

Timothy P. Marshall\* and David K. Hoadley

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are people who just simply enjoy watching a severe storm. Roger Jensen was such a person and was among the first pioneer storm chasers who began photographing the sky from his family's farm near Lake Park, MN. Born 5 September 1933, Roger began a life of weather observation. To him, there was no better experience than seeing a storm out on the plains, feeling the wind, smelling the freshness of spring inflow air, hearing the sound of distant thunder, or tasting the success of a great photo opportunity. He knew that a storm could be absorbed by all the senses. This paper celebrates the life of Roger Jensen as a weather photographer. From his early years on the farm, to his chronic battle with diabetes, Roger continued photographing storms, even while residing in various nursing homes.

## 2. THE EARLY YEARS

Roger grew up as an ordinary boy who liked planes, trains, and steam engines. However, Roger also loved storms. Early on, he became fascinated with the majestic thunderheads, especially when illuminated by the setting sun. To him, there was no better experience than seeing a storm in open country, away from the big city. Roger was hooked on storms by the time he was just eight years old.

Roger's family moved to a farm near Lake Park, MN around 1945 where they raised wheat and milked cows (Fig. 1). This presented Roger the opportunity to view storms out in the country -with no obstructions. However, in 1950, he and his family moved to the Seattle area. There, the teenager obtained his first camera, a Kodak Pony #828. He began photographing towering thunderheads over the Cascade Mountains. Roger loved the mountains, especially Mt. Rainier, but he still yearned for the plains. He worked the summer of 1952 building and improving trails at Mt. Rainier National Park as a member of a trail crew. On his days off, he would climb the mountain - sometimes with his brother Shannon. They once climbed to 3750m. Roger also got a chance to fly around the mountain and took numerous slides of Mt. Rainier.

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**Figure 1.** The Jensen family home in Lake Park, MN. Photograph © R. Jensen.

Roger was glad, however, when the family decided to return to Fargo, ND later that year. He began chasing storms during the summer of 1953. He and his father occasionally drove the family car, a DeSoto, to chase storms within about 80 km of their home. On 20 June 1957, a violent supercell produced a series of tornadoes from Fargo, ND to Detroit Lakes, MN (Fujita 1960). Roger witnessed the storm from the farm but he was too busy with farm chores to "chase" it. The third tornado in the series struck Fargo, about 50 km west of their farm. The tornado cut a swath of destruction that was five city blocks wide and 20 blocks long damaging or destroying about 1300 homes. Roger witnessed F5 damage for the first time and was amazed at the power of the tornado.

## 2. THE 1960's - PHOTOGRAPHING THE SKY

In 1960, Roger bought a single lens reflex, 35mm Miranda "S" camera with wide angle and telephoto lenses, which he used from then on. He read books on photography, learned how to compose a picture, and use the  $f$ -stop. He bought a polarized filter to deepen blue tones and bring out the crisp, cauliflower appearance of a thunderstorm updraft. Roger consistently used Kodachrome-64 slide film. He would make prints from his best slides and write copious notes on the on the back of each, including the date it was taken.

Often, severe storms came to him. On 4 July 1966, a hailstorm struck the Detroit Lakes area. Roger photographed hail greater than baseball-size (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Hail greater than baseball-size fell in Detroit Lakes, MN on 4 July 1966. This was some of the largest hail that had ever been reported in MN. Photograph © R. Jensen.

Rogers' father died in 1963 but Roger and his mother continued to work on the farm. Roger raised a wide variety of vegetables and flowers. A greenhouse was built adjacent to the house where Roger grew ornamental flowers and cacti to earn additional income. At harvest time, Roger sold these items along with farm produce from a truck. He called it "truck gardening".

One of Roger's best chases occurred on 30 June 1967 when a derecho moved through central MN. He followed the storm to Minneapolis where he took a series of pictures of a tiered shelf cloud approaching the city (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.** An ominous tiered shelf cloud approaching Minneapolis, MN on 30 June 1967. Photograph © R. Jensen.

