



## 2. Weather Signs

Signs and superstitions about the weather naturally seem important to a people who live by tilling the soil, and are taken very seriously in the Ozark country. There is no denying that some old hillmen are extraordinarily acute in their short-range predictions of rain and frost. The old-timer generally speaks dogmatically of bad luck, death bells, ghosts, witches and the like. But he becomes a bit more cautious in discussing the weather. "Nobody ever claimed that them old signs was *always* right," a gentleman in Jasper county, Missouri, said reasonably. "But I've been a-watchin' the weather for sixty years, an' I believe these here goosebone prophets are just about as good as the government men we've got nowadays."

The spotty nature of the Ozark weather, with conditions varying widely between one hollow and another a few miles distant, may also give the local weather predictor a slight edge. "Them government weathermen do pretty well on a flat prairie, like Kansas or western Oklahoma," an old man told me, "but they aint worth a damn in a hilly country."

The most colorful official of the United States Weather Bureau in the Ozarks is C. C. Williford, who has been giving a daily broadcast over a local station at Springfield, Missouri, since 1933. Williford differs from most of his colleagues in his readiness to argue with the "groundhog watchers" and other defenders of superstition. He takes a lot of ribbing about this, particularly when the goosebone meteorologists predict the weather more accurately than the government

weather prophets, as sometimes happens. The backwoods Christians known as "Holy Rollers," in Taney county, Missouri, have more than once held public prayers for "that feller in Springfield that lies so much about the weather." Williford gets many astonishing items by mail; as an example of Ozark innocence in these matters, here is a letter dated Oct. 21, 1939:

We thought maybe you would say something about the moon falling Sunday night. There might not have been many saw it but we sure did. There was six of us witnessed it. It looked to be about 1 or 2 hours high when it just suddenly turned over and fell like a star would fall, making a ball of fire which could be seen down low for 5 or 10 minutes. No one around here ever heard of the moon falling, even people 50 years old. Some wouldn't believe it. It was between 7:30 and 8 o'clock. If you or anyone else ever heard of this before I wish you would please mention it.

Paul Murrell  
Strafford, Mo. Route 3

To this communication Mr. Williford replied soberly that what Paul Murrell and his friends saw was probably a pilot balloon from the Weather Bureau, since one was lost that night. The records show, he added, that at the hour mentioned the new moon was almost invisible—a faint sickle riding low on the horizon. An account of this episode was printed in the *Springfield News & Leader*, Oct. 22, 1939, under a two-column head: "Extra! The Moon Falls on Strafford Route Three!"

There are so many rain signs, and they vary so widely in different sections of the Ozarks, that one frequently encounters contradictions and differences of opinion as to their proper interpretation. One old fellow told me that when the tall grass is bone-dry in the morning he "allus figgered on rain afore night" but he also insisted that a heavy dew is one of the most reliable rain signs known. Some time later, during a prolonged drouth, I showed him that neither statement had any great merit, but he was not at all disturbed. "All signs fail in dry weather," quoth he and seemed perfectly satisfied to let it go at that. And even Will Talbott, who used to be the govern-

ment weatherman of Greene county, Missouri, in 1930, was quoted as saying "the only *sure* thing about the weather is that a dry spell always ends with a rain."

Many common indications of rain are found in the activities of animals. If rabbits are seen playing in the dusty road, if dogs suddenly begin to eat grass, if cats sneeze or wash behind their ears or lick their fur against the grain, if large numbers of field-mice are seen running in the open, if sheep turn their backs to the wind, if wolves howl before sunset, the hillman expects a shower. Any backwoods farmer will tell you that when a hog carries a piece of wood in its mouth there is bad weather a-comin', and I am almost persuaded that hogs do sometimes pile up leaves and brush for nests several hours before a storm.

(When horses' tails suddenly appear very large, by reason of the hairs standing erect, it means that a drouth will soon be broken. If cattle and horses refuse to drink in very dry weather, the farmer expects a cloudburst. When horses suddenly stop feeding and begin scratching themselves on trees or fences, it is a sign of heavy rains. Farmers who live in the river bottoms are alarmed when they see dogs or cats carrying their young to higher ground, believing that these migrations indicate floods or cloudbursts.)

Mrs. Mabel E. Mueller, of Rolla, Missouri, says that "if the cat lies in a coil, with head and stomach up, bad weather is coming, but if it yawns and stretches, the weather will be good."

(Some country women believe that chickens are somehow able to tell what the weather is to be for several days in advance. When chickens or turkeys stand with their backs to the wind, so that their feathers are ruffled, a storm is on the way. If hens spread their tail feathers and oil them conspicuously, it is sure to rain very soon.)

A rooster's persistent crowing at nightfall is regarded as a sign that there will be rain before morning:

If a cock crows when he goes to bed,  
He'll get up with a wet head.

