

The Rainwatchers

Every Little Drip Counts

(Last of three articles)

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The vast majority of storms that keep the rain measurers busy in Santa Cruz County blow in from the coast. Many of these storms spend themselves in the hills, which accounts for the great discrepancy of precipitation measurements. It is not at all unusual for rainfall on Empire Grade, say, to be three or four times that dropped by the same storm on Soquel.

Less well known is the fact that often there can be great difference between rainfall measured in Swanton and rainfall measured in Davenport, which is directly on the coast, only a few miles away.

To obtain a better "weather picture" at the end of the current rainy season, The Sentinel has invited Frank McCrary to be a rainkeeper at his hilltop home overlooking some of the most unspoiled countryside in the county.

McCrary is a member of a pioneer family that settled in the Swanton area shortly after the Civil War. With his brother Homer, he developed the Big Creek Lumber Co. after both had returned from war service. Frank and Barbara McCrary raise blue-ribbon cattle, are strong supporters of the 4-H, and collect buggies and wagons used in the days when the horse was king of the road.

In Davenport, which most old-timers call "A Whale of a Town," a former county supervisor named Alvin Gregory measures rain, watches for whales, operates a grocery store and service station, responds to local emergencies as a member of the Davenport Fire Department, and between times can tell you many a tale of ships and the men who sail them.

Gregory can say, as few people can, that he was born in the "Whale of a Town," and received his elementary school education there before sallying forth to the world. After graduation from Santa Cruz High School he attended California Maritime Academy and went



Aptos had .7 inches of rain the day before Christmas at the time Mrs. Alan Nittler stopped babysitting her first grandchild, Patricia Lyn Parodi, to check her rain gauge.

In that "weather box" are other devices used by Mrs. Nittler to gather data for the U.S. Weather Bureau, including thermometers for recording maximum and minimum temperatures.

to sea for 12 years.

"I've been around the world both ways," he said. "Through the Suez Canal and also around the Cape of Good Hope."

Gregory was captain of a Liberty ship when he voluntarily beached himself.

In 1948 Gregory was elected to the first of two terms as a county supervisor.

"I enjoyed it in many ways," he said. "It's always interesting to know what's going on at the county seat. But I got too busy. I got too busy in Santa Cruz, and I got too busy with my business here in Davenport, so after my second term I decided

to stay up here."

Gregory said that the worst winter he recalls in Davenport was that of 1968-69. "We measured three inches in one day, and 39.17 inches for the season. Maybe we get more than that, but the wind seems to blow the biggest part of the storm inland to the hills."

Gregory and his wife, Dolly, have a boy, Leon, who is in San Jose State college seeking to become a high school teacher.

A daughter, Eleanor, is in her fifth year at Cal Poly and will undergo teacher's training in Morro Bay High School next semester.

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Howard Nielsen of Empire Grade is probably known as Father Christmas by more people than there are Christmas trees at his world-famed ranch.

School: "Why does The Sentinel print the rain records of Empire Grade and other places, but not Bonny Doon?"

Chris was asked in turn by his father, Donald B. Hummel of Martin Road, a consulting engineer, if he would like to keep the rain records for Bonny Doon. Chris agreed, and thereby hangs a tale.

Principal of Bonny Doon School is Howard Hazeltine, a confirmed weather watcher. Teacher of Chris Hamme's grade four class is Mrs. Vera Hulse, a pleasant and resourceful person who knows how to convert student interest in a subject into academic accomplishment.

Now Mrs. Hulse's class is studying weather, the cloud formations that announce fair weather or foul, the art of keeping precise records of storms and comparison of different rain measurements reported throughout the county. This spring the students may measure the new growth on trees and bushes. Next spring they may measure again and attempt to relate growth rate to rainfall as recorded by Chris.

Chris has his rain gauge mounted "twice as far away as the nearest tree is tall," which is a good rule to follow to avoid having drops of rain blown from a tree into your gauge.

People often imagine that rainfall reported from Cave Gulch a couple of miles from UCSC is recorded by a kind of Rip Van Winkle who comes tottering from a cave with a tin cup to take a weather sounding.

Actually the "cave man" is a hale and hearty Claude Lazarotti who lives up on the flatland of Cave Gulch, at its west entrance.

