

Blizzard of 1886—East of Dodge City. (Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.)

Weather Talk

Compiled By P. J. Wyatt

Although the preceding article deals with several aspects of the physical geography of Kansas, the following "stories" are mainly concerned with the weather and climate of the state. The first account, written in 1912 by O. P. Byers of Hutchinson, tells about the blizzard of 1886. Kansas has had more severe storms since then, but the state has suffered less because of improved methods of preparing for the storms. Mr. Byers' account gives the reader the feel of the excitement and the helplessness of the victims of the blizzard.

Personal Recollections of the Terrible Blizzard of 1896

By O. P. Beysr

The autumn and early winter of 1885 were of the grandeur possible only to the western plains. . . . The morning of December 31 dawned clear and mild, with a low barometer, and peculiar yellowish purple bordering the northern horizon. Early in the forenoon a single fleecy cloud from the northwest and a very rapidly rising [falling?] barometer foretold a coming storm. By noon a light rain was falling. The temperature in a few hours had fallen below zero. The storm, gaining force hourly, continued throughout the night, and by morning it might very truthfully be said the state was frozen solid. This in itself was not unusual, nor was it seriously feared, but as the storm did not abate during the second day or the following night the situation became alarming. The temperature continued to fall until it then reached twenty degrees below zero. Neither had the terrifying wind abated in the slightest. The atmosphere had assumed a peculiar blackness characteristic of such storms, and the fine, driven snow made breathing most difficult. Day after day the storm continued, each cessation quickly followed by another storm, making it practically continuous. The temperature did not rise to zero from the first night to the last, the latter part of the month, and generally ranged from fifteen to thirty below. . . .

Individual cases of perishing, suffering, escaping and heroism in well-known instances would fill a volume. A systematic search of dugouts, shanties and prairie was made as soon as possible. A number of people

were found in their homes frozen to death, and the ones alive were in bed, where they had been for days, as their only means to escape freezing. Many were found on the prairie, where they had become lost and perished. Much as the town people suffered, they fared well compared with the settler. Widely separated from one another, in the desperation of almost certain death, many attempted refuge with more fortunate neighbors, and generally with disastrous results. Several perished attempting to reach home. One of the most remarkable cases was a homesteader in northwestern Kansas. He and his team of two horses were found frozen to death within fifty feet of his dugout. Animal instinct had guided the horses home, but so impossible was it to see even a few feet, he either believed himself lost on the prairie and the animals unable to go further, or he perished on the road home. His family, in the dugout only a few feet away, knew nothing of his presence for two days. . . .

Jack rabbits and birds of every description were found all over the prairie frozen to death. Almost every town was destitute of fuel. Corn soon became the substitute for coal, and toward the end of the storm even that was becoming exhausted. It finally became a question of provisions. Business was suspended and schools dismissed almost the entire month. Water-works systems in the various cities and towns were frozen and useless; newspapers published could not be delivered by carrier, and even the post offices were idle. Telephone systems were at that time confined to cities entirely, and were practically of no service. Families huddled together in one room, with the balance of the house battened in every way possible, against the raging storm, passed anxious days in isolation. From the third day it was realized live stock on the wind-swept plains would be almost a total loss. The snowfall was not extraordinary in depth, except drifts, which were frequently ten feet high.

Every railroad in the state was completely paralyzed. Cuts were drifted full of fine snow driven by the high north wind. Trains were stalled, and the crude appliances for clearing the tracks were useless. . . . Some four or five days after the beginning of the storm the tracks were partially cleared, but before trains could be moved into division points they were again blockaded. Engines were off the track and so disabled from snow service that the attempt to use them further in cleaning tracks was abandoned altogether, and the slower method of shoveling out the cuts resorted to. So deep were the drifts, it was frequently necessary to form "benches," the man down on the track pitching the snow up to a man standing on the first bench, he in turn pitching it to another man on a bench higher up, who cast it out. Oftentimes a cut thus cleared would again be drifted full within a few hours by the high wind. No attempt was made to run freight trains after the day, and after the first week all effort to move even passenger trains across the western half of the state ceased entirely. But three passenger trains entered Denver from the east during the entire month.