### 3. THE 1970'S - THE BEST OF TIMES

The 1970's were the most productive decade for Roger, and he took thousands of slide images during that time. Some of his best work was with fall foliage, sunsets, and flowers from the greenhouse. Roger impressed the local weather service and television media with his storm and cloud photographs. This gave him added confidence to continue his photography. Roger even had some of his photographs published in the *Clouds of the World* (Scorer 1972).

In the summer of 1974, Roger's mother sold the farm and moved into an apartment in Detroit Lakes where Roger began working for Swift and Company, a turkey processing plant. He continued to chase storms when he could.

Roger's best tornado day was on 28 June 1975 when he photographed a large barrel-shaped tornado near Felton, MN that moved slowly north-northeast (Fig. 4). The tornado traveled only 10 km in 25 minutes. Roger filmed the tornado from the south; it only destroyed a barn and was rated F-2. That same evening, Roger photographed brilliant, orange-colored mammatus at sunset that made the cover of *Weatherwise* in October 1976 (Fig. 5).



**Figure 4.** Large, slow moving tornado near Felton, MN on 28 June 1975. Photograph © R. Jensen.

Roger submitted his chase accounts and photographs to the American Meteorological Society and they were published in the correspondence section of the *Bulletin* (See Jensen, 1973, 1975, and 1977). Figure 4 appeared on the cover of the June 1977 issue of the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society*.

Roger became a local celebrity and was featured in the Becker County Record newspaper on 22 January 1979. Roger expanded his photography by traveling around the country. He visited several National Parks including Yosemite and photographed many of the waterfalls there.





**Figure 5.** Mammatus clouds at sunset illuminated orange by the setting sun on June 28, 1975. Photograph © R. Jensen.

#### 4. THE 1980's - THE WORST OF TIMES

The 1980's were a reversal of fortune for Roger. His mother died in 1980, and then in January 1981, Roger collapsed in his apartment. He was rushed to the hospital and given the last rites. A series of tests revealed Roger suffered from chronic diabetes. He recovered and returned to work at the turkey processing plant, learning to give himself insulin shots every day. Roger continued his photography, taking some of his best fall foliage pictures in the early 1980's.

In 1985, Roger lost his job when the plant closed and, two months later, fell gravely ill again. He recovered, but doctors discovered a bone disease in his left foot and began treating it over the next two years. His diabetes worsened, and he eventually needed assisted care with nurses to monitor his condition. Thus, Roger entered St. Mary's Nursing Home, where he remained for three months. Showing improvement again, he left and moved into a new apartment in Detroit Lakes, MN in May, 1986. However, the infection again developed in the left ankle and foot. He was hospitalized in August 1986, then transferred to St. Mary's the following month. Roger would remain in a nursing home the rest of his life.

In January 1988, the infection in his left leg worsened and it had to be amputated below the knee. It took Roger several months to learn how to use prosthesis, but he was walking around well by August 1988. His health steadily improved, and he soon mastered his new leg, so he resumed photographing fall foliage and spring storms in open areas around the nursing home.

David Hoadley visited him late one night after a local chase and found Roger to be animated and jovial, fully accepting of his new condition and amazingly positive about the future. He proudly showed off his

old camera and lenses -and eagerly anticipated all the storms yet to be seen. Although now he walked with difficulty, his imagination was still as free as the wind.

#### 5. THE 1990's - A BIG MOVE TO TEXAS

David Hoadley interviewed Roger Jensen and wrote a biography that appeared in *Stormtrack Magazine* (Hoadley 1990). Soon after this article was published, many storm chasers began writing to him. Around that time, Roger was forced to move into a small nursing home in Detroit Lakes where he was not happy. He frequently wrote about heading south for a warmer climate -one that had severe storms more often. However, Roger had strict requirements for a new nursing home: "*It must have an unobstructed vantage point*", he said. Storm chaser Gene Rhoden took it upon himself to research nursing homes in the area but struggled to find one that would meet Roger's requirements. Finally, Gene found exactly the right facility southwest of Sherman, TX, that was located on a hill surrounded by open fields and they would take Roger!

