

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed April 6, 1935

WHEN THE ANDES LIGHT UP

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Comparable to the spectacular electrical displays known as "Andes lights" seen along the mountain crests in Chile are those that occur on the lofty table-land and the adjacent parallel ranges of the Andes in western Bolivia, in the region that includes Lakes Titicaca and Poopo. A description of Bolivia published in 1904 by the Pan American Union says that in the period before the rainy season sets in spectacular electrical storms occur here, attended by furious winds. We read:

"The heavy electrical accumulation in the clouds produce terrible atmospheric explosions and violent detonations, while the surface of the ground sparkles and crackles with the electrical fluid. When this phenomenon takes place men, animals, and inanimate objects give forth a sudden glimmering light, and the quivering, stifling atmosphere takes a reddish hue.

"Large masses of clouds hang over the cordillera covering it almost to its base, rising or descending according to the variations of the temperature of the lower atmospheric strata. In such case the accumulated clouds become phosphorescent at night, shedding a tremulous bright halo, accompanied by intermittent flashes of most vivid light, until every mass of clouds becomes a powerful center of incessant detonations, producing a constant low, rumbling sound. Sometimes this phenomenon takes place at a single point, as in 1878, when the Illampu Peak, near the town of Sorata, Department of La Paz, suddenly became brilliantly lighted while its surroundings were in total darkness. This phenomenon was accompanied by a heavy rumbling at the summit of the peak."

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