Old engineers, who had for years passed over the same track daily, became lost before they had gone five miles from their starting points. Not

a marker could be seen in broad daylight. In numerous cases they ran by the stations, unable to see the depots twenty feet away. Because of the great danger of running by or the impossibility of seeing signals, the dispatchers were obliged to abandon the telegraph as a means of moving trains. It became a custom for engineers to ride facing the rear, and through the vacuum created by the movement of the train, locate themselves by some familiar telegraph pole. They had no other means of forming any idea whatever as to where they were. Probably not in the history of railroads has a similar condition existed.

Men soon became exhausted from working day and night. Employees in all capacities were pressed into snow service. Box cars heated with temporary stoves were the sleeping quarters, and the subsistence such eatables as could be found. So crowded were the cars, unbelievable as it may seem, men were frequently seen standing perfectly upright, sound asleep and snoring.

Ten or twelve full-grown steers were found standing frozen to death on the track in a cut in the Harker hills. They had drifted in with the storm and become covered with snow. A snowplow was stalled but a few feet from them.

In western Kansas a passenger train was stopped on the level prairie by an obstruction ahead. Snow began drifting around the wheels, and in a few hours there was a solid drift up to the windows of the coaches the full length of the train. Several days later, when it was released, it was found the wheels were frozen to the rails. The cars had to be uncoupled and broken loose one at a time.

The morning of the second day of the storm the Santa Fe had several trains of cattle in western Kansas, east bound, in the usual course of business. They were rushed to Dodge City and unloaded for safety. The management congratulated itself upon thus getting them into a feeding station, which Dodge City was at the time. The next morning less than twenty-five per cent of the animals unloaded were alive. Leaving them in the cars meant certain destruction, and the railroad followed the only course that offered even a hope of saving them.

Each railroad issued a general order on the third day, refusing shipments of freight of every character. This order remained in effect almost the entire month.

Many farmers reversed positions of animals each day, where more than one stood in a stall, to prevent one side becoming frozen. With all the protection possible to give them, their eyes, nose, ears and hoofs were frozen. For days at a time it was impossible to get out to feed sheltered stock, and watering them was not attempted.

Numerous stage routes were still in operation at that time. A number of stages became lost and wandered miles from their routes. A stagecoach came into the military post of Camp Supply, Indian Territory, with the driver sitting on the box frozen to death. The passengers inside knew nothing of the death of their driver until after they had alighted at their destination. . . .

The net result of this storm was the most unprecedented loss of live stock ever experienced on the plains. The history of the state tells us of no catastrophe that has ever cost the loss of life and suffering produced by that terrible January, 1886. What planetary or atmospheric situation may have arisen, beyond the well-known barometric condition of the time, to have produced such an intense and continued blizzard has never been known. A weird story and sad commentary upon a land heralded everywhere as one of mild winters of short duration!

Some additional information about the blizzard of '86 comes from a tape-recorded interview with Mr. A. B. Bradshaw on December 31, 1959, at his farm near Langdon. According to Mr. Bradshaw:

I remember that morning well. It was just kind of a soft, damp morning, you know. Just pleasant out; a bit cloudy, though. Along in the morning, the wind came up from the north, and I tell you, it really got cold. It just kept getting colder and colder and colder. It snowed and blowed, and it went down to twenty below zero by the end of the second day. We've had some bad storms since—we had one just a few years ago when the trains were stuck—but the temperature never got below freezing. That storm wasn't so cold. But in '86, it was twenty below zero, and that was plenty cold! The roads drifted full, but in two or three days, it began to warm up. Most everybody around here had enough fuel. If they didn't have anything else, they burned corn. At ten or twelve cents a bushel, it was just about as cheap as coal. They just threw ears of corn, with or without the husks, into the stove and had a good hot fire.

Nobody froze to death, and nobody lost any stock in this area. There wasn't too much stock around here for one thing, and most people had pretty good sheds for their animals by that time. In Western Kansas, they had big herds. They grazed them out there on buffalo grass—thousands of heads in the herds, you know. Well, those cattle just drifted with the wind during the storm, and the people out there lost about all of their stock. Around here, a farmer would have maybe eight or ten cows, and he could get them into the protection of the shed.

