

THE SPOT

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Eye on the sky

By Rebecca Shelton
Sun Staff Writer

Wilbur E. Goll of Shawnee has been looking for tornadoes for 42 years.

In 1954, he was one of only two tornado spotters covering the entire Johnson County area.

"I've never seen a tornado," said Goll, "but I've seen a lot of funnel clouds."

Today, Johnson County has a highly organized spotter network, because even with sophisticated computer technology, the need for spotters has not diminished.

Radar can track the path and intensity of a storm, but it cannot tell when a tornado has touched down.

That's a job for the spotter. More than 400 people make up the spotter network, which includes many police and fire officials.

But the core of the network is the 62 amateur radio operators, or "hams" who volunteer their time, equipment, vehicles, and personal safety.

With lead time from a few minutes to several hours, the "net control operator" will put the word out over the ham radio.



Sun Photo by Hattie Barham

WEATHER WATCHER — Wilbur E. Goll of Shawnee is one of a network of 400 people who keep an eye on the weather in Johnson County. He has been looking for tornadoes in the skies over Kansas for 42 years.

Spotters will then drive to their predetermined locations. This could be a parking lot or the middle of wheat fields — but always with the means for quick escape.

"You make sure you don't get boxed in," says Dick Carter of Shawnee, who

has been spotting for more than 20 years.

Carter has been as close as five miles from a tornado that left mud dripping from the trees.

But many times, nothing happens.

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"It's a hurry-up-and-wait game," he says. "You go to the field and sit for hours. All of a sudden, there's sunshine. But then, radar shows another line coming in worse than the last one."

Carter says it's not tornadoes that pose the greatest danger to spotters, but the flash floods, large hail and damaging winds.

And he once felt a hard blow to his chest and was blinded for a short time

from a very close bolt of lightning. In Johnson County, no spotter has ever been killed or seriously injured while on duty.

But the vehicles of spotters are often pummeled by hail, and in 1993, lightning struck a truck and took the spotter off the air for a few tense minutes.

Once positioned, spotters keep in contact by ham radio with Johnson County Emergency Management, located in the basement of the Olathe courthouse.

"The spotters are our windows," says Rita Hoffman, assistant director in charge of training and public education.

Hoffman said to be an official spotter, a person must be at least 18 years of age, attend a four-hour training course and pass an exam, then be recertified every two years.

"It's not as simple as just looking at the sky," said Hoffman.

On a recent Sunday evening, the National Weather Service placed Johnson County under a severe thunderstorm watch, which changed to a warning when a storm cell began to head toward the county line.

Immediately, the "net" was activated.

Keith Bowman left work and drove into the storm as it moved north along I-35. Spotters begin to report three-quarter-inch hail, winds over 60 miles per hour and zero visibility.

And Bowman reported seeing a car overturned in a ditch. He was the first on the scene to help the motorist.

"She was very lucky, her car was filling with water," said Bowman, who stayed with the woman until emergency assistance arrived.

Spotters reported their sightings to the net operator, who reported them to Hoffman, who relayed the information to the National Weather Service, who sent it to the news media, who broadcast it to the public.

From first sighting to public broadcast, lapsed time can be under a minute.

In Olathe, Steve Rainey was running an errand when asked to proceed to his spotter location.

There are no official female spotters in Johnson County, but on Sunday, Rainey's 17-year-old daughter, Trish, just happened to be in the car when the call came.

"I told you it was going to rain," she told her father. "I'm not big on lightning, but I'm fine. It's cool to watch."

Under normal circumstances, Trish would be at home worrying about her father.

"We know when my Dad gets called at 2 in the morning — it's bad," she said.

Rainey parked his car near the New Century AirCenter. The sky was black, and Rainey had to wait for lightning to illuminate the clouds. Sparks from power lines or transformers blowing would have told him a tornado was on the ground.

"At night, it can be a little scary," said Rainey. "The wind can be rocking the car, rain on the windshield, and then they tell you you're going to get a 70 mph wind gust. At this point, the trees are bending over. There's always that one minute where you have to just ride it out."

But the sirens did not sound. By 8 p.m. the sky was calm and the storm had moved east.

"We don't chase tornadoes or drive into the middle of them — no thank you," said Rainey.

Rainey said it's neither a particular interest in weather phenomena, nor the element of danger that motivates him to be a spotter.

"I feel like I've accomplished something — saved some lives," he said, "because we might be able to give information a second sooner."

At 9:35 p.m., Rainey was told to "stand down." Until next time.