

Naming Storms

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SINCE SEPTEMBER 1954, the daily and weekly press has been engaged in a lively controversy over a new class of names, the names of hurricanes. The chief points of the controversy are: why do storms bear girls' names; is this in consonance with our American respect for the fair sex; and who started this idea anyway. It became a matter of public discussion when we had two especially furious storms along the Atlantic Coast and the United States Weather Bureau quite casually stated that it was "Carol" and "Edna" who had caused all the damage.

The first reaction was that sensitive females and chivalrous editorial writers expressed the opinion that it is a slur to American womanhood to connect destructive meteorological phenomena with names which we usually associate with gentility and loveliness. Would it not be more appropriate to call vicious storms for tempestuous United States senators or after despoilers and wreckers in history like Genghis Khan or Napoleon or Hitler? Then came the search for the culprit. In an interview Ivan Ray Tannehill, the chief of operations of the United States Weather Bureau admitted to Peter T. White that his Bureau uses girls' names for storms but denied that the custom originated there. He pointed out that George R. Stewart might be responsible because in his best seller novel, *Storm*, he has a junior meteorologist call the hero, or rather the heroine, "Maria," and the storms which play a minor role also bear female Christian names: Ruth, Lucy, Katherine, Antonia, Cornelia.

Everywhere in life the bestowing of names serves a very practical purpose. A name identifies a person, a place, an object, a phenomenon which otherwise would require a confusing and colorless

number or a wordy and inconvenient description. Storms are no exception to this rule. It would be confusing to number hurricanes because number codes are used in radioing weather as well as other reports; it would be most impractical to describe storms. It is much

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“... Reports indicate a particularly vicious storm building up in this area, men ... I propose we call it ‘hurricane Phidelia’ ... after my wife’s mother! ...”

easier and much more convenient to say “Cornelia” than “the low pressure center in latitude 175° East, longitude 42° North.” Sir Napier Shaw states in his *Manual of Meteorology* that a certain meteorologist had felt storms to be so personal that he had given them names, and Mr. Tannehill, in the above mentioned interview, says that storms began to acquire names early in the nineteenth century. Just as Spanish missionaries invariably named a location in honor of the saint on whose feast day they happened

to arrive at the place, the Puerto Ricans are said to have named storms for the saint on whose day the storm broke. This seems to be more disrespectful than giving a girl's name to a hurricane. "San Timoteo" refers to a definite individual, "Mildred" may refer to any of the quarter or the half million women so named—unless the name-giver has a definite girl in mind (as Stewart's meteorologist at first had), or a hen-pecked husband wants to name an especially vicious storm after his mother-in-law (see illustration).

Whether the bestowing of girls' names to storms is unfelicitous or not, it seems that Stewart's young weatherman will have to take the blame for inaugurating the custom. Any serviceman who during the Pacific war was in any way connected with weather forecasts or weather reports will invariably state that this is an old, old custom. However, no evidence has yet been produced that storms had borne female Christian names before Pearl Harbor. In Stewart's novel which appeared in November of 1941 the author felt the need of naming his storm not only for the practical reason of identification. This storm was not incidental to the development of a story of human tragedy—this storm stood in the center of the novel, was its principal character. "More than any human character," Stewart writes in the introduction to the Modern Library edition of the book, "as much perhaps as all of them put together, she was to be the center of attention. Her birth, growth, adventures, and final death were to be the main vortex of the story, with the various little human beings and their troubles and triumphs isolated here and there around the edges."

Although it appeared in the dress of a novel the meteorological authorities recognized the professional value of the scientific monograph presented in the book. There was hardly any budding meteorologist who did not read *Storm*—in some cases it was required reading.

The idea of naming storms for girls, or at least after girls' names, was immediately taken up by the rank and file in the meteorological program of the armed forces, vastly enlarged with the entrance of the United States in the war. At first it was done in a humorous way, born out of the irresistible desire of soldiers and sailors to designate each object, place, person, or phenomenon by a short, slangy term. But the practice continued after the war, and the

highest meteorological authority in the United States, the Weather Bureau, finally capitulated. Until 1950 they got along without names for storms. But the need for having concise, easily remembered names grew, and in 1950 a compromise was made. A conference in which the Weather Bureau, the Civil Aeronautics Administration, the Navy, and the Air Force participated decided to use the conventional words used by the armed forces to avoid confusion in telephoning, etc.: Able, Baker, Charlie, Dog, Easy, etc. This scheme soon proved impractical because of the international alphabetical code names adopted by foreign weather stations: Alpha, Bravo, Coca, Delta, etc. Hence, at another hurricane conference in 1953 it was decided to accept the popular idea of giving female Christian names to storms, and the storms expected during 1954 were baptized: Alice, Barbara, Carol, Dolly, Edna, Florence, Gilda, Hazel, Irene, Jill, Katherine, Lucy, Mabel, Norma, Orpha, Patsy, Queen, Rachel, Susie, Tina, Una, Vicky, and Wallis.

The storms for 1955 will bear the following names: Alice, Brenda, Connie, Diane, Edith, Flora, Gladys, Hilda, Ione, Janet, Katie, Linda, Martha, Nelly, Orva, Peggy, Queena, Rosa, Stella, Trudy, Ursa, Verna, Wilma, Xenia, Yvonne and Zelda. Alice could be used again because no storm in 1954 bore that name.

With that a new class of names was established, which is in all likelihood going to be permanent. Unless evidence to the contrary is unearthed, our vice-president Stewart will enjoy the credit of having inaugurated this practice. At the same time he might be open to the scorn of those who believe that the vicious hurricane which is traveling at a terrific speed across the ocean toward our coast should not be named Diane but Attila the Hun.