

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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ST. ELMO'S FIRE

Recent press reports of displays of St. Elmo's fire on vessels in San Francisco harbor were accompanied by the statement that similar displays were seen there before the disastrous earthquake of 1906. Whether or not the statement was true its obvious implication was sheer nonsense, as there is no conceivable physical connection between St. Elmo's fire and earthquakes.

This so-called "fire" is a first cousin of lightning. It is an electrical discharge, less violent than a lightning flash, proceeding from pointed, elevated objects in which an electrical charge has been acquired by induction owing to the passage of strongly electrified clouds or masses of air overhead. The discharge is usually accompanied by a hissing or crackling noise. This sound is often heard in the daytime when the light itself is invisible.

St. Elmo's fire may occur before, during or after thunderstorms, but it is also seen, in the absence of thunder and lightning, when rain, snow or hail is falling. In such cases the falling drops or particles are strongly electrified and a discharge occurs between them and pointed objects near which they fall. On mountains the phenomenon is especially common during snowstorms.

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