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THE TEXAS NORTHER

By

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... in Texas everything is sorter wild-like yet and hard to round up—Ingins, mustangs, weather, and all. (John C. Duval)
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PREFACE

TEXAS is quite an impressive place. A newcomer is struck by many things: oil wells, Cadillacs, Brahman cattle, ten-gallon hats, friendliness, superlatives—and the weather. The famous Texas heat—“Too hot for the devil and too hot for men”—comes as no surprise; the newcomer expects it—and isn’t disappointed! The Texas norther is something else again; it usually takes the newcomer by complete surprise and makes quite an impression. One hot October day four years ago I felt the sudden chill blast of my first Texas norther, and I shall never forget it. In studying the historical literature of the Southwest, I observed that throughout the past most visitors to Texas were also mightily impressed by their first norther. Their accounts are so interesting that I decided to collect them into book form, and the result is a sort of anthology of the norther. While I have read many, many accounts of northers, I have by no means read them all, and I hope that this work will induce others into collecting norther stories, both for the fun involved and also to further an appreciation of the big role which the norther has played in the history and life of the Southwest.

EDWARD HAKE PHILLIPS

Houston, Texas
March 7, 1954
NORTHHER! It makes me cold to write the word.”¹ So wrote an army colonel who had just led his regiment through the teeth of a bitter storm on the Texas prairies in 1855. The colonel was the noted Albert Sidney Johnston, the regiment was the famed Second U.S. Cavalry, and the storm was one of the notorious Texas northers. The norther is a strong, sharp, chilling storm that swoops out of the north with sudden fierceness and races across the usually balmy prairies and plains of the Southwest—the Llano Estacado, the Black Waxy, the Coastal Riviera—climbs into the scattered mountains of the region—the Davis, the Guadalupe, the Eastern Sierra Madres—spins out across the Gulf of Mexico, building huge waves and scattering ships and birds, and finally piles up on the humid, mountainous coasts of Central and Southern Mexico.

The norther is one of the most distinctive features of the Southwest scene—and certainly the most surprising, for visitors to Texas are little prepared to meet an Arctic breeze in the Sunny South. Moreover, the norther is more than an occasional Arctic wind gone astray; it is a regular feature of Texas life, particularly from September to May, during which time it carries on a see-saw battle with the warm Gulf breezes for dominance of the Texas plains and prairies. The heat and dryness of Texas summers have been amply publicized, but the coolness of Texas winters and the striking role played by the norther in the life and history of the area has largely been neglected. Even the exotic Spanish influence is trifling in comparison to the influence of the norther on Texas.²
The Texas Norther

Texans, with some justice, have tried to assert a proprietary claim to the norther and have prefixed the word "Texas" to that storm as if it was born, bred, and buried within the Lone Star State. It is true that no state is so widely, so frequently, and so bitterly buffeted by the blasts of the norther as Texas. However, the norther has its origin much farther north and west—the Canadian Rockies are its breeding ground. Moreover, it pays non-stop visits to Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico before taking out papers in the Lone Star State. And though the huge banks of tropical air from the Gulf will sometimes make a Texas captive of the norther, more often than not it will blast its way through the humid mass and visit the ports of Key West, Havana, Campeche, Vera Cruz, and Tampico, while bringing curses and anxiety to passengers and crews of ships on the Gulf. The Rio Grande has been an ineffectual barrier to the norther and consequently "El Norte" is almost as well known and feared in Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, Coahuila, and Chihuahua as it is north of the border. In the deserts of western New Mexico, Arizona, northern Sonora, and southern California the term "norther" is used for similar sudden northerly storms, but, though these northern are conceived in the same womb as the "Texas" norther, they usually represent separate storms. On the other hand, the blizzard of the northern Plains has a very close lineal relationship to the Texas norther, for often both are part of the same huge air mass. If the one is a snow giant, noted for its huge drifts and sub-zero dives, the other is a speed demon and wind machine noted for its sudden appearances and its relentless buffeting; the difference is explained by the thermal condition of the separate regions which the vast storm visits. The already cold northern plains encourage snow, a more moderate pace, and lower temperatures; the warm plains and prairies of Texas have a warming
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effect even on a cold norther, and the very warmth attracts the cold dense air mass into the humid "vacuum" at great rates of speed. But in any case Texas cowboys finding themselves up the trail in Montana and encountering a Plains Blizzard were not so very wrong in labeling it a "norther"—though to have called it a "Texas norther" would have been presumptuous.

