

THERE IS INDEED SCIENCE

in SUPERSTITION

Some superstitions are fanciful hogwash but many are rooted in scientific fact. Others work, yet remain a mystery to science

By REX R. GOGERTY

Almost everyone who ever planted a potato or milked a cow recalls a pet superstition concerning weather, crops, livestock or people. Some of these are just that—superstition—others are based squarely on scientific fact. For the record, and risking argument, let's separate the precise from the poppycock.

RING AROUND THE MOON



Since Moses' time, people have tried their hand at predicting the weather—some feel forecasting has improved little through the centuries. The moon has long been a handy weather gauge although meteorologists maintain the phase of the moon has little bearing on the weather—no matter if it is tipped so that "a farmer can hang his harness on it" or "no water will run out of it." But a halo around the moon is more than just back-forty hoodoo. Filmy, high cirrus clouds indicating moisture (ice crystals) at high levels, often precede rain.

The Weather Bureau receives many anxious calls each spring about an ominous "cross on the moon." Invariably the mysterious cross is the result of looking through a newly hung screen.

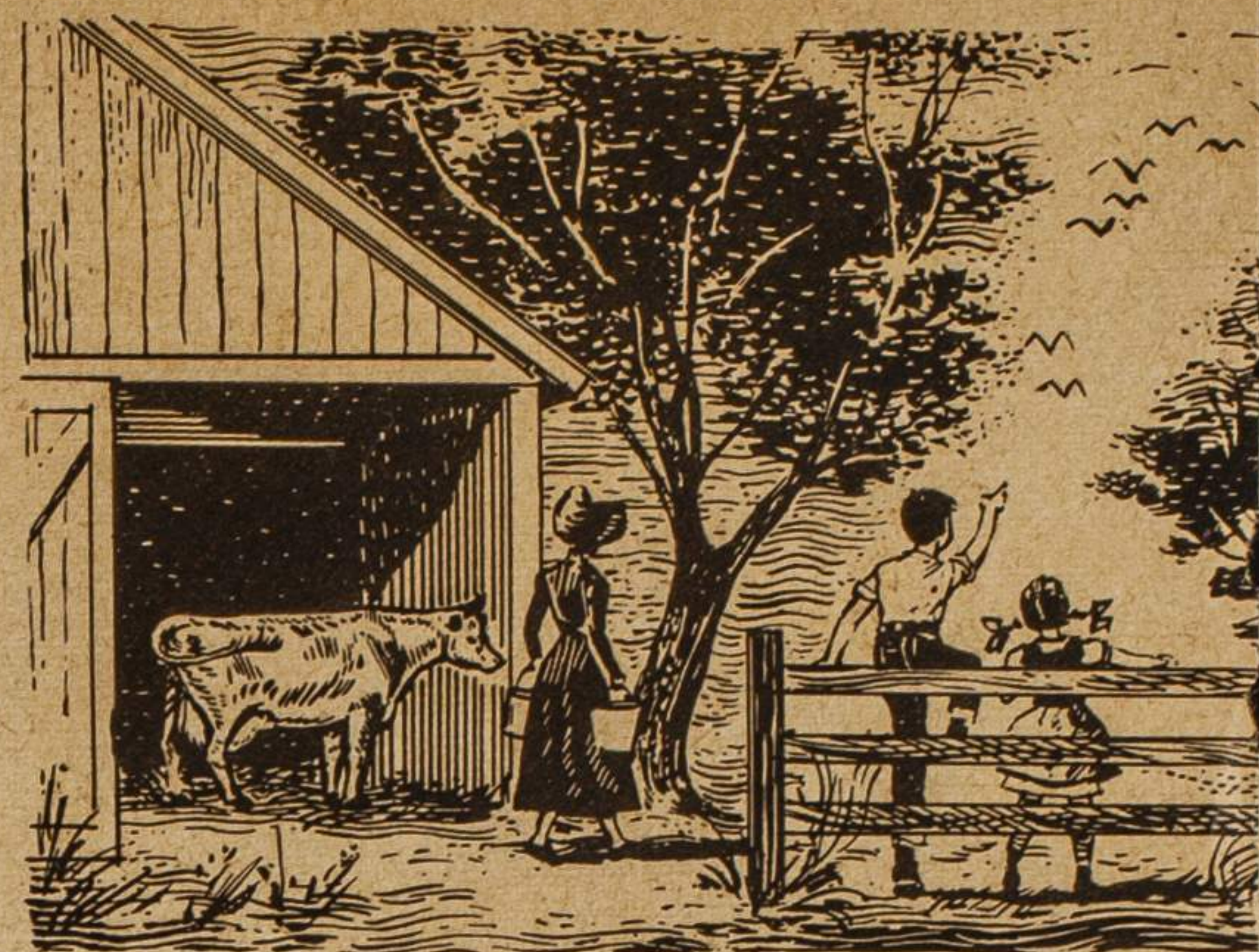
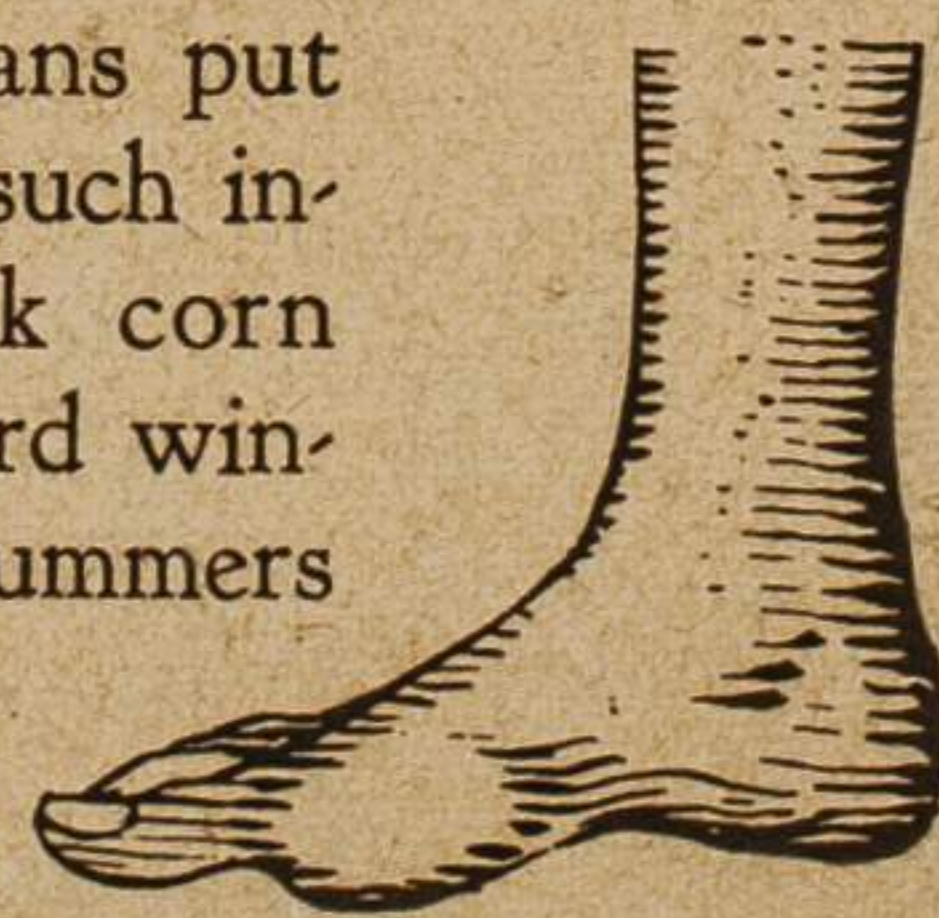
The experts consider birds far better forecasters than animals. Swallows, for instance, fly higher in fine weather than fowl due to changing barometric pressures—they seem to feel the weight of the air. But an extra heavy coat of fur