This jingle is evidently very old and is one of the few instances in which the male fowl is called a *cock* in the Ozark speech. In ordinary conversation the hillman says crower or rooster instead.

In front of my cabin near Sulphur Springs, Arkansas, a rooster crowed repeatedly at high noon. "What's that a sign of?" I asked an Ozark girl who sat beside me. "Oh, that aint no sign at all," she answered. "I reckon he's just a-crowin' up company."

In this same connection Mrs. Mueller says that her neighbors are much impressed when chickens suddenly go to roost outside the henhouse. One might suppose that, if the fowls really know what they are about, this would be an indication of fair weather, but the people near Rolla regard it as a sure sign of rain. A storm is expected, too, if the chickens are seen going to roost earlier than usual. Mrs. Mueller says also that "if chickens stand on the woodpile and pick their feathers, rain is on the way."

(When chickens and other fowls are seen feeding in the fields during a shower, it means that the rainy weather will continue for at least twenty-four hours longer. When ducks or geese or guineas suddenly become very noisy, without any visible reason, it is a sure sign of rain. When crows, or woodpeckers, or hawks make more racket than usual, the hillman expects rain in twenty-four hours or less. If robins suddenly begin to sing near the cabin, when they are not accustomed to sing there, the housewife prepares for a shower. The call of the yellow-billed cuckoo, which the Ozarker knows as the rain crow, is widely recognized as a sign of wet weather. If a big owl hoots in the daytime, or calls loudly and persistently near the house at night, there will be a heavy rain within three days.)

When kingfishers and bank swallows nest in holes near the water, the hillman expects a dry season; if these birds nest

high above the stream, the hillfolk prepare for much rain and flooded rivers. If wild ducks nest close to the water's edge a fairly dry summer is expected; if they make their nests farther back, the Ozarker looks for a wet season.

If quail are found sunning themselves in coveys, or if brush rabbits are lying in shallow, unprotected forms, the Ozarker feels safe in expecting two or three days of pleasant weather. The latter sign in particular inspires great confidence, and I am almost persuaded that there may be something in it. I have often seen farmers go out and flush two or three rabbits, and examine their nests carefully before deciding to go on a journey.

It is generally believed that snakes—particularly rattlesnakes and copperheads—become very active just before a rain. Thus an abundance of snake trails in the dusty road is regarded as a sign that a drouth will soon be broken.

The voices of tree toads always forecast a shower, according to the old-timers. Men who hunt bullfrogs say that the skin of these creatures turns dark about twelve hours before a rain. Old rivermen claim that when they see a great many fish coming to the surface and "stickin' out their noses," there is sure to be a rainstorm in three or four hours.

When flies and mosquitoes suddenly swarm into a cabin, or snails become very abundant, or spiders leave their shelters and crawl aimlessly about, or glowworms shine brighter than usual, or crickets chirp louder, or bees cluster closely about the entrance to their hives, or a centipede appears where centipedes are not usually seen—all these are signs of an approaching storm. When the burrows of ants and crawfish are "banked up" about the entrance, the mountain man looks for a cloudburst, or a sudden rise in the water of the streams.

If the sun "rises red" it is a sign of rain, according to the old rhyme:

When the morning sun is red  
The ewe and the lamb go wet to bed.

When the sun rises into an unusually clear sky, even if it isn't red, many farmers expect showers before night. Others contend that the meaning of this depends upon the season of the year—in summer a misty dawn means a dry spell, but in winter it is a sign of rain.

A red sunset is supposed to promise at least twenty-four hours of dry weather. If a dull blue line shows around the horizon at sunset, one may expect rain the following day. When a "sundog" circle is seen about the sun, there will be some radical change in the weather. Some say that a sundog means a prolonged drouth. When a fringe of cloud hides the sun, just before sunset, it is a sign of rain.)

A rainbow in the evening means clear weather, but a rainbow in the morning indicates a storm within twenty-four hours. If the weather clears between sundown and dawn there will be more rain within forty-eight hours. When fog rises rapidly it is always a sign of rain:

Fog goes up with a hop,  
Rain comes down with a drop.

If a fog descends and seems to disappear into the ground, the hillman expects several warm, bright days.

Lightning in the south is a dry-weather sign, while lightning in any other direction usually indicates rain.

When the crescent moon rides on its back, with the horns turned up, there will be no rain for some time. This is the moon that will "hold water," the moon a feller can "hang a powder horn on." When one of the horns seems much higher than the other, the concavity will no longer hold water, and one may expect rain shortly. If the moon remains low in the southern sky, the old folks say that it is well to prepare for a severe drouth.

(A ring around the moon is said to be a sure sign of bad weather—usually rain or snow.) You can tell how many days will elapse before the storm by counting the number of stars

inside the circle; if there are no stars in the ring, the rain is less than twenty-four hours away. There is a very general notion that if it doesn't rain at the change of the moon, there will be little rain until the moon changes again. In the midst of a drouth, one of my neighbors remarked that it *couldn't* rain until the new moon appeared. When the stars appear faded and dim, some people say that a big rain is on the way, no matter what the moon signs may be.

