
The Man Who Painted the Lake Gervais Tornado

Mark J. Meister

THE LAKE GERVAIS TORNADO of July 13, 1890, does not rank as one of Minnesota's great weather events. Though six people died and eleven were injured in it, it was not, according to weather experts and statisticians, one of the more devastating tornadoes in the state's history. Nevertheless that dramatic and ominous moment when the tornado touched the earth has been more graphically preserved in our history than many other more destructive storms and events. For on that afternoon, a photographer happened to be taking "views" from a St. Paul bluff, and he captured the tornado on film. Subsequently, a Minneapolis house painter, who had aspirations to more artistic occupations, based an oil painting on this photograph, ensuring for himself a small but secure niche in the state's art history.¹

On that memorable Sunday afternoon in 1890, vacationers and weekend guests in cottages, resort hotels, and tents around Lake Gervais and Lake Kohlman — popular places for St. Paulites because they were so close to the city — began to notice the threatening-looking weather. People began to head for lake shores, for cellars, and for low ground. There was ample time to observe the tornado's progress and to take cover, noted the *St. Paul Daily Pioneer Press* the next day, and it specu-

lated that the dead and injured either had not seen it coming because the tree-covered hills obstructed the view, or, "if seen was not thought dangerous." An eyewitness was camped on the north side of Lake Gervais and later told a reporter: "At 4 o'clock the weather was what you might call threatening. At 4:45 it began to blow from the southeast and the typical funnel-shaped clouds began to form in the northwest, advancing slowly against the wind. As these clouds approached Lake Gervais they swooped down like an eagle, and in a moment the cottages on the south side of the lake were in the air along with trees and anything else that pleased the tornado's fancy to pick up."²

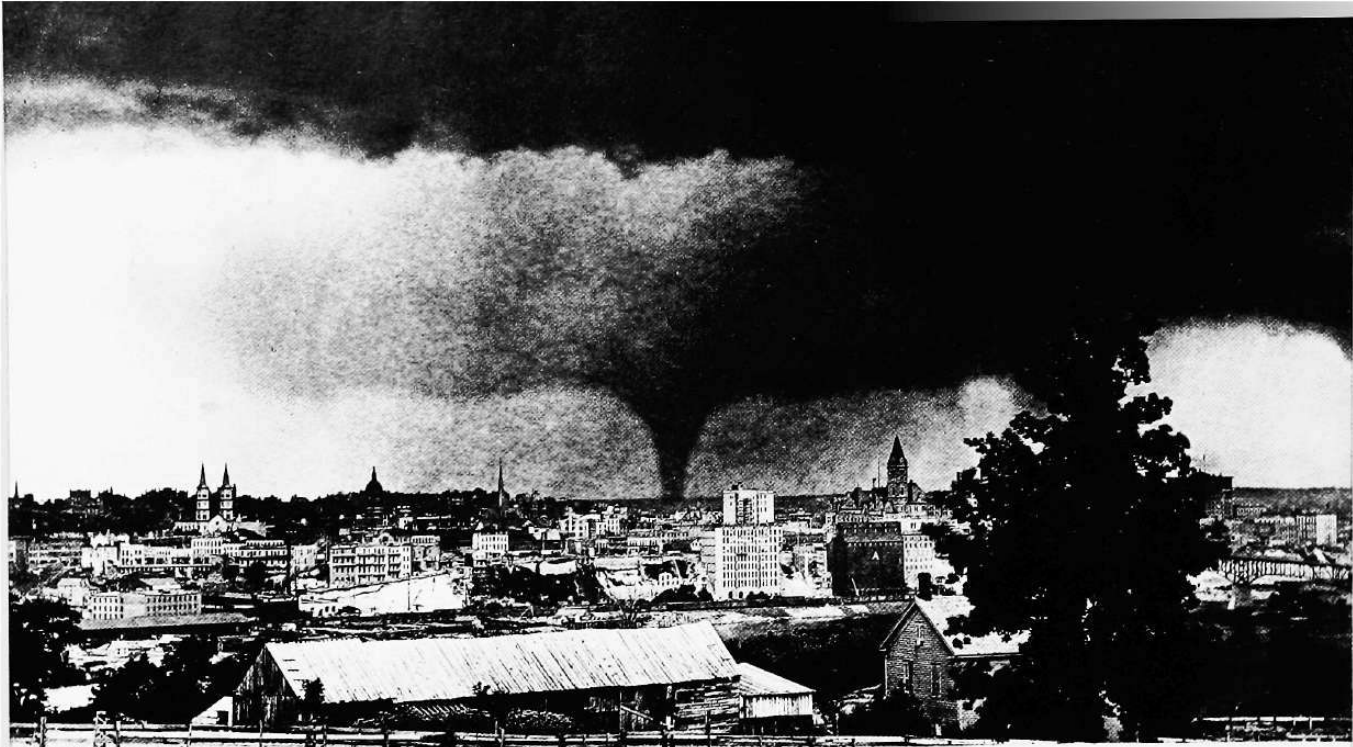
Apprehensive residents of St. Paul watched the storm approach throughout the afternoon and breathed a collective sigh of relief when it disappeared east of St. Paul. But one observer who was probably as elated as he was relieved was William F. Koester, a photographer for the St. Paul firm of Fredricks and Koester, who had his camera set up to take pictures from a Cherokee Heights bluff overlooking the city. From the news reports of the funnel's slow approach, one can conclude that he probably had plenty of time to arrange his equipment and wait patiently (if nervously) for what was probably the most dramatic scene he had ever photographed. Fredricks and Koester, realizing the appeal of this picture — which was enhanced by the fact that so many people had seen the tornado — published five-by-eight-inch souvenir cards for sale. The Minnesota Historical Society's audio-visual library has a copy of this photograph in its collection, and many more may still exist.