on a four-legged critter only means he'll be mighty uncomfortable until chillier weather arrives. Their long range forecasting record is far worse than that of U. S. Weather Bureau computers.

The Indians' ability to predict the weather far in advance has long puzzled and occasionally embarrassed the barograph boys. The Seminole of the Florida Everglades began preparing for the great hurricane of 1926 some four days before it struck the mainland. They had even persuaded the Indian agent to move all his charges to a safe place.

BUNION BAROMETERS

The Plains Indians put great stock in such indications as thick corn husks preceding hard winters and hot, dry summers following severe winters. Iowa State University researchers don't buy these calculations, but they cautiously recommend easterly winds, aching bunions and joints, and even train whistles as passable signs of a change in the weather. A falling barometer or rising humidity can stir up bunions, rural or otherwise, and R. H. Shaw, Professor of Agricultural Climatology at Iowa State, says predicting rain by an easterly wind is sound procedure. Seems a low pressure area to the south backwashes its counter-clockwise winds and moisture over cool, dry air. In other words, it's



an odds-on chance you'll get wet.

Rain on Easter Sunday or other special days has little bearing on the coming season, but records provide averages.

LIGHTNING TO LABORATORY

The Pennsylvania Germans can boast some of the most colorful, if not always the most accurate weather signs. "Never point your finger at lightning,"



is certainly good advice from a safety viewpoint; but the adage, "morning showers and old women's dancing do not last long," would depend a lot on the strength of the ladies and storms in question. Weather experts have found morning storms to be less severe than those occurring in the heat of the day.

The hill folks of a generation or two ago were the undisputed champions of home-brewed patent medicines and, unmindful of research, they got results. The broth of boiled oak bark was standard for what ails the milk cow. Poultices of bread and milk or platan leaf stopped infection in mules and people of all ages. Medical men agree there is merit in the drawing and healing power of most poultices. Even half grown chickens have been butchered and applied to draw rattlesnake venom out of a man's leg. In emergencies there just isn't time to argue the scientific angles if the cure works.

Superstition has, in fact, often been the taproot of great scientific discovery. Milkmaids in 18th century England were not only the best in the business—