

Farmer's Almanac fails meteorology

By SHERRY KAHAN



We can safely predict that spring is on its way. Beyond that, though, we are hesitant, because the science of long-range weather predictions is not an exact one.

Nevertheless, predictions on weather constantly rain on us from many sources and many people take them to heart.

Last fall, you will remember, we were warned of a cold winter. The mystic word came from field and stream where apparently the fish were diving deeper, the rabbits bundling up and outdoor persons wearing thicker-than-usual down jackets.

The Old Farmer's Almanac also promised an exceptionally cold period in the Midwest starting the last week of January and extending through February.

Big deal. It's not too hard to forecast a cold winter for this part of the country. But few are as daring as the Farmer's Almanac to put it down in black and white to be checked later for accuracy.

While many seers broadcast widely their successful prophecy about that big winter storm, few of them announce their failures.

FA also proclaims its successes. But its failures are available to anyone

willing to plunk down the money to buy a copy of this 187-year-old publication.

Since this is the year of the Global Weather Experiment involving the countries of the world in a combined effort to improve long-range weather forecasting, it might be in the spirit of the times to see how accurate FA was in its January and February weather estimates.

THERE WERE NOT precise enough to base your life on. Its general predictions are so vague that you wouldn't profit from referring to them about a date for skiing, washing the car or taking a long trip. The day-to-day prophecies for those two months missed more than they hit.

Zeroing in on the big memorable events of this winter, it is soon evident that FA gave no advance word to Chicagoans about the blizzard that was to dump 20.7 inches of snow on them Jan. 13. Nor did it provide sufficient information to residents of New York, Washington and Baltimore that a big one was on its way Feb. 19.

The magazine was much more successful in its predictions about what was to prove to be the coldest February in the Detroit area in 107 years.

In making its annual prognostications, FA divides the country into

regions. The Chicago-Southern Great Lakes area is called Region 9. It includes the bottom half of the Lower Peninsula.

Before it gets into the nitty gritty, day-to-day information, FA offers its readers a weather summary for the area. It was here that it warned of that exceptionally cold period that was to begin the last week of January and continue through February.

It added this puzzling sentence: "Snowfall will be greater than usual, although overall seasonal precipitation will be deficient." More snow would equal more precipitation rather than less.

DAY-TO-DAY PREDICTIONS are made in terse, farmer-like phrases. For January: "1-4 very cold, light snow, 5-9 seasonal; snow, heavy west, 10-15 intermittent snow, 16-20 light snow, then clearing, milder. 21-24 cloudy; snow, 25-27 near blizzard. 28-31 partly cloudy, turning extremely cold." Let's mark first at that "intermittent snow" estimate for Jan. 10-15. It simply isn't an adequate description for what happened on Jan. 13 to Chicago. No mere fog creeping in on little cat feet that day.

Let's snow roaring in like an elephant bringing drifts, winds and more than 20 inches of snow. The governor called northern Illinois a disaster area.

The snow also piled up a much-publicized disaster for Chicago Mayor Bilandic, who was said to have lost a primary election because of poor snow removal skills. It was an important climatic happening for FA to miss.

And out just for its Illinois and Michigan readers. Residents of Region 9 living in northern Indiana and Ohio and southern Wisconsin who waded around in galoshes in 12-16 inches of snow might have appreciated fair warning.

NOR DID THE ALMANAC pick up the cold that followed the big blizzard. Detroit's 11 degrees below zero on Jan. 15 was its coldest day in almost three years. On the same day, Chicago experienced 19 degrees below zero.

The closest FA came to an accurate heavy weather prophecy was a "near blizzard" estimate for Jan. 25-27. What

Detroit had was a two-hour wet snow, hardly a near blizzard, on Jan. 25. But because of warm temperature, the snow didn't linger.

Also contrary to FA's expectations, January went out like a pussy cat with highs in the 30s rather than the exceptional cold FA foresaw for that week.

Happily for the almanac, the publication's crystal foresight sharpened, and February's frigid follies were pinpointed more accurately.

Give or take a few degrees, FA was almost right on the button with its promise of a very cold Feb. 1-5. Very cold it was, with a wind chill factor of 23 degrees below zero on Feb. 4.

It was on the money Feb. 10-11 with another "very cold." You'd better believe it.

But fact and forecast parted company Feb. 12-14 when the almanac crystal-balled a "light snow, drifting, some sun." Mother Nature had not finished with her cold kick because Feb. 12 had a low of eight above and a wind chill of 10 below. It was zero on Feb. 13, and the almanac's snow turned up right on schedule Feb. 14.

The magazine was right again for Feb. 15 and 16, as a bone chiller arrived. However, on Feb. 17 when the wind chill factor was 26 below and the mercury at seven below zero, FA had only "moderate snow" listed in its report.

A cold wave was predicted for Feb. 20-24. Not so. True, Feb. 20 had a low of one above, but a high of 31, which turned into a winter "heat wave," lifting the mercury up to 45 above on Feb. 23. But FA quickly caught on to the temperature change and correctly picked "gradual warming" as its end-of-month guess.

THE SNOWFALL THAT smothered the nation's capital and caused a blizzard of looting in Baltimore highlights one of the main problems in the almanac forecasts. It is one of degree. It forecast "snow changing to rain," and that is exactly what happened.

But these words gave its east coast readers no indication that they were due for ferocious winds and 23 inches of snow that ground bureaucratic life to a standstill.

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