

A Science Service Feature

Released on receipt
but intended for use
April 6, 1929

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed March 30, 1929

By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,
Authority on Meteorology

"ARACHNOLOGY"

"Arachnology" is the name of the branch of natural history dealing with spiders, but the word was once applied, in a particular sense, to the nonsensical "science" of predicting weather from the observation of spiders. The delusion came into prominence at the close of the 18th century. A Frenchman, Quatremère Disjonval, who believed that he had discovered certain relations between the habits of these creatures and subsequent weather changes, was a prisoner at Utrecht. When the French invaded Holland in 1794 he looked forward to being released, but an unexpected thaw caused the invaders to plan a retreat. Disjonval's pet spider had, however, predicted an immediate return of cold weather and the prisoner sent word of this fact to the French commander, General Fichegru. The cold came, as announced, the canals froze hard enough to permit heavy artillery to cross the ice, and Utrecht was taken.

The following year Disjonval published a book in French and Dutch bearing a long-winded title, a translation of which runs: "On the discovery of the constant relation between the appearance or disappearance, the work or inactivity, the greater or less extent of the webs or supporting threads of spiders of different species and the variations of the atmosphere, from fine weather to rain, from dry to wet, but chiefly from hot to cold, and from frost to ice or veritable thaw." Several later editions and translations of this work appeared. There was also published at the Hague from 1795 onward an annual "arachnological calendar", containing weather predictions based on Disjonval's notions.

Even in the second decade of the nineteenth century the meteorological society of Brünn, Moravia, issued special instructions for the observation of "spiders, leeches and clouds"!

(All rights reserved by Science Service, Inc.)

SCIENCE SERVICE
21st and B Sts.,
Washington, D. C.