

# THE PALIMPSEST

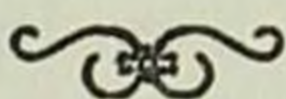
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## The Weather

Iowa weather in 1953 was marked by a withering drought, destructive floods, and damaging windstorms. The drought was unexpected, for there had been a severe dry spell in 1952 — and two droughts in a row seldom occurred. Torrential early summer rains indicated the difficulty would be not a lack of rain, but too much of it. Then came the drought and the sound of rain on the roof became almost a memory to Iowans until late November rains finally deluged the state. The length of this drought exceeded those of 1934 and 1936, but fortunately it came after the growing season was well advanced.

Only the counties bordering Missouri and the "Roman Nose" on the East missed the worst effects of the drought. Fremont, Davis, Clinton, and several other counties went only 21 or 22 days without rain. Elsewhere, it seemed that Nature had abandoned the device after a blinding rain and windstorm had dampened thousands of Fourth of July celebrants. Lucas and Polk coun-

ties suffered through 136 days without recording any rainfall. Historians searched records to learn that even the 133-day dry spell of 1936 had been exceeded.

As a result, park and game officials warned visitors against careless fires in the tinderbox recreational areas, farmers hauled water to their stock, and some cities had to curtail water usage, as streams and rivers that had been nearly out of their banks eight months earlier were reduced to a trickle. Rain became a major topic of conversation and even prayer, as in pioneer days.

Fortunately, the prolonged dry spell did permit farmers to harvest their corn crops about a week earlier than usual in many areas. The average moisture content of the crop, which was the lowest on record in November, enabled farmers to proceed ahead of schedule in their picking and cribbing operations.

By late October the weather column was front-page news. Perhaps to console their white friends, Tama Indians predicted that a warm winter was ahead, basing their forecast on the significant omen that the squirrels had soft hides and thin fur that fall. Finally, the skies darkened on November 19, and by nightfall Council Bluffs had received 1.28 inches as the welcome moisture touched every part of the state except the southeastern tip. Not until early December, however, did the drought definitely end. In a few scattered lo-

calities the dry period had lasted 156 days, making the drought the longest in Iowa on record.

The drought came slowly and Iowans became conditioned to it. In contrast, they were not prepared for the tragic flash floods that struck along the Floyd, Big Sioux, and Little Sioux rivers early in June. Cherokee, Spencer, and Sioux City were hardest hit by the swirling waters that left a death toll of fifteen and property damage of \$33,000,000. Mervin W. Feddersen, Red Cross disaster chairman at Sioux City, said the flood was the "worst disaster" ever to hit Sioux City. Temporary shelter camps were set up for hundreds of homeless families. Governor William S. Beardsley asked President Eisenhower for Federal Aid, and twelve counties along the swollen river banks were declared disaster areas, bringing government assistance to the stricken families. Blame for the deaths and damage along the Floyd was attributed by the president of the Iowa Izaak Walton League to "the stupidity of man" for failing to "properly handle" the Floyd watershed.

Winds clocked at over 100 miles per hour also struck Iowa, months after the spring "tornado season" had done its usual damage to farm buildings, trees, and utility lines. Miraculously, there were no fatalities although the hurricane-like winds swooped down while Fourth of July celebrations were in progress. Extensive tree and power-line damage was done at Waterloo, Cedar

Falls, Iowa City, and in parts of Linn County. The next day the most severe hailstorm of the year swept over parts of Lyon and Kossuth counties, causing crop and building damage estimated at \$4,000,000.

Let us turn now to the bright side of the 1953 weather ledger. Although the oat crop was the smallest since the 1934 drought, good weather at planting time gave corn and soybean crops favorable prospects from the start. Yields were lower because of the dry weather, but the high quality of the crops somewhat offset the lower yield. The winter had been comparatively mild in most of Iowa, with a snowfall average of 24.7 inches for the year, almost four inches below normal. Several spring-like days in January and February caused oldtimers to predict a long winter and "snow in June," but this forewarning proved groundless. By June 18, the thermometer appeared to be recording August temperatures, and Onawa and Sioux City each registered 105°.

Weather Bureau Chief C. E. Lamoureux of Des Moines declared 1953 was "warm and dry" on the whole. Corn cribs were bulging and farmers were pleased with the lowest corn moisture content in many years. All in all, the bright side of the 1953 weather ledger outbalanced the dark side.

ROBERT RUTLAND