



by R. E. Spencer *

Weather Proverbs

The trouble with weather proverbs is not so much that they're all wrong, but that they're not all right for all times in all places. Some of the ones we hear in New England originated thousands of years ago in northern Africa near the Mediterranean Sea where they could be heard and repeated and at last recorded by the writers of the Old Testament. And many a farmer in the Middle West, depending on a sure-fire weather saying his grandfather brought from Germany or Sweden has found it useless in the United States.

But distances far shorter than either of these are enough to ruin some weather proverbs, for instance, those that predict rain from the direction of the wind. When the wind blows up the side of a mountain it is cooled and loses its moisture in the form of rain; so that a west wind blowing up the west side of a mountain would produce the same result, a fall of rain, as an east wind blowing up the east side of the same mountain. What this adds up to is that a distance just great enough to hold a good sized mountain might also be great enough to ruin a proverb about west (or east) winds bringing rain; and people living in Denver should be cautious about wind and rain signs that work well for their neighbors over the mountains in Grand Junction, and vice versa. Here are a few, by authors of obvious standing, that were no doubt written in different places.

"Fair weather cometh out of the north." Job

"The north wind bringeth forth rain." Proverbs

"Take care not to sow in a north wind or to graft and inoculate when the wind is in the South." Pliny

"The north wind is best for sowing seed, the south for grafting." Worledge, 1669



Another point worth noticing about the importance of locality is that on our Pacific Coast the moisture-bearing winds blow in from the west and southwest, while in the East they come from over the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic. The two following, then, should not be considered too seriously in the East:

"A western wind carrieth water in his hand;"

"When the east wind toucheth it, it shall wither."

On the other hand the one following would have few takers on the west slopes of the Cascade Mountains and the Sierras, where rain and snow are very frequent companions of west and southwest winds:

"When the wind is in the west the weather is always best."

Also, the south wind, about which it is said

"The south wind warms the aged" and "The south wind is the father of the poor,"



are about the wettest, stormiest, and generally least pleasant of winds in our states bordering the Gulf of Mexico. The proverb writers, including Shakespeare himself, are noticeably consistent in pointing this out:

"The southern wind doth play the trumpet to his purposes, and by his hollow whistling in the leaves foretells a tempest and blustering sky."

"If feet swell, the change will be to the south, and the same thing is a sign of a hurricane."

"When the wind's in the south the rain's in its mouth."

Anybody who has ever looked at a collection of these sayings must have been impressed by their variety. They are extremely ancient, about as old as language itself; they illustrate as well as anything could illustrate the importance of weather in human affairs; they demonstrate very clearly man's hopeful opinion that experience is a good teacher; their literary merit ranges from excellent to unspeakable; and their range of subject includes practically everything from apple trees to zymology. Also, like politics, which we are told make strange bedfellows, they produce some very striking relationships, wolves and crops, sky colors with foul results, holy days and unholy weather; and rain is foretold by the behavior of cats and dogs and cattle, red hair and ropes, spiders and smoke, crickets, frogs, birds, mice, flies, rheumatism, etc., etc. Squirrel stores and the thickness of their fur make prophecies of hard winters. The drought or wetness of summers is predicted by the weather in March; what happens on Christmas foretells what will happen on Easter; light or heavy fogs in October foretell light or heavy snows in the coming winter; and one proverb says, "If the spring is cold and wet, then the autumn will be hot and dry," another, "A wet fall indicates a cold and early winter," and still another (this one from Holland), "A cow year is a sad year and a bull year is a glad year."

A few others, good, bad, and indifferent, showing this variety of subject:

"When the wind is in the south it blows the bait in the fishes' mouth."

"One swallow does not make a summer."

"If the weather is fine, put on your cloak, if it is wet, do as you please."

"A bad year comes in swimming."

"The first Sunday after Easter settles the weather for the whole summer."

"If Candlemas Day be fair and bright, Winter will have another flight; But if Candlemas Day brings clouds and rain, Winter is gone and won't come again."

"Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning."

'Mare's tails and mackerel scales make tall ships take in their sails.'

March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb."

"Clear moon, frost soon."

"Rain before seven, stop by eleven."

"A year of snow, a year of plenty."

"Rainbow in the morning gives you fair warning."

"The bonnie moon is on her back, mend your shoes and sort your thack."

"When the stars begin to huddle, the earth will soon become a puddle."

"A windy May makes a fair year."

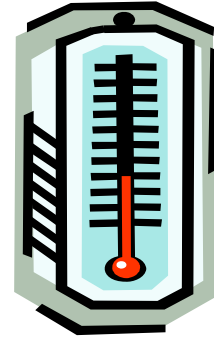
"When birds and badgers are fat in October, expect a cold winter."

"Wet May, dry July, Mud in May, grain in August."

"One would rather see a wolf in February than a peasant in his shirtsleeves."

"February rain is only good to fill ditches."

"February rain is as good as manure."



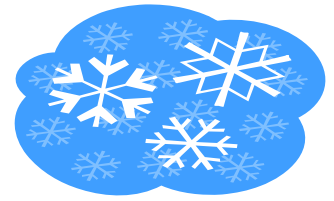
“A warm Christmas, a cold Easter; a green Christmas, a white Easter.”

“The circle of the moon never filled a pond; the circle of the sun wets a shepherd.”

“Moonlight nights have the hardest frosts.”

