

DOWN HOME: A tornado, rain and a prairie set on fire

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The radio announcer mispronounced Darrouzett (dare-uh-ZET), but he got all the others right—Booker, Follett, Lipscomb and Higgins.

And before he finished the list, I knew why he was reciting the names of every village in Lipscomb County: Grassfires.

Sure enough, local officials were thinking about evacuating the entire northeast corner of the Texas Panhandle. An incendiary mix of undiminished drought, unrelenting wind and unending prairie engulfed the county. And the flames threatened everything.

Most of his listeners never knew the announcer botched the pronunciation of Darrouzett. “Lipscomb County, where’s that?” they might have mused. Much closer to Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado and Kansas than to Dallas.

But sitting in my car, driving home from work, I felt the heat of those grassfires. I felt part of my heritage was about to go up in flames.

Mother grew up in Lipscomb County, in Higgins, where old-timers still

recall the tornado that devastated the community April 9, 1947—the last monster calamity to strike that part of the world.

By the time I was born, Mother and Uncle Norman were grown, of course. Grammar and Popo, my grandparents, had moved over into Oklahoma, but they still owned the family home. When Popo took me with him to check on things, I soaked up the place and the people who had shaped my family and contributed to who I was.

In 1987, we went back to the cemetery to bury Popo. Grammar showed me the eight graves Popo and another man hand-dug after the twister tore up their town.

Listening to the announcer talk about the threat to Lipscomb County, I couldn't help but think about the specter of flames sweeping right over Popo's body. I've never seen a burned-over cemetery. Still, I can imagine that if the grave markers don't get too charred, the place might be pretty if spring rains ever come again and grass springs green and new again.

Homes and stores and churches and the school are a different matter. All the markers that hold memories for generations—not to mention the shelter and livelihood of folks who live there today—could be gone in a matter of minutes.

Given their choices, I'd imagine most folks would take their chances with a prairie fire as opposed to a tornado. But a conflagration that spreads out for miles and eats up hundreds of thousands of acres of farms and ranchland is a ferocious beast. And 59 years from now, a middle-aged Texan will remember his grandparents talking about how they survived the Fire of '06.

As I write this, I don't know "the rest of the story." The weather forecasters are talking about the possibility of precipitation. But today, the wind still blows in Lipscomb County and across the Panhandle. And farms and

ranches and homes and towns sit before the fickle mercy of nature.

Pray for rain.

--*Marv Knox*

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