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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed December 18, 1930

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ICE FLOWERS

If you wish to annoy a meteorologist, ask him the meaning of the term "ice flower." The dictionaries ignore this term except as a synonym of the expression "ice fern," sometimes given to the patterns resembling vegetation seen in frost deposits on window-panes. The term was, however, applied by John Tyndall as long ago as the year 1863 to the figures, like six-petaled blossoms, seen when a beam of light, sent through a block of ice, falls upon a screen; these figures being due to the melting of crystals inside the block. Many descriptions and pictures of ice flowers, in this sense of the term, have been published since Tyndall first wrote about them, and many fine photographs of them have been made by Schoentjes, in Belgium, by Bentley, in America, and others.

Unfortunately the same term has been applied by dozens of writers to the clusters of fern-like hoarfrost or rime sometimes formed in very cold weather on the frozen surface of a lake or other body of water. Many pictures of these formations, also, have been published, including some from the polar regions, where they were found on sea ice.

E.W. Hilgard, in his book "Soils," applies the name to a silvery wire-like or leaf-like form of ice that sometimes emerges from cracks in the soil on cold nights. A recent magazine article transfers the name to the mysterious ice fringes or ribbons found on the dead stems of dittany and occasionally of other plants.

Let us hope we shall not hear of any more totally distinct kinds of "ice flower."

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