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May 2, 1927

A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed April 25, 1927

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"OLD PROBABILITIES"

The name "Old Probabilities" -- often shortened to "Old Probs" -- was much more familiar to the American public a generation or so ago than it is today. It was used as a sort of personification of the Government weather service, originally conducted by the Signal Corps of the army, or as a nickname for the head of the service, the Chief Signal Officer.

According to a story related by the late Prof. Cleveland Abbe, shortly before his death in 1916, the name originated before the national weather service was established in 1870, and the first person to whom it was applied was Prof. Abbe himself. He had organized a local system of telegraphic weather reports and forecasts at the Cincinnati Observatory in 1869. The first bulletin appeared on September 1.

"It contained", he said, "only a few observations telegraphed from distant observers and announced 'probabilities' for the next day. This bulletin, in my own handwriting, was posted prominently in the hall of the Chamber of Commerce, but unfortunately I had misspelled 'Tuesday,' and I soon found below my 'probabilities' the following humorous line by Mr. Davis, the well-known packer: 'A bad spell of weather for Old Probs.' This established my future very popular name of 'Old Probs.'"

Whatever currency the name may have had in connection with Prof. Abbe, it has been much generally associated with the first Chief Signal Officer, General Albert J. Myer. When this officer died, August 24, 1880, there was hardly a newspaper in the country that failed to mention his popular nickname of "Old Probabilities."

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