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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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A GOOSEBONE PROPHECY

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Authority on Meteorology

At last the dictionary-makers have discovered the word "goosebone." The recent revised edition of the New International tells us that the word is applied to "the bone of a goose locally used as a means of forecasting weather," though it fails to state that the breastbone is the part of the bird's anatomy exclusively employed for this purpose.

The superstitious practice of foretelling the character of a coming winter from the inspection of the breastbone salvaged from a feast of roast goose originated in the Old World and appears to have been brought to America by German immigrants some generations ago. It was made widely familiar to Americans early in the present century through the articles of Albert N. Burkholder, then and now attached to the Reading (Pa.) Eagle. The stories appeared in New York and Philadelphia newspapers and were extensively copied. Many of them centered about one Elias Hartz, a weather prophet of local renown, who depended upon the goosebone for his predictions.

Hartz died twenty years ago, but Mr. Burkholder is still writing him up in the Eagle. The issue of December 9 contains some anecdotes about him. As the writer is -- and delights in being -- a talented Munchausen, his reminiscences on this subject are not necessarily reliable. So it may not be "vero" but it is "ben trovato" that Hartz once predicted a severe winter and was charged with being in league with the Coal Trust.

"The old forecaster issued an indignant denial," writes Mr. Burkholder.

"Curiously enough, the ensuing winter was one of the most severe ever recorded in this section of the country, and in this Hartz had his vindication."

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