

IT'S RAINING, IT'S POURING

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

It was very early morning. It was still raining. I had emptied the rain gauge before I went to bed, but it had overflowed again during the night. There had been over 4 inches of rain in 12 hours. As I listened to the traffic reports for road closures that would affect my drive to work, I began musing on how our ancestors were affected by such “weather events” (as they are referred to in the current jargon).

Most of our ancestors’ knowledge of climatic events was localized and personal. They evaluated the weather—present and yet to come—by watching the sky and sensing the atmosphere. For the many who made their living from the land, weather had the greatest impact on whether their future would be bright or dismal. The timing and amount of rainfall and snowfall determined the success or failure of crops. Even those who made their living by a trade or mercantile venture were affected when impassable roads deterred customers.

Over a century ago, there were locations measuring meteorological events, but those measurements are often archived in back rooms and not easily accessible. The best sources for relatively normal weather and its effect are personal memories, newspapers, and the diaries of people residing in the same area as your ancestor (check out Laura Prescott’s “Diaries and Letters of Our Ancestors” in November/December 2003 *Ancestry Magazine*).

In the 1950s Dallas, Texas, suffered a severe drought. There was a river and man-made lakes to supply water, but as the levels fell lower and lower, potable water (water safe for drinking) became scarce. We may not think of this as an effect of a drought, but it is one remembered by Dallas residents. As an operations research analyst for the Water Utilities Department I had access to the numbers, but it was my in-laws who told me of standing in line with empty bottles to be filled at one of the city’s safe-water supplies.

To the questions we ask when we do an oral interview of elderly family members, we might add a variety of questions related to the weather: “Did you ever see a tornado?” “How did you cool off in the summer?” “How did you get to school after a heavy snow?” (As a small child, my mother walked on top of the packed drifts along the fence rows because she was shorter than the snow was deep. Her older brother held her hand in order to retrieve her when she fell through the snow crust.)

The goal of the questions isn’t as much to get a response to the specific question, as it is to start a stream of memories. With my mother, the story about walking to school was usually followed by memories of school in the winter, such as one boy daring another to stick his tongue on the pump. (If you don’t know what I’m talking about, ask your oldest relative.)

We are most apt to be able to locate information about extreme events such as floods, blizzards, droughts, torna-

does, and hurricanes. One way to learn of them is through contemporary newspaper coverage. Be aware that disastrous events were covered far and wide, so do not begin with a limited search of local newspapers. For example, in an earlier edition of *Ancestry Daily News*, an extract of an 1897 article from a Deming, New Mexico, newspaper that had just been added to the *Ancestry Historic Newspaper* database reported on the greatest and most destructive flood that had ever devastated the lower Mississippi River valley.

Extreme weather events were often covered by newspapers again much, much later. Many newspapers do retrospective news, ranging from “this day 20/50/100 years ago” to ongoing features during centennial years.

Information about significant events, including meteorological measurements, may appear in historical accounts and in studies of weather. All of these are much easier to tap into with the Internet. In 2000 a list was published of the “Top U.S. Weather/Water/Climate Events” for the closing century. For the early part of the twentieth century, it included the Galveston Hurricane (1900), the Tri-state Tornado (1925), the Great Okeechobee Hurricane & Flood (1928), the Dust Bowl (1930s), the Florida Keys Hurricane (1935), and the New England Hurricane (1938).

As a genealogist, I wondered about the prior century. Being from Nebraska, I knew of the infamous “Blizzard of ‘88,” which blew in unexpectedly on a relatively balmy January afternoon, catching children in one-room schoolhouses and farmers and livestock in distant fields. For this article, I typed “Blizzard of 1888” into Google (in quotes to maintain the phrase) and got 2,330 hits. I visited a couple of likely websites, which detailed a blizzard in New England—including photographs from Connecticut newspapers of sledding in the heavy snowfall.

Somehow this didn’t sound like the same blizzard. Was I remembering wrong? I added the word “Nebraska” to the search, and the responses were cut to 732. I discovered that the east-coast blizzard occurred later and is more famous, but the Great Plains blizzard (which hit Montana, the Dakotas, Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Texas) was both more devastating—235 people died—and more dramatic, with purported 100-degree temperature drops in 24 hours.

Some of websites were from individuals and concerned their own ancestry, but I also found text from local histories on RootsWeb and retrospective articles from newspapers, often detailing the heroics of school teachers in saving the children in their charge.

Next I turned my research eye even further back in time to the Year without a Summer. For those of us with Midwestern ancestry rooted in New England, the chilly weather of the 1810s may have been the primary motivator for the relocation. Many analysts have blamed a series of volcanic eruptions in the Pacific. The eruption of the Indo-

nesian volcano Tambora in 1815 spewed historic levels of volcanic dust into the atmosphere, reducing the sunlight reaching the ground. There may have been other contributing factors, but the crop of 1816 was dismal at best. For many families it was time to move on.

A quote-delimited search in Google for “year without a summer” produced 4,620 hits. (For those of you who are statistically inclined, “eighteen hundred and froze to death” garnered 310.) These included articles written by

meteorologists for newspapers, television stations, the National Weather Service (NWS), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Information gleaned from these included weather measurements, quotes from diaries, crop results, and newspaper reports.

Weather is not often one of the elements (pardon the pun) we consider when constructing a family history, but it was an important part of our ancestors’ lives.