Of course none of us that morning had any idea that there was going to be a big blizzard. We had no forecasts then, you know. It was warm and soft out, and just a little cloudy. And the wind came up and just kept blowing harder and colder all the time—probably about forty or fifty miles an hour. It was a dry snow because it was so cold. I don't think there was any wet snow at all. But there were some huge drifts, sometimes ten to fifteen feet deep. There weren't very good roads then, and there weren't any fences. After it began to warm up in a few days, people just drove their wagons and teams out around the drifts when they had to go to town. That big blizzard was the daddy of them all—the worst blizzard that ever blew into Western Kansas.

Turning from chills to fever, so to speak, let's hear about some famous droughts. An excerpt from The Gun and the Gospel by Rev. H. D.

Fisher, an itinerant preacher of the nineteenth century, tells about the hardships and the drought suffered by Kansans in 1860.

Every new country has had its attractions by which emigrants have been drawn thither, and its hardships through which they have had to struggle to make pioneer life successful. . . . But Kansas, in particular, [was] inviting mainly for the opportunity offered adventurous reformers to plant anew the seeds of a higher, broader and deeper civilization. Besides her rich and productive soil, her salubrious climate, her Italian skies and her indescribable sunsets, she was inviting to the pioneer as a central and pivotal state.

The early emigrant was confronted with unusual difficulties as he wended his way across her rolling surface to found for himself and family a home and to do battle for the glorious cause of freedom. Here he met the border-ruffian bushwhackers from Missouri and Arkansas; the little less uncivilized American Indians of the western plains; the terrible droughts and famine of 1860 and 1861; the hot winds from the southern sandy deserts, and here, above all places outside of Egypt, he suffered the indescribable annoyances and the losses incident to the devastating swarms of locusts known as the Kansas grasshoppers, which blighted the face of the earth as they swept in migratory tour from their habitat further north to their objective point further to the south and west.

It is no exaggeration to say that no pioneers in all this great country have suffered the disastrous series of drawbacks which have had to be met and overcome by the courageous and enduring Kansan, at least since the early days of Indian massacre and witchcraft in New England.

It may be well in passing to attempt a feeble description of the terrible drought which caused so much ruin and distress in 1860, just before Kansas was admitted to the Union of states. The pioneers of the eastern tiers of counties, for the western part of the territory was still unknown to civilization, had but recovered from the devastating effects of the border-ruffian contest which had been waged from 1855 to 1858 with more or less of continuance; the black cloud of civil war was threatening the entire country; in the very nature of things Kansas was destined to suffer seriously, in proportion to her resources, as this great cloud should burst upon her; her people were anxiously awaiting the coming of those awful events whose coming was as certain as is the rising and the setting of the sun, realizing that they were to suffer almost beyond endurance, yet not flinching from the contests before them. It would seem that the territorial population had had enough to contend against already, and that with the impending internecine struggle immediately ahead they might have been spared further tests of endurance and suffering. But it was not to be.

The spring of 1860 opened auspiciously. Fields were planted and the hardy pioneer went to his work of opening up new farming ground and planting new sod-crops with confidence that the fertile prairie would repay him for his toil and privations. But he was to be disappointed. As the young crops came along the rain fell not. The skies were as clear as the