A great many hillfolk believe that an abrupt drop in the water line of a spring or well is a sure indication that wet weather is coming soon. When the surface of plowed ground appears damp, or moisture seems to gather on the gravel in dry gullies, a rain is expected within a few hours. Nearly all of the old-timers seem to believe this. One of the most successful and progressive farmers in my neighborhood told me that he does not believe in many weather signs, but that he is prepared to wager even money up to a thousand dollars that whenever the flint-rocks in his field suddenly begin to sweat, there will be some precipitation within twenty-four hours.

A man in Greene county, Missouri, has a cave on his place. He says that when the roof of this cave begins to drip, after a spell of dry weather, it always rains within two or three days. He used to crawl into the cave, particularly at harvest time, to see what sort of weather was coming.

(When a housewife is boiling food in a kettle, and it seems necessary to add more water than usual, she expects a rain shortly.) Mrs. Mabel E. Mueller, of Rolla, Missouri, says that her neighbors watch the coffeepot—if the coffee boils over too often, they regard it as a sign of an approaching rain. The lumping of table salt, the unusual creaking of chairs, the loud sputtering of a kerosene lamp, an extraordinary amount of crackling in a wood fire, the "warping up" of a rag carpet, the sudden flabbiness of hitherto dry and crisp tobacco leaves—all these phenomena are supposed to indicate rain.

If the leaves of a tree turn up, so as to show the undersides

which are usually lighter in color, the hillfolk expect a rain within a few hours. When the upper blades of corn begin to twist, as they do in very hot dry weather, many farmers predict rain. If dead limbs fall in the woods, with no perceptible wind blowing, it is regarded as a sure sign of rain; but when an entire tree topples over, under the same conditions, it is not so considered.

If oaks bud earlier than ash trees in the spring, a wet summer is expected; if the ash buds first, look out for a drouth in July and August.

It is said that certain flowers, which ordinarily close at dusk, sometimes remain open all night—this is a positive indication that it will rain very shortly. A sudden appearance of toadstools or mushrooms is regarded as a sure sign of rain within twelve hours. If a hillman sees thistledown or milkweed or other hair-winged seeds flying in the air, when no breeze is otherwise apparent, he predicts rain.

(When rain falls while the sun is shining, it will be of short duration—"a sunny shower won't last an hour." A sunny shower means that "the Devil is a-whuppin' his wife," according to the old-timers, and is a sign that there will be more rain on the following day. If drops of water hang on twigs or leaves for a long time after a rain, you may be sure that more rain is coming. It is said also that if one sees many large bubbles in roadside pools after a rain, it means another shower within a few hours. The belief that showers which begin early in the morning do not last long is recorded in the old sayin':

Rain before seven  
Shine before eleven.

Many hillfolk believe that large raindrops mean a brief shower, while small drops indicate a long siege of rainy weather.

A series of hot days and cool nights, some old-timers say, is a sign of a long dry spell to come. If it seems very warm in the evening, and unusually cool next morning, the hillman con-



cludes that a rain has "blowed over" or "went around," and he expects three or four days of dry weather.

There are farmers in Arkansas who insist that the blood of a murdered man—bloodstains on a floor or garments—will liquefy even on dry sunshiny days, as a sign that a big rain is coming. Burton Rascoe, who once lived in Seminole county, Oklahoma, told me that this notion is common in many parts of the South, and that the field hands on his father's farm used to go to a cabin where a Negro had been shot and examine the bloodstains on the planks to see whether a rain was about due.

Many persons believe that twinges of rheumatism, unusual soreness of corns and bunions, or attacks of sinus trouble inform them when it is going to rain.

Country women say that when milk or cream sours sooner than usual, a rain may be expected—and they insist that this works in fairly cold weather as well as in the heat of summer. Also that the little globules of fat in a cup of coffee to which cream has been added collect at the edges of the cup when a rain is coming, and in the center when there is dry weather ahead.

Little whirlwinds in the dusty road are regarded by many as sure signs of rain. If the wind blows suddenly and strongly from the east, many old-timers expect a heavy rain soon.

People in some parts of Taney county, Missouri, live so far from a settlement that they do not ordinarily hear trains or motor cars or church bells. Once in a while, however, they *do* hear these sounds, very faintly. When this happens, the people expect a good rain before many days. It is generally believed, in many sections of the Ozarks, that gunshots, church bells, whistles and the like may be heard at a greater distance when rain is approaching than when continued dry weather is in store.