Roger moved to Texas in 1996 and loved it. He wrote David Hoadley: "*the fantastic, wonderful realization of finally making it to Texas is too much to comprehend. I'll be pinching myself for the next couple of months to make sure I am not dreaming.*" In Texas, Roger saw more storms than ever before and he was a lot closer to other storm chasers. In November 1996, a group of storm chasers (including the lead author) took Roger out to dinner. He was again interviewed for an article that appeared in *Stormtrack Magazine* (Marshall 1996). When asked why he chased storms, he responded: "*Gosh, it's for the awe at what you're seeing. I was born loving storms.*"

Roger attended some of the storm chaser picnics held at the lead authors home each May (Fig. 6). He loved to meet other storm chasers, show photographs, and tell stories.



**Figure 6.** A gathering of storm chasers in May 2000 (from left to right): Tim Marshall, Roger Jensen, and David Hoadley.

In 1999, Roger moved to a nursing home in Terrell, TX (just east of Dallas), where there were nearby open fields. Roger loved that place and the personnel there gave him the freedom to take pictures of storms in the adjacent fields. One day, he received permission to leave the nursing home and he walked out with a camera and folding chair into an open field about half a mile away. There he sat with his camera watching and waiting for the distant thunderheads to approach, when suddenly the police pulled up. The farmer who owned the land had called the police saying there was a strange man sitting in the middle of his field taking pictures. Roger was thrilled to get a ride back to the nursing home in the police car, but not before getting permission from the farmer to sit in his field anytime he wanted. In 1999 and 2000, Roger took hundreds of storm photographs, more than in prior years.

## 6. A PEACEFUL ENDING

Roger died suddenly and peacefully in his sleep on 26 April 2001, bringing to an end almost 50 years of storm and cloud photography. During his life, Roger had taken more than 8500 images, mostly of storms. He documented these images like a scientist and wrote numerous letters about his experiences. His love of storms was paramount to all else in life. As a tribute, David Hoadley drew a sketch of him (Fig. 7). Roger's remains were cremated and scattered near Mt. Rainier, the place where he began his life's mission, photographing the mountains that first catch the dawn and the great orographic storms that reach to the stars.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Jensen family for allowing us to utilize his slides and stories in this paper. Roger kept all correspondence sent to him. The authors appreciate those who took time out of their busy schedule to write Roger including: Bill Barlow, Charles Bustamante, Jack Corso, Jon Davies, Warren Faidley, Drew Farmer, Tom Grazulis, Richard Keen, Bill McCaul, Colin McIntyre, Alan Moller, Gene Moore, Jim Reed, Gene Rhoden, Ed, and Jerrine Verkaik. We also are grateful to Dr. Charles Doswell III for reviewing this paper.

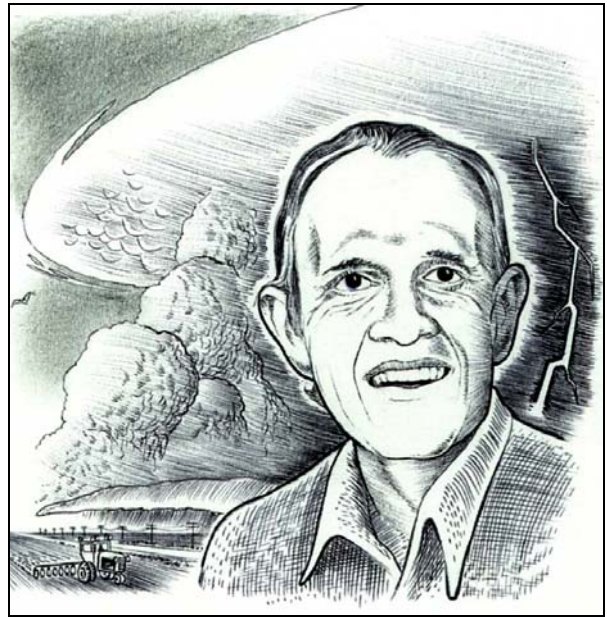


Figure 7. Sketch of Roger Jensen by David Hoadley.

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