A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed August 26, 1929.

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VISIBILITY

In ordinary language "visibility" means merely the state of being visible, but meteorologists usually apply this term to the transparency of the air. A generation or more ago the term was still further specialized in meteorological use by being applied, not to transparency in general, but to an exceptional degree of transparency; traditionally regarded as a sign of rain or storm. Thus a well known British work on meteorology by Ralph Abercromby, published in 1885, speaks of "that unusual clearness of the atmosphere known as 'visibility.'" This state of the atmosphere is still recorded in the Beaufort weather notation by the letter "v".

With the advent of aviation the term began to be used in a somewhat different way. The aviator is much interested in the distance at which landmarks and other objects can be seen, and he refers to this as the "visibility", which may be characterized, as good, bad, fair, etc., or by stating that the visibility is "one mile" or "five miles", etc. In meteorological records and reports visibility is often expressed on a numerical scale of degrees. There is an international scale for this purpose, which recognizes ten degrees of visibility, and there are several others used by individual weather services.

Airway weather observers in the United States report "no visibility" if objects cannot be distinguished at a greater distance than an eighth of a mile, and report the visibility as "unlimited" if objects can be seen at a distance of ten miles or more.

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