

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## The Weather

Scorched by a blazing sun in 1934, drenched with excessive rains in 1935, Iowans looked forward hopefully for more temperate weather in 1936. The opening weeks of January were mild, giving promise of an early spring. Suddenly the mercury fell! On January 18th Iowa entered the most severe and prolonged cold snap in 117 years according to various weather records in the upper Mississippi Valley.

On January 22nd the mercury plunged to 30° below zero at West Bend, but the thermometer at Cool indicated only 22° below zero. It was so cold at Davenport that factories were unable to sound noon whistles. Members of the Jasper County Board of Supervisors spent some uneasy hours as calls to open roads for the emergencies of birth and death kept the telephone jingling. The intense cold made frozen fingers quite in vogue: in Northwood sixty pupils were frost-bitten.

But the cold of those memorable days did not

stop all activity. In Des Moines a fat robin shrugged off the 21° below zero temperature. College and high school students continued going bare-headed. And Iowa's nature man, Willis Willey of Mount Ayr, took his usual walk over the trackless country roads, wearing only trunks and a pair of rubbers.

The cold wave continued with unabated fury the rest of January. A heavy blanket of snow from ten to twenty inches deep covered most of the State by the end of the month. Howling winds and continued snowfall paralyzed highway traffic, disrupted or cancelled railroad schedules, and forced the Highway Commission to battle day and night against almost insuperable odds. Snowfall averaged 19.4 inches which was approximately three times as much as the average. Thousands of dollars were spent and hundreds of men worked to clear city streets. The deep snow and severe cold exacted a heavy death toll of wild birds. Meanwhile, a coal shortage throughout the State began to assume serious proportions.

The reign of King Winter continued into February. By the end of the first week many an isolated community was in a dire plight. The coal supply of Radcliffe could be counted by lumps, and the precious fuel was rationed out like food to a starving garrison. The mayor ordered families

to stop heating extra rooms and stores were required to reduce their open hours. A few loads of cobs and wood were brought in by farmers able to reach town. The churches and the school and the indoor skating rink were closed. At last, when conditions were desperate, a shipment of coal arrived.

Just as people began to expect milder days, the weather man announced that a real blizzard was on the way, one that "they'll be talking about in generations to come." His prediction was correct. The "winter's worst blizzard" came roaring out of the northwest on February 8th. At Tipton the temperature dropped thirty degrees in sixty minutes. The swirling wind whipped clouds of blinding snow along the roads. In Marion County one farmer took care of twenty-eight marooned motorists. Two Charles City firemen froze their ears while answering a call. Trains were delayed for hours in huge drifts. Trucks, busses, and ambulances stalled in snowbanks that rose high above the cars. When the storm was over, the frozen snowbanks were so high at Randalia that Miss Dorothy Moore reported that the ears of a team of mules she was driving to a corner mail box continually touched the telephone wires along the route.

Powerful snow plows and paved highways proved of little value in the teeth of a howling

wind that piled up snow faster than the most modern equipment could remove it. For long periods of time only one-way traffic was possible in some places on the primary roads. Ordinary farm roads and many county roads were blocked for weeks. It has been estimated that more than half of the 212,376 farms in Iowa were without vehicular communication for a period of about seven weeks. In northern Iowa some towns were without railroad service for approximately three weeks.

As the end of February approached, Iowans looked forward hopefully to relief from the relentless winter. Not until February 22nd, however, did the cold spell finally break. During the three months ending with February, 42.9 inches of snow fell, the highest winter average during the forty-three years that State-wide snowfall records have been kept.

Most Iowans who endured the hardships of winter felt they had suffered enough from ruthless nature. But they reckoned without the summer — a summer that was to go down as the most prolonged heat period since records of the upper Mississippi Valley were begun in 1819.

The excess torridity began on June 25th. During the first few days of the drought which was destined to scorch the grain and bake the soil of the entire corn belt, the mercury climbed to the top

of the thermometer. Before the end of the month a scourge of hungry grasshoppers and chinch bugs added exasperation to worry, and farmers extended their calloused hands toward Washington for aid.

A committee was created to cope with the emergency. Secretary Henry A. Wallace toured the drought-afflicted area and formulated plans to help the farmers. The trouble became so acute that President Roosevelt decided to visit the parched region. On September 3rd he conferred with the Governors of Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Kansas at the capitol in Des Moines, but the remedy for dry weather was not discovered amid the political distractions involved in the meeting of the rival presidential candidates.

During the seventeen days from July 3rd to July 19th, the temperature exceeded 100° every day. July was the hottest month on record during the sixty-four years for which detailed data is available. All records for sustained high temperatures were broken both for the State as a whole and at most of the stations. Corning had 100° readings or higher on twenty-five days while the entire State averaged seventeen days with temperatures of 100° or over.

Factories in Burlington closed early because of the heat. One man fixed the following sign on his

office door: "Closed for the afternoon, owing to the hellish heat. Home in the cellar, reading Dante's 'Inferno'." At Charles City the intense heat hatched two chickens in a pail of discarded eggs. A large thermometer at Preston burst when the mercury expanded to the top, and the empty tube, acting as a lens, set fire to the garage building of Nick Maybohn, the town fire chief. On H. F. Eicher's farm near Mount Pleasant 515 turkeys died of excessive heat.

When the weather goes beserk, people want to know all about it: how hot it is, how cold, what the forecast will be. "The weather bureau", protested Charles D. Reed, United States meteorologist, "is set up as a service to agriculture, transportation and commerce. Idle curiosity of a man sitting on his front porch in the summertime does not come under these." But the weather in 1936 was really something to talk about. Despite the fact that his department furnished readings hourly to Des Moines radio stations, Mr. Reed and his assistants received between 800 and 900 calls a day.

The blistering heat continued through the month of August, three-fourths of the stations registering the hottest August on record. The afternoon of the 18th was the hottest August afternoon ever endured in Iowa, the average maxi-

mum temperature of 113 stations on that date being 106.5°. When the heat wave finally broke the weather bureau revealed that there had been an average of 25.6 days with maximum temperatures of 100° or higher. This was the worst of any summer on record and 5.9 days more than in 1934. The hottest day the whole State experienced was July 14th, when the average maximum temperature at 113 stations was 108.7°.

The average rainfall during the three summer months (June, July, August) was 6.84 inches, or 4.91 inches below normal. In addition to intense heat the summer of 1936 ranked fourth among the dry summers for which records have been kept. The corn crop was reduced to 173,000,000 bushels by the heat and drought of July.

Only the good crops of small grain harvested early in the summer prevented the great drought of 1936 from turning into catastrophe. Because of the ordeal of fire through which Iowa passed, the tall-corn State lost the leadership of the nation in maize production. The President of the United States might call a drought conference and perspiring politicians might promise the moon, but King Sol reigned in the heavens. And it was the sun that ruled the destinies of Iowa in 1936.

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