



MERCURY DURING TRANSIT—
Taken at 12:25 p.m. EST on Nov. 14 at the U. S. Naval Observatory in Washington, this picture shows the planet Mercury during its most recent transit of the sun, as it appeared by telescope. This rare astronomical event, when Mercury appears as a black dot on the sun, occurs only 13 or 14 times a century. (See SNL, Nov. 7, p. 298.)

MEDICINE

Girls Are Birthmarked Twice as Often as Boys

► GIRLS HAVE birthmarks twice as often as boys, Drs. W. Brandon Macomber and Mark K. H. Wang of Albany Medical College, New York, report in GP, the journal of the American Academy of General Practice.

This has led to the belief that the birthmarks, scientifically termed hemangiomas, may be related to the female hormones. A birthmark, the doctors pointed out in this connection, may start or may increase in size at the beginning of the teen age or at the start of pregnancy.

Most birthmarks, however, are present at birth or shortly thereafter and most are found on the head and neck. Malignant varieties are rare, and usually can be recognized by a tendency to ulceration and bleeding.

Cauterization, carbon dioxide snow, radiation, injection and surgical removal are treatments used to remove these. Surgical removal is the most effective, but may be used only in carefully selected cases. It is the treatment of choice in any birthmark that is fast-growing or suspected of cancerous change.

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AERONAUTICS

Airport Noise Complaints

Airplane noise is a real problem still to be solved, but some complaints of residents near airports can be blamed on politics and weather.

► POLITICS AND WEATHER are among the variables that swell and ebb the tide of complaints from residents living near noisy airports.

The Air Line Pilots Association told SCIENCE SERVICE that politicians frequently use airport noise as a political plank hewn to get votes. When this happens, stirred-up residents write letters of criticism they ordinarily would not have written.

Overcast skies have their own effect by reflecting airplane noises back to earth. Resembling mirrors in effect, the clouds intensify the sound entering open windows on the ground.

Airplane noise is a real problem that the industry is striving to conquer. However, the world's uncertain military situation is among the factors that are impeding progress.

All four-engined planes now in transport service are built for immediate conversion to military duty should the necessity arise. These planes largely have been developed with the design goal of achieving as much horsepower from the engine as possible. No consideration for noise has been worked into the engine design.

Furthermore, many airplanes now in commercial service were inherited from the Army Air Corps after World War II. These planes also were built to strike out at the enemy with the greatest efficiency. Noise was of little importance in their design.

Present planes could be made more silent if the operators reduced their payloads, the pilots' organization added. However, a reduced payload means less money to the airlines and this in turn means more taxes and government subsidies.

The airlines are trying to reduce the noise nuisance as best they can. At present, pilots of aircraft leaving some of the nation's largest airports are instructed to climb rapidly to an altitude of 1,200 feet before gathering full cruising speed. At this altitude, the plane's engine noise as heard on the ground is not as objectionable as when the plane circles at a lower altitude while gaining cruising speed under most atmospheric conditions.

The pilots' association also pointed out that most complaints come from residents near commercial airports. Few noise complaints are voiced by residents near busy military air bases. The Air Force reports it has succeeded in allaying fears through aggressive educational campaigns at two bases. The campaigns got underway when fleets of noisy jets were stationed there for the first time.

Complaints also seem to be tied in with noise's psychological effect. A low flying, powerful plane sometimes rattles dishes in the cupboard and frightens the housewife and her children.

Loud airplane noises can be compared to thunder, the Air Line Pilots Association reports. If you hear the noise, chances are that you are safe. This is because airplane noise is loudest when the plane is directly overhead. Should something go wrong, the plane would not plunge straight down upon your house. It would crash some distance away. Fear of overhead airplanes also has been traced to ignorance of the laymen regarding the relatively young aviation industry.

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METEOROLOGY

"Economy" Seen Reason For Weather Ship Cuts

► "ECONOMY" IS the reason for the latest cut in the number of ocean weather stations supplying wind and other meteorological data on which accurate weather forecasts are based.

Such economies, however, can lead to serious gaps in knowledge of the weather headed toward the United States, since the two ocean stations now being removed furnish information on North Pacific weather. The general trend of weather movement in the northern hemisphere is from west to east.

Announcement of U. S. intention to withdraw from the international North Atlantic weather ship network was made recently, also based on "economy" reasons. An argument presented in support of this move was that the weather moved from west to east, thus the weather reports from the Atlantic were of more value to Europeans than the U. S. (See SNL, Nov. 7, p. 294.)

Many meteorologists not connected with the government question whether it is possible to assign an exact, or even approximate, monetary value to the weather information received from the vast ocean areas by way of ocean weather stations.

They believe that only by obtaining as complete a picture as possible of weather conditions over most of the world will meteorologists be able to make new improvements in forecasting techniques, and thus more accurate weather predictions.

One of the most important present uses of ocean station weather data is in five- and 30-day forecasts.

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