

Weather-Wise

Benjamin Franklin correctly observed that everyone talks about the weather but no one does anything about it. Whether it is hot, cold, wet or dry, when people meet and finish exchanging greetings, it is usually the weather that dominates the conversation. Everyone has an opinion, complaint and sometimes, but not often, an expression of pure satisfaction. Any remark about unusually hot or cold weather out of season brings to life doom-day or end of the world remarks. Invariably someone will warn that the Bible says that we will not know one season from the other at the end of time. Obviously we have not yet come to the end, regardless of how many times that passage has been quoted. Weather might confuse some, but it seems trees are never confused, always knowing when to robe and disrobe.

We are left to wonder if the people of the Bethel Presbyterian Church area considered 15 April 1849 as the end of the world. While they prepared for their spring Communion wheat was in full bloom, corn was knee-high and cotton was showing a good stand. That day snow fell and covered the ground to a depth of five inches and was followed by a hard freeze.

Six years later, though the world did not come to an end, it certainly appeared that way to many in Western York County, as well as throughout the state. In 1855, March came in like a lion and by the ninth "Cyclonic" winds were blowing over the state. Across the Broad River in Union County houses were collapsing and embers from fireplaces were scattered, setting hundreds of fires. Around nine that morning fires had united into one inferno and they were racing toward the Broad River. The fire, aided by the wind, leaped across the river and began to burn everything in its way. By sunset 2,000 acres had been burned along with homes, out building and fences.

Earliest records at the Museum of Western York County on weather report severe droughts in the county in 1755, 1766 and 1769. Records on the ebb and flows of the Broad River begins with 11 September 1784, marking a "big fresh" on Broad River. Eight years later the first session of court at Pinckneyville opened 2 April 1792. For lunch the judge and court officials had to cross the river to dine at an tavern, but while dismissed the river made a sudden rise and when the judge saw the rolling water he sent his servant cross on a ferry to dismiss the court for him. Freshes and freshets came and went over the years. There was a large flood on the river in 1822, and on 24 August 1850 high water was measured at 24 feet at Howell's Ferry. High water destroyed large portions of bottomland and crops. Dr.

Thomas Beard Whitesides lost a child in the flood near Ninety-Nine Island Dam, while catching watermelons floating down the river. The next two years, the Broad River produced destructive floods on 24 August. The 1851 August flood was measured at 27 feet and the following year's flood was equally destructive.

On 21 December 1855 snow began to fall and fell for five consecutive Saturdays. Snow was still lying on the north side of hills between Bullocks Creek and Howell's Ferry on March 10--lying for two months and twenty-one days.

The winters of the 1870s were rough and hung long over the land. In 1873 a heavy frost killed everything in May to a degree that would not be seen again for twenty-two years. Following a flood on Broad River in June 1876 that rose to twenty-two feet, an arctic blast hit South Carolina making it one of the coldest on record. In Columbia the Democrats and Republicans locked horns, neither willing to leave the state house and spending the night without lights and heat. An inch of ice formed over the well of John Smith at Smith's Ford. His well was 55 feet below ground level and it took a heavy blow to break the sheet.

The county was struck by another arctic blast in 1881 breaking a record set in 1835. Broad River froze over for the first time in thirty-five years. That same year a drought set in on 26 April and continued to 10 September, making it comparable to the drought of 1845. Crowder's Creek all but dried up and the Broad River was reduced to a small branch. Speaking of drought, many of us old timers can remember the drought of 1954 when Turkey and Bullocks creeks went dry. The town of York suffered worst in its history. Water was hauled in from local fishponds from August to November and irrigation pipes were used to bring water to the reservoir from five ponds. Following the drought the town built a 15-acre pond for water supply.

Bad weather continued on through 1884, with a tornado thrashing through Western York County in May and was followed by a drought. By November a high death rate among hogs was being reported, attributed to the drought. Another tornado came on May of the following year, tracing the path of the year before. The twister first touched down on the Chambers farm of Bullocks Creek, damaging trees and fences. As it traveled toward the north of York it twisted trees, collapsed outbuildings, toppled chimneys and blew the roof from homes. The top story of Thomas Wood's home was blown off and a buggy and wagon was blown from a shed and carried eighty feet. After flattening a small house on the farm of Butler Thomasson's it passed into Mecklenburg County.

Hardly a month later rain fell in torrents for nearly an hour and the creeks of Western York County rose from their banks. Doolittle Creek was reported to be 15 feet deep and 125 yards wide. At the Hawkin's farm it was estimated to be 500 feet wide and the greatest freshet in memory. Those living on Kings Creek experienced the greatest loss in crops. H. M. Moore lost 200 shocks of wheat.

The next year heavy rains in May washed out the bridge at Kings Creek near W. J. McGill's mill and the bridge at Clark's Fork suffered heavy damage and the bridge over Bullock's Creek on Hamilton's Ford Road moved from its abutment. A number of flour and corn mills were swept into the Broad River that was 33 feet above the low watermark. One man claimed the river was 2 and one-half feet higher when Sherman came in 1865. In June Dr. J. Rufus Bratton was caught in a flash flood on Bullocks Creek while making a house call. Attempting to cross over a submerged bridge with a patient, the horse stepped into the raging water and while trying to climb the bank got tangled in the harness and drowned. Dr. Bratton was able to save his patient, but lost his medical bag and medicines.

In August 1887 the Broad River was reported to be higher than it had been in 30 years. All bottomlands were inundated, ruining corn and cotton crops. The piers on the rail trestle above Howell's Ferry broke from their foundations by trees being hurled by rapid waters. One farmer in Chester County lost a thousand bushels of corn and eight bales of cotton.

In August of 1893 the "Quattlebaum Storm" did a lot of damage. It was so named by Hickory Grove Methodist because it came the same night Rev. Quattlebaum closed the revival at Mount Vernon Church. The next couple of years experienced record temperatures. March 31, 1894 was the coldest night of the years, killing grain and some trees. In May 1895 the heaviest frost since 1873 covered the land.

In 1904 the Broad River was at the lowest level in memory, lower some said, than in 1881. Sand bars were well visible and the ferries were grounded. The Cherokee Cotton Mill was running only 2 or 3 days a week. As the century entered its second decade, weather continued with its highs and low temperatures and the river ebbed and flowed, but no one was expecting the Great Flood of 1916, and when it came it must have seemed like it was the end of the world. Though time continued, those that lived through it never forgot.