

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXXVI

ISSUED IN JULY 1955

No. 7

Copyright 1955 by The State Historical Society of Iowa



The Weather

Iowa weather during 1954 followed its usual unpredictable pattern. Located in an area where air masses from Canada, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Pacific Coast mixed, the Iowa forecaster had a more difficult time than many colleagues in other sections of the country who usually had to chart the course of only one of these major weather ingredients.

The year began warm and dry. Temperatures in February were the warmest on record for that month. Some farmers even began their spring plowing and planting. The dry spell, meanwhile, lasted from December, 1953, to February, 1954, with precipitation in southwest Iowa averaging only 2 per cent of the normal amount. Much of southern Iowa, with its water levels already greatly depleted by the drought of the previous year, was forced to resort to water saving measures.

Heavy rains throughout the state on February 19 and 20 ended the dry spell. A few days later the unseasonably warm weather also ended. The

heaviest snow of the winter blanketed northern and central Iowa on February 25, with Cedar Rapids receiving 20 inches. March was cold and wet. In mid-month a heavy sleet storm, together with strong winds, knocked out telephone and power lines in many parts of the state. At the peak of the storm 100 communities were without telephone service.

Twelve tornadoes struck at scattered points in April. The most severe damage occurred on the last day of the month when five tornadoes swept across eastern Iowa, resulting in the death of a woman near Fort Madison, and injuries to nine others elsewhere. Over 120 farmsteads, homes, and other buildings were badly damaged. Livestock losses were heavy, with 100 hogs on one farm near Letts being killed. A farmer near Rockwell City was killed by a tornado in June.

Nor was Iowa to escape from the scourge of floods. In mid-June torrential rains drenched the northern part of the state. The heaviest amounts came on June 18 when Woden recorded an unofficial 10 inches. A continuous series of thunder-showers took place over a four-day period. At one time an estimated 725,000 acres of land were covered with pools of water which did not drain off in some cases for over two weeks.

The heavy rains forced many rivers out of their banks. Considerable flooding took place along the Floyd, the Rock, and the Little Sioux rivers, the

floods in the lower Little Sioux being the most prolonged since 1891. The most spectacular flooding was along the Des Moines River, which, on June 24, crested at 30.19 feet at the Second Avenue gauge in Des Moines. This compared with the previous high of 27.3 feet in 1903 and a reading of 26.5 feet during the disastrous 1947 flood. More than 7,500 persons were evacuated from their homes. Des Moines was better prepared this time, however, and the crisis was passed with no major breaks in the dikes and levees.

City Manager Leonard Howell congratulated Des Moines residents on the splendid work which they performed during the emergency. An estimated 1,000 boys, ranging in age from 10 to 17, helped out on the levees and in filling sandbags during the critical June 23-24 period. State Adjutant General Fred C. Tandy remarked, "They were wonderful. Sometimes you'd see a little guy tugging a sandbag that weighed about as much as he does." Downriver at the John Deere plant in Ottumwa sandbags were filled mechanically and taken on a carrier belt to trucks which transported them to the levees.

Fortunately, only two persons lost their lives as a result of the floods while 22 were injured. The Red Cross reported that 1,600 homes were damaged and 160 destroyed by flood waters, much less than losses suffered in previous floods of lesser size. Between \$7,000,000 and \$10,000,000 in

crop damage was suffered along the Des Moines, Raccoon, Skunk, Iowa, and Cedar rivers. The Soil Conservation Service reported that 387,000 acres of crops were destroyed by floods and standing water. Some 55,000,000 tons of soil were washed away.

The floods had not passed before the state was sweltering in the midst of hot weather. The heat wave, which lasted from late June through most of July, was described as the most prolonged since the summer of 1936. Temperatures over 100 degrees were recorded at many points, sometimes for several days at a time. An official 108 at Red Oak on July 13 was the year's hottest thermometer reading in Iowa.

Dry weather accompanied the heat, with serious consequences for some farmers in southern Iowa where moisture had been scarce for over a year. Residents of Shenandoah and Centerville called in rainmakers in a desperate effort to bring water. Some rain did fall, but it was difficult to determine if it was the result of natural or artificial causes. Relief came in August which was the wettest on record. Crop prospects improved considerably in the north, but the rain came too late to help many cornfields to the south.

The remainder of the year was relatively uneventful, although a hailstorm in September caused crop losses in Plymouth County estimated at \$1,100,000. A mild fall permitted farmers to

harvest crops through the month of November. This compensated for the difficulties which the weather had imposed upon them earlier in the season.

GEORGE S. MAY