A rain on Monday, according to some backwoods folk, means that it will rain more or less every day that week. Others say that if it rains on Monday there will be two more rainy days in the week, and maybe three, but that Friday will be bright and

fair. There is a common notion that Friday is always either the fairest or the foulest day of the week. If the sun "sets clear" on Tuesday, it is sure to rain before Friday. If the sun sets behind a cloud on Tuesday, there will be showers before the *next* Tuesday. If the sun "sets cloudy" on Thursday one looks for heavy rains before Saturday night.

Many people insist that "the sun shines every Wednesday" even if only for a moment, but if a Wednesday *should* pass without a sunbeam, there will be some sudden, violent change—perhaps a cloudburst or a tornado.

When rain falls on the first Sunday in the month, most old-timers expect showers on the three following Sundays. If it rains on the first day of the month, at least twenty days of that month will be wet. This is really taken seriously by farmers in some localities, and they consider it in planting and cultivating their crops.

A number of farmers in Greene county, Missouri, have told me that, during the month of July, it *never* rains at night. One old gentleman said he had watched the weather for nearly sixty years and had never yet, during the month of July, known rain to fall after dark or before dawn.

There is a common notion, in rural Arkansas, that it never rains during dog days—that is, the period in July and August when Sirius the dog star is supposed to rise at dawn.

Many old-timers are obsessed with the notion that there is always a big storm at Easter time. Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, writes: "I have lived to be 'over twenty-one' in the Ozarks and I have never failed to see an Easter squall yet. I believe if Easter came as late as the Fourth of July we would still have that squall. When I was a girl we used to always depend on it for our Easter picnics, and dread it." There is also the common belief that if it rains on Easter Sunday, the seven Sundays following Easter will be rainy too.

It is said that the last Friday and Saturday of each month rule the weather for the next month—that is, if the last Friday

and Saturday in May are wet or cloudy days, the month of June will be wet or cloudy.

I have known hillfolk who more or less seriously forecast the weather for many months in advance by splitting open a persimmon seed in autumn. If the little growth at one end, between the two halves of the seed, looks like a spoon, it means that the next summer will be moist and warm, and that everybody will raise bumper crops. But if the seed carries a tiny knife and fork, instead of the spoon, the growing season will be unsatisfactory and many crops will fail.

Some hillfolk claim to predict the rainfall, in a general fashion, for a whole year in this wise: take twelve curved pieces of raw onion, set them in a row, and place an equal amount of salt in the hollow of each piece. The first piece represents January, the second piece February, the third March, and so on. Let all the pieces stand undisturbed over night. The one which contains the largest amount of water in the morning shows which month will have the greatest rainfall.

In any case, a dry March is supposed to mean plenty of rain and good growin' weather later on. There is an old sayin' that "a bushel of dust in March is worth a bushel of silver in September." Many farmers say that if dandelions bloom in April, there will be both rain and hot weather in July.

Will Rice quotes a patriarch at St. Joe, Arkansas, as saying that "for every 100-degree day in July there will be a 20-below day in the following January."<sup>1</sup> Rice assures his readers that this idea has come down from grandpappy's day, and that many hillfolk believe it absolutely.

(July 2 is a mysterious and important day to some backwoods weather prophets) The idea is that if rain falls on that day the season will be moist and prosperous, but if it does not rain on July 2 there will be no rain for six weeks.

July 15 is also an important date in connection with weather

<sup>1</sup> *Rayburn's Ozark Guide*, Lonsdale, Arkansas (September-October, 1943), p. 17.

prediction, but I have been unable to get any definite information about this. There are many hillfolk who insist that if November 1 is clear and cool, it means that big rains or snowstorms are coming soon. Others say that if November 11 is cold, we may expect a short, mild winter.

Some people think that the weather on December 25 is somehow correlated with the rainfall and temperature of the following summer. A mild Christmas, according to many Ozark farmers, always means a heavy harvest. A good season for the crops is supposed to be bad for human life, however, hence the old saying that "a green Christmas makes a fat graveyard."

If there is no wind on New Year's Day, the Ozarker expects a very dry summer; a fair breeze means sufficient rainfall to make a crop; a real windstorm on New Year's is a sign of floods the following autumn.

Many hillfolk believe that the first twelve days of January rule the weather of the entire year. That is, if January 1 is cloudy, the whole month of January will be cloudy; if January 2 is clear, the whole month of February will be clear; if January 3 is stormy, the whole month of March will be stormy, and so on. One finds Alice Curtice Moyer-Wing<sup>2</sup> rejoicing with her neighbors that January 6 was dry, therefore June would be dry enough to permit work in the cornfields; it was fortunate also that January 7 and 8 were wet, since that assured rain enough in July and August to make a crop. Clink O'Neill, of Day, Missouri, remarked to me that there may be something in this theory "if it aint carried too far," adding that he doubted whether snow on January 8 means that there will also be snowstorms in August.