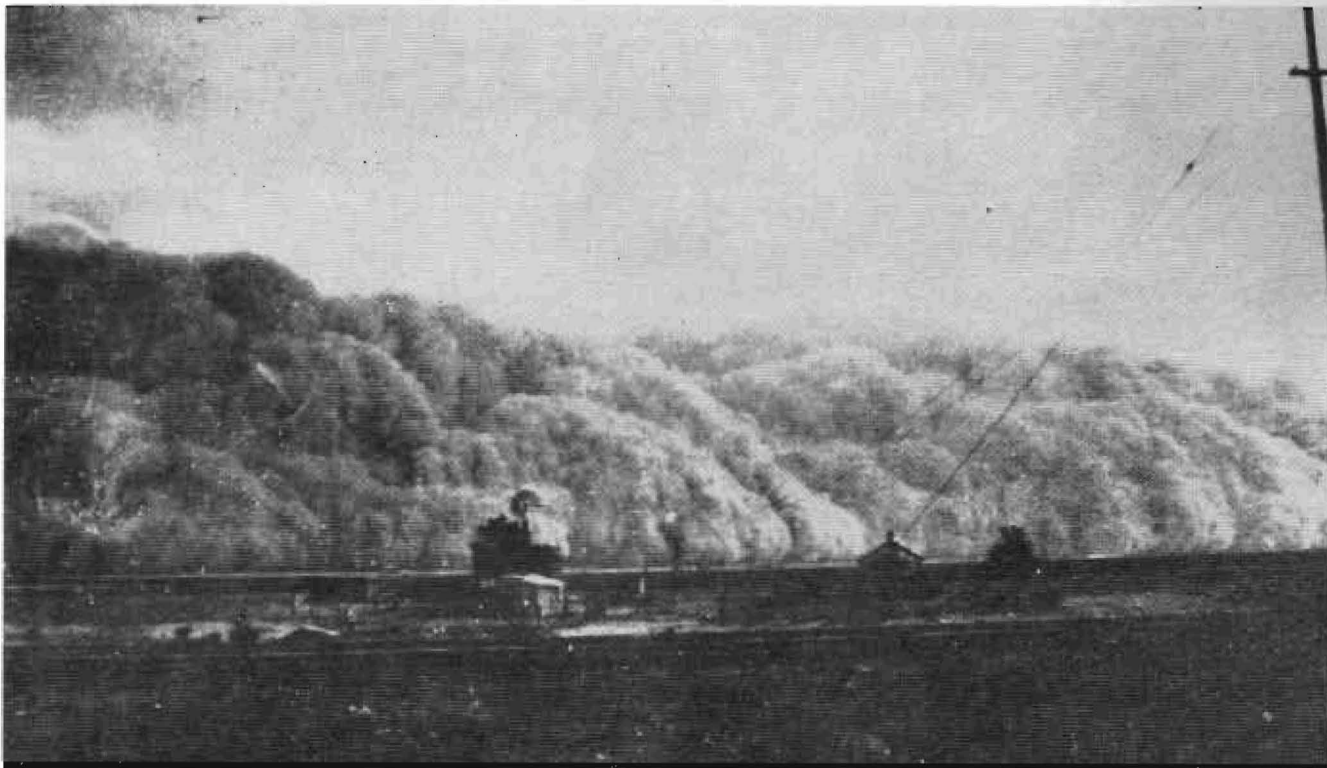
most beautiful Italian skies ever depicted by poet or painter. The sun shone upon beautiful Kansas with a generosity that would have given us the most bountiful harvests had not nature forgotten to turn on the water. But though the winds blew and the sun shone, and the sky was clear, and all nature looked gay enough in the spring and early summer, yet for seven long months we suffered the horrors of a desert drought. For four months consecutively there fell not a drop of rain. The country was blighted almost as if by a great prairie fire. The grass dried up; the leaves fell from the trees as if from the autumnal frosts; the ground opened with great yawnings, by which horses and cattle were often stumbled and injured; running streams went dry; the rivers became so low that steamers of even the lightest draught could navigate them with difficulty; the wells and cisterns were soon emptied, and people had to haul water for domestic purposes many miles in many instances; horses, cattle, and even the buffalo on the plains died from thirst, the blighting drought being destructive in the extreme upon every living thing. Hundreds upon hundreds of struggling pioneers were compelled to exist for months upon the most unsavory and unhealthful food, the result being that sickness and death added terror to the disaster.

It is impossible to depict the suffering and distress incident to the terrible drought and awful famine of 1860. So widespread were they that thousands of brave pioneers were compelled to return overland to their former homes in order to keep from starving. . . .

In addition to the drought of 1860 just described, there have been many other droughts in the past, some in the mid-west area, some more generally over the country. Notable droughts in Kansas were recorded in 1860, 1865, 1874, 1901, 1911, and 1917, to name a few. Of course the droughts were not alone responsible for the dust storms which accompanied them. Long-term weather conditions, prairie fires, overgrazing of lands, overworking of crop lands, in addition to long dry periods caused the dust storms that have become so famous.

