

Wilder Weather: Laura Ingalls Wilder and Her Famous Tornado

Barbara E. Mayes Boustead

NOAA/NWS/WFO Omaha/Valley, NE, and School of Natural Resources, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE



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

Almost overhead now, the tumbling, swirling clouds changed from black to a terrifying greenish-purple. They seemed to draw themselves together, then a groping finger slowly came out of them and stretched down, trying to reach the earth. It reached, and pulled itself up, and reached again.

“How far away is that?” Laura asked.

“Ten miles, I’d say,” Almanzo replied.

It was coming toward them, from the northwest, as they sped toward the northeast. No horses, however fast they ran, could outrun the speed of those clouds. Green-purple, they rolled in the sky above the helpless prairie, and reached toward it playfully as a cat’s paw torments a mouse.

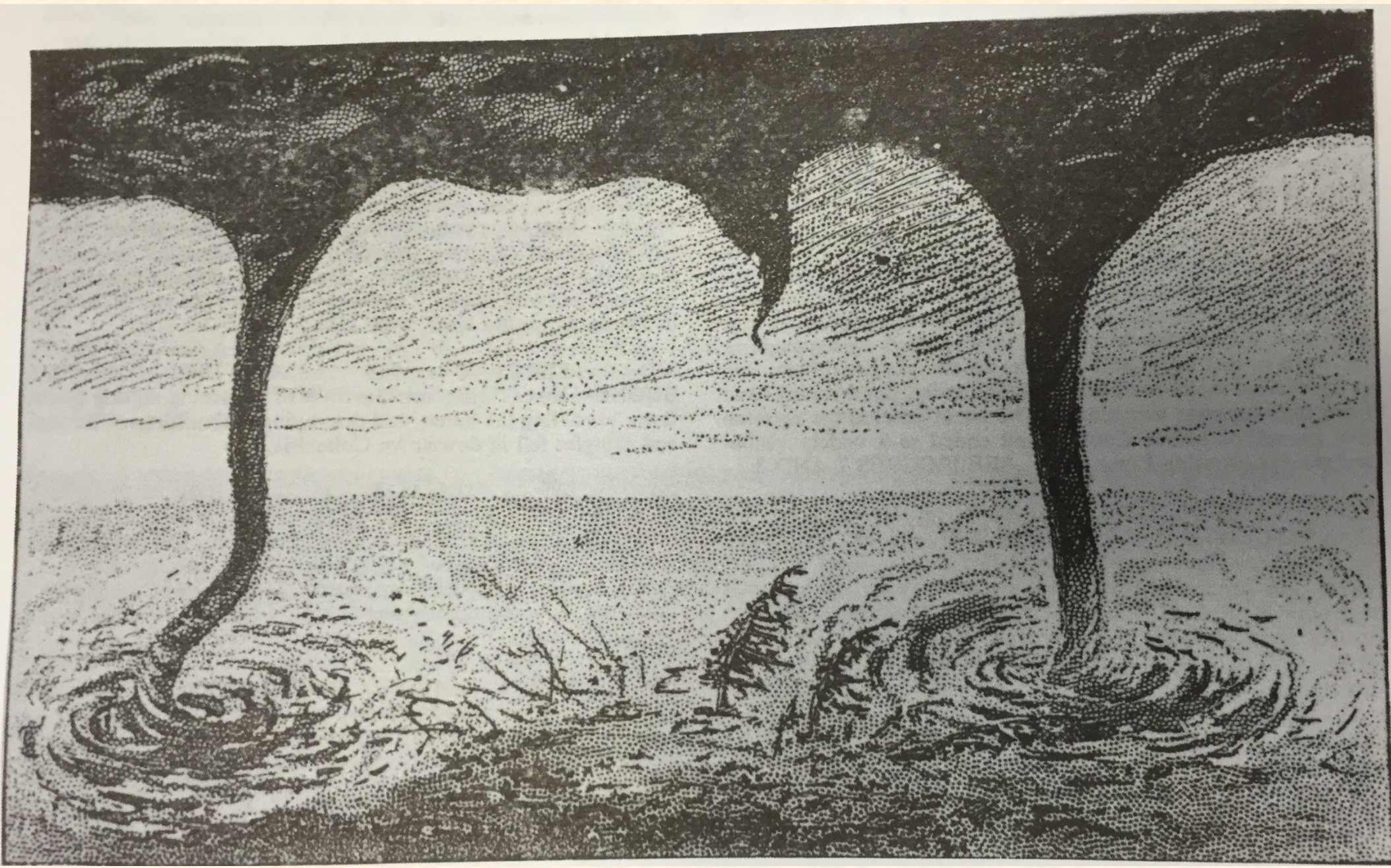
A second point came groping down, behind the first. Then another. All three reached and withdrew and reached again, down from the writhing clouds.