Mr. Ora McGrath, a farmer of Taney county, Missouri, tells me that in his family it has always been believed that the twelve "old days"—the last twelve days in December—rule the coming year. Some old-timers near Farmington, Arkansas, think that the "ruling days" are the last six days in December *plus*

<sup>2</sup> St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 28, 1917.

the first six days in January. Still other hillfolk believe that it is Old Christmas (January 6) and the eleven days which follow Old Christmas which really determine the weather for the year.

The dates of the first and last frosts are matters of considerable import to the Ozark farmer, and he has many curious ideas about the prediction of these frosts. There is a very general notion that katydids sing to bring on cold weather in the fall. A writer in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Aug. 25, 1936) says that the katydids "can sing for frost, and get it in about two weeks," but the old-timers say that it can't possibly be done in less than six weeks. In some parts of Arkansas and Missouri the farmers expect the first frost exactly six weeks after the katydids' singing begins; others say that nine weeks is the correct figure, and many Missourians hold out for three months. Mr. Elbert Short, of Crane, Missouri, says that it was always three months to the old folks in his neighborhood. Whatever the period, nearly all Ozarkers feel that there must be something in the katydid-frost theory. I know many hillfolk who listen for the katydids and arrange their agricultural schedules accordingly, and I have interviewed very few old-timers who did not believe in this sign to a certain extent.

An old man in Washington county, Arkansas, told me that he always marked on the calendar the date when he saw the first Devil's-darning-needle—the walking-stick insect, that is. His prediction was that the first real frost comes just six weeks later, and he swore he had missed it only twice in twenty-seven years.

In Taney county, Missouri, they say that the first killing frost comes ten weeks after the "locusts begin to holler"—the locust or jarfly is really a cicada. The locusts usually began to holler about the Fourth of July, when I lived in Taney county, but the first killing frost, in the average year, doesn't come to the Ozarks before the middle of October.

There seems to be some correlation between the date at which deer change their coats and the time of the first frost. In south-

west Missouri, in 1943, it was said that fawns "lost their spots" about the middle of July; old-timers who observed this all agreed that it indicated an early fall.

Butterflies seen late in the autumn are signs that cold weather will be here very soon. The same is true of big woolly caterpillars. The intricate designs made by the tiny larvae that work inside leaves are said to be significant in weather prediction, but I have been unable to learn just how to read their signs.

Many Ozarkers tell me that it never frosts until the cockleburs are ripe—nobody ever saw a frostbitten cocklebur. As long as green cockleburs are in evidence, one may be sure that there will be no frost for several weeks. It is said that persons who suffer from hay fever are reliable weather prophets—the first attack of the season always comes just ninety days before the first frost. When angleworms and grubs are found close to the surface there is no danger of frost. When crab grass lies flat on the ground, many country folk say that there'll be a frost within twenty-four hours.

I have known old-timers in Carroll county, Arkansas and in Taney county, Missouri, who believe that thunder in February always means frost on the corresponding date in May; that is, if it thunders on February 12, there'll be a frost on May 12, and so on. Others contend that there are always as many frosts in May as there are thunderclaps in February but do not insist that the dates must correspond exactly.

Several old hillfolk tell me that the number of fogs in August is always equal to the number of snows in the following winter. Some say that the number of days the first snow remains on the ground indicates the number of snows to be expected during the winter. Another view is that the whole thing depends upon the date of the first snowfall. One man told me that if the first snow falls on December 1 it means that there will be twenty-four snows altogether. "What if the first snow came on November sixteenth?" I asked. "Then thar'll be a hunderd an' seventy-six," he answered after a moment's thought but refused to tell me

how he arrived at these conclusions. Another old-timer whom I consulted gave me the same figures for these two dates, adding that every man should obtain the method of "figgerin' it out" from the elders of his own family, and that it would be very bad luck for him to tell me about it. I "figgered it out" for myself later on, however; one simply multiplies the number of the month by the number of the day, and in case the latter is less than fifteen doubles the result.

Mrs. Mabel E. Mueller, of Rolla, Missouri, tells me that people in her neighborhood count the number of sunny days between July 1 and September 1 and multiply by two—this gives you the number of freezing cold days to be expected the following winter.

Some old folks take careful note of the age of the moon, at the time the first snow falls. It is said that the number of days the moon is old, at that time, is always equal to the number of snows which will come that winter.

The deepest snow of the winter, according to some Ozarkers, is forecast by the height to which the brush rabbits gnaw the sassafras sprouts in the fall. I have heard this mentioned in all seriousness at least fifty times, from Mena, Arkansas, to the suburbs of St. Louis. But I do not think that the genuine old-timers take much stock in it. Personally, I am not even sure that brush rabbits are accustomed to gnaw sassafras sprouts in the autumn.

There is an old saying that "clouds on frost means bad weather," and many believe that when a heavy frost is accompanied or immediately followed by a cloudy sky, it is well to prepare for severe storms and lower temperatures.

