

5.6 "OLD INDIAN WAYS" OF KNOWING THE WEATHER: WEATHER PREDICTIONS FOR THE WINTERS OF 1950-51 AND 1951-52

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1. INTRODUCTION

In September 1950, U.S. Senator Robert S. Kerr (D-Oklahoma) wrote to Indian leaders across the U.S. in order to "make some determination with regard to whether or not we are going to have an early winter and whether or not we may expect a hard winter." Even though he had access to U.S. Weather Bureau predictions and other scientific data, Kerr and his Administrative Assistant, Ben Dwight, a Choctaw Indian and onetime Principal Chief of that Nation, wrote to Indian leaders that they had a "high regard for the old Indian ways of determining such things – because they are practical and have always been able to make some very accurate predictions." A few responses were received (e.g., Fig. 1). Based on this response, from Roly Canard – the Principal Chief of the Creek Nation in Oklahoma – a follow-up letter-writing campaign was made in fall 1951 for the upcoming winter, producing more responses, especially from outside of Oklahoma.

This presentation will examine the letters and responses, and explore the possible policy, political, and personal motivations of Senator Kerr – an influential oil man born in a log cabin in the Indian Territory in 1896 – in seeking this information. This research is done as partial background for field work that seeks out the local weather knowledge of Native farmers in Oklahoma and how they use it as a production strategy, and how this knowledge is informed by observations of nature, tribal worldviews, and the important events and occurrences in one's life, including what has been passed down as stories and practice.

2. KEY FIGURES IN THIS STORY

Robert Kerr was a successful oilman who parlayed his business success (Kerr-McGee Oil Industries) into a long political career. He was Oklahoma Governor during 1943-47 and then was elected to the U.S. Senate in November 1948. He served in the Senate until his untimely death of a heart attack at age 66 on New Year's Day 1963. His close friend, President Kennedy, attended his funeral in Oklahoma City, and in death Kerr was mourned by friends and foes alike as the "Uncrowned King" of the Senate.

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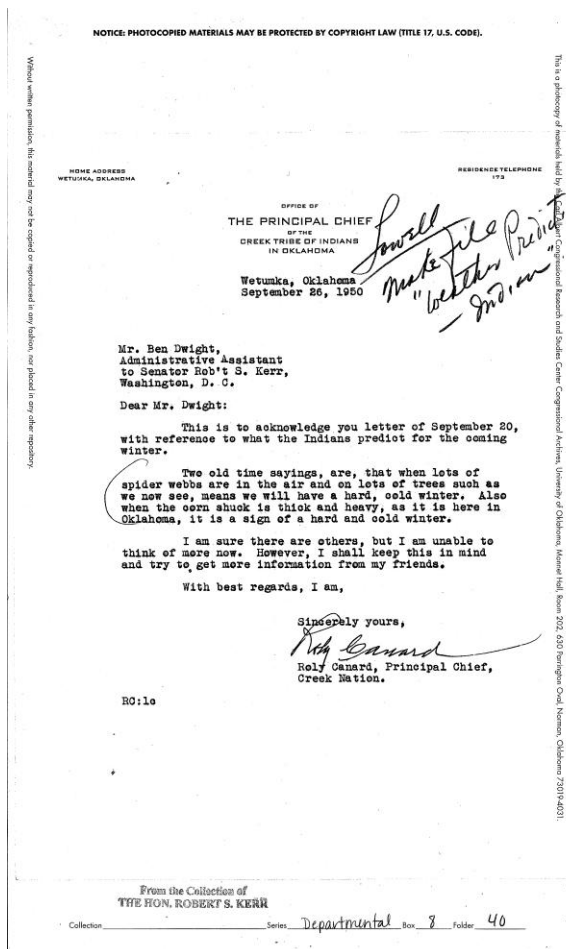


Fig. 1. Response received from the Creek Nation.

One Oklahoma paper wrote of Kerr in death, "If Will Rogers was Oklahoma's most loved citizen, then Kerr was its most powerful." He was a member or chair of committees on Public Works, Finance, Appropriations, and the committee that oversaw the creation of NASA, and chaired a subcommittee on Rivers and Harbors. He unsuccessfully sought the Democratic nomination for president in 1952. Public works was his main area, including prominently the securing of appropriations for the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System, linking the Port of Catoosa near Tulsa to the Gulf of Mexico – it is considered among the most expensive civil projects in U.S. history, after the Panama Canal and the Space Program.