If Kansas people start talking about the 1930's and the succession of droughts in that decade, the conversation will soon turn to the dust storms, the more obvious phenomena of the dry spells. Probably most discussions of the '30's would sound like this one, which was recorded in 1959:

"Sure, I remember the droughts and the dust storms of the '30's. Around Wichita, 1933 was especially bad. People went around with handkerchiefs tied over their faces so they could breathe. I remember some days having to hang up wet sheets over the windows and doors to keep out the dust and the heat as much as possible. I had two youngsters growing up then—a baby just three months old and her sister who was about five. I kept a big tub out on the back porch filled with water. All day I'd keep going out and dipping the sheets in the water. I'd wring them out a little and hang them up. When I'd take them down the next time, they'd be all muddy. In the middle of the floor I kept a wash tub with a big cake



Western Kansas Dust Storm of the 1930's. (Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.)



Drifts of Dust—Western Kansas in the 1930's. (Courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.)

of ice in it and an electric fan blowing over it to try to keep the babies comfortable. I expect the temperature got up to 112° to 115° that summer on some days. And those old hot dry winds blowing the dust in! I swear there wasn't a drop of water in the Big Arkansas River—and even when you dug down into the sand of the river bottom, you couldn't find moisture!”

Another woman agreed: “Yeah, I sure remember 1933. We were living on a farm out north of Wichita. It was hot that we had to keep feeding the chickens cracked ice so that they wouldn't lay hard-boiled eggs.”

Another one said, “You shouldn't joke like that. Somebody might believe you! But seriously, I remember lots of times right here in Wichita when they left the street lights on day and night because the sun never really shone through the dust. It wasn't ever pitch dark like it was out west, but it was dark enough that we needed lights on in the daytime.”

“Yes, and when you drove your car in the daytime, you had to turn your lights on. The air was kind of like fog, only it was a reddish-brown fog. You could see the sun on most days. You could look right at it without hurting your eyes because it was so dim. It looked like a dull, red-orange ball in the sky—kind of ghostly pale. I remember how the dust drifted in around the cracks of the doors and windows and settled in little piles along the sills. We wore wet cloths over our faces on the worst days so we could breathe. And the food! Gosh! There was dust in the air and the food and your mouth. When you chewed, it was real gritty, like you were eating sand.”

One of the men added his experiences. “Sometimes it would sprinkle with all that dust in the air, and it was like little drops of mud. One time I was driving home south from Dodge City when it started to sprinkle like that. The windshield wipers didn't do much good. They just sort of smeared the mud around. I could only drive about five miles an hour. That was probably in about 1930. Lots of people got ‘dust pneumonia’ in the '30's, and had to leave this part of the country.”

Another man added: “I remember out around Dodge City and further west when those little prickly-pear cactus suddenly started coming up in the fields—especially in the pasture lands. When the cactus got big enough, the farmers used to burn off the sharp spines with blowtorches or something like that, so that the cattle could eat them. I've seen pastures out there where the dirt had just been blown away between the clumps of buffalo grass. The dirt was gone clear down to the roots of the grass, and the roots were almost out in the open. The people way out in the western part of the state really had it rough in those years.”

But these extremes must not be taken for the ordinary weather. Before ending these weather stories, we should hear from one of Kansas' faithful supporters and early writers, John J. Ingalls, U. S. Senator from Kansas, 1873-1891. In a letter to his father in Massachusetts, Ingalls elegantly states his views of the physical geography of Kansas:



Scene in the Smoky Hills Area.
(Courtesy of the Kansas Industrial Development Commission.)

Atchison, Kas., Aug. 21, 1860.

Dear Father—If the heats of summer in New England have been as protracted and exhausting as here in Kansas, it is not wonderful that it should have a debilitating effect upon the system. The latter half of June, the whole of July and the first two weeks of August were only fit for a Hottentot, accustomed to the ardors of Sahara, but recently an invigorating coolness has succeeded the tropical fervor, the nights have been refreshing, and the atmosphere as pure and clear as though the first frosts of autumn had distilled their health-giving influences through its noxious exhalations and poisonous miasma.