Nearly all of the old-timers believe that when a frost comes in cloudy weather it is less harmful to crops than a frost in clear weather. Many insist that a frost in the light or increase of the moon is much less harmful than a frost in the dark or waning of the moon. Some go so far as to say that fruit is *never*

killed by frost in the light of the moon, though anybody who has lived in this country a few years can see that it isn't so.

I know deer hunters in Arkansas who think that if an autumn campfire spits and sputters more than usual, it means that a snowstorm is not far off. The firewood, they say, is "stompin' snow." Mr. Elbert Short, of Crane, Missouri, agrees with the deer hunters. "If your wood fries an' sings an' pops an' cracks," says he, "it's a sure sign that snow is a-comin'."

Children in the backwoods sometimes make a great show of counting the nodules on cane, the knots on lilac bushes, the spots on bass in September, the freckles on their left hands and so on, to determine the number of cold spells to be expected in the coming winter, but I do not believe that any of these signs are taken very seriously by adult hillfolk.

Many of them do believe, however, that they can make some general forecasts about winter weather by examining the breast-bone of a wild goose killed in the fall. If the bone is thin and more or less transparent, the winter will be mild; if the bone is thick and opaque, the winter will be severe. If the bone is white, there will be a great deal of snow; if the bone is red, or has many red spots, the winter may be very cold, but the snowfall will be unusually light.

These goosebone weather prophets are still common in some sections, and their predictions are often recorded and discussed solemnly in the country newspapers. J. O. Wadell, veteran newspaperman of Springfield, Missouri, used to comment editorially upon the weaknesses of the goosebone school of weather forecasting. In the *Springfield Press*, he wrote: "The fact that one goose-bone may be thin and another from the same flock be thick, as has often been demonstrated, has no effect upon the old superstition. Folks believe it just the same."<sup>3</sup>

The severity of the approaching winter is indicated by the thickness of furs and feathers and cornshucks and so on. If hair

<sup>3</sup> Oct. 31, 1930, p. 3.



on muskrats, skunks, coons, and possums is unusually thick, the hillman expects a hard winter. If goose feathers are "veined close" it means severe weather ahead. Every backwoods child has heard the little rhyme:

Onion skin mighty thin,  
Easy winter comin' in.

Some old men tell me that a summer in which the foliage on trees is unusually dense, or exceptionally bright in color, is followed by a very cold winter. When great numbers of squirrels are seen moving toward the south, it is regarded as a sign of an early fall and hard winter.

Many old people say that if the hornets build their nests low in the trees, it means that a severe winter is coming; if the hornets' nests hang high, the following winter will be mild.

A big crop of walnuts indicates cold weather to come. A great abundance of *mast*—which means acorns—is a sure sign of a severe winter. If cherries or lilacs bloom in the fall, the winter will be unusually long and severe. If woodpeckers begin at the foot of a tree and work clear to the top, it means that cold weather is coming very soon. When a cat sits down with its tail toward the fire, the hillman looks for a cold spell. If the moon appears farther north than usual in the fall, the Ozarker predicts an unusually cold winter. Most old-timers feel that a very hot summer is likely to be followed by a winter of extraordinary severity.

When snowflakes are very large, it means that the storm won't last long; if the flakes are small, it may be only the beginning of a heavy fall of snow. If snow *lays* on the ground, without melting appreciably, it is a sign that another snowfall may be expected soon.

Pick up a handful of snow, and try to melt it with a lighted match. If it melts quickly, the snow on the ground will soon disappear. But if the snow in your hand does not melt easily,

It means that there will be snow on the ground for a considerable time.

Old hunters say that when a deer lies down casually in the snow, there will be another snowstorm within a few days. But when deer paw out places in the snow, as if to make beds for themselves, it means that there will be no more snow for a week or two at least.

The old belief regarding Groundhog Day is very widely accepted in the Ozarks. The groundhog is supposed to emerge from his burrow on Groundhog Day, and if the sun is shining he goes back to sleep, knowing that there will be six more weeks of winter weather.

February 2 is recognized as Groundhog Day in most sections of the United States, and is so marked on our calendars and almanacs. Otto Ernest Rayburn says that the Missouri Legislature has established February 2 as the legal and official Groundhog Day of Missouri.<sup>4</sup> But there are thousands of people in Missouri and Arkansas who regard February 14 as Groundhog Day, and it is February 14, not February 2, that they consider in deciding the proper dates for plowing and planting.

The publisher of the Crane (Missouri) *Chronicle* comments editorially: "In Pike county, Ill., where I was born, groundhogs crawl or failed to see their shadows on February 2nd. That date prevails to this day as far west as the Mississippi. Down here, the official date is February 14th."<sup>5</sup>

Uncle Jack Short, Galena, Missouri, told me in 1944 that he never heard of February 2 being called Groundhog Day until after 1900. "February fourteenth is the real old-time Groundhog Day," he said. Mr. Short was born up on Crane Creek, not far from Galena, in 1864. His father came from Tennessee in the 1840's.

