

Variable Iowa Weather

By N. TJERNAGEL

The reason it is so interesting to live in the heart of the Middle West partly may be ascribed to the great variety of weather. Outside of the general manifestations, which appear seasonally, one cannot know definitely what freakish atmospheric upset may be in the offing within the day's span. The modern weather-bureau forecasts general conditions fairly well, but sometimes inadvertently "takes the public by the nose," especially as concerns local conditions. There also are private weather prophets, nor do they always miss their guess, but by comparison horses are perhaps equally reliable, being instinctively aware of coming weather changes. Generally, animals provide their own weather bureau when left to themselves, and the nature lover does well to observe their habits.

We speak as if we were in the know about June floods, January thaws and Indian summers, but these are elusive enough at that. One may never place a finger on their exact approach; nor do we quite realize how quickly that thunderstorm we see advancing will be upon us in the field, or how soon the apparent threat may possibly disappear. We are fairly certain there will be rain when we feel the drops, see the lightning, mark the wind, and we ask: how much and for how long? So we remain on edge, occupied with our work in the open until we are nice and damp, uncertain as to whether it will clear up, or that a "deluge" is at hand. Both have happened; threatening clouds flirting with rain dissipating into nothingness and leaving the earth parched; or, sluice-gates opening up from the assembled vapors above, drenching the ground and the tarrying field-worker with generous downpours. But it can be fun to wade around midst the teeming rivulets and pattering rain, when glorious

sunshine and freshened colors beckon beyond, the plants, meanwhile, taking on added growth.

THE STORM CLOUD

Here we see no lofty mountain peaks, but our cloud formations make up for them in variety and magnificence, and eclipse such aerial exhibitions most anywhere else in the world. To see an approaching thunderstorm rolling in from the Northwest is appalling in its immensity, but is inordinately grand in its majestic approach. To witness a tornado at work is a fearsome spectacle, but what of the significance in view of the power that releases it? It inspires awe in the on-looker and demonstrates to him that he is but an atom at best, and that it is well for him to look beyond himself for the greater supremacy, care and protection. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that these mighty manifestations of Nature do not seem to discourage individuals from exerting themselves; rather it helps boost them into ever continuing effort and activity. How languid, by comparison, for instance, is the passive clime and ever blue sky of Egypt: nor does it seem greatly to influence its present dwellers to accomplishment.

SEASONAL VARIETY

Iowa's springtime with its exuberance of new growth, seeded and perennial, its joyous songbirds, frisky four-footed folk, vociferous frogs and insects, electrifies us into action and makes for hope, looking toward the time of ripeness, of fruition. And does not the beauty and glamour of unfolding life feed our esthetic sense and help form both body and soul into more amiable proportions?

And how about the heat-elixir of summer, when the sweat pours, rejuvenating the body, even bringing ease to some who are afflicted with confirmed ailments! For the season discouraging indisposition, it is especially irksome to continue in the role of an invalid out in the sun and the wind and the dew. What of the delightful summer evenings out on the porch? Was

there ever a more cosy, romantic air and atmosphere of an evening to be enjoyed elsewhere? There we may sit, relaxed and fanned by the evening zephyrs, the air balmy and home-like, not exotic. Sleep is not confined to a stuffy room, and we recline in the open, counting stars until we drone away in slumber. Who said there were always mosquitoes?

The warm days are succeeded by the mellowness of early autumn, with its changing hues of varied color, its insect ensembles, the lovely still days and unruffled canopy of blue in the heavens. That is when day-dreams take on actual form and we wander about in wood and meadow to whet the lofty longings of body and soul. Of course, if one were in a surly, carping mood, it might be fairly easy to overlook the seasons' brighter aspects and hunt for little miseries here and there; but, what fool is man when he thus cheats himself of the greater delight of living!