The memory of the cool, fresh breeze from the waste of waters, the plunge and sway of the restless surges, and the vague, sad suggestions of the mysterious sea, have often recurred to me since I have been restricted to the monotone of the river and the prairie. But these even are not without their charm to the lover of nature, nor destitute of the strongest interest to the student of science. The theory of the formation of continents by slow accretion beneath incumbent oceans, and their subsequent upheaval by some interior force, has here abundant confirmation. The primitive strata in broken and irregular masses protrude through the later limestone, locked in whose stony volume lies the history of innumerable generations of animal and vegetable existence. Fossils of the most delicate and beautiful ferns spread their tracery upon the surface of every fractured rock; shells of every shape and size, from whose lining membrane the pearly luster has not faded, are disposed in layers, as they were left by the receding billows of that unremembered sea, while evidences of the existence of lower but not less perfect and beautiful organisms are revealed by the microscope in every roadside stone.

The climate is certainly very peculiar; subject to the most violent and unaccountable contrasts—very like some impulsive, fickle, superficial persons I have met, in whom a treacherous blandness and serenity of demeanor was liable at any moment to yield to a tornado of angry passion, and that in turn to be repented of and atoned for by an excess of tenderness, itself as delusive and uncertain as that which preceded. The summer is mostly in the early months; the severest winter in November and December. A fall of 50 to 60 degrees is by no means an uncommon occurrence, though far from an agreeable one. . . .

With much regards to all at home.

Very truly, your son,

J. J. I.

And some years later in an essay entitled "Blue Grass," Ingalls wrote a somewhat flowery, but really a rather good description of Kansas weather—and one which certainly supports our theme:



(Courtesy of the Kansas Industrial Development Commission.)
Scene in the High Plains Area.

Kansas is all antithesis. It is the land of extremes. It is the hottest, coldest, driest, wettest, thickest, thinnest country of the world. The stranger who crossed our borders for the first time at Wyandotte and travelled by rail to White Cloud would with consternation contrast that uninterrupted Sierra of rugose and oak-clad crags with the placid prairies of his imagination. Let him ride along the spine of any of those lateral "divides" or water-sheds whose

"Level leagues forsaken lie,

A grassy waste, extending to the sky,"

and he would be oppressed by the same melancholy monotony which broods over those who pursue the receding horizon over the fluctuating plains of the sea. And let his discursion be whither it would, if he listened to the voice of experience, he would not start upon his pilgrimage at any season of the year without an overcoat, a fan, a lightning-rod and an umbrella.

The new-comer, alarmed by the traditions of "the drought of '60," when in the language of one of the varnished rhetoricians of that epoch, "acorns were used for food, and the bark of trees for clothing," views with terror the long succession of dazzling early summer days, days without clouds and nights without dew, days when the effulgent sun floods the dome with fierce and blinding radiance, days of glittering leaves and burnished blades of serried ranks of corn, days when the transparent air, purged of all earthly exhalation and alloy, seems like a pure powerful lens, revealing a remoter horizon and a profounder sky.

But his apprehensions are relieved by the unheralded appearance of a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, in the north-west. A huge bulk of purple and ebony vapor, preceded by a surging wave of pallid smoke, blots out the sky. Birds and insects disappear, and cattle abruptly stand agazed. An appalling silence, an ominous darkness, fill the atmosphere. A continuous roll of muffled thunder, increasing in volume, shakes the solid earth. The air suddenly grows chill and smells like an unused cellar. A fume of yellow dust conceals the base of the meteor. The jagged scimitar of the lightning, drawn from its cloudy scabbard, is brandished for a terrible instant in the abyss, and thrust into the affrighted city, with a crash as if the rafters of the world had fallen. The wind, hitherto concealed, leaps from its ambush and lashes the earth with scourges of rain. The broken cisterns of the clouds can hold no water, and rivers run in the atmosphere. Dry ravines become turbid torrents, bearing cargoes of drift and rubbish on their swift descent. Confusion and chaos hold undisputed sway. In a moment the turmoil ceases. A gray veil of rain stands like a wall of granite in the eastern sky. The trailing banners of the storm hang from the frail bastions. The routed squadrons of mist, gray on violet, terrified fugitives, precipitately fly beneath the triumphal arch of a rainbow whose airy and insubstantial glory dies with the setting sun. . . .

Well, when all's said and done (and a lot can be said but not much can be done), it seems as though the sunflower state always has had and always will have its weather. And that's one thing, of course, that makes Kansas . . . uniquely Kansas.

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