

EDITORIAL

The Unexpected Humor of *Monthly Weather Review*

Since its inception 150 years ago, *Monthly Weather Review* has been a source of serious and scholarly information on weather, climate, and related topics. While often unintentional, the content published in *Monthly Weather Review* has, from time to time, taken on a somewhat humorous, offbeat, or otherwise unorthodox tone, especially when viewed through a modern-day lens. Examples of such content are most notably found in the early volumes of *Monthly Weather Review*, published during a time when the journal included a wider variety of content that allowed for the occasional deviation from strict editorial standards.

While Cleveland Abbe, who served as editor from 1893 to 1909 and from 1914 to 1916, set a high editorial standard for the journal during its formative years (Schultz and Potter 2022), Abbe's editorial policy was broad and inclusive, assuring readers that "any short article that you may desire to offer for publication in the MONTHLY WEATHER REVIEW will be taken into favorable consideration" (MWR 1895a).

It was *Monthly Weather Review's* Notes by the Editor department, initiated by Abbe, that most often lent itself to a less formal editorial tone and, at times, seemed to delve into the realm of humor or levity, especially when interpreted by today's readers. Schultz and Potter (2022) discuss one such instance from the April 1900 issue (MWR 1900a) in which Abbe, who often used the pages of *Monthly Weather Review* as a means of sharing information he found elsewhere, reported something he had read in the Weather Bureau's January 1900 Climate and Crop Service report for New Mexico. In that publication, Robert M. Hardinge, the Weather Bureau's New Mexico section director, included an excerpt from a local cookbook that discussed how recipes originating elsewhere often proved unreliable at the higher elevations prevalent across much of New Mexico. "The whole article seems to give results of actual experience and careful observation on a subject which is now attracting great attention at the hands of experimental stations that are doing for the kitchen that which has already been done for the farms and the workshops," Abbe said, in reporting Hardinge's excerpt to readers of *Monthly Weather Review*. Adding what likely was meant to be an earnest observation—but what takes on a more humorous tone today—Abbe noted that:

We believe that the Weather Bureau observers on Pikes Peak were never able to boil their dried beans so as to make them palatable. As regards the action of baking soda and of egg batter, it may be that the barometric pressure or the elastic resistance of the air (not its weight) determines to what extent the disengaged carbonic acid gas shall expand and aerate the dough.

Another somewhat amusing example of Abbe's notes appeared in the July 1897 issue, under the title of "Fake Storms" (MWR 1897). In it, Abbe described how a voluntary observer in Florida debunked a report by a Cincinnati, Ohio, newspaper of a tornado that reportedly occurred in the observer's vicinity. Abbe's comments took on an almost admonishing tone in rebuking such reporting. "Meteorology is peculiarly liable to be troubled by the inevitable errors of observers, but it is greatly to be regretted that any one, in seeking to hoax the public, should not also send the Weather Bureau at least a word of caution," he said. "We rely so implicitly on the good faith of the press and of both regular and voluntary observers, that it troubles us to realize that we are liable to be taken in by such unblushing deception." Abbe added that trying to determine the true location of the tornado in question was futile, saying, "we fear that it is not worth our while to make further search after this will-o'-the-wisp."

While it is impossible to know what Abbe's exact intentions were in writing some of these editorial musings, it is difficult not to discern—or at least imagine—a hint of sarcasm in a note he published in the March 1900 issue, titled "Benefits and Injuries Due to Storms" (MWR 1900b), which began:

We hope that some one will have the patience to make out a balance sheet showing the good and evil done by storms throughout the whole United States. We notice that one of the severest storms, most disastrous in the Eastern States, is said to have been of untold benefit to the ranges of New Mexico and Colorado.

The note went on to say:

No matter how much man complains of the weather, it would seem after all to be very satisfactory to the human race in general; it would seem to be a case where man grumbles at the blessings that are showered upon him, and we believe that a careful review of every aspect of the question would tend to make us better content with existing arrangements.

Abbe was not the only early *Monthly Weather Review* author whose words seem to strike a somewhat sarcastic tone. Alfred J. Henry, who would later serve as editor of *Monthly Weather Review*, wrote a brief note for the December 1899 issue titled “Date of Cold Friday” (Henry 1899), which appeared as part of the Special Contributions department. “A correspondent writing from Columbus, Ohio, asks us to fix the date of Cold Friday,” Henry wrote. “Our correspondent remarks that his grandfather was buried on that day in Jefferson County, Ohio, about the year 1806. We infer, therefore, that the term Cold Friday must refer to a day of extreme cold that was felt in Ohio, at least, and over we know not how much greater extent of territory.” Apparently, it also occurred on a Friday.