"Oh, sure, there are lots of little caves up here," Lazarotti said, "but no one is living in them to the best of my knowledge."

Lazarotti has been an unofficial rainkeeper for about 20 years, and has reported his measurements to The Sentinel for the past eight years. Last year's measurements totaled 90.57 inches.

Lazarotti describes himself as

The Supervisors

Few know him as a rain-keeper of distinction, however, a man who for 21 consecutive years has kept meticulous rainfall records in one of the wettest areas of the county.

Heaviest rainfall recorded by Nielsen is 104.98 inches. This was in the 1950-51 season.

"I think perhaps I got a bit weary that year measuring the rain and watching the gauge to make certain it didn't overflow before I did the measuring," Nielsen said.

Nielsen's identification with Christmas began sort of casually back in 1948, when he decided he ought to do something with a 40-acre vineyard he bought in 1941. "The vineyard was started in 1859," he said, "but grape prices weren't especially high when I got the place."

University farm adviser Ed Koch said to him one day: "Why don't you try Christmas trees?" Nielsen did.

The first 5000 seedlings set out died miserably, Nielsen recalls. "We worked the ground up too well and then we put in mulch, and in the first frost the seedlings were pulled out of the ground. But we did better after a while, with 30,000 seedlings obtained from Olympia, Wash."

At Crest Ranch the Nielsens sell from 4000 to 5000 trees yearly. Nielsen, a successful electrical engineer, was the originator of the "choose and cut," approach now used in making retail sales at Christmas tree ranches throughout the country.

If the trees are cut above the first layer of branches, Nielsen said, three or four additional trees can be grown from the same stump.

Nielsen said that the Scotch pine has become the biggest selling Christmas tree in the United States. "It superseded Douglas fir two years ago," he added, thanks to a Pennsylvania groceryman who decided one day that a Scotch pine would make a fine tree if it were sheared and pruned. Now there are millions of acres in Scotch pine cultivation. We were the first to plant it in California. It's a weed tree unless pruned and sheared."

Nielsen and his wife, Beatrice hail the widespread use of Scotch pine. "It saves our silvertips," Nielsen said. That's a prime tree, but it takes almost a generation to grow one.

Incidentally, California imports about 75 per cent of the Christmas trees its booming population uses.

Chris Hummel of Bonny Doon, nine, is the youngest and one of the most dedicated rainkeepers in the county. One day he asked his teacher at Bonny Doon

"unemployed," but last week he had a number of "help-put" projects going for his neighbors. Before retirement he worked 36 years for the U. S. Post Office. From 1957 to 1962 he was supervisor of mails in the Santa Cruz post office.

Lazarotti and his wife, Carol, have two children: Loren, who works for the State Highway Department, and Gary, a U.S. Air Force officer who flies KC-135 tanker aircraft.

That the rainkeepers for the county are responsible individuals whose figures can be relied upon is evident to anyone who discusses with them the duties and problems of rain measuring.

However, the topographic characteristics of the county prevent uniform rain measurements throughout a storm area.

It is for this reason that no county rainkeeper will tell you that his rain measurements are exact measurements of the rainfall on each spot in his geographic area.

Storms will dump rain on one hillside, but not the next. Wind will herd the clouds around like sheep, and those clouds will sluice. Boulder Creek, all but skip Ben Lomond, half drown Felton, and then perhaps sweep on to Soquel or Capitola before letting go again.

This explains why two accurate rainkeepers in the same city or township still have quite different storm records although they live but a few blocks apart.

But the total records kept by all the official and unofficial rainkeepers in the county do agree on two important points.

These are:

1. That the county gets a thorough sluicing down between September and July every year.

2. That rainkeeping can be hard and sometimes unpleasant work, especially when the wind is whooping at gale force and an inch-an-hour rainfall is filling your boots almost as rapidly as it is filling your rain gauge.

But rainkeeping is of interest to the rainkeepers, and an important community service.

And so in foul weather, while others may be curling up for a second morning snooze, the rainkeepers slosh through the wet to do their jobs.

PROBE DEMANDED

SAN FRANCISCO (AP)—An "immediate and intensive investigation" by the Democratic National Committee of "attacks on Mayor Joseph Alioto" was urged Saturday by Robert L. Coates, former California chairman of the party.