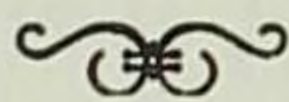


# THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XXXIII    ISSUED IN NOVEMBER 1952    No. 11

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## Cold, Windy, and Wet

Come what may in politics, foreign affairs, or domestic events, Iowans can always be sure of one thing — unpredictable weather. During 1951 the Iowa weatherman's costume ran the gamut from a fur-lined cap and hightop boots to a raincoat and sunglasses. By the close of the year statistics showed 1951 to be one of the coldest, wettest, and windiest years since statewide weather recording began in 1873. Hardest hit by the unseasonable weather was the farmer, who harvested a comparatively poor corn crop.

January blustered in with snow and sleet, then reversed itself in mid-month with a "heat wave" that took the mercury up to a record 69° at Hamburg. Before straw hats were in order, however, the temperature dipped again until it was 43° below zero at Decorah on January 30. A steady flow of bulletins from highway officials warned motorists of icy roads, but auto supply stores reported little change in the demand for tire chains and car heaters. By Lincoln's Birthday, the ther-

mometer reading had edged back up to a record 67° at Council Bluffs, and farmers were complaining because of the lack of rain, which forced them to "import" water for their livestock and homes.

Late in February the first major flood threat of the year was reported at Hamburg when an ice jam several miles long formed on the Missouri River. A similar threat on the Mississippi near Davenport ended when dynamite charges were used to break the jam, which experts blamed on the unseasonably warm temperatures. The first day of March dispelled any notion that the winter's worst was over; a fourteen-inch snow blocked many northern Iowa highways, and snow generally blanketed the state.

The earlier flood threats were hardly forgotten before creeks and rivers began to overflow again. In western Iowa the citizens of Turin, near the confluence of the Little Sioux and Maple rivers, were forced to higher ground when flood waters invaded stores and homes. Torrents from flooded creeks overran highways, ripped away bridges, and caused harried officials to estimate the damage "in the thousands." Tireless sandbag crews at Sabula fought off the Mississippi when it reached a crest of almost twenty-one feet. Rains added to the deluge caused by melting snows in the north. Few Iowans were looking for their first robin when Davenport was threatened by high water. At Waterloo, the Cedar River left

its banks, covered the famous Dairy Cattle Congress showgrounds, and forced a thousand residents from their homes.

The last ten days of April turned into a nightmare for countless Iowans along the Mississippi as they fled their dwellings to seek shelter at emergency relief stations. Twelve hundred were homeless at Davenport. Eighty city blocks in the Dubuque area were under water. Three hundred National Guardsmen and a Coast Guard detachment from Chicago were called to help at Muscatine, where the levee seemed in peril as the flood crest moved southward. Muscatine finally recorded a crest of nearly twenty-one feet, fourteen inches higher than the memorable 1922 flood. But the thirteen miles of levee held firm, thanks to the efforts of Guardsmen, volunteers, and even school children who helped prepare sandbags.

Heavy rains continued to fall on Iowa in May. Ponds and even shallow lakes covered farms. Spring had officially reached Iowa on March 21, but still the unpredictable antics of the weather continued, feigning fall one day and winter the next. Nor were rain and cold the only culprits. Marshalltown was hit by a tornado on June 1, which destroyed one million dollars worth of property. In the Des Moines area, sixty families were warned to move to safer ground when the Raccoon River approached the flood stage.

Marshalltown's residents had hardly recovered

from the first tornado when another twister struck the community on June 19, toppling electric high lines and trees. The same freakish high winds caused \$160,000 damage loss at Elliott. Severe crop damage was reported near Tama. A few days later, on June 25, the town of Duncan was hit by a tornado which killed one person, injured eight, and damaged property estimated at \$500,000. Every one of the town's twenty-five homes was either partially or totally destroyed.

Meanwhile, farmers complained that their corn, oat, and hay crops were damaged by the excess moisture, and cultivation of the all-important corn was delayed.

A July thunderstorm of unusual violence caused widespread damage in northern counties, while hail and rain swept across the eastern areas. At Iowa City a greenhouse owner sadly reported six hundred broken window panes. On the Fourth of July, when the corn was supposed to be "knee-high," Iowans learned the state's 1951 corn crop was in critical condition because of the excessive rains. Crop experts made their forecast, with considerable gloom, of 464,000,000 bushels — "the poorest in years" — almost a hundred million bushels less than the 1949 crop. Corn prices advanced when this news was released, but the farmer found this slight compensation in the face of a diminished crop. A break in the bad news seemed imminent, however, when the state

weather bureau released figures which showed the October corn moisture content average was 35.1 per cent, or less than the average in 1950.

After the cool summer, most folks expected a warm autumn. The farmers particularly hoped for dry weather which would aid their corn crops. But cloudy skies and rain prevailed, to dog the steps of both the farmer and the football fan. Early in November cold winds, clocked at up to seventy-three miles per hour, crossed the state in the wake of a temperature drop which sent the mercury close to the zero mark. Three-inch snows covered scattered portions of the state, and wind damage to farm buildings and trees was reported at Newton. On November 20 the corn moisture content still averaged 27.3 — highest since statewide records were inaugurated in 1928. Agricultural experts conceded that the moisture content of the 1951 corn crop was so high, grain growers would lose millions of dollars "unless some satisfactory means of handling it can be worked out." But if the moisture content was excessive, there was some cause for cheer as the final harvest netted over seven million more bushels of corn than the pessimistic July forecast had predicted. And the wet season had favored a record hay crop.

November of 1951 was Iowa's coldest since 1911, and the seventh coldest since 1873. No relief seemed likely in December. Sibley recorded 19° below on December 22, and a white Christ-

mas for most of Iowa was assured when an eight-inch snow fell in Dubuque, moving westward across the state while crowds did their last minute shopping. Clinton had a record 27.9 inches of snow in December.

Weather-wise, the Iowans would remember 1951 as a year that was cold, windy, and wet. The early threat of drought had turned into the actuality of floods, high water, and soaked fields. Precipitation for the year averaged 42.22 inches, almost eleven inches above normal. Only in 1881 and 1902 had the amount of precipitation been exceeded in Iowa, and the snowfall total was the greatest on record — 53.2 inches. The annual temperature averaged 45.6 degrees, three degrees below the normal, while 1951 was marked down as Iowa's coldest year since 1917. The 1951 summer was also one of the "coolest." It was the seventh summer since 1879 in which the temperature failed to reach the 100° mark.

A few Iowans were ready to charge the freakish 1951 weather to the atomic bomb explosions which had occurred in various parts of the world. But old-timers were inclined to smile at these stories as they recalled extraordinary weather had played hob with Iowa long before the Atomic Age, even as late as 1934 and 1936 when dust storms and hot winds had plagued the land.

ROBERT RUTLAND