

(from the 1873 Texas Almanac)

THE NORTHERS OF TEXAS.

It is understood by many persons at a distance that the Texas “northers” are dreadful winter storms, which come on so suddenly and are so severe and extremely cold that man and beast, caught out on the open prairies a few miles from shelter, have often been known to freeze to death in a very short time. Before I came to Texas I had heard such representations made of Texas northers. In a late “Manual of Georgraphy” the children are taught that “Texas is famous for its north winds. These come on at times so suddenly in winter, and are so cold and severe, that both man and beast have been known to perish in them.”

Now it is admitted that Texas Northers have not only become famous abroad, but that they deserve notoriety for the suddenness and violence of their winds, but not, generally, for the severity of the cold which attends them. The cold spells of winter of the same latitude in Georgia and Florida, from which I came, are generally as cold, if not colder, than the winter northers of Texas. It is seldom we have frost, in the vicinity of Austin, before the middle or last of November, and be it known that Austin is about in the centre of the belt of Texas northers ; for the northers are confined to the prairie portion of the State, west of Trinity river.

For the last three or four winters—since I have been in the State—not more than a half-dozen of these north winds have been cold enough to form ice at all, during any one winter, and only three or four of them during the whole time have sunk the mercury to twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit.

Let it be understood that here in Texas all north winds which come up suddenly, with any degree of violence, are called northers—even a summer thunderstorm from the north is called a norther—but the term is principally applied to the sudden north winds of winter.

The people here in Texas divide these winter storms into “wet northers” and “dry northers.” The wet northers are very similar to the winter storms in the States east of the Mississippi river. A north wind blows, with more or less violence, attended with rain, and sometimes, but not often, with snow and sleet, and lasts about twelve or fifteen hours, passing off with a moderate north or northwest wind. But the dry nothers are attended with peculiar and singular phenomena, never witnessed, so far as I know, in any storms east of Texas. As these notorious dry north winds have given the character and the bad reputation of the northers of Texas, I shall endeavor to describe them somewhat in detail.

For several hours preceding the most violent of these dry northers there is almost a dead calm and the air is unusually warm and sultry. A few low, sluggish bodies of cloud float about in the eddy atmosphere. A dark, muddy looking cloud wave next appears low down all across the northern horizon, which is the “precautionary signal” of the near approach of this strange Texas storm. A few minutes more, and the terrible roaring of the norther is distinctly heard. All hands in the field at work are now running to the house for

shelter, where all is hurry and bustle to pile on the wood and get the fires ablaze. At the same time, the stock on the prairies have turned tail to the wind, and are fleeing as for life to some timbered ravine or bluff for shelter. All this, and more too ; but be not alarmed, for there is no danger, though the Geography says “men and beasts have sometimes perished in them,” which may possibly be so ; but still the colts on the prairie and the children in the yard are kicking up their heels, sporting amidst the pranks of the dashing wind. But the dark cloudwave is now over, and no rain, except it may be a very slight mist, followed by a dry, blue, misty haze, with the peculiar smell of—some say—sulphur, but others say like a burning forest. Let this be as it may, there is evidently in these dry “blue northers” (as they are called), a state of high electrical condition of the atmosphere, which produces a thrilling sense of exhilaration in man and beast.

The force of the wind in the most violent of these dry storms is about sufficient to blow down an ordinary rail fence, where most exposed to the wind. These storms continue without abatement for about twelve hours, and then gradually subside in about twelve or fifteen hours more. The cold which attends them is variable, often not freezing at all, and then again sinking the mercury in the tube of the thermometer down to twenty-five or twenty degrees, and in one instance at Austin as low as six degrees ; but such extreme cold only occurs, perhaps, once in a lifetime ; as was experienced in Florida in February, 1835, when the water froze on the skin of the cheek between the washpan and the towel.

These dry northers are considered, and no doubt are, very healthy winds, coming as they do over an extended dry and elevated country. The experience is that a few “blue northers” sweeping over the malarious districts of the country, in the month of October, bring health and infuse life and energy into all the subjects of chills and fevers, and morbid livers. W. J. BLEWETT.

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