

Features

The 'Great Drought of '81' kills crops, snow, economies

United Press International
AUGUSTA, Kan. — Clee Ralston lived through the perilous days of the Dust Bowl era and survived the scorching Drought of '57.

In a half-century there's not much a Kansas farmer hasn't seen nature throw at him. Ralston isn't easily scared.

But even a 62-year-old Kansas farmer worries when the skies remain cloudless for months on end and heat and wind suck the moisture from the soil.

"This is as bad as it was in 1936, as far as moisture and weather is concerned," said Ralston, whose family has farrowed the land in south central Kansas since before Ulysses S. Grant was president.

"And feed supplies are in bad shape. Fortunately, we're smarter than they were back then."

Agricultural expertise may be better now, but Midwest farmers are having more than a little trouble recovering from "The Great Heat Wave of 1980" and coping with a drought that has lingered in the nation's breadbasket since 1978.

Fred Ostby of the National Weather Service says the precipitation level in the Midwest is 15 inches below normal over the past three years. He says this dry spell compares in intensity to the droughts of the 1930s and the 1950s.

The drought's effects are widespread. While farmers from South Dakota to Texas fret, some Colorado ski resorts have closed for lack of snow, despite calling in Indians to perform snow dances. Air pollution has increased in Nebraska, and the drought likely will drive up the price of a peanut butter sandwich.

Even the Mississippi River has fallen to its lowest level in 111 years, causing navigation problems.

In fact, much of the rest of the nation has been affected by the problem — a stubborn high pressure system over the Rockies. Even New York City Mayor Edward Koch has had to declare a water emergency in that city.

But Midwest farmers — the people who put the bread on the nation's tables — have been hit the hardest.

Gerald McCathern, who farms 1,500 acres of wheat near Hereford, Texas, says the situation has become critical.

"In the last three years, it (the drought) has really taken its toll," McCathern said. "There's no way to estimate how much money has been lost. The drought, inflation and market price are all working together and have forced about 90 percent of the farmers in this area to seek refinancing through the government.

"Another year like last year will put a large number of them out of business."

In Nebraska, all but one county in the entire state has been declared eligible for disaster loans because crops and livestock were damaged by the summer's triple-digit heat wave and drought. And in Missouri, the value of the 1980 corn and soybean crop was 3 percent lower.

That was last summer. But this winter certainly has not helped the situation.

Bob Swanson of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture called the Winter of '81 the driest winter in nearly 100 years. Illinois Crop Reporting Service spokesman John Unger said that state has been so dry that soil moisture supplies are 81 percent short.

Dry winters plague wheat farmers because too little snowfall leaves a ground cover inadequate to protect dormant winter wheat crops from the cold.

"We're real short on subsoil moisture, which is real important to the winter wheat crop," said Mike Kubicek, assistant director of the Oklahoma Wheat Commission. "There hasn't been enough moisture for the wheat to grow."

"Much of our wheat was planted late and it just hasn't had the adequate moisture to develop a good root system. If the winter remains dry and we don't get adequate root growth, we could be in a great deal of stress in the spring. If we get into a severe cold spell for any length of time, we might see a lot of winter kill because of the shallow root growth."

Nor is winter wheat the only threatened crop. Bill Flanagan of the Oklahoma Peanut Commission said the drought-shortened harvest in 1980 — 50 percent lower than 1979 — has pushed peanut prices up from 40 cents per pound to nearly \$1.50 for manufacturers.

The prolonged dryness has also caused what Nebraska Air Pollution Control Chief Gene Robinson calls the worst level "we've ever had" of dirt, fly ash and other particles in the air.

Meanwhile, the Mississippi, the nation's largest river, has fallen to its lowest level since 1870 and its main tributaries, the Missouri and the Ohio, have become sluggish streams.

The Army Corps of Engineers has begun dredging operations at some points on the Mississippi to keep channels deep enough for river traffic, and barge owners have been forced to lighten their loads to reduce the chances of running aground.

A spokesman for Riceland Foods in Stuttgart, Ark., said the White River is so low that barge ports

have been closed, forcing the company to ship grain to a Mississippi River port.

The Kansas Wheat Commission reports the slowing down in grain movement to the Gulf of Mexico has pushed wheat prices up sharply.

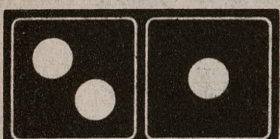
Just as barge traffic has slowed on the Missouri has the stream of skiers to Colorado. There hasn't been enough snow.

Breckenridge, Colo., resort manager Jim Calkins has lost almost all of his Christmas business because the barren slopes. In Steamboat Springs, 90 percent of the ski runs are open and the town estimates it has lost \$6.5 million in business.

