

A Science Service Feature

Released upon receipt  
but intended for use  
May 9, 1932

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed May 2, 1932

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PSEUDO-CLOUDBURSTS

Though the term "cloudburst" is a misnomer, since clouds do not actually burst, it is well established in scientific as well as general literature as the name of an excessively heavy local downpour of brief duration. In popular usage, however, this name is often applied to showers of relatively moderate intensity occurring in dry mountainous regions, where they cause spectacular short-lived floods owing to the rapid flow of the storm water down bare slopes and its concentration by ravines and canyons. Many floods of this character have been extremely destructive. Among them was the one that wiped out a large part of the town of Heppner, Oregon, in June, 1903, causing the death of 200 people. This disaster figures in the list of famous American cloudbursts, but an investigation made immediately after the storm by J.T. Whistler, of the U.S. Geological Survey, proved that the rain causing it was not exceptionally heavy.

Mr. Whistler estimated the average rainfall in the Heppner storm at an inch and a half over an area of 20 square miles. Such a shower would yield more than two million tons of water, and the town was, unfortunately, so situated that a great part of this water swept down upon it in the course of a few minutes. A rain of equal intensity falling on a level surface, or on slopes well covered with vegetation, would have had no serious results. This case is typical of what happens in a large percentage of the storms reported as cloudbursts from the mountains of the arid and semiarid West.

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