

The Roodeport tornado of 26 November 1948 Geoff Boner aged 11 remembers:



The twisting funnel-shaped cloud was first spotted near the Potchefstroom Road at about 6pm. Passengers in a train approaching Roodeport at the time were terrified.



The tornado struck at 6.05pm, leaving 500 damaged houses in its wake and killing four people.

It is estimated that the tornado travelled at a speed of 320km per hour and affected 1,804 people in Roodepoort. In all 40 adults and 20 children were injured.

The tornado lasted only a few minutes and was preceded and followed by severe hailstorms, with eyewitnesses claiming the stones were as large as cricket balls.



The tornado struck the Durban Deep Mine headgear and pylons and cables south of Roodepoort town early on, plunging the town into darkness. The electricity supply being cut off was actually a positive thing – not a single fire broke out. There were also no electrocutions reported because no electrical wires trailed across the streets.

It was told that many of the Indian shopkeepers opened their doors and allowed affected people to take what they needed, blankets, food, etc.

Nearly all of the eyewitnesses described the sound of the nearing tornado as an “earth shaking roar” and “like a thousand express trains passing”. Everybody who witnessed the storm commented on the paper whirling around in the air, but this ‘paper’ was, in fact, the corrugated iron roof sheets torn off houses.

Geoff Boner aged 11 remembers:

Farrell Spiro was visiting us, and we were playing in my room, when we heard the noise of the wind and saw a corrugated iron roof fly past the window and cut down the back wall surrounding our property. There were pieces of corrugated iron wrapped around electric poles. Several houses in our street and in nearby streets were destroyed. Except for the back wall our house was intact.

We were without electricity for some time, but our family did not suffer too much.

Geoff's sister Zelia Boner remembered: The tornado occurred in 1948. Farrel and Celeste Spiro and Geoff and myself were playing cricket in the street outside our house. Other games we played were a one called kenney which was played with two sticks. Suddenly the sky turned very pink and the wind started blowing very strongly. I remember my mom was feeding Beulah who was just a baby at that time. We saw roofs flying past outside our bedroom window. We were the lucky ones because only the wall around our house and the garage were destroyed apart from our veranda chairs which had blown away.

Most of the people in Roodepoort were badly affected and had to be put up in the town hall.



Geoff Boner's friend George Rosowsky was 12 years old when the tornado hit. George remembers "I was standing on the steps of the Roodepoort Synagogue, waiting for the service to commence when I noticed a dense cloud of red dust in the dusk air. The sky was darkening, and it appeared we were in for a heavy storm so I decided to make my way home on Nefdt Street," said George.

On his journey home, the hail started falling, with the stones bigger than any he has seen before. He used the pine trees as cover as he ran home. "As I opened our front door, our square carpet in the entrance hall was rising up in the air – like a magic carpet," he said.

What stood out most for him, is a family friend from Johannesburg who had heard about the devastation on the radio, arriving at their door with blankets, candles and a few groceries.



Like others, George also remembers the spirit among the community and the generosity of the Indian traders. “Even the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides helped, and the community members made sandwiches and coffee for everyone who flocked to help. If something like this should happen today, I am afraid it would be much different,” George concluded.

One of the tragicomedies to come out of an otherwise catastrophic happening, was the story told of completely denuded chickens found kilometres away, illustrating the force of the wind.



Roodepoort Tornado

Compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London February 2024