On the back of the card this legend was printed: "This 'Chance Shot' of the Lake Gervais Cyclone was taken about 5 o'clock P.M., July 13th, 1890, from the West St. Paul Bluff, where the undersigned happened to be with his camera, taking views at the time of the disaster.

¹Bruce Watson, *WCCO Radio Weather Guide*, 1977, 30, 1976, 157 (Navarre, Minnesota, 1976, 1975); *St. Paul Daily Pioneer Press*, July 14, 1890, p. 1.

²*St. Paul Daily Pioneer Press*, July 14, 1890, p. 1, 2; Jerome O. Schueler, "'Salubrious Minnesota': Kohlman's Hotel and the Resort Era," in *Ramsey County History*, 5:16-18 (Fall, 1968).

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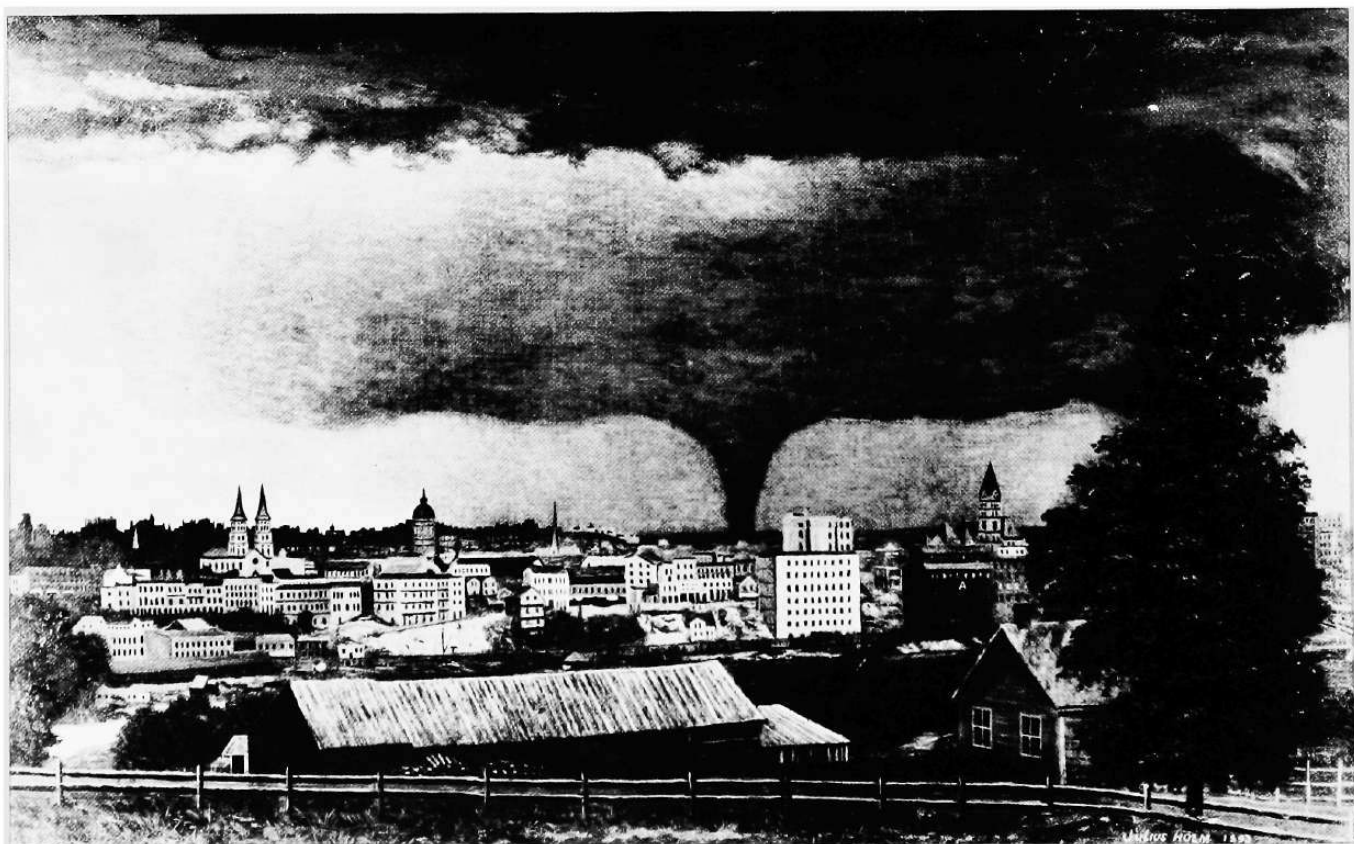