<sup>4</sup> *Arcadian Magazine* (February, 1932), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Feb. 18, 1943.

In 1933 I was in Greene County, Missouri, where February 2 was clear, while February 14 was dark and cloudy. The "fur-riners" prepared for six weeks of cold weather, but the old-timers shucked their sheepskin coats and began to spade up their garden patches. The following is clipped from the Springfield (Missouri) *Press*, Feb. 16, 1933.

"What's all this talk about February 2 being groundhog day?" asked a man at the courthouse Wednesday who is old enough to know what he is talking about. "It was always February 14 until late years. Suppose the darned hog has caught the spirit of the times and is stepping on the gas—working under high pressure and starting his year 12 days earlier than in the good old days when men and ground-hogs both took time to live in a rational manner.

"My father and my grandfather, and all the generations from Adam down to 20 years ago pinned their faith to February 14—St. Valentine's day. That is the correct date, and it matters not what the younger generation may say about it. There was no shadows Tuesday and Winter is about over."

Three years later the people in Greene County were still wrangling. Here is an editorial comment from the Springfield (Missouri) *Leader*, Feb. 4, 1936:

Groundhog saw no shadow here and a large faction says it makes no difference whether the hog saw a shadow or not on February 2, as the correct date for such an observation is February 14. The second-of-February faction claim that those who stand by the fourteenth have mixed the date up with Valentine Day. A great many people are neutral on the subject, or pretend to be in order to avoid making enemies.

The last sentence of the above quotation shows how seriously the controversy is taken by some persons. Springfield is a town with a population of perhaps 60,000 souls, and many of these, including some newspapermen, are not native Ozarkers at all. Most of the weekly papers in the back-country villages do not even mention this controversy about the date. Their readers all know that Groundhog Day falls on February 14, and there is no need for any argument about it.

It is said that Deacon Dobyns of the Oregon (Missouri) *Sentinel* kept careful records of Groundhog Day for more than forty years and discredited the see-your-shadow prophecy in his section of the country, for either February 2 or February 14. But that doesn't matter in the least to the old-time hillman, who still believes in Groundhog Day. I have encountered, in some isolated localities, traces of an ancient notion that birds and rabbits begin their mating on February 14, and some old folks say that it is unlucky to eat rabbit meat after this date.

There are other ways of determining whether winter is really over, regardless of Groundhog Day. Even though many warm days come early in the spring, if the moon appears just a hair farther north than it should be, many an Ozark farmer fears another killing frost. Some people say that the moment a sign of green shows on the bodark tree (*bois d'arc*, or Osage orange) the cold weather is definitely over, but many hillfolk are skeptical even of this sign.

One often hears frogs piping very early. Mr. Rufe Scott, attorney at Galena, Missouri, has noticed for many years that during court week (the second week in March) the frogs holler for the first time. In this locality it is commonly believed that the frogs always come out too soon, and are "froze back" three times before spring really arrives. The birds known as killdeers are much more reliable than frogs, but even killdeers are sometimes mistaken about the weather. One certain sign of spring, however, is the return of the turkey buzzards; the old-timers all agree that there is never any freezing weather after the first buzzard is seen.

There are occasional violent tornadoes or cyclones in the Ozark country. I have seen long lines of big trees uprooted in the timber, and sometimes one of these storms destroys a settlement with considerable loss of life. But somehow the hillfolk as a rule are not much concerned about windstorms, and there is little of the tornado-phobia that used to be so common in the cyclone-cellar belt of Kansas and Oklahoma.

I have heard farmers declare that the wind always slacks up at milkin'-time, both morning and night. Some of them really believe this, while others tell it to their children along with the old story that a boy who rubs a sow's milk in his eyes can *see the wind*.

Some people say that the angle at which a star falls somehow indicates the direction of the wind which will arise next morning. Charles J. Finger, of Fayetteville, Arkansas, tells me that his neighbors believe that the "set" of the Milky Way shows the direction of the prevailing wind for a month in advance.

Many hillfolk think that cats are able to tell when a wind-storm is on the way; some even say that just before a storm a cat always scratches itself and points with its tail in the direction from which the wind will come. When crows fly erratically, or pitch about high in the air, the hillman expects a strong wind within the next hour or so.

If a hog is seen looking up, when nothing is visible which would ordinarily attract his attention, some folk conclude that a terrific storm or tornado is imminent. Several farmers near Green Forest, Arkansas, and Berryville, Arkansas, where wind-storms have destroyed houses and killed many people, claim to have seen hogs looking up at the sky not long before the big winds came.

