plaza and Taylor Motors, said he had looked at the sky about five minutes before the tornado actually touched down.

"My son-in-law, Brandan (Booi) yelled to me 'tornado!' and I said, 'where?' The next thing I saw was flying debris," he said.

"It happened so fast and then it was gone," he said. "The whole situation didn't really sink in until 10 p.m. that night."

Taylor and his wife, Linda, said they were grateful the only damage was to material things and no people were seriously injured.

An estimated 15 to 20 vehicles at Taylor Motors were damaged from broken windows, windshields to body dents.

The directory sign on the corner of Southwind's lot was destroyed.

"We figure the sign alone will be over \$50,000 to replace," he said.

Other residents also spoke about the tornado and what they were doing at the time.

Shelley Barton was shopping with her daughter, Shanna Cooksey of Colby and two of grandchildren, Brooklyn and Nichelle, in Wal-Mart.

"We had been shopping for about 30 minutes in Wal-Mart when over the loudspeaker we were told there was a Code Black," she said. "We knew it was a tornado, but that was about it."

Everyone was asked to go to the center of the store and within 30 minutes customers were allowed to leave.

Barton said it was a frustrating she couldn't see what was going on, but was thankful her family was safe.

"We had just gotten done eating at about 6:40 p.m.," said Jaylea Black, 14, a freshman at Colby High School. "I was in the backyard and looked to the south and there was the tornado," she said.

Black said she remembers a bigger years ago, which was the first she had ever witnessed.

"I was really surprised to see it, in fact I had seen it before the sirens started to go off," she said. "I went in and told my mom and grandfather and about that time the sirens went off, so they went downstairs and my dad and I went outside. I grabbed the camera and snapped it."

For Jaylea and her dad, Jay, they stood outside and watched the twister go west, and disappear back into the clouds.

"We watched the clouds for a while, a little funnel started to form again but quickly broke apart — then the clouds just broke up," Jaylea said.

Judi Feldt, who lives on Pine Street said she was making scrambled eggs for dinner.

"I went outside to get a pepper from the garden for the eggs and I saw a cloud that looked unsettled," she said.

Feldt said she saw the cloud start spinning so she ran back in to get her camera.

She and her husband, Chuck, were concerned the twister would be near the airport where they have their airplane, but were glad to learn it had missed that area.

Nick Howard said he saw the tornado while on Webster Street.

"I saw the clouds twisting," he said. "It was something neat to see."