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CHATS WITH THE WEATHER MAN

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NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Speaking Time: 10 Minutes.

ANNOUNCEMENT: And now for our chat with the Weather Man. The Weather Man has been to the United States Weather Bureau again. He is going to tell us what the weather-wise men say about long-range forecasting and the like -----

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Every few days, Mr. Tannehill tells me, the United States Weather Bureau gets requests for long range forecasts. Folks write in, in all seriousness, to ask what the weather will be a month from now, or next summer, or next year.

Mr. I. R. Tannehill, you know, is in the forecast division of the Weather Bureau, to which these queer questions come.

Of course, those of you who know the weather and how the Weather Bureau works know the answer to those questions.

True, there are goose-bone prophets and wish-bone prophets who, now and again, claim they can predict the vagaries of the weather far in advance. And, strange as it may seem, a lot of good folks believe them.

It does seem funny, however, that of all the trained weather men in all the Weather Bureau stations throughout the country and all the weather specialists at the Weather Bureau headquarters, you never hear one making these long range weather forecasts. And you can just about bank on it, that if we ever do find out any practical way to really forecast the weather a long time ahead, our Weather Bureau will be doing it.

Our present system of daily and weekly forecasts is based on the idea of knowing just what the weather is all over the country. Knowing what the weather is here and a long way from us, which way it is headed, and what conditions are along the route, enables the forecaster to estimate what it will be here tomorrow, and the next day, and even, what the weather will be next week. Although, of course, the week ahead forecasts can't be made with as much detailed accuracy as those for 36 to 48 hours ahead.

You see, weather forecasting is something like Paul Revere's ride. Instead of being "booted and spurred, and ready to ride" like Paul Revere, however, our weather forecasters are armed with telegraph and radio to give warning of what's coming.

But that doesn't mean that our weather scientists are indifferent to this problem of extending the range of forecasts. They are continually looking for the laws back of present conditions which control weather, and studying the possibilities of other things influencing our weather beside the temperature, and wind, and pressure ordinarily considered in making forecasts.

There are what you might call wish-bone prophecies. We get that kind every once in a while. Mr. Tannehill says honest, sincere seekers after this will-o-the-wisp of forecasting often let their enthusiasm for some pet idea run away with them. They hit upon some contributory cause of weather conditions, and try to base forecasts on it as the chief or only cause.

This variety of complex conditions constantly changing and interacting with each other, which we call the weather, may be due to a thousand factors.

In fact, Mr. Tannehill tells me, we have maps of weather conditions in this country for each and every day in the year for the past forty years and more, yet no two of those maps are exactly alike. Often, he says, he has seen a map of the weather which reminded him so strikingly of some other map, that he has looked it up only to find differences here, there, and yonder. The chances of getting two precisely alike is next to nothing.

In limited localities, scientists have at times detected apparent correlations, for instance, between the temperature of sea water and weather on shore. Rainfall in certain parts of California and in India has been correlated with sea temperature or other conditions in an imperfect way. But when it comes to making a forecast for the entire country, Mr. Tannehill points out that no reputable meteorologist claims to have discovered any system by which reliable forecasts can be made further ahead than those made daily and weekly by the Weather Bureau.

The United States Weather Bureau, as well as various other scientific institutions, is making a study of the variations in radiation from the sun, in an effort to find what effect if any those variations have upon the variations in our weather. Such correlations, however, are still open to question, and nothing has been worked out which can be relied upon in practical weather work throughout the country.

In the meantime, while the country's chief weather scientists are groping into these fundamental weather problems, Mr. Tannehill tells me our annual crop of goose-bone prophets come out from time to time with sensational claims to predict the weather for the entire country for months and even years in advance.

Most such predictions are mere guesses. Then, too, people in all parts of the country still rely on the weather advice contained in almanacs, which some of the prognosticators claim they get from the position of the planets. Of course, our real weather experts deny that the planets have any influence on the weather that they have been able to detect. They deny most emphatically that anyone can say what this old weather of ours will do a year in advance, by any system that will stand up against logic and scientific reasoning.

Mr. Tannehill points out, however, that any guess on the weather made with an intelligent knowledge of the conditions that normally occur during a season in a particular region, will be right occasionally. If the guesser is lucky, he may be right half the time. But that is not science, nor is it weather forecasting in any fair sense of the words - it is guessing.

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ANNOUNCEMENT: You have just heard the chat with the Weather Man. This Station presents this feature once every two weeks in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

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