In many respects the norther bears a resemblance to the "chinook" of the north, though in reverse, for whereas a norther is a cold freezing wind, a chinook is a warm, thawing wind. Both are sudden, however, both usually come from the northwest, and both are exceptions to the prevailing climate; also both bring relief—the norther brings relief from the oppressive heat of the sub-tropics, the chinook brings relief from the biting cold of the snowbelt. On the other hand, the chinook is a friend of cattle, the norther an enemy, except when a "wet norther" brings moisture to the parched prairie.

The norther also bears a resemblance to the *pampero* of South America and the *mistral* of the Mediterranean. The *pampero* is a strong, chilling wind that blows off the Andes and proceeds northeastwardly across the Argentine *pampas* just as the norther races southeastwardly across the Great Plains. The *mistral* also is cold, sudden, and even violent, blowing from out of the northwest into the Rhone valley and out over the Gulf of Lions, generally bringing "cloudless skies, brilliant sunshine, intense dryness and piercing cold."

The norther has three invariable characteristics: it is windy, it is cold, and it is sudden. The norther does not have the power of the Florida hurricane nor of a North Atlantic gale; it is not as cold as a Plains blizzard; but in suddenness, it walks off with the prize. The suddenness with which a norther will change the air from balmy spring to icy winter is so
noteworthy that it has become immortalized in Texas folklore. The change is not very gradual but rather almost instantaneous. One of the early settlers, Moses Lapham, said, "It is often so warm that you are uncomfortable, without coat and jacket, and in less than two minutes the wind will turn from S. to N. and you will be shivering though [sic] you are weighed down with the warmest clothing." N. A. Taylor, touring Texas in the seventies, tells of an incident when he was riding along with an old Scotchman in warm, humid weather. The Scot was hot and had unbuttoned his shirt. Suddenly a norther put in its appearance, and "the old gentleman said; 'What a cool pleasant breeze!'" However, "in about two minutes he commenced buttoning up his clothing, and broke out: 'What a d—d cold wind!'" The suddenness of the norther would not be so striking, if it were not for its sharp, instantaneous effect on the temperature. There is no gradual cooling of the air but rather an abrupt drop in temperature—several degrees in the first minute, perhaps 20 degrees in forty minutes and 50 degrees in the course of a day, or even in a few hours. Extreme claims have been made regarding these drops, one writer claiming that the thermometer once dropped 100° in a day and another boasting that the thermometer once fell three feet in a few seconds—off a nail on the wall! It makes a difference, of course, whether one calculates the drop from a thermometer in the sun or in the shade, and the large claims are undoubtedly based on calculations made in the sun before the norther hit—and this seems justified, since to the man or animal on the treeless prairie, it is the temperature in the sun that is real not the temperature in the fictitious shade.

To some extent native Texans know how to anticipate a norther, though even today with the aid of the weather
bureau they are not infrequently led astray, and newcomers are almost always caught unawares. The norther usually, though not always, gives some warning of its coming. The air seems to get unusually sultry and still several hours before the appearance of a dark cloud bank in the north. The English journalist, Edward King, upon his arrival in Texas in 1873, received his indoctrination from “a ‘Norther’ which came raving and tearing over the town, threatening to my fancy, to demolish even the housetops.” King points out that “This ‘dry norther’ was the revulsion after the calm and sultry atmosphere of the preceding day. A cloud-wave, like a warning herald, rose up in the north, and then the Norther himself

‘Upon the wings of mighty winds
Came flying all abroad.’

A haze or overcast will often appear, slowly obscuring the sun and increasing the ominous feeling of the atmosphere.