Ben Dwight was Robert Kerr's Administrative Assistant from 1942 until shortly before his own death in July 1953. This period covered Kerr's years as Governor and his first four years in the Senate. Dwight

was a distinguished member of the Choctaw Nation, having been the Principal Chief from 1929-37. His experience as Chief served him well as Kerr's assistant, as he had represented the Choctaws in Washington on issues such as property rights and social welfare. He was an attorney who attended Columbia, Michigan, Oklahoma, and Stanford.

And, Roly Canard was Principal Chief of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation beginning in 1934. Information about him is hard to find, but he was the only Oklahoma tribal chief who responded to the 1950 letter from Dwight and Kerr. His response was used as the basis for the follow-up 1951 letter campaign, which in addition to seeking forecasts for that winter also sought Indian ways of forecasting in general. In his 1950 response (recall Fig. 1), Canard indicated that due to the preponderance of spider webs in the air and in trees and the thickness of the corn shuck, information he obtained from tribal people versed in the weather, it would be a cold, hard winter.

3. ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS RESEARCH

Using original documents to do research is a scavenger hunt that requires the help of good documentation and nice archives curators and librarians. If you have an interest in history or touching old things that important people touched, it is a rewarding activity. It also teaches that you should never throw away anything even remotely interesting, because you never know who may find it interesting in 60 years. A web interface for Robert Kerr's papers within the University of Oklahoma's Carl Albert Center Congressional Archives is a gateway to this information (<http://www.ou.edu/special/albertctr/archives/kerr.htm>). While it does not allow you to actually see those papers, it does tell you everything that is in every box and folder containing his collection. For this project, the two inventories of most interest were the Departmental Inventory, which includes a hodgepodge of information, and the Legislative Inventory, which documented his Senate activities. If you go to the Departmental Inventory, you will find a page that holds links for 24 banker boxes full of material.

If you go to Box 8, the contents of 54 manila folders are listed, including Folder 40 containing the 1950 letters seeking Indian winter weather forecasts and the responses. The web page fortunately describes the contents of each folder briefly. Through more searching in the Carl Albert Center archives I was able to find the 1951 responses to Kerr's follow-up letter, but these are contained in the collection of Malvina Stephenson, a *Tulsa World* reporter who later became Kerr's press secretary. Her Box 2, Folder 40 sadly does not contain Kerr's 1951 follow-up letter. It turns out the 1951 responses are much richer than those from 1950.

This talk also is informed by two books – *Robert S. Kerr: The Senate Years* written by Anne Hodges Morgan in 1977, and Kerr's de facto biography, *Land, Wood and Water*, published in 1960. Both contain great detail about Kerr's Congressional activities and his

beliefs about the environment and how to harness it for the benefit of society.

4. FORECASTS AND INDICATORS

Of the 33 letters sent in September 1950 (nine to tribes inside Oklahoma and 24 outside), only three responses were received. One came from Roly Canard of the Creek Nation, as already discussed. Another came from the All Pueblo Council in Casa Blanca, New Mexico. It indicated that "most...Indians in this area" felt this would be a hard winter, colder and snowier than usual. Two Pueblo informants felt there had been "some sort of unusual disturbance in the skies this year, assuming 'cloud seedings'." Other Pueblos said that "whenever there was any amount of drought then hard winter followed." The other response, from the Crow Agency in Montana, was informed by 70-year-old Sidney Blackhair. He had learned to forecast from his father, a famed Crow chieftain. He predicted a mild winter for southeastern Montana and northern Wyoming, based on factors such as (1) the occurrence of a mid-September snowfall; (2) frequent rains; (3) ants not having gone into the ground yet; (4) snakes still being out; and (5) an absence of frogs. The letter writer, Joe Medicine Crow, said these signs had been observed "by the Indians of this region from time immemorial and are well founded and could be relied upon." He also said means of forecasting had been developed by Indians in other regions "for their particular locality."

