

To: The Executive Net -- C778 Community Conference
From: Walt Roberts
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PROVOCATIONS -- #2
Red Skies at Night, Sailors Delight

As a child I lived on a farm near the east coast town of Plymouth, Massachusetts, and spent many summer months on the island of Cuttyhunk, half way between New Bedford and Martha's Vineyard. On the island, I boarded in the home of Frank Veeder, whose trades were the somewhat prosaic lobster trapping, and the exciting one of swordfishing by hand thrown harpoon. In such an environment I was exposed to a great deal of the lore of the sea. One of the Rules of Thumb by which the sailors lived was the adage: "Red skies at night, sailors delight; red skies in the morning, sailors take warning." How good a rule is it? Really quite universal and quite good!

The adage goes back at least to the Bible. If you look in Matthew, Chapter 16, Verses 2 and 3 you find Saint Matthew quoting the words of Jesus to the Pharisees, when they asked him to show a sign from heaven:

When it is evening, ye say, it will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, it will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can yet not discern the signs of the times?

The weather saying goes through many forms and languages, always with the same meaning. And there is a great deal of sound observational experience underlying it. It applies not only to sailors and the sea, but to landlubbers just as well. It works south of the equator just as effectively as north of it. If any of you know of older quotes of the rule, please tell me. I suspect it goes back hundreds of years before Christ.

Why is it a workable rule? It's because storm systems generally move from west to east. The larger low pressure cells, that are imbedded in the southwards excursions of the jet streams, as a rule, migrate eastwards with a speed of perhaps 500 to 1000 miles per day. The fronts that bring the bad weather generally lie on the eastern edges of the low pressure cells. The fronts, in turn, are usually preceded, perhaps some 300 miles or so, by thin, high level clouds often called "pre-frontal cirrus".

So, when the sun illuminates these thin clouds as it sets in the west, there's a magnificent red sunset. The storm system, lying farther west, then has perhaps two days to reach the watcher. And the weather is likely to be fair and sunny for the next day or two, followed by a worsening.

On the other hand, if the morning sky, to the east, has the red colors, then the front itself and the bad weather has almost reached the observer, and storminess is imminent.

There are hundreds of weather sayings like this. Some appear to have no validity, and others like this, have a solid scientific basis. I'm hoping to do a book on both the good ones and the bad--so pass on your favorites!
