



The Summer of 1936

A Badlands Wedding

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Heat, Drought, and Dust

The summer of 1936 was one of heat, drought, dust, and desperation. July of that year continues to be (for now) the warmest July on record for the United States. The 1936 heat wave merits its own Wikipedia entry and has the dubious distinction of being on many “worst heat waves of all time” lists. As many as 5000 people died. Crops failed. Livelihoods were ruined.

Statistics and lists tell one part of the story, but what was daily life really like when temperatures rose to triple digits before the age of air conditioning or widespread electricity?

We can glean some clues from letters and diaries of the time. Hattie Witcher, a homesteader who lived with her husband, Will, near Hidden Timber, South Dakota, on the Rosebud Indian Reservation, kept a daily diary for over 37 years, and this is how she tells the story of the summer of 1936.

Badlands Wedding

The heat wave began in June. When Hattie writes on June 18th, “Bright, hot, dusty, South wind until towards eve clouds from the north but no rain...” she could have had no idea how often she would write similar words in the coming weeks. June ended with a welcome rain and hail storm, but relief didn’t last long.

On July 5th, the temperature soared—to as high as 120° F in Gann Valley, South Dakota (currently the nation’s smallest county seat), tied with Usta’s 120° reading in 2006 for the highest recorded temperature ever in the state.

Staying home on this sweltering day was not an option for the Witchers. Hattie’s extended family was very large, even for the time period. She was the oldest of ten children, and her brother Jake would eventually have 18 children of his own. His oldest child, Lawrence, was to be married the next day north of Kyle, South Dakota, so Hattie and Will would spend July 5th traveling with Jake, his wife, Cora, and two of their children—Raymond, age 3, and George, 13 months—to the wedding.

Kyle, on the Pine Ridge Reservation and at the edge of the Badlands, is over 100 miles from Hidden Timber and eleven miles from the official North American continental pole of inaccessibility, or the most remote area geographically from any coastline. The group of travelers left after breakfast and most probably made the journey in the Witchers’ Chevrolet Sedan, which they had bought used a couple of years earlier from a neighbor.

The car balked in the hot sun. They ran low on water. Will (as did so many others that summer) got sick from the heat. But upon their arrival at sundown, they were served cool spring water (“was wonderful”) and cold milk. They slept outside under some trees, and the “moon shone all night.” The transcript below is slightly abridged and paragraphs and minor changes added for ease of reading.

1936 July 5th Sunday: *Another bright, hot day, a few clouds west of Martin and a sprinkle of rain on us but otherwise was too hot to travel for our car balked on us at Vetal in Bennett Co. and nearly every time we stopped Jake and Will had to fuss with it and prime it. Will got a bottle that had acid in it and had some gas put in it and it burnt his shirt-sleeve & one glove. This happened at Vetal.*

We had dinner at Martin, went to Brennan (Wounded Knee) Store, got water, stopped at observation tower wind-mill at Porcupine Buttes, got gas down the Creek, got water at a spring towards Rocky-Ford, stopped at Rocky Ford. Saw George and Florence Clifford also George Clifford of the Rocky Ford Store, [could not] fix car here, so went on to a store at White River Bridge, got a lunch there, went on through the Sandhills after leaving Charles Cliffords, where we got water to drink and put in the car.

The car balked on us after leaving Charles Cliffords and Will was sick from too much heat but he and Jake got the car up a sand-hill and Cora and I. Raymond and she carried George up the hill and we were short on water, but got to John Cliffords just at Sun-down, they ate outside and gave us some supper, they have a cool spring so the water was wonderful and they had cold milk for us to drink. Lawrence Whiting was there for he went from St. Francis with Bill Smith Friday p.m. to get ready to marry Martha Clifford, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Clifford, where we are.

July 6th: *The temperature is 110 and 114 and yesterday got to 116. Bright, hot a South wind blew the dust out off the White River Bed towards John Clifford's, for there is no water in it up there.*

Everybody slept out-side, for the beds were there and moon shone all night, it was hot until towards morning. Will and I slept on a cot north of the house near some trees and Jake & Cora and children slept in [a] bed near [the] house. Some slept in wagon and Hay-rack and another bed outside and George, Florence, Laverne, Collins and Tommy slept on the ground.

