

Buffalo Tales

May/June 2019

Buffalo County Historical Society



Cyclists' Account of the June 4, 1908 Tornado

By: Nathan Tye

Dr. Ethel and Daniel Lynn set out from Chicago to San Francisco on a tandem bike in the summer of 1908. A series of calamities forced the pair to flee Chicago, the city where they sought refuge after the 1907 earthquake destroyed Dr. Ethel Lynn's medical practice in San Francisco. In Chicago, Daniel could not find work and Ethel's hospital laid her off. Soon the pair were living in a flophouse. When Ethel was diagnosed with tuberculosis the Lynn's decided to return to San Francisco. Gifted a tandem bike by a friend, the pair set off for California. The pair survived numerous crashes, hitchhiked, and hopped freight trains as they crossed the West. On June 4, 1908 as the couple passed through Buffalo County they were overtaken by one of the most violent tornado outbreaks in the area's history.

Ethel Lynn's rare published account of their trip, *The Adventures of a Woman Hobo*, included a first-hand account of the June 4, 1908 tornado outbreak. Now available in the public domain, only twenty-four copies are held in US and Canadian libraries. Her account, reproduced below, does not radically change anything known about the tornado, but it is thus far the only known published non-newspaper account of 1908 tornado disaster.

Ethel and Daniel Lynn found better days in California. Ethel claimed the arduous trip cured her tuberculosis. She restarted her medical practice, became involved in the Women's Political League, and spoke on behalf of the unemployed. In 1917 she published the account of her trip. Reviewers were unsure "whether or not the narrative...is all literal truth," but considered it "at least all interesting and racy reading," regardless. By reading her account of the 1908 Buffalo County tornado against contemporary newspaper reports it is clear this section of her text is factual. Yet, given the few copies that remain it appears Ethel's story, factual or not, did not find a wide audience.

"Near a little place called Gibbon our rear tire gave out, and while making the change, a farmer invited us to his home to eat supper and spend the night. After considerable trouble with the wheel, we started on shortly after noon next day, but had not gone far when we saw dense, black clouds piling up ahead. We rode hard for some time, then rain began to fall and we stopped beneath a cattle shed. The rain slackened and we rode on, but had not proceeded any great distance when we noticed a very severe storm raging in the northwest.

"Soon great gusts of wind came whirling across the prairie, while rain and sleet whipped our faces. There was no shelter near, so we determined to struggle on and reach Kearney if possible. A train steamed past, with passengers leaning from the windows and waving their arms in great excitement. Glancing about to learn the cause of the commotion, I looked toward the south and nearly fell from the wheel. A cyclone was bounding across the country and as I gazed it whirled a building into the air, then dashed it to earth, where it flew into a thousand fragments.

"Suddenly we were picked up, wheel and all, and the next thing I knew, were rolling over and over in the ditch at the roadside, while the tandem lay twenty feet away. As I struggled to my feet I saw another cyclone, which had just given us a playful flip, scudding away in the north. Hailstones as large as pigeon's eggs now began to pelt us, and to add to our discomfort, we found that both chains and the steering gear had been broken in the crash and Kearney was still at least two miles distant.

"We had pushed the damaged bicycle a scant hundred yards when a two-seated automobile, guided by a man with a white-faced woman at his side, drew up beside us. The man invited me to ride into Kearney with him while Dan brought in the wheel. Dan urged me into the back seat and the machine plunged ahead. With a wild yell, the driver whipped off his soft felt hat and began to beat the steering wheel with it.

"Whoop-la!" he howled. "Go it, Nellie! Go it, old girl! Show the natives what you can do."

"The car careened from side to side across the wet and slippery road. At tremendous speed we struck the railroad crossing at a tangent. Tossing us high in the air, the machine leaped for the ditch. With a powerful wrench the driver whirled the car, which poised on two wheels at the verge, then headed straight for a telegraph pole on the other side of the road. Once more he veered, and the brass hub of the hind wheel bit into the wood as we shot past.