Another item appearing under the Special Contributions department, in the April 1898 issue, contained excerpts of correspondence by Samuel Kain, librarian of the Natural History Society of St. John, New Brunswick, Canada, and others on the topic of “Seismic and Oceanic Noises” (Kain et al. 1898). Kain’s contribution included notes from two lighthouse keepers on the Bay of Fundy, recalling their experiences hearing odd sounds emanating from the sea. Kain also described how he had “personally questioned masters of fishing schooners, all of whom are familiar with these sounds, and among whom they are known by the somewhat vulgar but very expressive name of ‘sea farts.’” This phenomenon was revisited by Abbe (1915), who wrote:

Similar sounds on Lake Seneca, N. Y., were known as the “Seneca guns;” the fishermen on the Banks of New Foundland knew them as “Seefahrts” “[Sea farts?]”; the similar sounds emanating from the drum fish as kept in our aquaria remind one of the mythical monster known to the Norsemen as Kraken, whose breathings caused the ocean tides. At Cape Haitien there appears to be a mysterious “gouffre” similar to rolling thunder and the Italians sometimes call similar noises “mugito.”

Another example comes from the May 1922 issue, in which Clarence LeRoy Meisinger of the Weather Bureau (who tragically died two years later after being struck by lightning during a meteorological balloon experiment) presented a review of a book by Dr. Carl Kassner of the Royal Prussian Meteorological Institute. The book, *Gerichtliche und Verwaltungs-Meteorologie (Legal and Administrative Meteorology)*, is essentially an early primer on forensic meteorology, meant to aid lawyers, judges, and others in dealing with cases in which weather data or information is presented as evidence. In his review, Meisinger (1922) presented a small sampling of the 438 case examples Kassner included in his book. One example, at least, sheds light on the sometimes creative—if not humorous—ways in which defendants attempt to shield themselves against claims of liability. This particular case involved a man who broke his leg while allegedly running from a large dog. As Meisinger (1922) describes, the dog’s owner “maintained that rain had made the sidewalk so smooth that the man had slipped and thus injured himself.” In reply, meteorological evidence showed that there was no rain, “but clear sky instead.”

Sometimes, the subject discussed in a note or article appearing in *Monthly Weather Review* seems so far-fetched by today’s standards—or is presented in such an archaic manner—that it may seem humorous to modern-day readers. Such is the case with a brief article from the July 1919 issue, titled “Man-Carrying Kites for Meteorological Work” (Frantzen 1919). The article summarized abstracts from *The Aeronautical Journal* of articles appearing in the French magazine *L’Aérophile* by aerologist L. P. Frantzen, who advocated “strongly that there is a great future for scientific kite flying for meteorological work, aerial photography, signaling, etc.” In what seems self-evident to the point of eliciting amusement or astonishment, Frantzen noted that such kites “must be stable in flight, and must act as a parachute if a sudden drop of wind occurs.”

A Note by the Editor contribution from September 1895, titled “How to Observe an Earthquake” (MWR 1895b), presented a set of instructions compiled by Professor Charles Davison of Birmingham, England, on the subject. While seemingly oblivious to the safety of the observer (or, at least, failing to include any disclaimers to ensure one’s safety before attempting to undertake detailed observations of an earthquake), the instructions included such steps as recording the time when the strongest shock occurs, recording in detail the nature of the shock, estimating the duration and intensity of the shock, and noting any unusual sounds that may precede or succeed the shock. The instructions noted the importance, following an earthquake, of comparing the time on the observer’s watch with other

watches or clocks, especially those known to be accurate. “The standard clocks of the ordinary jewelers are often allowed to be in error half a minute and are rarely adjusted to absolute correct time more than once a week or month,” the instructions noted, “but by cultivating a friendship with the jeweler you can generally obtain the exact error of the clock, provided the information is to be used only for strictly scientific purposes.” Friendships with jewelers aside, the instructions prompted observers who found themselves in an area where an earthquake occurs but do not notice the tremor—despite the fact that they should have—to make note of this fact, asking, “If you know that you are in the neighborhood of an earthquake disturbance, which you did not yourself experience, although you were in a favorable condition to do so, it is important to record that fact.”

