

## SOME COMMENTS CONCERNING MY EXPERIENCES ON 5/5/93 IN SOUTHWEST KANSAS by Jon Davies

I don't enjoy writing this type of article, but I feel some clarification is needed regarding events in which I was involved on May 5 in southwest Kansas. Many stories I hear being passed around among storm enthusiasts and meteorologists are quite inaccurate, and tend to ignore some larger issues concerning storm chasers and law enforcement people that also require some comment.

On the evening of May 5, along with dozens of chasers and curious locals, I had been following and photographing a tornado family that moved almost due north across the Oklahoma panhandle into southwest Kansas. I drove north on the blacktop between Hooker and Moscow, well within the speed limit, and occasionally pulled over at section roads to observe tornadoes to my northwest.

Somewhere east of Hugoton near dark I came upon a blazer/wagon-type vehicle with amber flashers that was stopped on my side of the road. Two men in baseball caps and plain clothes were yelling for me and the northbound vehicles behind me to stop. I figured these were county volunteer spotters, properly keeping people from driving north into a tornado that they thought was moving northeast, rather than due north. I stopped and waited on the right side of the road. I did not hear either man identify himself, and no specific markings were visible to me from the rear of the vehicle.

Soon, the two men got into their vehicle and pulled slightly over to the right. Assuming (incorrectly and improperly) that this was a sign that the "spotters" were now less concerned about danger to traffic as the tornado moved further north, I slowly pulled out around the vehicle to keep the tornado in view as it moved into its occlusion stage. Soon I was abruptly overtaken and forced to the side of the road by the same vehicle I had passed. One of the plain clothes passengers jumped out and, identifying himself as a sheriff, demanded to see my driver's license. He seemed unreasonably angry, and cut me off when I tried to discuss who I was and the situation at hand. Snatching the license from me, he said I could pick it up in the morning at his office when he would write me a ticket, then hurried back to his vehicle and began backing south down the blacktop.

I was stunned, and certainly unclear whether I was to park my vehicle at that point and walk, or what. At the next mile intersection north were parked two or three vehicles, so I proceeded to the intersection hoping to discuss the situation with some other people.

As I approached the mile section, the sheriff roared up beside me again. I was ordered to get out of the car, which I did immediately. I offered no resistance as I was searched and was hand-cuffed, even though no one would tell me what exactly I was being arrested for. No one attempted to read me my rights. At no point did I lose my temper, but I was very direct as I was escorted away from my vehicle in saying I wanted nothing to happen to my briefcase, notes, and camera equipment in my unlocked car.

To make a long story short, I was driven to Hugoton where I was finger-printed and booked for "disobeying" the sherriff, who was not present. I was very cooperative, and the office personnel could soon see I was harmless and that essentially the situation was a misunderstanding. When the sheriff returned 1-1/2 hours later, I was released and no official charges were filed. Around 11 PM I paid \$40.00 to have my car released from a garage in Moscow.

There are two sides to every story, and, though I'm upset about the way the situation was handled, I think it is important to look at the viewpoint of the law enforcement personnel involved. A large tornado was on the ground nearby, and there was a sizable "circus" of chasers and locals driving north to view a tornado that, by typical Kansas standards, should be moving northeast and crossing the same road. Several cars passed me at high speed a couple of miles before I got to the "road block". While I have no idea what happened to these drivers, I suspect that the sheriff and his people were quite stressed in dealing with a rapidly evolving and dangerous situation that had the added complication of some people who appeared to be driving recklessly at times. Although the law enforcement personnel were less than communicative with me, I later learned they told NWS personnel that a vehicle they were unable to stop had been clocked at over 100 mph; the same vehicle drove over wheat fields on private property. This kind of chaser behavior is so reckless and absurd, it doesn't deserve comment.

For my own part, I did make a mistake in judgement by assuming it was alright for me to pass the vehicle with flashers in front of me. *I should have not assumed anything*, and walked over to the vehicle to discuss the situation with the passengers. I will not make that mistake again. As a friend pointed out to me recently, when a tornado or tornado family has been on the ground for some time, law enforcement people will be trying to do their job to protect people. In such situations, I think chasers and observers should be cooperative and comply when blocked from proceeding by local officials, even if some of us think there is little danger and that we know more about the situation.

I do have some suggestions for law enforcement officials that would help them to communicate better: (1) wear some kind of identification so people can see who you are (2) if you are going to block a road, *block it* (e.g., position your vehicle in the middle of the road) so that there is no question about what is intended (3) keep your cool; the anger directed at me seemed unwarranted by the situation (it was probably directed in part at other offenders who got away), and did little to encourage compliance or a respectful attitude in a situation I did not fully understand.

Additionally, I feel law enforcement people can be more clear about what they want people to do in a given situation. If they want someone to move away, they should walk or drive up to them and tell them directly to leave rather than shouting directions in the wind at people across a road. If this isn't possible due to the number of people present, then a clearly marked road block should be used to keep people away. For example, an Oklahoma Highway Patrol officer showed up at an intersection north of Hooker where I was parked beside chasers from NSSL. He was apparently willing to allow some people to remain where they were, but from across the road behind me it was certainly not clear who he wanted to stay and who he wanted to leave.

Finally, it is my opinion that there are getting to be too many chasers, TV crews, and curious observers on the roads looking for the "ultimate video" or some kind of "thrills and chills", rather than seeking a better understanding, documentation, and appreciation of storms or providing information of value to the public. Some of us need to take a hard look at why we are out there, and whether we are part of a serious problem that puts other people in danger. It may be that in crowded situations, some of us would contribute more to solving the problem by removing ourselves from the scene rather than trying to find a place to view. After my experiences on 5/5/93, I'm going to seriously consider doing that in future situations of a similar nature.