LAKE GERVAIS CYCLONE AS SEEN FROM ST. PAUL JULY 13TH 1890.

FREDRICKS & KOESTER

THE LAKE GERVAIS CYCLONE (above), a "chance shot" captured by photographer William F. Koester; copy in MHS audio-visual library.

"TORNADO OVER ST. PAUL" (below), an oil painting by Julius O. Holm based on Koester's photograph; published with permission of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.



"As per County Map, the distance from point of observation, Cherokee Avenue and Ohio Street, to where the funnel-shaped cloud touched the earth, is full six miles, in a direct line a little east of north.

Wm. F. Koester."

THE HOUSE PAINTER was Julius O. Holm, who may or may not have been an eyewitness to the tornado but who was struck by the dramatic appeal of the photograph. Three years after the disaster, Holm based an oil painting on the photograph, which has been called simply "Tornado over St. Paul."³

The answer to the question, who was Julius Holm, remains elusive. Some facts have begun to emerge, however. By 1893 when he did the painting he was a house painter and self-taught artist whose aspirations were growing. He never attained his goals. Although he listed his occupation as an artist or a portrait artist for almost a decade, no portraits of his contemporaries have been found thus far. Only two other paintings of his are known, and both are copies of other works. One is a three by five feet oil painting of Martin Luther, the other a portrait of Norwegian lay preacher and revivalist Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771–1824). Both are owned by St. Olaf College in Northfield.⁴

Holm was a Norwegian immigrant who arrived in Minnesota in 1880 at the age of twenty-four and he is first listed in the *Minneapolis City Directory* in 1881. He gave his occupation as painter — probably of houses, not of portraits and scenery. His listed addresses were always in or near the predominantly Scandinavian

Cedar-Riverside community. Several Holms (presumably blood relatives since Julius never married) lived with him on and off over the years. He may have been the first in his family to arrive in Minneapolis, and his home may have been a sort of "jumping off" place for the others. Perhaps their sporadic sharing of quarters was a reflection of their fluctuating fortunes.⁵

Beginning in 1882 in the city directories, Theodore Holm, a tailor, shared Julius's address, followed soon by Marcus, a cabinetmaker, Ole S., a carpenter, Adolph O., a butcher, John O., a tailor, "Miss" Sophia Holm, sometimes listed as a housekeeper, and, later still, "Mrs." Christina Holm, widow of Ole. John was Julius's brother, and the common middle initial O suggests that Adolph, at least, was also a brother.⁶

Holm was listed as a house painter in the directories until 1896, three years after he had painted "Tornado over St. Paul." Then he was briefly associated with John Snesrud in the Holm and Snesrud Photography Studio at 1313 Washington Avenue South in Minneapolis. Snesrud had previously worked for Snyder Brothers Photography Studio at 729 Hennepin. In 1897, Snesrud moved to Shakopee. Holm is never again listed as a photographer. Snesrud was the experienced photographer of the two, and it is quite possible that when he left Minneapolis, Holm did not have the skill, equipment, or inclination to continue in that trade.⁷

From 1897 to 1906, Holm gave his occupation as artist or portrait artist with the exception of two years when he returned to house painting. In 1902 and 1903, Sophia Holm is also listed as an artist associated with "J. O. Holm," which may mean that Holm was doing well enough to have needed an assistant. Unhappily, in 1903, at the age of thirty, Sophia died. By 1908, Holm was again a house painter — an occupation he followed until his death on November 25, 1930, at the age of seventy-four. His last known job was as a painter for Kayser and Company in Minneapolis, a manufacturer of wallpaper and room molding. It is unclear whether Holm was ever able to support himself as an artist, but it is also unclear whether he ever gave up being an artist, even when working as a house painter.

