

BOOK CORNER

The Country Journal New England Weather Book. By David Ludlum and the editors of Blair and Ketchum's Journal. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2 Park Street, Boston, Mass., 1976. 148 Pages. \$5.95. 8¼ x 11", soft cover.

One hundred years ago, Mark Twain had this to say about New England weather:

"There is a sumptuous variety about the New England weather that compels the stranger's admiration — and regret. The weather is always doing something there; always attending strictly to business; always getting up new designs and trying them on the people to see how they will go. But it gets through more business in spring than any other season. In the spring I have counted one hundred and thirty-six different kinds of weather inside of four-and-twenty hours."

Weather, and its capriciousness, has no doubt been a topic of concern and consternation for humans as long as we have been in existence. In whatever form, it affects all of us one way or another every day. But it is not the nice, pleasant, sunny days that generally attract our attention. On the contrary — to qualify as memorable, a day must feature some extreme or other; the greater the extreme, the greater interests generated.

If Mark Twain were to be taken seriously, the conclusion might be that, while memorable days abound in New England, there are never any nice days and probably no normal ones either. We know, of course, that nice days *do* occur there, but the audience for a description of *Nice Days I Have Seen in New England* is likely to be limited.

The Country Journal New England Weather Book is not a chronicle of nice days in New England, but rather, an anthology of the most interesting, unusual, and/or disastrous weather events experienced in that region during the last 300 years.

As the reader will learn, this area has experienced some *very* unusual weather. For example, on July 15, 1643, "Gov. John Winthrop described (a) small tornado at Newbury, Mass., 'Through God'd mercy it did no hurt, but only killed one Indian' and, on September 25, 1696, John Higgins in Salem, Mass. wrote of "A black frost. Ye ice on ye side of my house as thick as window glass."

Considerable effort has obviously gone into the layout and arrangement of this book. It flows smoothly from origins of New England weather through regional climatology and on to specific events, all accompanied by a generous number of illustrations, photographs and paintings.

Chapter one describes the air circulations patterns over the United States that control New England's weather. Also, it identifies the several tracks by which storms approach New England as well as the type of weather usually associated with storms following each track.

Chapter two contains a daily chronicle of novel weather events and a descriptive climatology of the region for each month. These climatologies are excellent examples of the value of descriptive climatology. Undoubtedly, prospective travelers to New England in October would find the following more helpful than tables containing minimum, maximum and normal temperatures.

"October is the truly autumnal month. The intensity of summer heat has faded, yet the cold sting of winter is still weeks ahead. Warm days, cool nights, and glorious

autumn foliage are the normal delightful fare in New England. The number of clear days reaches its annual maximum, winds tend to be light, the horizon is dulled by a blue-grey haze — weather conditions known in America lore as Indian Summer."

For disaster buffs, chapters three and four feature heat waves, cold waves, drought, flood, hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, ice storms, and hail stones, all described in highly readable prose complemented by dozens of photographs and illustrations.

The New England Weather Book has a decidedly regional flavor — perhaps even chauvinistic. Yet it has much to offer a more general readership. Part III, comprising chapters five and six, contains an abundance of weather lore and information useful to all who are interested in weather. These chapters explain the meteorological terms and concepts used in storm warnings and safety rules issued by the National Weather Service and provide definitions for such esoteric terms as 'wind chill' and the 'cooling degree day.'

Part IV is a history of New England with a meteorological slant. Readers will surely be interested, as was I, to learn that Samuel Williams (one of my ancestors) carried on a series of meteorological observations at home and at his office at Harvard using a set of instruments of the latest design set to him from the Meteorological Society of the Palatinate at Mannheim, Germany. Unfortunately —

"Williams seems to have aroused the enmity of his colleagues, partly for his propensity for wearing a scarlet coat (his confreres dressed in black) and partly for his indulgence in high living — his appetite for gourmet foods and fine Madeira. These activities also brought him into dire financial straits and he was accused of shenanigans in the handling of money from a colleague's estate. Williams departed Cambridge one step ahead of the law and settled in the independent Republic of Vermont, where many another man in difficulties sought sanctuary. Williams resumed his meteorological activities at Rutland the next year, so he must have taken his thermometer and barometer along in his hasty departure."

No meteorological history of New England could be complete without some mention of the almanac. These remarkable pamphlets, which have been published in New England continuously since 1639, are the subject of chapter eight. The first weather forecasts were published in almanacs. There are some interesting descriptions of how forecasts were made and some excerpts of the criticism directed toward those efforts.

Chapter ten, "The Weather of Independence," is a nice conclusion to the book. Almost a dozen important revolutionary battles occurred in New England between 1775 and 1778. This chapter describes the weather at the times of these engagements and assesses its effects upon each one.

New Englanders are considerably impressed with the variety and ferocity of their weather and rightly so. But every weatherperson knows which region has the most unusual weather and the most difficult to forecast. It is his or her own. One illustration, a cartoon depicting a man encumbered with the necessary paraphernalia to meet *any* change in the weather could hang in many weather offices outside of New England.

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