Without measurable precipitation since the National Weather Service starting keeping records — went the first 26 days of the month without a drop.

When will the skies open up and dump snow on the Colorado ski slopes, swell the Mississippi and dump moisture on Clee Ralston's wheat? No one is sure.

Fred Ostby of the National Weather Service he's uncertain because the jet stream which brings moisture from the Pacific Ocean continues to be diverted toward Canada.



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Last crank phone system is Americana; pushbuttons coming soon, owner says

United Press International
BRYANT POND, Maine — Most folks in Bryant Pond don't bother with things like telephone numbers. They just crank up the old phone on the wall and ask the operator to call the neighbor.

The lakeside community of 1,000 residents in western Maine is the only town in the nation that still uses crank phones. But Elden Hathaway, the owner of the Bryant Pond Telephone Co., says it may not be long before his customers have to start getting used to the new-fangled dials and push buttons, like other Americans.

After 30 years in the business, he

says he is looking for a buyer for his tiny company.

"I'm not going to keep it too much longer, my overhead's too high having to pay the operators," said the 63-year-old Hathaway, whose living room serves as the company's main office.

"I won't go automated, but somebody else will," he predicted.

The phone company had 31 lines when the weathered, bearded Hathaway bought it in 1951. His phone number is 32.

The system now has 208 lines serving 440 customers, or about 700 residents, most of them sharing party lines.

"Operator, can I help you?" answered Linda Fraser.

The "drop" on the antique wooden switchboard had fallen over hole 122. Number 122 had just cranked, wanting to talk to 155.

"I'm sorry, that number's busy," Fraser said.

There was already a wire plugged into hole 155.

"I think a lot of people in town couldn't cope if we weren't here," the operator said. "They ask for names, they don't even know people's numbers."

"And we're always asked what time the church service starts, the dump hours and the library hours," she said.

"Old people take naps and ask us not to ring them for a couple of hours."

Bryant Pond became the last crank system in the country last year, after residents of Grand River, Iowa, voted 121-73 to go modern.

The system can call all over the world. Cards listing toll calls are punched on a time clock for billing purposes.

"I've gotten Belgium quicker than West Paris sometimes," said Fraser.

Belgium is the European country. The town of West Paris is 8 miles away.

Hathaway, who worked for 40 years on the Grand Trunk Railroad, keeps an old caboose on his side yard — equipped with beds, a gas stove bought for "a half-gallon of vodka" and a crank phone. A friend recently slept there "when his wife kicked him out."

His cluttered house is filled with

vintage telephones, wall-mounted with two mounted bells and leosticks — thin hand-held models popular in the 1930s.

At the nearby Boiler Room restaurant, a candlestick sits on the table after a conversation.

"It's worth every penny of aggravation," said co-owner L. Robiller. "It's a bastion of Americana; they haven't done away with anything that would be a shame if they did."

Hathaway said he has had offers from other small telephone companies and individuals, but no rush to sell out.

"Whenever the price and the is right," he said.

But he confessed, "It'll be a day for me when I have to give and she goes automated, and the people feel the same way. It's the Smithsonian should come and make it into a museum."

WANT TO STUDY OVERSEAS? NEED FINANCIAL HELP?

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Interviews will be conducted February 11, 12

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Hubert Beck, Pastor

WHAT DOES THE LUTHERAN CHURCH TEACH AND CONFESS?

WE ARE BEGINNING A STUDY OF THE TEACHINGS OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF SUNDAY AFTERNOON AT 4 P.M. THESE SESSIONS ARE FOR THOSE WHO MAY WISH TO FIND OUT WHAT THE LUTHERAN CHURCH TEACHES, FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO REVIEW BASIC CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS, OR FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE INTERESTED IN JOINING THE LUTHERAN CHURCH. WE INVITE YOUR ATTENDANCE.

WORSHIP SERVICES AT 9:15 A.M. AND 10:45 A.M.
BIBLE CLASS 9:30 a.m.
Fellowship Supper 6 p.m.
Holy Communion (Folk Setting) 7 p.m.

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Philip Sigler
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Since 1972, m
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lapses. Sigler
"voyages," f
ive on cruise
— one in 1972, two in 1973
and in 1977 — and the sixth in
land-based expedition in Big
Montana.
Marcy Sigler, who handles
party, arrangements and almost
thing else for the cruise as
serving as social director on
said the response to the cruise
been unusually enthusiastic.
"Some people said, 'If you see
one eclipse, you've got to see
all.' Others told me 'It was no
booze-snooze cruise.' And
aren't. The social status lies in
binoculars or telescopes or
and not in your clothes or what
you," she said.
"Others said they had
thought they'd be taught
ce and love it so much," she