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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE TRADITIONAL COLD SPELL IN MAY

In American weather lore Indian summer and the January thaw are probably the most familiar instances of supposedly recurrent periods of unseasonable weather. In Europe the most celebrated of these traditional periods is that known as the "ice saints", when cold weather and disastrous frosts are looked for. The dates assigned to the cold spell are May 11 to 13, or, in some countries, May 12 to 14.

A great deal of scientific discussion has been devoted to this alleged cold period. One of the earliest students of the question, J. H. Maedler, suggested that the temperature depression experienced in Germany was due to the cooling of the air to the northeastward, where, he assumed, a large amount of heat was abstracted from the atmosphere every spring through the melting of the ice over the great basin of the River Dvina -- the solar heat becoming "latent" in this process. In 1839 Adolf Erman advanced the idea that the May cold spell was the effect of meteors passing annually at that time between the earth and the sun. Both Maedler's and Erman's hypotheses have been advanced, with various elaborations, by others, but are now quite out of date. C. E. Ney, in 1885, made the interesting suggestion that a chilling of the air was to be expected at the time in the spring when vegetation was generally coming into leaf, owing to evaporation from the newly expanded foliage.

The tendency of cold weather to recur, from year to year, at about the same time in May has not yet been satisfactorily explained. Neither is it at all certain that such a tendency exists. Nothing is more elusive than alleged recurrences of anomalous weather, of which several have been widely discussed among meteorologists. Few attempts have been made to detect the "ice saints" in American climatic records and they have led to no tangible results.

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