Articles or notes that themselves are not humorous in any way may take on an air of humor, absurdity, or ludicrousness solely on the basis of their titles. Such is the case with “Uncle Sam’s Dampest Corner” (Larrison 1919), “Showers of Fish” (MWR 1905), “Rainfall and Gunfire” (Angot 1917), and “Bumpy Flying Conditions along the Atlantic Coast” (Parkes 1922). The January 1902 Notes and Extracts item “Yellow Snow in Michigan” (MWR 1902a) might remind modern readers of the cautionary (albeit culturally insensitive) classic Frank Zappa song “Don’t Eat the Yellow Snow.” In fact, it is an excerpt from a 27 January 1902 newspaper article from Grand Haven, Michigan, describing “the unusual phenomenon of a fall of snow of a dull yellowish tint, which covered the ground to a depth of one-fifth of an inch.” A discussion that followed the excerpt in *Monthly Weather Review* concluded that it was loess, a fine-grain, yellow-gray sediment, that was carried aloft by wind and mixed with the snow, giving it its distinctive yellow color.

While *Monthly Weather Review* would never bill itself as a literary journal, that did not stop Abbe, in his role as editor, from publishing a poem, titled “The Cyclone,” by “Townsend Allen” (MWR 1902b), which was originally published in the *New-York Tribune* that same month. “Townsend Allen” was actually a pseudonym for Mary Townsend Allen, an author, art connoisseur, playwright, and poet, who was a second cousin of Abbe (Abbe 1909). “In venturing to publish a poem in the MONTHLY WEATHER REVIEW, the Editor owes it to himself and his readers to quote as justification the occasional practise [sic] of several other scientific journals which do not decline to publish contributions that are so eminently true to nature as is the present description of the general phenomena of a West Indian hurricane,” Abbe wrote. Abbe noted that “Allen,” who lived “on the banks of the Hudson” (near New York City’s Fort Washington Park), was inspired to write the poem after reading about the approach of a hurricane (which, according to modern reanalysis data, was actually a tropical storm) in September 1897 and “listening to the rush of the preliminary northeast winds and under the influence of the somber skies.” The first stanza of the poem is reprinted here:

With my heart on fire
With the sun’s desire
I arise from my tropic home,
And curl and swirl
With a passionate whirl
To the breast of the temperate zone;

According to Abbe, who fancied himself a poet of sorts (Potter 2020, pp. 86 and 195), “The poetry is good; the meteorology seems to be correct, and therefore we can not refuse a place to these graphic lines.”

Of all the offbeat, humorous, or otherwise unusual items published in *Monthly Weather Review* over the years, perhaps none is more bizarre than an article titled “The People of Mars,” by Charles Fitzhugh Talman (Talman 1900) of the Weather Bureau Central Office in Washington, D.C., later the bureau’s librarian for nearly 30 years until his death in 1936. Appearing in the Special Contributions department of the December 1900 issue, the brief article began by discussing how the climates of planets other than Earth may one day be the subject of investigation by “future meteorologists who, with more efficient means of observation than we now possess, may find in the phenomena of the planetary atmospheres important aid in the elucidation of many obscure phases of their science.” Talman then described some of the features already known about Mars at the time, speculating as to the implications for the planet’s climate. As Talman pointed out, “the evidence points to a similarity between the terrestrial and Martian climates, and this fact leads up to the perennial topic of the planet’s inhabitants.” Noting the propensity of newspapers to “seize the opportunity to publish more or less fantastic dissertations on this inexhaustible subject,” while “harebrained speculators spring up everywhere prepared to show us exactly how to telegraph across the abyss of space and communicate with the inhabitants of our sister world,” Talman contended it was “strange that no one has ever pointed out how unphilosophical, from a biological point of view, is the question, ‘Are there people on Mars?’” Pointing out how life

on Earth “apparently entered, at an early stage, upon two diverse roads,” he argued “there is no reason for supposing that the course of events has been the same in other worlds than ours,” suggesting, perhaps, that “it may be that on Mars plant life only exists” and that, even if Martian plants achieved a higher stage of development than their terrestrial counterparts, “it is not conceivable that any plant, however high in the scale, could hold communication with the human race.” Talman concluded his article by suggesting that “it is most reasonable to assume” that life on other planets, should it exist, “has assumed forms of which we know nothing” and “which transcend our experience, and of which we are therefore quite unable to conceive.” He ended by stating bluntly, “Even could we actually perform the journey to Mars, it is not likely that we would be able to communicate with its inhabitants, and if we found existing there a great number of life forms we would probably have difficulty in deciding to which of them, if any, the designation people should be applied.”

Although more scholarly content has dominated the pages of *Monthly Weather Review* for much of its existence, its early volumes are replete with content that, while perhaps not befitting a modern peer-reviewed scientific journal, offer a fascinating insight into the thoughts and works of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century meteorologists and others whose contributions fill its pages. While some of this content takes on a humorous or offbeat tone, it nonetheless adds an important chapter to the history of meteorology.

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