And so comes late fall, with carping winds in fields and forest, and soon after the season's first snow, always a revelation; it's white blanket serves the soil beneficially; also helps lift up men's minds from mundane sordidness. It is a sign that everything be tucked up and in order, inside and out; then what greater pleasure may we enjoy than to foregather in the bosom of the family, "where the hearts are of each other sure" to rest, to read, to talk, to listen, sing and play. On moonlight nights the ice offers its allure, or the snow-covered hills; and bodily well-being may be ours, even in winter when we duly regard diet, precautions as to heat and cold, and the requisite of pure air. Winter seems harsh mostly because we are neglectful, or when we are unable to provide for its seasonal requirements.

SNOWED UNDER

Speaking of the rigors of winter, we are reminded of the fact that it was not at all easy in the early days to have everything shipshape and in readiness for the onslaught of extreme cold or the fury of storms.

James Brown, for one, experienced great trials during the winter of 1856-57, which was intensely severe alternating with sleet, blizzards, and heavy snowfalls. Thinking to obtain the greater protection against wind and weather, when building his house, he decided to erect it on the sunny slope of the hillside, but it proved to be a mistaken choice of location. Prairie fires had swept away the tall grass after the first frost in the fall, which left the snow free to drift at the caprice of the wind. The "northwesters" were the most tempestuous, and the drifts forming from this direction, finally grew so high as to envelop the dwelling and outbuildings, barring also the path to the well, the only water source except snow, which had to be melted on the kitchen stove both for man and beast, a well-nigh impossible task. Transportation of any kind was not only blocked by drifts, but because of the bare ice in parts of the wind-swept road and elsewhere, an unshod team could find no footing, and in the present emergency, was rendered useless. By the fall of 1857, the Browns had righted their mistake, having moved their abode to the top of the hill, away from the drift center; and here they lived, well or ailing, in sunshine and storm, well advanced in life, to the end of their days.

Michael Hegland, like many another intrepid pioneer, experienced some harsh winters during the early years of residence in Story county. The tempests would sweep across the bare prairie and upon reaching the homesteads and other form of resistance, would pile up huge snowy drifts high enough to bury the largest haystacks. The settlers were obliged to shovel deep into the snow and make steps therein to reach and distribute their fodder. The hay was pulled forth with improvised wooden hooks, but before the harassed choreman had reached the livestock with a precious armful the merciless wind had whipped away a goodly portion of it. The hours were long that were spent waiting in many a cabin for the uproar of wind and weather outside to subside.

Another early-comer, Hans Henryson-Beroen, related that back in the fifties and sixties the winters were often severe and full of trying experiences. Snowstorms in the form of blizzards would come up with unexpected suddenness and continue with varying intensity, sometimes as long as four days. Drifts were known to have piled up as high as eighteen feet. Guide ropes were strung along between the well and buildings during the storm period. The well on the old Beroen place had been sunk thirty rods away from the house, and when bad weather rendered it too difficult to reach, there was no lack of snow immediately by to melt, if possible, to serve as a substitute for the sorely missed well water. The snow drifted clean those days when the fields were tiny, and the soil but little exposed. Death stalked in the air during the fiercest storms and people were known to have missed their bearings and lost their lives, when venturing forth away from guide ropes or familiar fence lines.

MAIL CARRIERS' EXPERIENCES

We learn through Mr. Chris Nelson that the early mail-carriers endured great hardships in the performance of their duties. Especially was this the case during bad winter weather, or when the prairie roads were rendered well-nigh impassible during spring thaws, or after protracted rains. The elder Nelson held the contract to carry the mail between Nevada and Story City twice a week, and north to Randall once a week, a country post office established April 15, 1863, I. Biggs, postmaster, with Henry L. Henderson as his successor, appointed November 23, 1854, and surving till June 15, 1890. Mail deliveries continued for a time in the early days from the Randall post office to Lakins Grove some six miles further north. Many a time father Nelson was mired down in the sloughs, and it was a difficult as well as unpleasant task to work the mudplastered mail vehicle back on firm ground. In case of sickness or other particular emergency, young Chris had to take his father's place,

and on such occasions usually suffered his full share of mishaps and disagreeable experiences.