A number of writers have mentioned that just before a norther hit a “sulphureous” sort of odor filled the air, which according to one old resident, Dr. John Washington Lockhart, gave “rise to the saying: ‘A norther is coming, I can smell it.’” Some have described the odor as that of burning hay, burning forests, or charcoal. Animals could smell or sense a norther’s coming before humans could, so that natives learned to anticipate northers somewhat by observing the behavior of the birds and beasts.

Occasionally a norther would present itself without any particular change in the sky, but usually it sailed in on the wings of an awesome-looking, dark cloud bank. Often this cloud bank would appear as a line sweeping across the whole northwestern horizon; John Steuart Curry has caught this picture most ably in his magnificent painting, “The Line Storm.” A Mexican official who was traveling in Texas in 1829 de-
scribed the norther's appearance as "a black bank of clouds that stretched from the west to the north, and the murky and sombre sky inspired a certain sadness not unmixed with terror." Evidently the color of the norther's huge bank of clouds varies considerably; some writers have described it as "black," "dark lead color," or "black and purple"; some others have pictured it as "muddy looking," or "greenish and yellowish"; and many northers have been described in terms of various shades of blue, which is one of the reasons for the term "blue norther."

As a rule the front of the norther moved swiftly ahead, and not much time elapsed between the first appearance of the cloud bank on the horizon and its full descent overhead. Frederick Law Olmsted, who was fascinated by the Texas northers, has commented on the "incredible swiftness" with which a norther "spread over the heavens."

As the norther drew near it broke the silence of the atmosphere with what was at first a low humming or soughing of the wind and the dull rumble of thunder but which soon became a veritable bedlam of noise as the full brunt of the storm arrived. Various observers have described three ranges of sound which the norther seems to possess: above the central roar of the wind, which sometimes is so "deafening" that the sound of crashing trees cannot even be heard, rises a high-pitched whistling that has been variously described as a "hissing," a "wailing," a "whine," and even a "shriek"; beneath these tones, however, can be heard a deep rumbling sound that has been called both a "hoarse and hollow moan" and an "earthquake's growl." In addition to the sounds generated within the storm itself there are the rattling of ash cans, the slamming of doors, the banging of windows, the cries of the birds, and the rustling of leaves and branches to add to the symphony.
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While a norther's wind seldom reaches hurricane proportions, it packs plenty of power nonetheless. The earlier writers estimated the norther's wind velocity at 30-60 mph, and records indicate that this estimate is not too far from the mark though, of course, many northers are weaker than this. The wind is certainly strong enough to scatter most insecure objects in its path, and at times it does serious damage to buildings; and its repeated visits have been known to lean or twist houses to the southward. Typical of the havoc which a norther could play is this report from the Panhandle's *Clarendon News*:

Blow soft breezes . . . the heaviest storm of wind known to residents arose Monday morning before day and for twelve long hours made the old bones rattle. As it was from the north every movable object out of doors at once emigrated southward. One could take a sheltered position and see boxes, barrels, cans, boards, cotton-wood limbs, and occasional pieces of house-roofing go whirling by to the river. Volumes and clouds of sand filled the air at all times. Panhandle soil shifted its location rapidly; sand and dust and gravel left deep holes in some quarters to pile mountain high in others. Under doors and through cracks and around windows swept wind and dirt. Light buildings yielded to the first blasts . . . Two houses lost their shingle roofing and even some of the flat dirt roofs were made penetrable by the later sunshine.  

At sea the norther's winds are particularly a problem and have not unfrequently frightened passengers, wrecked ships, and blown vessels far off their courses. Austin's first group of settlers who sailed from New Orleans on the *Lively* in November, 1821, were blown far out to sea by a norther—in fact, according to one of the members of the crew, W. S. Lewis, they were blown nearly to the Bahamas and were four weeks reaching the Texas coast. A later immigrant, J. C. Clopper, who was greeted by his first norther as his vessel reached Galveston in December, 1827, has vividly described the frightening experience:
About 9 o'clock [PM] the wind suddenly rose... [We] encounter a severe blow from the N. West—the sea becomes fearfully tumultuous—gale increases—topsail is furled and sails reeled—billows rolling to a prodigious height—vessel lying on her side and riding majestically over towering waves—a dutch passenger's hat and bible blow away he fastens himself to the ropes—we are all stretched across the deck—water dashes over upon us from bow to stern—suffer greatly from the cold—gale continues till morning—high winds till late in the day—find that we are blown off about 20 miles from the coast...17

