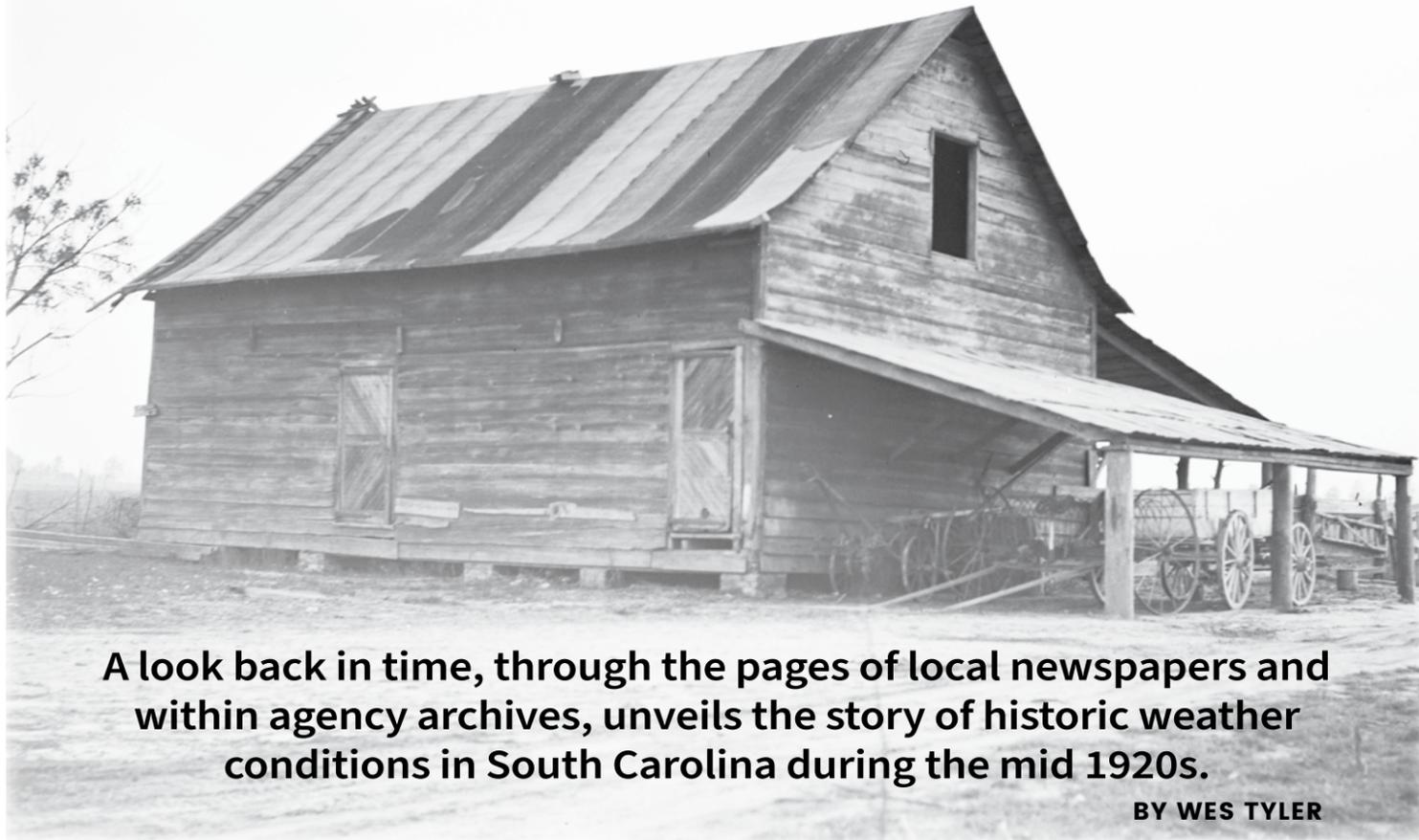


Under a Punishing Sun: The Summer of 1925



A look back in time, through the pages of local newspapers and within agency archives, unveils the story of historic weather conditions in South Carolina during the mid 1920s.

BY WES TYLER

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY, CREATOR. Hanover, Barn, Pinopolis, Berkeley County, SC. Documentation Compiled After. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/sc0406/>.

Details of historic weather after the turn of the 19th century, and that worthy of recordkeeping, depended on the careful efforts of a widely-spaced U.S. Weather Bureau Office observation network. Prior to this more systematic method, most references were held in U.S. Army reports, Signal Service and U.S. Department of Agriculture records, medical journals, local newspapers, diaries or perhaps some anecdotal penciling in the back of a family bible. One of South Carolina's earliest episodes of severe weather, labeled "The Great Hailstorm at Wateree Township," occurred on May 8, 1784. The eight lives lost during this storm made it America's

deadliest hail event to date. Present day baseball-sized hail, for comparison, bombarded the small riverside community near Camden, leaving a measured depth in gullies of three feet. It was said that the four days of unmelted stones allowed for the "gathering of ice in wagon loads."