Once, on coming across the prairie from Nevada to Story City on a bitterly cold day, our young mail-carrier jumped out of his sleigh to warm up a bit by running. Sprinting along and crossing a big pond covered with ice, his reindeer shoes, which slipped easily, proved treacherous, and down he went. Regaining his feet he called to his horse, but owing to the strong wind they were facing the horse did not hear him and kept trotting doggedly on and on intent on home. There was nothing for the unlucky driver to do but to race for it, which with wildly palpitating heart he did unto utter exhaustion, yet catching up with the exasperatingly dutiful steed just in the nick of time to save himself. Had he not been successful he might not have lived to tell the tale, considering the extreme cold and high wind.

Another time, caught in a raging blizzard, he was obliged to crouch down in his sleigh under cover of his buffalo robe to protect himself. Left to himself the faithful horse on his own account found the way home, and the benumbed driver emerged from his burrow somewhat uncertainly, but with the mail-pouch fast in his grasp. In speaking of his experiences our old friend would have us know that he cherishes the memory of the old horse and thinks of his faithful service on that occasion as providential. Shortly after these notes were taken, Mr. Nelson departed this life. The elder Nelson died in 1869, and Nels Utaaker took over as his successor in the mail carrying business.

WINTER EXPERIENCES

Our maternal grandfather relates that during some of the winters back in the pioneer days, blizzards would blow in with great fury, and sometimes threatened fairly to obliterate the habitations of the Des Moines river squatters, who lived on the edge of the wind-swept prairie. It happened at times, that the little cabins and sheds would disappear in the drifts at

night, and in the morning a solitary chimney seen here and there was about all the variety the landscape afforded. The deep blanket of snow had enveloped the scene surprisingly fast, but it was a matter requiring prolonged effort to burrow out from under.

Once, when out in his sleigh, grandfather was caught in a furious "northwester," and then had an unique experience. There were other wayfarers on the road besides himself, and noting that one poor fellow had lost his cap, he drew off his own and gave it to the shivering wretch, pulling the collar of his own great-coat over his exposed neck and ears. He had only driven a short distance when lo! another cap better than his own was flung before him out of the storm. The Word "Cast your bread upon the waters" had a way of occurring to him at the thought of the providential cap.

As a member of the congregation, grandfather frequently drove for days and days in rough wintry weather, to take the pioneer pastor, the Rev. Nils Amlund, part or all of the way on some of his preaching itineraries, which included Fort Dodge, Badger, Tipton, Roland, Story City, and other places, the first of these being quite distant. They were, necessarily enough, well-clad, Amlund especially, he having foot-covering consisting of many layers of wool and leather, also coats and great-coats of different sizes, one topping the other. We cannot but look with great respect and admiration on these men and others, whose interest in furthering the Lord's Kingdom, prompted them, despite great trials and hardships, to such unselfish, devotional activities.

CREEK AND RIVER OVERFLOW

Whoever it was that named Long Dick creek, flowing from north to south through east Scott township, Hamilton county, chose the designation well, for, like the River Jordan, it's innumerable twists and turns, if straightened, would resolve themselves into an astonishing distance. Not only is its course of consider-

able length, but during freshets the otherwise unassuming streamlet will quickly take on volume and become really formidable in depth and breadth. The rise may be so sudden that the oncoming flood will form in discernible tiers looking toward its source.

In the early days, the bridges here were rather frail and would sometimes be riven asunder by the raging waters or, at least, be submerged, making very precarious footing for those who waded in and tried to cross. One of our early friends, Osmund Mortvedt, endeavored to do this on horseback one day in the early spring when the ice-jammed waters rose fast and furious and were flooding the bridge platform. Insecure of foot the frightened animal on which our friend was mounted suddenly swerved aside and slumped into the torrent. The rider kept to his mount and sought to work himself and horse towards the nearest bank, but the struggling animal finally gave up, finding itself beaten, and drifted passively with the current downstream. When, at last, rider and horse, were flung aside near the shore like other drift material, they were both so benumbed with cold and exposure that they could scarce make land. How fortunate that this man survived the life-threatening danger, that he might continue on for years his good influence in the community.