"But Providence was with us, and in a few moments the car drew up in front of a hotel in Kearney, while the half-drunken owner staggered out, and conducting me within, engaged and paid for the best room in the house for Dan and me. The other poor woman, who had been picked up from the roadside like myself, made her escape.

"Dan came in, drenched and weary from the buffeting of the storm, and threw himself on the bed. I heard a terrific, roaring, crashing, rending sound, and rushing to the window saw another cyclone sweeping through the outskirts of the town. Large trees swayed and whipped madly, then were whirled into the air.

"Cyclone! Cyclone! Quick, Dan, here comes another cyclone," I screamed above the roar of the tempest.

"Darn the cyclone," Dan replied; "I've seen enough for one day."

"Nevertheless, he came to the window just as the great, black, swirling funnel passed from view, and, gazing at the sky, enquired where all the books had come from. Sure enough, something floated in the heavens that resembled the scattered leaves of volumes. An instant later these pages came down and disclosed themselves as the sides and roofs of houses.

"Next morning Dan took the wheel to the repair shop while I studied the ravages of the storm. No lives were lost in that immediate neighbourhood, but much property had been destroyed. The brick foundation of one home had been scattered in every direction, while the wooden frame, apparently unharmed, had been set down on its original site. In another instance a parlour wall had been neatly removed and a marriage license torn from the frame which still hung in its place, while furniture and pictures remained untouched. This peculiar phenomenon gave rise to considerable comment and jokes concerning the domestic felicity of the married pair.

"We were eating lunch in a vacant lot when our friend from Gibbon drove up. He called Dan over for a short talk, then drove rapidly away. When Dan returned and held out his palm, I cried out in surprise, for in his hand lay four shining five dollar gold pieces. When we had gone and the storm came up, this man had worried over our probable fate, and early next morning had driven the twelve miles into Kearney to overtake and give us this money to ease the journey across the Rockies. Thus we were able to renew our shoes and stockings, which were in shreds, pay for new parts for the wheel, lay in a stock of groceries and still have a little money in our pockets.

"If grateful, loving thoughts have power to benefit the recipient, then surely our benefactor will receive some reward, for my soul pours itself out in deepest gratitude for his gracious, generous act.

"Leaving Kearney, we were able to do a great deal of riding, but suffered severely from heat in the middle of the day. For miles we rode beside stock fences where groups of horses with heads tossing nostrils flaming, manes and tails floating like pennons in a breeze, raced beside us to the confines of their pastures, there to stand with stamping hoofs and outstretched noses, eyeing us with the greatest curiosity. Once a steer, grazing by the roadside, started to run ahead of us, and lumbered along a full mile, then, in a panic of fear, he reared and up-ended over the fence in a comical fashion and stood blowing wildly, watching his strange pursuer glide past."

For more on the 1908 tornado see Heather Stauffer, "Winded: Kearney's Cyclone of 1908," *Buffalo Tales*, Vol. 30 (2007) and Katherine Wielechowski, "One Hundred Years of Twisters," *Buffalo Tales*, Vol. 34 (2011).

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If you are interested in sponsoring a day, you can email bchs.education@hotmail.com or call the Trails and Rails Museum at (308)-234-3041.

Director's Report—Jennifer Murrish

We are off to a great summer with an amazing summer staff ready to assist you. They have great senses of humor along with amazing work ethic. Our summer began with another successful Wagons West Celebration and Buffalo County Stampede 1/2 marathon, 10K, & 5K!

With the help of BD Construction, our staff, and volunteers, we have begun the process of transforming the old Archive Building into a new Textile Tales exhibit. Stay tuned for further development! The building committee is ready to move forward with Phase 2. BD Construction has our preliminary designs in hand so they can get them out to subcontractors. BD will then be able to create an estimate for us so we can move forward with fundraising.

I have been talking with some folks about online tour registration so we can plan ahead better for staffing and volunteers. In the mean time we have publicized tour times and have staffing scheduled accordingly. If you are interested in learning how to be a volunteer tour guide, let us know!

Enjoy your summer and we look forward to seeing you here at your Trails & Rails Museum.

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 (Contact Trails & Rails Museum for more information on becoming an Engineer)

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Trails & Rails Museum

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