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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE DESERT RETURNS

In the early 'nineties of the last century the fertile soil of the Great Plains and the occurrence of a few abnormally wet years in a region of normally meager rainfall tempted settlers to pour by the thousands into western Kansas and Nebraska and eastern Colorado. In the sensational "boom" that then prevailed millions of acres of virgin land were broken to the plow, cities and towns were laid out, and pretentious courthouses and schoolhouses were erected. The bubble burst in 1893 when conditions even more arid than the average for the region set in, and the rash experiment ended in ruin.

This classic example of the folly of ignoring climate had a parallel on a smaller scale in the state of Washington some years later. There is an area of over a million acres east of the Columbia River in that state where the normal rainfall is less than eight inches per annum, but where rainfall much heavier than usual occurred in the years 1900-09. A few pioneers obtained excellent crops, and their success induced other settlers to rush into the area, clear the sage and plant extensive fields of wheat. When the rainfall returned to normal, the boom collapsed.

A few places in this district now prosper because of irrigation. "Outside such oases," says Prof. J.W. Baylor, of the University of Washington, "deserted cabins, dilapidated fences, abandoned fields and unbroken stretches of sage all bear mute testimony of man's failure to utilize these lands unless water is procurable."

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