

Weather Predicting

One thing that we all can agree upon is the changeableness of our weather. Our parents and grandparents had stories about how bad things were when they were young, but I would guess by recent events that we are going to be in a position to trump most of the old timer's pet stories by a lot. The hurricanes, tornados, blizzards and floods of the past few months are a cause of concern, leaving us wondering not if, but when we are going to be under the gun once again.

Folklore concerning weather, especially among sailors, goes far back into the mists of time; remember Ulysses, who was blown far off course on the return trip to Greece at the conclusion of the Trojan War because one of the laws of the gods was broken by the returning sailors, and as a consequence were dealt a round of impossible weather. The Trojan War was fought about 3,500 years ago.

Some weather lore is remembered as rhymes, such as "When ye see a cloud rise out of the west, straightway cometh the rain" (Luke 12:54)

Rainbow at night is the sailor's delight
Rainbow at morning, sailors, take warning.

Mackerel skies and mare's tails
Make tall ships carry short sails [lower their sails].

When the porpoise jumps,
Stand by at your pumps.

July stand by
August you must
September, remember
October, all over.

(This rhyme was to remember the seasons of West Indian hurricanes).

Close behind mariners were the farmers, especially those who raised crops; they developed sayings that foretold what was to be expected weather-wise. Some rhymes passed down through the generations by farmers were:

If wooly fleeces deck the heavenly way
Be sure no rain will mar a summer's day.

If the wind is northeast three days without rain,
Eight days will go by before south again.

Rain before seven
Quits before eleven.

Those were short range predictions, some long range predictions are:

If skunks come in early from the woods and seek shelter under the barns; if walnuts produce a bumper crop; if muskrat's homes are going up in great numbers and size, there will be a long, hard winter.

If the last three days of a month had been rainy, the next month would be too rainy for much outside work.

If a chicken's gizzard comes away easily from the inner skin, it predicts an open winter (meaning little or no snow cover).

A snowless winter means a full graveyard (open winter)

When Christmas is white

The graveyard is lean;

But fat is the graveyard

When Christmas is green.

If corn is hard to shuck, it is a sign of an approaching hard winter.

As in every vocation, some weather prognosticators have a better reputation than others. A short while back I ran into Rich Wilber, who promptly asked me if I had my snow shovel out and handy. When I asked why the early concern, he said that Charlie Pease of Sandisfield, had told him that the 2011-2012 winter would begin with an abnormal amount of snow that would fall throughout November, after which the winter would be warmer than normal with little snow accumulation. He went on to say that Charlie had always been pretty good at long range weather forecasting, and that he had predicted last winter's abnormal amount of snow.

It was Rich who I saw standing in the check-out line at Stop and Shop a few winters back, and knowing that he was a member of our excellent road crew and could take some credit for Colebrook's well groomed highways, thought I would give him a little "dig", so I said to the checkout girl (in a louder than necessary voice) something like "hurry up, I've got to drive home to Colebrook, and who knows how long that will take over our snow-covered roads!" Without batting an eye, Rich called out "The shovels are in isle seven!"

Years ago, before the era of modern-day weather forecasting, (although even today, there's a lot of room for improvement), there were times when farmers had to take extraordinary measures in order to harvest a crop. I remember that sometime during the mid-1940s we had a summer that didn't seem to have two days of back-to-back sun. By July and into early August the hay stood tall in the fields. Many times the Hartford radio stations would predict a spell of good weather, but these seldom if ever materialized, and those farmers who cut their hay on a partly cloudy day would end up losing the entire crop due to several days of persistent rain. My father and Don Brown, who used to help with each other's haying, eventually decided to try a new tactic with the forecasters; they would cut in the rain and hope that a couple of days would follow with good weather. It is all right to cut wet grass, as long as it doesn't lay there too long and doesn't get wet after it has begun to dry. The result was that those two farmers were among a small number of locals who actually got some good hay in their mows that summer.