“A red morn, that ever yet betokened Wreck to the seaman, tempest to the field, Sorrow to shepherds, woe unto birds, Gust and foul flaws to herdmen and to herds.”

“Do business with men when the wind is in the northwest.”



One of the best known of the rain prophecies is the one about the wet 40 days that supposedly follow a rainy St. Swithens's Day (July 15); and the groundhog day story gets into practically every newspaper in the country during the first week in February. Since neither of these old standbys has any basis in fact so far as weather is concerned, their persistent popularity, like that of countless others, must be explained by something else possibly that nearly everybody on earth, now and for many thousands of years, has wanted to know what the weather is going to be tomorrow, next week, next month, a year from now, and so on. Farmers want to know this and so do sailors because such a large part of their actions and fortunes depend on weather; but it also affects the work of a great variety of other outdoor operators, salesmen, washerwomen, grain speculators, baseball and amusement park managers, brides planning outdoor weddings, fishermen with their eyes on a holiday, military leaders planning field actions, and any number of others, from advertisers to zoo keepers.

Another partial explanation of why these saying are repeated so often is that the repeaters like to speak their wishes or gloomy states of mind, regardless of whether they make logical weather predictions; another, because we love the prestige that comes with prophecy, most of us can't resist the temptation to spout a jingle when it fits the conversation (and even, very often, when it doesn't) like these:

“Fish bite the least with wind in the east.”

“Winter's thunder bodes summer's hunger.”

“Two full moons in a calendar month bring on a flood.”

“A red sun has water in his eye.”



Another explanation, also taking account of human vanity and the natural desire to simplify, is that we enjoy the praise of being helpful and the glamour of interpreting mysteries. Here are a few likely examples (if delivered to the right audiences):

“New moon on its back indicates wind; standing on its points indicates rain in summer and snow in winter.”

“Mackerel clouds in the sky, expect more wet than day.”

“When smoke in clear weather rises vertically, the weather will remain clear.”

“When oak trees bend in January good crops may be expected.”

But the best explanation for the persistence, the invention, and the very wide distribution of these sayings is simply that a great many of them make good sense. For example, the one quoted above about the peasant in his shirt-sleeves in February means simply that a warm February will advance the growth of vegetation so far that a subsequent hard frost will destroy it, which nobody wants, especially a farmer who depends on his crops. Here are three others with the same message:

“A late spring never deceives.”

“Better to be bitten by a snake than to feel the sun in March.”

“A wet March makes a sad harvest.”



And “A year of snow is a year of plenty,” is just a pleasant way of pointing out that a snowy winter provides enough soil moisture to assure good crops.

The familiar halo of the sun or moon is caused by the refraction of its light by ice crystals in cirrus clouds, which frequently appear when lowered air pressure and high clouds are present and rain is approaching. Thus, proverbs saying the ring around the sun (or moon) is a sign of rain, such as this one. “The moon with a circle brings water in her beak” are frequently right.

Several of the many signs men see in the behavior of animals and insects are worth note too. For example:

“A bee was never caught in a shower.”

“Expect stormy weather when ants travel in lines, and fair weather when they scatter.”

“When flies congregate in swarms, rain follows soon.”

“Pigeons return home unusually early before rain.”



The following rather inclusive one, giving several results of low air pressure or high humidity (which often precede rain) should prove, if we wait long enough, that not all weather signs are wrong.

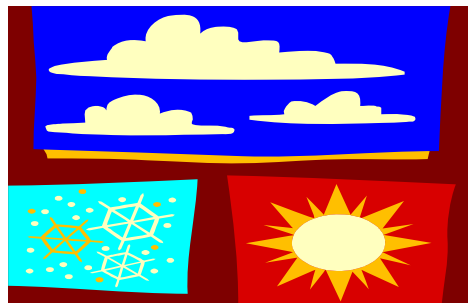
“Lamp wicks crackle, candles burn dim, soot falls down, smoke descends, walls and pavements are damp, and disagreeable odors arise from ditches and gutters before rain.”

And finally this one, of dubious meteorological value, requires no comment:

“Dirty days hath September, April, June, and November; from January up to May the rain it raineth every day. All the rest have thirty-one without a blessed gleam of sun; and if any of them had two and thirty, they ‘d be just as wet and twice as dirty.”

*** “Weather Proverbs” by R.E. Spencer, formerly of the National Weather Service, first appeared in the December 27, 1954, issue of the “Weekly Weather and Crop Bulletin.” Several proverbs have been added by the editors.**

Reprinted from NOAA Magazine October 1979 updated by NCDC 2005



Weather Proverbs Questions:

1. What is the significance of Ground Hog Day?
2. When are the weather proverbs true?
3. For what species are the proverbs particularly true?
4. Give the scientific basis for one of the proverbs?
5. How were these proverbs passed down?

North Carolina Standard Course of Study Science 8th Grade Objectives

Competency Goal 5: The learner will conduct investigations and utilize appropriate technologies and information systems to build an understanding of evidence of evolution in organisms and landforms.

Objectives

- 5.04 Analyze satellite imagery as a method to monitor Earth from space:
- Spectral analysis.
 - Reflectance curves.
- 5.05 Use maps, ground truthing and remote sensing to make predictions regarding:
- Changes over time.
 - Land use.
 - Urban sprawl.
 - Resource management.

