



"Spud" Superstitions

POTATOES in your cellar are sprouting again, as though impatient to be put in the ground to grow. And there are two potato-planting superstitions that you are doubtless hearing from right now.

One is that potatoes should be planted on Saint Patrick's Day. This must be of comparatively recent origin, as folk-ideas go, for the "Irish" potato did not get to Ireland until two or three centuries ago. But once it did, and could establish itself as a thoroughly naturalized Irish citizen, the idea that it should be planted on the festival of the patron saint of Ireland seems to have been irresistible.

The only difficulty, for the northern part of the United States and all of Canada, is that it simply won't work. March 17 is much too early to plant in any soil that has been thoroughly frozen in the winter. It still wants three or four weeks, at the very least, to finish thawing out and to get warmed up. Except in the South, potatoes planted on Saint Patrick's day

will simply turn moldy and decay in the ground.

The second superstition is like unto the first, except that it has to do with a movable date. Many people—more perhaps than are devoted to the Saint Patrick's day notion—are firmly convinced that for best growth potatoes must be put into the soil on Good Friday. Possibly there is a vague sort of hook-up with the Bible story of the Resurrection back of it—though the whole thing may even go far back

into pagan times, stemming from such symbolic seedtime resurrection-cults as those of Osiris in Egypt and Adonis in Asia Minor.

Whatever its origin, the idea of planting potatoes on Good Friday can claim validity only in years when Easter falls at its "normal" time, about mid-April. This year, with Good Friday falling on March 26, is obviously no time to risk any good seed potatoes in putting it to a large-scale test.

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ASTRONOMY

Veteran Princeton Astronomer Has Studied 300,000 Stars

MEASURING changes in the brightness of eclipsing variable stars is the forte of Dr. Raymond S. Dugan, professor of astronomy at Princeton University and president of the Commission on Variable Stars of the International Astronomical Union.

During the past 32 years, over half a million such measurements have been made at the Princeton Observatory, approximately 300,000 of them by Prof. Dugan in person. He is generally regarded as having the most accurate photometric observing eye in the world.

Authoritative light curves of 19 eclipsing variable stars have been published by Prof. Dugan. One of them was based on a series of over 14,000 measurements, and for another he took observations over a period of nine years in order to obtain the necessary data.

The process of making each measurement involves adjusting a photometer so that the eclipsing variable star and another star of constant luminosity appear

equally bright. Although a measurement can be made in less than a minute, the exacting nature of the work restricts the number of them which can be made during one observation period, and weather conditions usually permit measurements on only about 100 nights a year.

Eclipsing variables, it was explained by Prof. Dugan, are "double stars" which are so close to each other, astronomically speaking, that they could not be distinguished individually by a telescope a hundred times more powerful than any in existence today. Some of these stars are much bigger and brighter than the sun, but they are so far away from the earth that only a few can be seen with the naked eye.

The stars, many of which are stretched by mutual attraction into a shape resembling a football, eclipse each other once in every revolution, and the measurements are designed to determine the length of the eclipses, which star is the larger and brighter and whether the eclipses are total or partial. Prof. Dugan has observed pairs which eclipse each other six times every day, and one in which the eclipses last about two years and occur at 9,883-day intervals.

Observers in many parts of the world are now investigating this field of astronomy, and Prof. Dugan seeks to keep them acquainted with the latest information and to coordinate their efforts whenever possible. Since he began his work in 1905, the number of definitely known variable stars has increased from 50 to approximately 1,000, and new ones are being discovered at the rate of about 100 each year.

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