It is not known how many letters Kerr sent in October 1951, but seven interesting responses were received, all from outside of Oklahoma. The Chippewa Tribe in Cass Lake, Minnesota, indicated that it would be a long and hard winter; signs included that "if the muskrat or beaver build an unusually high and large house, the winter will be severe." Others Chippewa signs included the heaviness of wild animal fur, the thickness of tree bark, and whether "squaw-corn" is heavily covered with shell. The Pima-Maricopa Council in Scottsdale, Arizona, reported that a wandering Gila monster was found in town, a sign of a "long and very cold winter." The Potawatomi Indians of Indiana and Michigan, reporting the findings of "some of the old timers," predicted a short but hard winter with heavy snowfall; signs included adequate rains and "somewhat even" temperatures that occurred the past spring, summer and early fall; small and numerous muskrat houses meaning that "rats will be moving about more and won't have to be worrying about too many tight ice freezes"; and fox squirrels not storing nuts and corn, meaning the snow that does fall won't last too long. One of the old timers said he could no longer give good predictions – he said "since the atomic tests, I believe the chemicals have interfered with the air and clouds, the clouds I use to see are no longer in the skies, can't give you a good prediction." But he did say he thought there would be a hard cold snap from the middle of January to the first of April because the leaves on most of the hardwood trees remained on the limbs late in the fall. The Navajo Tribal Council in Window Rock,

Arizona, also reported many signs, including the food-gathering behavior of small animals, the color and thickness of fur, insect behavior, the disappearance of bees, rabbits, birds, and eagles, and the appearance of “well sheltered ground green plants” due to early spring rains, a sign of an easy winter with little snow and mostly rain.

Two other hand-written responses from 1951 are full of information. The Oneida Indians of Wisconsin had several ways of “telling what the future weather is in store for us” – indicators included the flight of wild geese south at a high altitude meant a hard winter, but this year they flew low, so it was to be a mild winter; if rabbits are fat in fall there will be a mild winter; if rabbits eat brushwood next to the first fall snow it will be a mild winter, but if they eat it in a standing position there will be a lot of snow; and when an Oneida butchers a fall pig and its spleen is thick, look out for a hard winter with lots of snow. They agreed with Roly Canard’s assessment on the thickness of corn shuck. The Oneida brought these ways of knowing with them from New York in the 1820s and were working with the University of Wisconsin to preserve their “folklore.” In Montana, a response from the Gros Ventre of the Fort Belknap Reservation related various signs. Low-flying geese had been seen, indicative of a “severe and hard” winter. Other signs of a long and hard winter were a beautiful fall with lots of berries on the bushes; buffalo not migrating too far south because they had plenty of food and forage under the deep snows; and prairie dogs raising the entrance to their burrows. The writer of this letter said that all of these methods of forecasting weather “by the Indians up here are most surprisingly accurate.” He also described a “famous Indian weather prophet” named Faces Backwards who “never missed.” This writer also claimed that “there is much – very much – that the Whiteman fails to appreciate because he doesn’t study...the “Indian’s way” that would contribute greatly to the progress and advancement of the Whiteman’s civilization.”

5. THE 82nd CONGRESS AND KERR’S INTERESTS

To try to find out why Kerr sought this weather information, it is worth looking at what was going on in Congress and what Kerr was doing at the time. The 82nd Congress served during the final two years of Harry Truman’s presidency. It was largely ineffective, mirroring Truman’s final two years in office (during this time he fired Douglas MacArthur as supreme commander of United Nations forces in Korea, an unpopular move). This allowed fresh faces like Kerr to establish their own agendas. Congress had four sectionalized voting blocs that rarely came together: (1) Truman’s Fair Deal Democrats; (2) the Southern Democrats, who had a tight grip through seniority on important committee chairmanships – this was the group Kerr belonged to – and its members led the House and Senate; (3) Liberal Republicans from the two coasts; and (4) Conservative Republicans. There were three main areas of debate, including: (1) the struggle against Communist aggression – according to Truman, “...aggression in

Korea is part of the Russian Communist dictatorship to take over the world step by step...”; (2) domestic policy – largely blocked by the Southern Democrats and Conservative Republicans; and (3) Congressional investigations of the Administration – there were more than 130 investigations during this Congress. Kerr was part of the 1948 Democratic freshman class that included Lyndon Johnson (D-TX) and Hubert Humphrey (D-MN).

