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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed June 21, 1933

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WHAT IS A CLOUD?

Aviators who have flown through dense clouds can tell us that a cloud is very much like a fog; in fact a fog is really a cloud that happens to be touching the ground. Both are made up of minute droplets of water or ice spicules, condensed out of the air. So small are the particles that fog or cloud contains surprisingly little water. It has been calculated that 900 cubic feet of wet fog would yield less than one-seventh of a glass of water -- hardly more than a swallow.

It is so cold at high levels that the thin cirrus or mare's-tail clouds are made of ice particles, even in summer. Their long delicate wisps are trails of falling snow. The denser lower clouds are composed of water droplets. Sometimes you see a towering thunderhead, brilliantly white and looking almost as substantial as a snow mountain. In such a cloud the outlines are hard and sharp. It marks the top of a strong rising current of air where condensation is taking place vigorously. Thick clouds reflect sunlight well, but will not let it pass through. Therefore, the same cloud may look dazzling white at a distance, but dark and black if overhead.

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