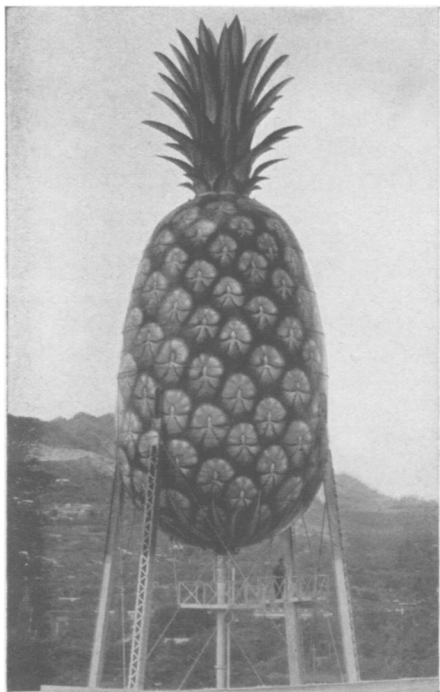


NATURAL HISTORY

Ireland's Snakes Departed Long Before St. Patrick Came



BIGGEST STEEL PINEAPPLE

It serves as the watertower of the world's largest commercial packing plant for the handling of Hawaii's national fruit, and is a conspicuous object on the skyline before the eyes of all incoming steamer passengers.

ST. PATRICK gets credit he never would have claimed for himself, in the matter of the snakelessness of Ireland. He found no snakes there when he arrived. There hadn't been any snakes in Ireland for thousands of years—ever since the last Ice Age at least. Possibly there never were any snakes there at all.

Ireland has never yielded any fossil snakes, even. However, that is no special argument that no snakes ever existed there. Snake bones are small and fragile, and like bird bones do not fossilize well. But it is quite possible that Ireland may have been free of snakes since the very beginning. It is a comparatively new country, geologically speaking, and snakes are comparatively recent products of evolution.

But if there ever were any snakes on the island the cold weather that came

with the Ice Age wiped them out. Snakes are warmth-loving animals. Temperate-zone snakes are mere outliers of the great tropical swarms. So when the earth settled down to a hundred thousand years or more of stiff winters, the snakes in the higher latitudes had a hard time of it.

As a matter of meticulous fact, Ireland is not entirely without snakes. The little English grass-snake exists there, but is found only as an exceedingly great rarity.

It is quite true, however, that Ireland has no poisonous snakes. The common adder, the only poisonous snake found in western Europe, which is fairly frequent in England, is quite unknown in the land of St. Patrick's adoption.

When Patrick stooped to pluck the trefoil shamrock to demonstrate the doctrine of the Trinity to a doubting pagan king, he settled one controversy but started another.

Nobody knows what the shamrock really is. The name is simply an Anglicized form of the Celtic "seamrog," and "seamrog" means, simply, "three-leaf."

There are three common shamrocks in Ireland, each with its supporters for Patrician honors. Two of them are clovers and one is the oxalis. All three of them grow in America, either as native plants or naturalized from their Old-World home.

The shamrock question gets no help from the old botanical records. At one end, they do not go back far enough. The first "herbalist" in medieval Europe wrote centuries after Patrick said his last Mass in Ireland. So they could get no good record of the plant he plucked. And at the other end, they do not jibe with modern botany. Present-day botanists base their classification primarily on the structure of flowers, whereas the medieval herbalists used leaves as a starting-point. Hence all three-leaved plants were "shamrocks" to the early botanists, however unrelated they may be in the lists of later ones.

So all true sons of St. Patrick, (and who isn't one, on the Seventeenth of March?) will wear the green trefoil on his day, but they should not inquire too nicely into its botany.

Science News Letter, March 14, 1931

METEOROLOGY

Rainfall For Drought Area Forecast in Next Few Weeks

AMPLÉ rainfall over the larger portion of the area of the country recently affected by drought is forecast by H. H. Clayton, meteorologist, for the latter part of March and the first week in April.

In a forecast made on Feb. 26 through the use of solar constant data gathered by the Smithsonian Institution and other meteorological information, Mr. Clayton said:

"The indications at present are that in the North Atlantic States the month of March will average normal or somewhat above normal in temperature but with a trend toward temperatures below normal during the latter part of the month and during the first week in April. The precipitation promises to be somewhat above normal.

"In the Lake region and over the upper Mississippi valley and Northwestern States the downward trend of temperature will be more marked than in eastern sections and for this reason

ample rainfall is expected over the larger portion of the drought area."

Mr. Clayton made this forecast public exclusively through Science Service. Mr. Clayton has been a collaborator of Dr. C. G. Abot, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, who has announced his conclusion that weather is dominated by solar changes.

"I do not claim a finished method of forecasting weather by means of which I am able to foretell the weather for any future date for any part of the earth's surface," Mr. Clayton said in explanation, "but as the results of years of painstaking research I do believe that I have developed a method of forecasting depending upon solar changes which enables me to make reasonable estimate of certain coming changes. These estimates I believe will be nearer the truth than those based on any method known to me, and I have a wide acquaintance with the various methods."

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