The sudden rising of Long Dick creek caused much uneasiness on the part of the boys sent to watch the cattle left free to graze on the open prairie. A cousin of ours related that he had sometimes been caught on the far side of the creek when it's rapidly rising waters made it difficult for him to get his herd across and home. He dared not swim over because of the swift current, but watching the cattle take to the water for home on their own account he would hasten to grab hold of Goldie's tail, to be towed in safety to the other side.

A FLOOD FATALITY

The Rasmus Eide family, who lived near the creek,

lost a young child through one of its rampages. The child, a little girl, who had edged too near the flooded banks while at play, had fallen into it's swirling waters, and was carried away. Efforts to reach her were made, but proved futile. As a last resort someone suggested that a wagon-box hard by be launched into the creek in a final attempt at rescue. "Why, that won't do; the wagon-box is new and might be damaged!" So spoke a woman in a hysteria of excitement, not realizing what she said. Dazed by the catastrophe the others acquiesced, and by the time they had recovered their wits further rescue work was unavailing. Ready presence of mind, enabling one to act on the instant in an emergency is a gift, but nowhere can it be better cultivated than in being wide awake and resourceful during untoward, trying circumstances that so often unexpectedly develop in the country districts.

Long Dick creek also must needs be made to serve its useful purposes, for just a little ways north of the old Griffith place, about one mile and a half south-east of Story City, a small grist mill took toll of its rollicking advance and ground grain for people in adjacent territory, including the Roland and Lakins Grove districts. Being obliged to await the capacity of swap yarns, each had his story of frontier experience to add to the general fund of reminiscences. It is to be regretted that no scribe was in at the telling.

The Skunk river, too, frequently took on very unusual width and depth during floods. An early settler came from Illinois in 1858, and visiting Fairview for the first time, had to use a boat to get across the river, which was then swollen to a width of some eighty rods. Those who had worked up timber for wood or otherwise, for future delivery, were quite out of luck, when the water rose and whisked it away for the benefit of shore dwellers down river. Sometimes the floods tore great gaps in the river bank, even toppling through in places and forming new courses and, incidentally, bayous. The water in these formations was left enclosed and

often grew putrid and green with scum-covered surface during summer. River-bottom plantings might look unusually promising in early summer, but if the June floods, or later overflows, took on appreciable proportions, they worked havoc in such low-lying fields.

To one for years familiar with the pranks of the river, it is interesting to have noted and compared its varying haunts from decade to decade. It gives our hearts a feeling of loss, for instance, to see the beloved spot once a favorite fishing hole, all filled with sand, the fickle river, meanwhile, flowing jauntily by in its new bed only to mock the forlorn old-timer.

A PERILOUS FORDING

The Skunk river did not rise quite as rapidly after a heavy downpour as did the creeks east and west of it, but it proved more than fast enough for our Store Per, previously mentioned in these pages, once when he was detained on the opposite side and away from home. As he reached the river on his return, he saw danger before him; but he decided to risk the crossing and ordered his oxen to plunge in. He remained in the wagon-box, which he had lashed to the truck, but when one of the oxen sank and got under the wagon-tongue, he jumped into the stream and with Herculean strength drew forth the submerged animal which, upon being freed, went blowing and snorting down the river. This left Per and Buck to battle alone with the current, which was gradually drawing their outfit away from the landing place. Per now performed a long remembered feat of strength and courage. He took Pride's place in the yoke and with united effort he and Buck managed to struggle ashore with the wagon and its contents. Pride, upon making shore some distance away, absented himself forthwith; so there was nothing for Per to do but continue on in the yoke, and with Buck at his side, jointly they pulled the load home nearly three miles distant.

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