A Science Service Feature

Released on receipt
but intended for use
April 20, 1927

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed April 13, 1927

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CIRRUS AND RAIN

It is easier to say that cirrus clouds precede a storm and, therefore, indicate the coming of rain, than it is to prove such a generalization. H. Helm Clayton's studies at Blue Hill Observatory, in eastern Massachusetts, some years ago indicated that cirrus clouds here are not, as a whole, an indication of coming rain. They are followed by rain even somewhat less frequently than the average occurrence of rain whatever its precedents.

Some observers claim that the direction from which the cirrus clouds move is a prognostic of rain or snow. A 14-year compilation in Belgium, however, is not very helpful in such a connection. The directions of motion most often followed by rain were southwest, west, and northwest. Cirrus clouds moving from the opposite directions were found in the majority of cases to be followed by days without rain. The probability of rain was found to exceed 50 per cent., however, only in the cases of cirrus clouds moving from the west or southwest, directions from which lows most commonly approach Belgium.

When the local forecaster, however, takes into account not only the occurrence of cirrus clouds and their direction of motion but also their particular form and whether or not they are increasing in extent and thickness, then the prognostic value is enhanced. Few amateurs are fooled by expecting rain or snow shortly after they observe long, thickening plumes spreading rapidly out of the western sky.

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