Most of the folks went to early Mass and we all went to 10 o'clock Mass for Lawrence & Martha [were] married then. A big dinner.

Hattie and Will left for their return journey at 4 p.m. on July 6th and arrived home at 11:30 p.m. that night.

An interesting side note is that on Sunday Hattie writes of seeing "a Balloon moving N.E. [of] Rosebud when we saw it and landed at Presho, Lyman Co., So. Dak." This would have been the 24th annual national balloon race, originating in Denver. According to a newspaper account at the time the winning balloon, Goodyear X, landed "at Presho, S.D., approximately 385 miles from Denver. [The pilot] was the only one of the five balloonists who took-off here Friday night to find good fortune in variable winds which kept the others from drifting out of the state" (*Lawrence Journal-World*, July 6, 1936, "Trotter Is the Apparent Winner in Balloon Race").

Still the Wind Blows

On July 31st, Will helped Hattie rinse the clothes and put them on the line "in all the wind and down they came when post broke so Will had to get more water to rinse them over and we got them dry." Washing clothes before modern appliances was time-consuming under the best conditions—each washing required hauling in water then boiling it inside an often already overheated kitchen—but in the 1930s, the constant dust meant that clothes never stayed cleaned for long.

Hattie ushers in August with the words "Still the wind blows." The Dust Bowl had already stripped much of the Plains states bare. The historic photo taken in Dallas, South Dakota, at the beginning of this article, is from May of 1936.

The combination of wind, drought, and lightning made fire a constant danger that summer. On August 10th, for example, when a dust storm caused Hattie to "get clothes in in a hurry," two fires broke out, the second in a nearby pasture. "[T]he men went and about 75 other cars so after

it burnt a half mile wide and 1 1/2 miles long they got it out but I [stayed] at home and worried."

The Whitchers were lucky. Their farm didn't burn down. They were able to stay on their land through the 1930s. But not all of their neighbors could say the same. While John Steinbeck's classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and the subsequent film starring Henry Fonda have informed generations about the rural westward migration from Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl, many people do not know that "drought refugees" also left the Dakotas in search of a new start. Hattie wrote of one neighboring family as "speeding on their way to Idaho."

Birthday Taps

In the end, what do we learn from diaries like Hattie's? Of course, there are the almost unimaginable daily struggles of getting food on the table in heat and dust, keeping farm equipment running and livestock healthy, and staying one step ahead of illness and injury.

Just as important, though, we see the diligence and optimism required to hang on to a sense of normalcy in extraordinary circumstances. While Hattie is honest about the difficulties, at the same time she continually seeks out pockets of goodness and gratitude, whether an unexpected cool morning after a rainstorm or a glass of chilled milk at the end of a day-long desert trek or the pleasure of conversation with family and friends, something she always treasured. She never loses her sense of adventure.

On July 21st, Will turned 45. It was, of course, another hot day, "so dry," and a regular work day for Will, who "finished the dishes" before they drove to a neighbor's place to see about getting fireguards plowed, went to a nearby town to get the spark plugs in their car cleaned, stopped at the Rosebud Hospital only to find that the doctor was not there (Hattie was supposed to be checked in that day for a goiter operation), and attended a Council Meeting before coming home.

The next day, Hattie writes, "Yesterday was Will's Birthday and I gave him some taps after he went to bed and he was too tired so only scolded me."

Ten years older than her husband, Harriet celebrated her birthday three days later, on July 24th: "Another bright hot day, wind from S.W." She worked at home doing the washing and getting the meals. She writes of Will's putting up hay stacks, "2 big-stacks and 1 small one," caring for the cattle, and taking a bull that had got out back to pasture. Some neighbors visited in the evening.

"This is my Birthday," she concludes her entry, **"and I felt pretty-good."**