Do politicians spend much time seeking information like winter weather predictions to satisfy their intellectual curiosity, or is there something in it for them? My cynical side says the latter, but as we will see this may not have been the case with Kerr. Seen as a parochial, special interests politician due to his efforts to prevent any sort of regulation of the oil and gas industry, he was an unsuccessful presidential candidate. But, this image made him a powerful Senator. Since almost every Congressional district has a waterway or a farm pond, his committee memberships ensured that the path to many Federal dollars came through him, allowing him to curry favor for his own projects like the Navigation System. During the period of our interest, Public Works became his power base, allowing him to play a large role in the authorization of Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation projects that oversaw the construction of water and power-generating facilities. His first bill in Congress created the Arkansas, White and Red River Study Commission, which was the planning effort for land and water development in the Oklahoma/Arkansas region. This eventually led to the Navigation System project, which topped Kerr’s lists of activities throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Oklahoma had a series of flood disasters along the Arkansas River in the 1940s that made controlling its waterways important. Kerr teamed with Senator John McClellan of Arkansas, the other namesake of the Navigation System. The first major funding for its westward portions was achieved by 1956-57 and more came when Kennedy was President. It’s not clear, though, how the winter weather predictions of 1950-51 played into this project, since this was still a time of planning and gathering support for the project, and not actual construction.

Kerr also had interests in agriculture in the early 1950s and throughout his Senate career, so maybe these may have led him to seek winter weather predictions? In Oklahoma and other southwestern states bad weather and shortages of farm credit had led to declining beef prices and rising production costs – creating a crisis in the beef industry. Kerr introduced legislation on January 1, 1953, to require 100% price supports for beef producers. After much debate this amount was reduced and was limited to provide insurance only against disaster because of fears that it would lead to uneconomic production practices, though it is not clear how this was resolved. Still, throughout his career Kerr worked to establish price supports for grain sorghum and subsidies to drought-plagued cattle producers. Again, it is not clear how the weather forecasts may have helped this effort.

6. WHAT TO MAKE OF ALL THIS?

It is clear that Kerr's primary interests were in harnessing the natural environment for the economic good of Oklahoma, and in taking care of Oklahoma farmers and ranchers. He had a natural affinity for the outdoors; his father had told him in the early 1900s, "To raise a family, you have to have three things – land, wood and water." This slogan became the title for Kerr's 1960 book about his views on the environment and how to harness it, including an Introduction from close friend LBJ. It has a fascinating second chapter on water and weather called "The Liquid of Life." In it, while he does not specifically mention the "Old Indian Ways" of weather forecasting, Kerr describes many things – meteorologically speaking – that you would not expect to read about in such detail from a Senator. He discusses evaporation (and it being a problem in the West); the various layers of the atmosphere and their role in weather and rainfall; the geographic variation of rainfall and the role of orographic features and the oceans in creating this variation; frontal systems and their role in the creation of storms; high-level steering currents; and the effects of cosmic energy – the 1950s had been the time of above-ground nuclear testing in Nevada and people were becoming worried about their effects on the atmosphere (remember the concern in the one Indian response). Kerr does talk about the moon and that it may influence the weather, but "how much, and why, is still a mystery."

Kerr also discusses weather modification – specifically cloud seeding with dry ice to produce rain that could then be captured and stored. He had been involved with Senate colleagues in 1950s legislation that led to the Advisory Committee on Weather Control, which published a final report in 1958. About weather control, he says in his book, "It is frightening to speculate on what could occur, if an enemy should master the mysteries of weather. This knowledge could become a more powerful weapon than any bomb. We must spare no effort to learn these secrets first". And LBJ, in the Introduction, states, "I am of the opinion that water management is a decisive tool in our mighty struggle for national security and world peace. The best control and use of this precious resource is the key to progress, here and elsewhere".

Perhaps, then, this is it – Kerr was so interested in weather and its mysteries and how to control it for the production of water resources that he was keen to find knowledge about it from any source, including the "Old Indian Ways" of knowing. I intend to talk to Kerr scholars to see what they think about this and look through more of the Kerr papers, and plan to include this as historical background in my research on how people who live close to the land know the weather.

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