HOLM'S use of a photograph as a basis for his painting is in keeping with traditional practice. Academic artists have often used photographs as a source for paintings, and until recently that widespread practice has been largely ignored by art historians. Self-taught artists like Holm have been generally neglected in such studies of the correlations between painting and photographs. Holm's work, like that of many self-educated artists, has an amateurish yet fresh and vital quality which has often been compared to children's art and unfortunately has been termed "primitive" or "naïve" — terms which also have other connotations and meanings.⁸

³Until now, no one has published the fact that the painting was based on Koester's photograph. Rena Neumann Coen, *Painting and Sculpture in Minnesota, 1820–1914*, 60, 134 (Minneapolis, 1976); editor interview with Gregory Hedberg, curator of painting, Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

⁴Editor interview with Reider Dittman, professor of art and gallery director, St. Olaf College, Northfield; A. Christian Bang, *Hans Nielsen Hauge og hans samtid, et tidsbillede fra omkring år 1800* (Copenhagen, 1910); Joseph M. Shaw, *Pulpit Under the Sky: A Life of Hans Nielsen Hauge* (Minneapolis, 1955).

⁵Obituary in the files of the Norwegian-American Historical Association, St. Olaf College, Northfield; *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1881 through 1931. Information about Holm, his relatives, occupations, residences, and associates in this and subsequent paragraphs is from the city directories.

⁶Obituary in files of the Norwegian-American Historical Association.

⁷The possibility that he might have been a hand-colorist of photographs should not be dismissed.

⁸Van Deren Coke, *The Painter and the Photograph from Delacroix to Warhol*, esp. 233–275 (Albuquerque, 1965); Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography*, 98–103 (London, 1968); Elinor B. Robinson, "American Primitive Paintings," in *Antiques*, 19:33–36 (January, 1931); Edith Gregor Halpert, "American Folk Art Painting," in *Design*, September, 1937, p. 9–14.

Holm's painting was true to the photograph only as far as his untrained eye would take him. He may have used a system of graphing his blank canvas and the photograph to provide himself with co-ordinates to make the painting more accurate, but it is doubtful. Ultimately his own vision prevailed.

The dark clouds and the funnel in his painting are essentially faithful to the photograph, although Holm has made them more powerful. It is the details of the city that he fails to capture completely. His buildings are copies of those in the photograph in general form, although he has advantageously added color, contrasting the buildings with the dark sky. Except for windows, much of the surface decorations and details are omitted. Background structures are almost entirely obscured in some cases. In his attempt to reproduce an entire scene, Holm focused on certain individual objects, paying an inordinate amount of attention to windows, distorting their size as well as the size of the buildings, which are proportionately larger than they are in the photograph. He enlarged the foreground with the fence and omitted most of the scene to the right of the tree and added a

humorous touch just above his signature by painting this tree growing half inside and half outside the fence railings. Unlike many self-taught or primitive painters who are anonymous, Holm signed his name.

Identifiable in both the painting and the photograph are, from left to right, the twin-spired Assumption Church (still standing), the second State Capitol building, West Publishing Company (the large white building, center right), which, with additions, still stands, grain elevator "A" of the St. Paul Warehouse and Elevator Company (now gone), and, behind it, the St. Paul City Hall (now gone). At far right, partially obscured by the tree, is the Pioneer Building.

Recently the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, recognizing that it was an excellent example of a painting by a self-taught artist, purchased the Holm painting. The man who longed to be a successful artist but who could never really escape from the house painting profession has now received lasting recognition as an artist. He will be remembered as the man who painted the Lake Gervais cyclone of 1890.



“The Little Jean Pants”

THE FALL, 1977, issue of *Minnesota History* contained a description of the Minnesota Historical Society's latest major exhibit, "The Clothes Off Our Backs: A Minnesota Collection," which was inaugurated in September (and is still open to visitors) in the society's main building at 690 Cedar Street. Star of that exhibit and symbol of its major themes are a pair of worn, faded, and patched little boy's overalls.

To some people, making something apparently so trivial as these overalls the star of a major clothing exhibit

must have seemed unusual. Such people ought to read the following essay uncovered by writer and historian Helen M. White of Taylors Falls, while doing research in Evanston, Illinois. It was written by an individual listed only as "Rev. L. Hawkins" and was published in the November 30, 1864, issue of the Central Christian Advocate, a Methodist weekly published in St. Louis, Missouri. We believe that it puts little boys' overalls in their proper intellectual perspective and will perhaps persuade those who may think them frivolous to take them a little more seriously.

HAVING OCCASION not long since to use some refuse clothes in rubbing the stain on a piece of cabinet work, I went to the pile of paper-rags in the store of the village merchant and helped myself. Among those taken were a little pair of cast-off pants. They were considerable of a curiosity. I held them up in my hands and looked at them; and while I did so the words of the poet came forcibly to my mind —

"To what base uses have we come at last!" Let me describe them. They were about eighteen inches in length, all torn, the legs and body about equally divided, say nine inches each. The material of which they were made was blue cotton jean, costing, probably, before the war, from twelve and a half to eighteen and three quarter cents per yard; now, probably from thirty-seven and a half to fifty cents. Of the price of this material, however,



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