

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed April 25, 1932

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INVISIBLE DUST STORMS

Every year, from early spring to the middle of autumn, many invisible dust storms sweep over the United States. A few years ago their existence was hardly suspected, and definite information about them is just now coming to light. The dust does not, like that blown up from deserts, blot out the sunshine, nor does it, like the soot of our cities, swell the citizen's laundry bills, but it gets into people's nostrils and it causes an annual total of fully a million cases of hay fever. This dust is the wind-borne pollen of plants. In spring it comes mainly from trees, in the early summer from grasses, and in the late summer and the autumn from ragweed, except in the far West, where its principal source at that season is the group of plants known collectively as wormwoods, including mugwort and sagebrush.

Science now seeks to learn the duration, area and intensity of each of these pollen storms. That hay fever is due to the pollens of certain plants has been known for more than half a century, and the present method of treatment, in which the pollens causing the disease are utilized to render patients immune to it, was introduced some twenty years ago; but in order that an effective campaign may be waged against this malady much more knowledge is needed concerning the amounts of the various hay-fever pollens present in the air at different places and at different times. Many local "pollen surveys" have been conducted for the purpose of obtaining such information, and for some years past an annual survey has been carried out on a national scale during the ragweed season under the direction of O. C. Durham. The daily counts of the number of pollen grains in a cubic yard of air are obtained from a microscopic examination of vaseline-coated slides exposed at selected stations of the U. S. Weather Bureau.

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