

DROUGHT

by Ed Mergele

What is that old saying, “Everyone talks about **it** but no one does anything about it.” That “**it**” is the weather and certainly **DROUGHT** is about the weather.

Last week, one of our weathermen showed a map of the southwest and explained that the experts are saying that the Sonoran Desert (average rainfall ten inches) is expanding further into Central Texas, and will encompass our Hill Country and some of areas east of San Antonio. He said it means that perhaps ten inches of rain per annum will be our norm in the future! If that is true no more green lawns and fancy landscaping. Sprinkler systems will be a thing of the past. No more swimming pools either. For our rural folks they can still raise some livestock and do a little farming as our friends out west and in Mexico do with as little as ten inches of rain a year. However, they will just have to change their old habits and lifestyles. That translates into 160 acres per animal unit.

I hope you realize by now that the weather people on our television stations, radio, and in our newspapers with their million’s of dollars worth of equipment are merely taking the Federal Government weather forecasts and putting their own stamp on what they think the weather will be tonight, tomorrow, or seven days from now. Just like their predictions of percentages of likely rain of 0,10, 20, 30, 40, etc. that is also the percentage of how often they get it right. I do feel sorry for them right now don’t you?

I’ve been interested in weather and the predictions for over sixty years and I haven’t seen any better information today than it was long ago. Old timers, in times gone by, could do just about as good a job calling the weather with their sore knee joint and the Farmer’s Almanac as these highly trained, schooled, and electronicated (my own word) weather persons do it today.

Well..... what is the answer? We can’t do anything except wait and see what Mother Nature has in store for us. What can we do about it? Well, nothing. There is cloud seeding, and in times gone by they shot cannons into the clouds, and of course there is praying...I think that helps the most. Veterans of the Civil War times wrote that because there was so much cannon fire into the sky during a battle that it rained all the time. Perhaps they had a solution then and we haven’t used it since. Almost every day I see all that Gulf moisture going over us headed for the Midwest and East and it disturbs me greatly. The weather people are very good at telling us how high the humidity is on a given day, but they don’t do anything about stopping it here. Why are we being so generous? We have fenced everything else why not the clouds?

We humans here in Texas and the Southwest have actually done a great deal to try and help nature. As to helping, we have built reservoirs large and small by the thousands and we have planted and allowed trees to grow over thousands of acres where there were no trees in the past. As little as seventy years ago there were only a handful of water reservoirs in the whole Southwest. Medina Lake was one of the first built in 1912. Two hundred years ago our Southwest was primarily

grass lands. The only trees were in the stream bottoms. All the trees you see today are less than 150 years old with very few exceptions.

However, as humans we have also dealt a severe blow to Mother Nature. We have plowed up the grass lands, we have drilled holes to drain the aquifers that took thousands of years to fill, we have built millions of structures, roads, and parking lots over the once porous soil, so that the aquifers cannot possibly refill, and worst of all we have overpopulated an area that cannot support us. You can guess what the answer is.

So there you have it...maybe those predictions about the Sonoran Desert creeping over us will happen sooner than we think. We are responsible and there is nothing we can do about it. I am talking about reversing the so-called progress we have made.

Now I will give you a little hope with some history of the Droughts in our area. In my short lifetime of 85 years I well remember the droughts and dust storms of the 1930's. Everyone thought there was no end to that, but it did end. Then again in the 1950's we had another severe drought that lasted over a half dozen years. Everything dried up including the wells, springs, creeks, and rivers. Now we are again in a bad drought that probably started at least five years ago. The only thing that I remember ending these dry spells was a tropical storm or two coming in from the Gulf of Mexico and apparently changing our weather pattern. So if you are prone to praying – pray for a hurricane, that is, unless you have a home or big boat at the Gulf Coast.

Some of the weather bureau drought statistics show the following data that has been garnered from diaries, newspapers, area reporting, and tree rings over these many years:

Severe droughts have occurred in the periods: 1772 to 1781, 1791 to 1800, 1855 to 1864, 1887 to 1899, 1906 to 1912, 1924 to 1925, 1930 to 1939, 1947 to 1948, 1950 to 1956, and our latest had been 2007 to 2011. They tell us that since 1698 we have had over 77 years of severe drought periods. That is about twenty five percent of the time on average! A drought in our region is considered serious if the annual rainfall is less than 18 inches. But to sustain our present living standards we need about 30 plus inches of annual rainfall, but not in one or two months. We can still have a severe drought in a year even if we get 15 to 30 inches of rainfall in just a couple months time. As I have pointed out it all runs off now because we have covered over large areas of our porous soil that used to soak up the rainfall and store it underground. Our surface reservoirs cannot be made large enough to store the surplus rainfall in good times.

Years that we had 15 inches of rain or less were: 1790, 1800, 1805, 1855, 1857, 1897, 1909, 1917, 1925, 1954, 1956, and at least twenty other years that the rain fall was under 20" for our area. The driest year was 1917 with only 10" and the wettest year was 1973 with 52".

When I was a teenager a drought only meant that I didn't have to push a lawn mower for my parents every week, but it did mean that I had to stand for an hour with a garden hose or a bucket watering my grandparents garden. Today it means that hopefully I still will have one day a week that I can water my outside plants and my well won't run dry. Your well driller can be your best friend.

My best advice is to move North or East as soon as you can. They have plenty of water up there that I've been noticing on the news. My family and I have been here for 168 years now, so I guess I'll have to stay on for a while. I would however suggest that you keep up with you subscription to the *Hill Country Weekly*, so you can know what is going on locally.

I hope my little story about the **Drought** didn't discourage you too much. My Editor would very much like to hear from you as to whether you like these stories or not.

Ed Mergele is a sixth generation Texan, historian and published author of many books about the Southwest and Texas, living right here in Boerne. His works include: Robert E. Lee's First War; Lee- His Last Days in Texas; Federal Gold & Rebel Cotton; Alsace to Texas and U.S Second Cavalry- its Last Days in Texas.

Note: Reprinted by permission as published in the Hill Country Weekly, 16 June 2011. Send comments to: Editor@HillCountryWeekly.com