Another source, incident to the mid-month historic cold wave of February 1899, cites J.S. Wannamaker; the St. Matthews volunteer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Climate and Crop Service, and his February 4 observation "record warmest for so early," 80 degrees. Just ten days later he enters a thermometer reading of "zero."

It's April 1, 1925, and Calhoun Falls

reports a "coldest for so late" 26 degrees. By April 9, moist topsoil and warming sunshine gives character to the outdoors — plants were flowering and "generally green." It seems nature is cooperating against chance. Showers over Blackville on April 11 bring 0.60 inches of rain. No rain would fall for thirty more days. On April 24, 1925, an April high temperature of 99 degrees, the current state record, is recorded at Blackville and Society Hill.

Seasonal conditions bring a landscape of optimism through most of May with beneficial rains of around three inches falling statewide from May 11 through May 18. Typical of May's history of agreeable

weather with cool mornings and warm afternoons, Spartanburg reports a May 21 sunrise temperature of 56 degrees that rises to 88 degrees. Early peaches make it to market during the last week.

June arrives with steadily climbing temperatures and a poor distribution of rains. Darlington measures 7.93 inches for the month but only a "trace" amount is noted at Calhoun Falls. On June 22, both Calhoun Falls and Garnett report the month's highest temperature of 105 degrees. Trenton, a small farming community in Edgefield County, records 100 degrees or higher on ten straight days and just one day of rain in June that leaves a disappointing 0.23 inches. The Congaree River at Columbia flows with less than a foot of water.

July's rainfall is the lowest in thirty-nine years. Calhoun Falls again records the state's highest monthly temperature of 106 degrees on July 3. At Little Mountain, 0.30 inches of needed rain fall on just one day, July 4, but not another drop until August 4. The dangers of field work are grimly accented in July, with an "any month" state record of eleven deaths from lightning. Part of which, four members of a Sumter County family, a friend and their mule, all seeking safety at a tobacco barn, are taken by a single bolt. Crops are failing from Allendale County, eastward into Florence County then northwestward to the Foothills. The hardship of shouldering water to save home gardens becomes a necessity.

It's August 1925, and the worst is yet to come. Proven wells across many of the central and western counties have gone dry. Stock water has become scarce. Livestock left to free range are dying in great numbers. Afternoon heat is the highest in twenty-five years. Only a small percentage of rural South Carolina has electric utilities and the luxury of a table fan. With the exception of bottomlands and the coast, corn acreage wilts into a total loss. On August 20, the mercury climbs to 109 degrees at Blackville, Calhoun Falls, Trenton and Society Hill, the group within one degree of the state's highest accepted value of 110 degrees set on July 18, 1887, in Chester. Station records of 107 degrees at Laurens and 105 degrees at Landrum, both taken on August 20, stand

today. At Society Hill, a lone shower of just 0.28 inches is their 31-day August total. The Congaree River gage at Columbia now indicates "no flow" with only a few puddles in the channel.

On a request from the Columbia First Presbyterian Church, South Carolina Governor Thomas G. McLeod issues a proclamation on Thursday, September 3, for the upcoming Sunday's church services to include prayers for rain. On September 4, 1925, Blackville records the (then) state's highest known temperature of 111 degrees. The 108 degrees on the same date in Florence continues as their all-time record. Walhalla records their existing station record of 108 degrees on September 7 while at the same time prayers are answered in Trenton when thunderstorms bring 1.02 inches.

August 7 through September 24. Their forty-four days of 100 degrees or higher in 1925 is the existing annual state record. For Wedgefield, Columbia, Aiken, Newberry, Greenwood and Clemson University, the 1925 June through September rainfall total endures for each as "driest of recordkeeping."

Areas of rain become more numerous in the first week of October, but are of little consequence to the hundreds of small farm owners now overwhelmed by debt. On October 5, the months of unbearable heat exit the state on Georgetown's 98 degrees. Canadian-sourced cold comes on October 10, signaling the end to the heat and autumn's late arrival. Darlington awakens to a sub-freezing 30 degrees on the morning of October 11 and to this day, their "earliest



DELANO, JACK, PHOTOGRAPHER. Mule on a farm near Pacolet, South Carolina. Mar. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/2017794001/>.

Blackville receives 0.40 inches and their first rain in 34 days. The suffering heat over a weary Calhoun Falls peaks on September 8 as they match Blackville's shade temperature of 111 degrees, then follows with a distressing wait for rain that takes eighteen more days. Calhoun Falls surpasses their June-ending forty-five-day stretch of no measurable rain with a record fifty more consecutive no-rain days from

freeze date" since making observations that began in 1893. The narrative ends on October 30, with a late afternoon remark by the Landrum U.S. Weather Bureau volunteer observer, R. Hartwell Wilds, D.D.S., "rain, sleet."

Wes Tyler is a retired staff climatologist of 32 years with the SC State Climatology Office, S.C. Department of Natural Resources.