

FORTY-THREE YEARS OF OBSERVING THE WEATHER

Donald R. Whitman
National Weather Service
Chief, Data Acquisition Division



Winston and Josephine Hall of Mobridge, SD,
weather observers extraordinaire.

Stand beside the river at Mobridge, South Dakota most any day--Summer or Winter--and chances are you'll see Winston Hall, at 75, holding his rendezvous with the wide Missouri. From Spring, when the ice breaks up, until Winter, when it freezes, Winston swims. Here the water is clear and cold, winding its way from the high country of Wyoming and Montana to its meeting with the Gulf of Mexico in South Louisiana. In Winter Winston skates--often four or five miles a day.

An uncommon routine by an uncommon man. But not out of character. People here are pioneers, with a history of heartiness and a spirit of accomplishment. They adapted as they came; and they assumed ruggedness and attitudes to match the country.

It was the Dakotas that attracted the Halls--Winston's parents. They knew people already there, and they came from England to settle near their friends in this brand new land of untold opportunity. It was 1911, Winston was two-and-one half; the Indian lands were opened to white settlers; and a newly built railroad bridge spanned the river.

They first came to Philadelphia and their South Dakota friends met them. They travelled together, by rail to Sioux City, Iowa, then by wagon from Sioux City across the Indian territory to Mobridge. Winston remembers. And those first impressions were indelibly written in his mind. The thunder and lightning were so intense! Much more violent than he'd known in England.

"It was indeed a lustier land to which the settlers had come," says Sauer, as he wrote about the settlements in North America, "A land of hotter summers and colder winters, of brighter and hotter sun and more tempestuous rain." Such could be said about Dakota.

Many were afraid, and they stayed behind. The land was too level; there were too few friendly trees; and the shade and water too scarce.

The adventurous, the curious, the hearty eased into it. They followed the familiar rivers, searched out the openings, and built their homes. They adapted. Houses were built of sod instead of logs; cow chips and twisted grass fueled the fires; and wells were dug with pick and shovel.

In all probability, they didn't come to farm. They expected to make money in almost any other way but farming. The threat of starvation, however, made farming a necessary but unplanned adaptation.

There are great extremes, most certainly. It gets hot in Mobridge--hitting the 100 degree mark plenty of times; and it gets cold--often dropping to minus-twenty. Usually it's windy.

Weather isn't just a topic of conversation. It's life-giving and life-taking. It demands a healthy respect at least.

They came to Mobridge where the river is wide. Here it bends gently around the city--now home for nearly 5,000 people--before flowing into Oahe Lake, one of the many stop-go-stop-go reservoirs on the upper Missouri.

On the other side--the west bank--lie the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River Indian Reservations--and the grave of Sitting Bull.

It is here the High Plains begin. Really begin. And here, weather is the starting subject in lots of conversations. Physiologists say the climate is healthy--that it forces the body to exercise its natural powers of adaptation. Maybe so. And maybe people, like water flowing through subterranean strata, assume the characteristics of their surroundings.

As the years came and went, the boy, Winston, became a man. Some times were good--others not so good. It was during a not-so-good time in 1939 that Winston and brother, Willis, began taking weather observations for the (then) Weather Bureau.

They took over a job already started, and succeeded six others who, each in his own time, observed the weather from 1911 (the year Winston came to South Dakota) until 1939. Each three hours--eight times in every twenty four--they recorded the weather at Mobridge, and gave the information to the weather office at Bismarck, North Dakota. It was a precious commodity, and they made the only observations in the vast prairie between Bismarck and Pierre. The agreement was in Willis' name, and the income--about 25 cents for each observation--was a welcome addition to the family's income.

By 1941, Winston had married the girl next door--Josephine. Josephine's father worked in the rail post office and after transferring from Minneapolis, rode the trains out of Mobridge to sort the mail. Josephine and Winston had been childhood sweethearts, and their marriage was no surprise.

As newlyweds, Winston and Josephine took over the observations completely. Money was scarce, and Willis had other things to do. Every three hours, on the dot, the Mobridge observation was sent to Bismarck.

Then, in 1942, with the world at war, Winston and Josephine decided he should join the Army Air Corps. With money borrowed for a train ticket, Winston went to Omaha to sign up; and Josephine went about earning dollars to repay the loan.

But the Mobridge weather observations didn't end when Winston went to war. Josephine kept the watch, along with a little help from some high school girls who lived with her. There were other accomplishments too--results of efforts that took a real pioneering spirit. In Winston's absence, Josephine learned to fly an airplane; she taught weather observations to pilots; she worked as a rural mail carrier--and she paid the loan that bought Winston's train ticket! And a particularly frustrating incident with the Army is recalled. Winston submitted their original marriage license as evidence that Josephine was entitled to an allotment. The Army lost it. Eventually, with the help of other evidence, the allotment came through. But the marriage license was never recovered.

From 1942 until 1945 Winston was away--serving as a weather observer in the Army Air Corps. Then--in 1945--the war was over! Winston came home!

The years that followed were growing years--maturing years. And the Halls faithfully observed the weather; built careers --he with the post office, she with the newspaper; they reared children; and their lives, like the river, were gently bent around Mobridge. They adapted to the extremes and the averages. They waded drifts to measure sixty-one inches of snow during the Winter of 1949-50; sweltered in the 110 degree temperature of August 9, 1947; and shivered when it hit 31 below zero on February 16, 1958. Josephine had already recorded 37 below in 1943 when Winston was away.

Then--Christmas Eve, 1982--a perturbation in the flow of life. Right after Winston finished the 9:00 p.m. observation, a heart attack! A fast trip to Bismarck for help! The midnight observation was missed that night, but by 3:00 a.m. the data was flowing again. Josephine saw to it; and once more kept the watch while Winston was away.

The bypass surgery was successful, and by mid January Winston was back home, taking observations.

But then it was time to ease up. After 42 years of marriage and 42 years of recording weather every three hours--it was time to get a full night's sleep. Winston and Josephine asked to be replaced.

Replacements aren't easy to find in Mobridge--or elsewhere for that matter. Once an observer is found, equipment has to be moved, holes dug up, concrete poured, trenches for cables. And before it could be done, the Mobridge Winter began. The 137-day frost-free season had ended.

Winston and Josephine understood. And they volunteered to record another winter's weather--to keep the data flowing until a move could be made in the Spring.

The Mobridge community is not unaware of Winston's and Josephine's contributions. To show their appreciation, the City Commission plans a "Winston Hall day". Most of the Commissioners were school-age when Winston first took observations--and they remember. They've heard he's giving up the watch soon, and they want to honor him.

Maybe the stark realities of the High Plains does bring strength to its inhabitants. Maybe extremes of climate cushion life's other ripples. Whatever strengthened them, Winston and Josephine steadfastly weathered the storms of life and locale, faithfully recording the latter for the many who need to know.

Best wishes, Winston and Josephine--it's time to get a little rest.