Then they all turned a little toward the south. One after another, quickly, all three points touched the earth, under the cloud-mass and traveling swiftly with it. They passed behind the buggy, to the west, and went on southward. A terrific wind blew suddenly, so strong that the buggy swayed, but the storm had passed. Laura drew a long, shaking breath.

-- Laura Ingalls Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years*



Often cited as the “first picture of a tornado,” this is actually the second known tornado photograph. It was taken by F. N. Robinson in Howard. It is suspected that the photo was retouched, as was common practice in the era, but it does seem likely that the depiction of multiple funnel clouds is accurate. Credit: NOAA Photo Library



Sketch by J. H. Nott as one of the tornadoes passed near (the former town of) Redstone in north central Hanson County (tornado 3). Credit: *Tornadoes* by John P. Finley, reproduced in Grazulis (1993).

Truth Vs. Storytelling

❖Laura and Almanzo almost certainly saw the tornado near Howard, roughly 10 miles from their buggy ride path.

** This is the same tornado photographed by Robinson (left)! **

❖Why are there differences between Laura’s description and other evidence?

❖What did Laura get “right”?.

Truth	Storytelling
Date: August 28, 1884	Date: Summer 1885 Laura often compressed or altered timelines to make the story flow
Appearance: Multiple-vortex and/or three funnels intermittently touching down	Appearance: Three funnels intermittently touching down. Laura’s description is verified by other sources, both visual and descriptive.
Distance: Closest tornado to Laura and Almanzo was tornado 1, about 10-15 miles away at its closest.	Distance: Tornado was “about 10 miles” away from Laura and Almanzo when it touched down. Pretty good for estimating distance!
Impacts: 2 boys on a mule struck, 1 killed, by tornado 3 near Forestburg. Multiple homesteads struck by tornadoes in the outbreak.	Impacts: 2 boys on a mule struck, 1 killed – that part is verified. However, tornado 3 was longer than an afternoon trip away, making it unlikely that Pa and Almanzo assisted that family. Unknown which homestead was described (could have been the same family, or Laura could have combined stories of damage at one homestead with fatalities at another).

References

Grazulis, T.P., 1993: *Significant Tornadoes 1680-1991*. Environmental Films, St. Johnsbury, VT, 1326 pp.

Snow, J.T., 1984: Early tornado photographs. *Bull. Amer. Meteor. Soc.*, **65**, 360-364.

Wilder, L.I., 1943: *These Happy Golden Years*. HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 289 pp.

Corresponding Author: Barbara Mayes Boustead, 6707 N. 288th St., Valley, NE, 68064; (402) 359-5166; email: barbara.mayes@noaa.gov; http://www.bousteadhill.net/wilder_weather/

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.

