

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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SCARING AWAY STORMS

The superstitious practice of making loud noises to drive away storms has prevailed from early antiquity and has assumed a great variety of forms. Bells, firearms and the human voice are some of the noise-making agencies employed for this purpose, and there are several others. Writing some 25 years ago of weather superstitions in Austria, W. G. Fitzgerald traced the history of ringing church-bells during thunderstorms.

"The ringers in the belfries," he says, "were so frequently struck dead by lightning that the Empress Maria Theresa, in 1750, issued a decree prohibiting this practice altogether. The peasants were tenacious of their old customs, however, and so 40 years later we find the Emperor Joseph II confirming his mother's decree. Yet in rural districts of Austria today you will hear the 'thunder bells' during a storm, or you will hear the huge 'weather horns' blown from the church tower on the hilltops of Styria (Printer: Note spelling; not Syria), while the herdsman set up a terrific howl and the women rattle chains and beat together the lids of their milk pails to scare away the destructive demon of the storm.

"For centuries the Austrian peasants have also shot at destructive clouds. Consecrated guns, powder and bullets were used, the last with a pious cross scratched upon them. In some districts horsehoe nails were fired from the guns, a different name being called out at each shot. If by chance it fitted the evil witch of the cloud, she fell dead -- though none saw her remains."

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