

Talking up a storm about the weather

By Rob Dollar Jan 14, 2018

Small talk about the weather never impressed Oscar Wilde.

“Conversation about the weather is the last refuge of the unimaginative,” declared Wilde, a popular literary figure in late Victorian England.

The long-dead Irish author, poet and playwright—known for his great wit, vibrant personality and the novel, “The Picture of Dorian Gray”—just didn’t get it.

It’s the weather, stupid!

Everybody out there likes to chat about the weather. In fact, they love it, even if the conversation is only an ice-breaker.

Now, the late Ken Litchfield certainly was no Oscar Wilde when it came to making an impact on the world with the written word. But, to his credit, the longtime wire editor for the Kentucky New Era recognized and celebrated the fact that people everywhere are always interested in talking — and arguing — about the weather.

For Mr. Litchfield — a mentor of mine who worked for Hopkinsville’s daily newspaper for nearly 48 years before retiring in the fall of 2004 — there was no better topic than the weather for one of those browbeating lectures he liked to give to the youngsters working alongside him in the newsroom. Providing readers with useful information about the weather and recording it for history, according to Ken, was a sacred responsibility of every newspaper.

“Li-i-i-sten!” he often screamed through gritted teeth. “Everybody is affected by the weather.”

Ken Litchfield was right as rain. After all, the weather — when it’s bad and not pleasant — can have a profound effect on the operation of transportation systems, and it’s frequently to blame for causing allkinds of chaos for businesses, schools and community activities.

During his career at the local newspaper, Ken kept meticulous records about the weather in Hopkinsville, jotting down information about temperatures and rainfall on notecards that he squirreled away for posterity in his desk.

It's too bad that Ken still isn't around. He left this world at the age of 79 more than nine years ago, but he'll always be remembered for his eccentric behavior, editing prowess and tough reporting from City Hall.

That 12-day cold snap not too long ago most definitely would have pleased my old friend, and it would have had him talking up a storm.

Arctic air masses — strong and relentless — turned Hopkinsville and much of the country into an icebox for the Christmas and New Year's holidays. Locally, overnight temperatures for much of the Big Chill hovered around the single digits. Baby, it was cold outside.

“The last time we had temperatures this cold was in the winter of 2013-2014,” observed David Powell, a local radio station weathercaster who also serves as coordinator of the Christian County Weather Spotter Network.

Powell said the mercury dropped below zero at least once during the cold spell, apparently for the first time in years. A low of 1 below zero was recorded for Hopkinsville on Jan. 2, according to the Kentucky Mesonet, a network of automated weather and climate monitoring stations.

Hopkinsville has seen more than its fair share of frightful weather events over the years.

Folks still like to talk about the great floods that soaked the city in January 1937, November 1957, and March 1997.

Folks still like to talk about the destructive tornadoes that tore through the community in May 1978 and April 2006.

Folks still like to talk about the epic ice storms that paralyzed the town in February 1994 and January 2009.

Folks still like to talk about the cold, snow and crippling January blizzard that characterized the winter of 1977-1978.

Folks still like to talk about the day in September 2002 when it rained cats and dogs — 6.66 inches, a record for a 24-hour rainfall — as well as another day in January 1910 when their grandparents witnessed a 14-inch snowfall.

“It (the weather) IS the most talked-about topic in conversation,” Powell quipped.

As bone-chilling cold as the arctic weather of late was for city residents, it was a walk in the park on a sunny day when compared to the frigid temperatures that occurred during some of the more memorable winters in Hopkinsville’s past.

Arctic air masses in January 1963 and February 1951 dropped temperatures to as low as 30 below zero in some parts of Kentucky, according to Dr. Stuart A. Foster, a climatologist and director of the Kentucky Climate Center at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green.

As a result, there’s a good argument that the two coldest days ever in Hopkinsville took place during those two harsh winters.

Intellicast — a web site that promotes itself as “The Authority in Expert Weather” — insists it was minus 22 degrees in Hopkinsville on Feb. 2, 1951, and minus 20 degrees on Jan. 24, 1963.

