

THE PALIMPSEST

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Sunburn, Dust, and Insects

The happiness and prosperity of Iowans in 1934 was subject as usual to the eccentricities of the weather. Three factors — a scorching sun that resulted in excessive and prolonged heat; an increased wind movement that caused higher consumption of water as well as greater evaporation; and a deficient precipitation that left the soil parched and arid — combined to produce the most serious crop shortage on record in most southern and western counties. The extension of this drought over a great portion of the Mississippi Valley aided two other plagues, the chinch bug invasion and the dust storms. The ravages of the weather were probably more far-reaching in political, social, and economic consequences than anything else that occurred in Iowa last year.

Old Sol himself glaring down upon the State in unrelenting prodigality deserves the epithet of Iowa enemy number one. The average temperature for the State in 1934 was 51.5°, the third

hottest on record. Although this was only $.7^{\circ}$ above that of 1933 and 3.6° above the average for the past sixty-two years, it was the excessive heat of spring and early summer that ruined crops. May averaged 69.6° , the warmest ever recorded. Indeed, the average temperature was above normal every month except September and December. At Lenox in Taylor County the thermometer registered 100° or over on forty-two days, which was three times the greatest number ever before reported in Iowa. The highest temperature since 1873 was 113° , but in 1934 a new record of 118° was established at Keokuk on July 19th. In addition to this, new monthly and seasonal high temperatures were established at many points in southern and western Iowa. It is significant that twenty-three of these counties produced less than five bushels of corn per acre.

The blazing heat which beat down on Iowa took a heavy toll. Scores of Iowans flocked to rivers, lakes, and shady timbered tracts. Highways were clogged in early May with motorists seeking to escape the burning sunshine. As the summer advanced, the heat became so intense that people died. The merciless sun caused livestock to expire in the fields: on one hot July day the carcasses of two hundred hogs, twenty-two cattle, and twenty horses were brought to a single

Des Moines rendering plant. Carl Cromwell, a prudent albeit a dishonest young Dubuquer, was jailed for stealing his winter's supply of coal with the temperature at 104°.

The Iowa farmer had just cause for alarm when the closing four months of 1933 registered a sub-normal rainfall. With a single exception every winter since 1929-1930 had been deficient in precipitation. The year 1934 opened with the Mississippi River at Keokuk 4.2 feet below zero, the lowest stage on record. By February many streams established new record low stages. It was not until July that Iowa received a normal precipitation. By that time numerous communities in southern Iowa had exhausted their water supply. Creston was in the worst plight. A train of forty tank cars, each holding 10,000 gallons of water, sped daily from Council Bluffs to empty its precious cargo into the filter basins that fed the Creston water mains. Water rates in Creston rose from 35 cents to \$1.50 a thousand gallons. Chariton and Osceola also suffered, the latter finally resorting to a pipe line.

A total of 26.85 inches of rain fell in Iowa in 1934 compared with a sixty-two year average of 31.60. The heaviest local precipitation was 37.47 inches, at Muscatine, the lightest 16.77 at Glenwood. A "freakish" precipitation of 36.65 inches

for the year at Davenport gave no indication of the devastating spring drought, 8.54 inches deficient from January 1st to June 19th.

The combination of drought and increased wind movement in 1934 produced a strange phenomenon in Iowa. On January 28th the western sky turned sickly pale and the sun was dim behind a yellow haze. The smell of dust was everywhere. Not a blizzard but a mid-winter dust storm swept over the State. During the following month high winds brought several deposits of soil across the Missouri River. Dust storms occurred on nine days during March, the worst in the history of northwestern Iowa being on March 16th.

To make matters worse, rainfall in April was thirty-nine per cent below normal. Dust filled the air on twenty-two days of that month. Soil and seed were blown about by high winds, causing a spotted condition in small grain fields. The sun was obscured, motor driving was often hazardous, and housewives futilely resisted the dusty adversary. On April 23rd an ominous cloud darkened the morning sky and remained until after sunset. This storm was described as the worst of the season. At Davenport visibility was reduced to a quarter of a mile, while the "thick brown fog" at Keokuk left the Illinois shore entirely invisible. Air mail pilots reported that the dust extended to

a height of over two miles. In some places snow plows were used on the roads to clear drifts one to three feet deep. Dust storms were common throughout May, sometimes obscuring the sun and even burying snow fences. Grave apprehension was expressed that a continuance of such storms might turn the garden of the nation into a desert. The formation of the loess hills was no longer a mystery.

With the drought came armies of hungry chinch bugs. Having eaten acres of barley, oats, and wheat they invaded corn fields. Rexford Tugwell, visiting a farm near Ankeny in June, expressed "surprise as well as horror and disgust when he examined a stalk of corn and found it literally alive with chinch bugs." Miles of paper and chemical barriers were constructed in forty-seven counties in Iowa, and slightly more than 3,000,000 gallons of creosote were used for this purpose. By fall the chinch bugs had caused more than \$25,000,000 damage, and their presence in menacing numbers in eighty counties portended disaster for crops in 1935.

Sunburn, dust, and insects made 1934 memorable in Iowa. These tribulations were all the more conspicuous because they were abnormal. Nature, disporting herself unnaturally, imparted a somber hue to the whole history of the year.

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