There are still a few diehards in the Ozarks who believe that men can control the weather to some extent by charms and incantations, but the average farmer has little confidence in such methods. The wild rain dances of the Cheyennes, not uncommon across the Oklahoma border, excite only laughter among the mountain folk. One hears occasionally of certain preachers, particularly those of the Pentecostal or "Holy Roller" cults, who have big meetings at which the whole congregation prays for rain—but apparently without much effect.

Other hillmen try to produce rain by burning brush along the creeks, or hanging dead snakes belly-up on fences, or killing frogs and leaving them in the dry road, or putting salt on

gravel bars, or suspending live turtles above the water. Singing late at night is said to "fetch on a shower," as explained in the little rhyme:

Sing afore you go to bed,  
You'll git up with a wet head,

but I have never known any grown-up hillfolk to take it seriously.

In very dry periods a farmer may try to "charm up" a rain by pouring a gourdful of water on the ground in the middle of a dusty field. Children are sometimes told to do this by their elders, but I don't think that many adults have any real confidence in it.

In some localities people imagine that they can cause a rain by submerging a cat in sulphur water—they don't drown the animal, but make sure that it is completely under water for a moment at least. I once saw this tried at Noel, Missouri, but without any success.

There is an old saying to the effect that "rain follers the plow," and this is sometimes interpreted to mean that a farmer can actually bring on a rainstorm by plowing in the dust. I have met farmers who repeated this saying and said that they believed it. But the only man I ever knew who actually put the idea into practice was a religious fanatic, not a typical Ozark hillman at all.

Mr. G. H. Pipes tells me that in 1929 an old man appeared at Reeds Spring, Missouri, and announced that he was a professional rain maker. The country was mighty dry just then, and the tomato crop seemed certain to fail. Mr. Pipes says that Jim Kerr, who owned the tomato cannery in those days, offered fifty dollars for a good soaking rain. The old man begged a lot of used motor oil from a filling station and carried it to the top of a high hill near the village. That night he set the stuff afire, and the blaze could be seen for miles around. Next day came a good rain, and Jim Kerr paid him the fifty dollars without any quibbling. The rain maker stayed around Reeds Spring for

several months, and the old-timers claim that he produced several other showers when they were sorely needed.

Mrs. May Kennedy McCord says <sup>6</sup> when she was a child the rain maker knelt down facing the sunrise, bowed three times, and repeated the 6th verse of Psalm 72: "He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass, as showers that water the earth."

Some say that if one kills a spider it won't rain for seven days, and in certain families the children are very careful not to kill spiders in dry weather. It's only a sort of childish game, though. And I doubt if many of the children really believe that there is anything to it.

Mr. Elbert Short, of Crane, Missouri, quoted for me an old sayin' that if a farmer doesn't provide sufficient cook wood for his womenfolk, his crops will suffer from lack of rain. I have heard this in several remote sections of Arkansas and Oklahoma, but very few backwoods farmers pay any attention to it, and the women still split most of the cook wood.

Some Ozark farmers are very careful, at corn-planting time, to save the cobs from the seedcorn and soak them in water—this is said to insure plenty of rain to make the crop. Once the crop is safe, these cobs are buried in the ground or thrown into a running stream. On the other hand, I am told that the people who live in the White River bottoms burn every seedcorn cob, contending that this prevents floods which would otherwise damage the corn. Will Rice of St. Joe, Arkansas, remarks that his neighbors believe that "if after you shell the seedcorn from the cobs, you throw the cobs in the creek, your corn will have all the moisture it needs. But if you burn the cobs in the stove, your corn crop will burn up in a drought." <sup>7</sup>

Many hillfolk feel that it is best not to call a tornado or cyclone by name. I remember a man near Pineville, Missouri, who viewed a sudden black cloud with considerable alarm. But

<sup>6</sup> *KWTO Dial*, Springfield, Mo., October, 1946, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Kansas City Star*, May 5, 1943, p. 2.

he was careful to avoid the word cyclone. "I'm afeared *somethin' bad* is a-comin'," he quavered.

There is an old story to the effect that when a farmer sees a cyclone coming he should run into a field and stick his knife into the ground, with the edge of the blade toward the approaching cloud. The knife is supposed to "split the wind," so that his dwelling and barn will be spared. This notion is widely known in the Ozarks, and it is said that it is still practiced in Carroll county, Arkansas. I know a lot of backwoods people in Carroll county but have never found a man who would admit having done such a thing himself. Several of them have told me, however, that such "foolishment" is common among their neighbors.

I was once present in a backwoods settlement when the place was struck by a high wind—trees uprooted, some buildings turned over, and so on. The natives ran wildly about, cursing and screaming, exactly as people do elsewhere in similar situations. One bewhiskered citizen prayed a little and then sprang into a pigpen where he somehow broke one of his legs. But if anybody stuck knives into the ground, or worked any sort of magic spells against the approaching storm, I found no evidence of it.