Put on your heavy coat, and let’s take a look.

The Kentucky New Era — in its 1951 “Groundhog Day” edition — reported that the overnight low temperature in the city had broken a cold weather record. It gave the story top billing, with a headline that screamed, “Suffering, Damage Mount As Mercury Hits All Time Low Here; No Immediate Relief.”

According to another front-page story in that same Friday afternoon’s newspaper, the reading of minus 22 degrees for Feb. 2, 1951, toppled the previous record low of minus 19 degrees that had been set on Feb. 10, 1899.

As for that bitter cold day in Hopkinsville on Jan. 24, 1963, it apparently resulted from a modern-day record for plunging temperatures in the state. Jerry Hill — author of “Kentucky Weather,” which was published in 2005 by University Press of Kentucky — told the story in his book. Hill noted that the daytime high temperature in Hopkinsville on Jan. 23 — the day before a powerful arctic air mass invaded Kentucky — was in the 50s. The mercury eventually dropped 71 degrees, in a matter of hours, for an overnight low of minus 20 degrees.

For the record, and not to rain or snow on anybody’s parade, Ken Litchfield’s weather files included the low temperature for Jan. 24, 1963, but there apparently was no mention of that even colder day in February 1951. Of course, it’s only fair to point out that Ken wasn’t even working at the Kentucky New Era in 1951. He was in the Army and out of the country. He started his job — which included record-keeping duties — at the newspaper in November 1956.

Unofficial weather records — based on data collected at Campbell Army Airfield at the nearby Fort Campbell Army post — reveal at least three other record-cold days for the Hopkinsville-Christian County area over the years. They occurred on Jan 17, 1982 (minus 14 degrees), Jan. 21, 1985 (minus 10 degrees), and Dec. 22, 1989 (minus 13 degrees).

The hottest day in Hopkinsville history apparently occurred during the “Dust Bowl” era when the summers were hot and miserable throughout the country.

On July 13, 1936, the temperature here soared to 110 degrees, according to several weather sources, including Intellicast.

A handful of other scorchers from the not-too-distant past apparently mounted serious challenges for the title of Hopkinsville’s Hottest Day. Those hot days — but not hot enough — occurred on June 29, 2012 (106 degrees), Aug. 16, 2007 (106 degrees), June 30, 2012 (105 degrees), July 28, 1952 (105 degrees), Aug. 15, 2007 (104 degrees), June 28, 2012 (104 degrees), and June 28, 1952 (104 degrees).

So, why was it so hot on July 13, 1936?

The first few weeks of July 1936 made history because of one of the most severe heat waves to ever occur in North America. As many as 5,000 people died across the United States from heat stroke and heat exhaustion during a time when air conditioning was rare in homes and commercial buildings.

The weather was big news. According to a front-page story in the Tuesday, July 14, 1936, edition of Hopkinsville's newspaper — back then known as the Daily Kentucky New Era — Hopkinsville, on the previous day, had staked a claim as the sixth hottest spot in the entire nation.

“This community's official high of 110 degrees during the afternoon was topped by only one Kentucky city (Henderson), one in Michigan (Saginaw), one in Wisconsin (Appleton), and two in Illinois (Harrisburg and Carbondale),” the story claimed.

Two days later, the Daily Kentucky New Era reported in another front-page story that the temperature had hit 100 or above in Hopkinsville for eight of the nine days between July 7 and July 15, and it barely missed the mark on July 8 when the mercury reached 99 degrees.

The newspaper further noted that 18 heat-related deaths had been reported in communities across Kentucky — including Hopkinsville — on July 15 alone.

As an afterthought, it should be mentioned for the sake of history that Hoptown was plenty hot only 11 years before the famous 1936 heat wave that baked the town.

Dr. Foster, the state climatologist, noted in a 2012 presentation to state Transportation officials that Hopkinsville and Christian County suffered through 14 consecutive days of temperatures at or above 100 degrees — from Aug. 27 through Sept. 9 — in 1925.

Tell me that that's not hot.

It's definitely worth talking about while everybody tries their best to enjoy the rest of this winter.

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