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Wilder Weather: Laura Ingalls Wilder and Her Famous Tornado

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August 28, 1884 Tornado Outbreak

- 5 significant tornadoes (Grazulis 1993)
  - 1: Miner County, from near Carthage to 3 miles west of Howard. Death of a boy unconfirmed. F2
  - 2: Beadle-Sanborn Counties, 3 miles north of Huron southeastward. 1 killed on a farm. F3
  - 3: Sanborn-Miner-Hanson, from 5 miles north-northwest of Forestburg to Long Lake. 2 brothers caught in open, one killed. May have been 2 separate tornadoes. F4
  - 4: Hanson/Hutchinson Counties, from near Alexandria southeastward. 4 killed on a farm, 3 died in the open. F4
  - 5: Minnehaha County, from 6 miles northwest of Sioux Falls. One man killed in the open. F2

Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Story

- On a hot, humid, and gusty summer day shortly before their wedding (in August 1885), Laura Ingalls and Almanzo Wilder take a buggy ride south of De Smet.
- Laura and Almanzo “sense” storminess in the air and watch towering clouds develop. They turn back toward home.
- While the storm moves from the northwest, they drive horses toward the northeast and away from the path.
- Laura and Almanzo return to Laura’s house. Almanzo and Pa return to Laura’s house. Almanzo and Pa take a buggy ride south of De Smet.
- Returning later that night, Almanzo and Pa report that a homestead was struck. Two boys on mules were hit, and one of the boys died. The homestead was destroyed, but the front door was lofted high and fell to the ground, intact, at the home site shortly after the tornado had passed.

Truth Vs. Storytelling

- Laura and Almanzo almost certainly saw the tornado near Howard, roughly 10 miles from their buggy ride path.
- Why are there differences between Laura’s description and other evidence?
- What did Laura get “right”?

Laura and Almanzo return to Laura’s house. Almanzo and Pa take a buggy ride south of De Smet.

Reconstruction of tornado tracks for tornadoes 1-4, from Snow (1984), with additional context annotated. The town of De Smet is located about 27 miles north of Howard and 33 miles east of Huron.

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