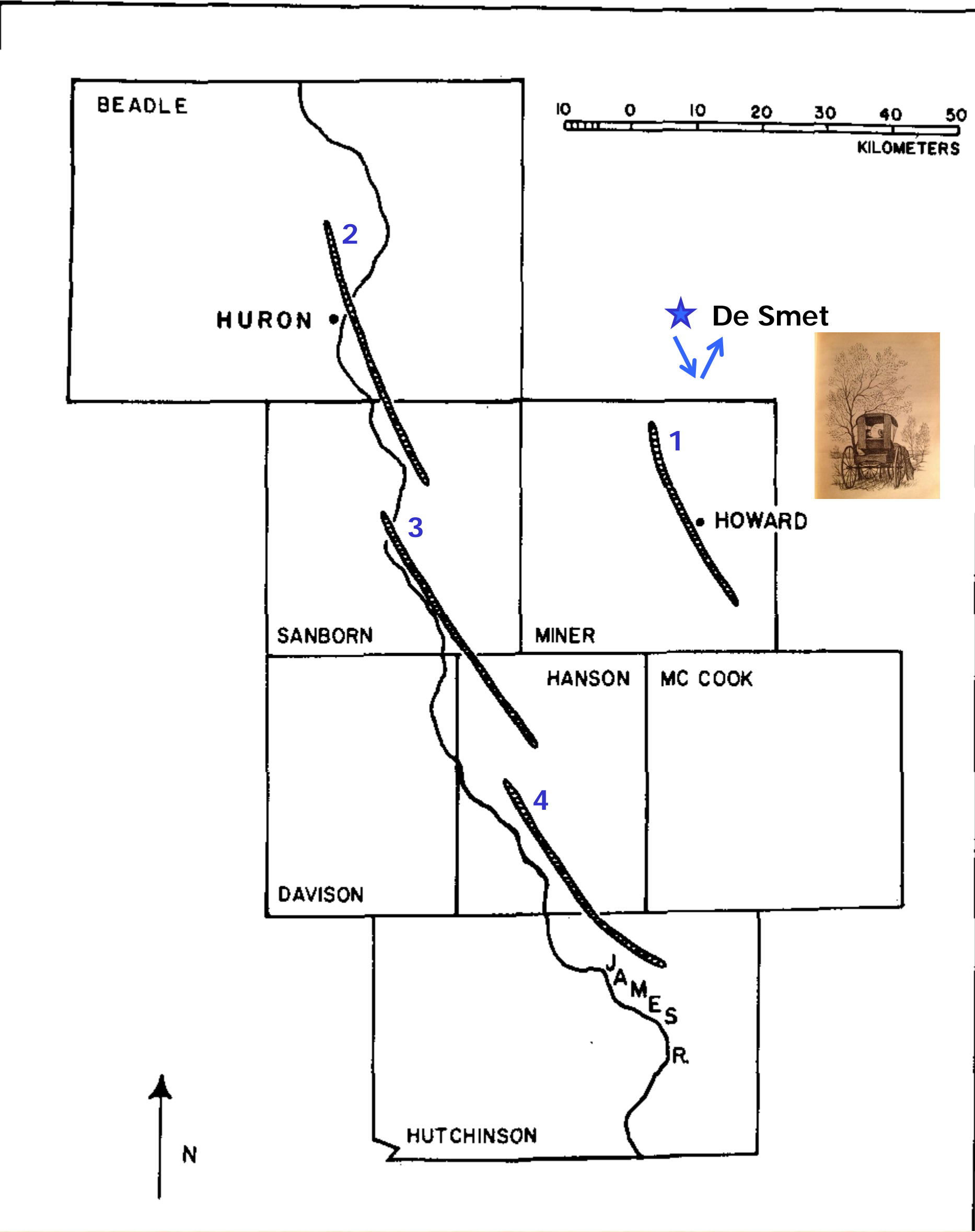
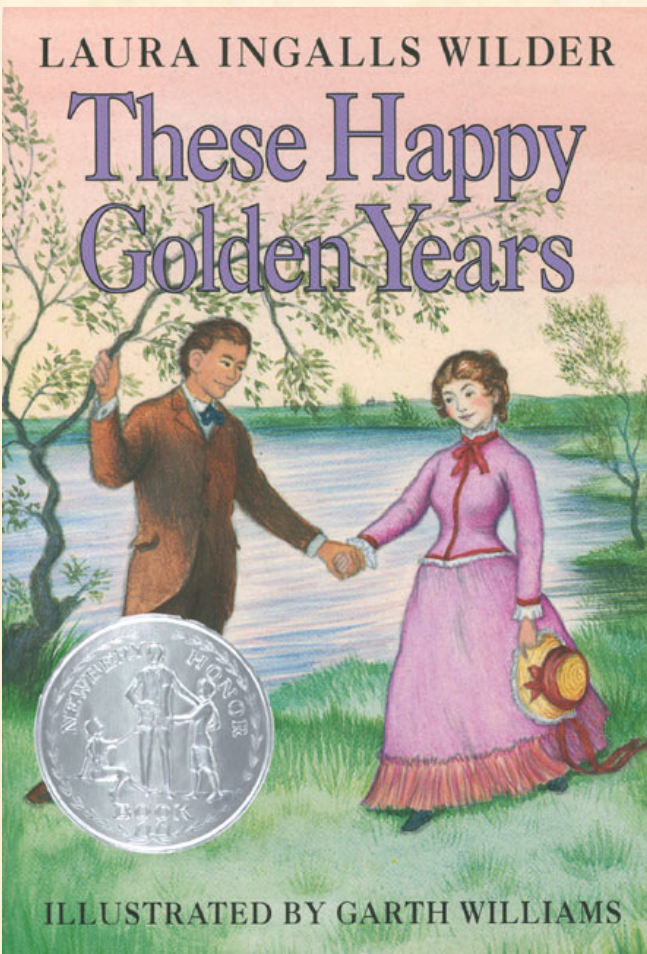
❖Laura and Almanzo “sense” storminess in the air and watch towering clouds develop. They turn back toward home.

❖Laura and Almanzo watch a thunderstorm to their west produce funnel clouds and then a tornado.

❖While the storm moves from the northwest, they drive the horses toward the northeast and away from the path.

❖Laura and Almanzo return to Laura’s house. Almanzo and Pa (Charles) Ingalls set out to assist anyone struck by the tornado.

❖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.



Laura and Almanzo Wilder, 1886.

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.