Mary and Elias Wightman, who founded Matagorda in 1828, were delayed time and again by northers as they sailed from New Orleans. These northers “would make us lose more in a few hours than we had gained in days,” said Mary. She added that the captains would often anchor their ships in the Gulf, if the water was shallow enough, in order to prevent being driven so far off course by a norther.18 When John Sowers Brooks arrived in Velasco in December, 1835, he wrote his father about his first experience with a norther:

The vessel in which I sailed from New York, the Schooner, America, was wrecked away on the Brazos Bar, and we escaped from the wreck in an open boat with the utmost difficulty to another vessel that lay securely outside the tremendous breakers which dash along the coast in a gale of wind from the North.19

Another settler who experienced a frightening norther off Galveston in 1839 was C. C. Cox, whose ship was

... riding quietly at anchor, ready for sea, but waiting for a breeze, the sea was almost smooth and not a breath of air astir... at 12 Oc[lock] when all hands were piped to dinner, the sails were left spread, and a peaceful stillness pervaded the vessel—when a visitor came upon us with such suddenness force and fury that before the Capt. or rather liut [sic] comdg, could get on deck, the schooner was lying on her starboard side with the foresail and mainsail in the water. The Capt shouted let go the sheets, let go the halyards, but the men seemed paralyzed and only after repeated orders and by his own efforts, were the sails so lowered and shifted as to be
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relieved of the force of the wind—and then slowly the schooner righted, and faced to the Wind—the sails were rapidly taken in the anchor weighed and we drifted before the Storm. The Norther was a terrific one, we lost our convoy, and on the fifth day pulled up at the mouth of the Brasso...20

To some extent seamen had some warning of a norther’s approach which their fellow landlubbers usually lacked, and this was due to the presence of a barometer aboard most ships. An English visitor, Mrs. Houstoun, has pointed out the advantage her sailors had over her in this regard:

The crew were fortunately always prepared, by the sudden falling of the glass, for these national northers; but if it happened that I myself had neglected to consult this unerring guide, I have been quite astonished at their arrival. I have known a calm as still as death; not a ripple on the water and not a murmur on the breeze; when suddenly a sailor has exclaimed ‘Here it comes!’ and, in a moment, literally in the twinkling of an eye, the wind was roaring through the rigging, and the sea rising to a tremendous height;

“Remoter waves came rolling on to see The strange transforming mystery:”

The schooner was tossed about at her anchorage, and the water fell on the bar to its lowest depth.21

The habit which northers had of lowering the level of the coastal waters, which Mrs. Houstoun mentions, was especially serious to coastal shipping and sometimes, indeed, stranded fish and turtles as well as boats high and dry on the coastal bars. The great traveler and chronicler of the Santa Fé trail, Josiah Gregg, visited Galveston in November, 1841, and reported in his diary that

... last Thursday morning opened with a heavy “northern” [sic] so that boats which were up for Houston could not venture out. This continued for four days, and so lowered the water as to lay the usually covered beach along the north side bare.22

Ships which wanted to enter Galveston Bay at such times
often had to “trip” their vessels over Red Fish bar, shifting the ballast first aft and then forward to accomplish this trick.

The norther is frequently accompanied by lightning and thunder, rain, hail, sleet, and even snow, though the so-called “dry” northers may dispense with all of these effects. Charles Hooton, who visited Texas in 1841, has effectively described the norther’s fireworks:

. . . These northers are sometimes accompanied by frightful storms of thunder, lightning, and rain; during which, what with the rattling of the latter upon your shingled roofs and wooden walls, the roaring of the wind, and the never-ceasing bellowing of the thunder, broken now and then by terrific claps that convey the sensation of a immense weight let fall upon the top of the skull, it is next to impossible to make yourself heard by a person sitting close alongside, unless by literally shouting very loud. The lightning is incessant—the heavens appear one mass of vaporous fire, intermingled with streams of forked lightning of all colours, that really seem to run down from the sky like molten metal. Two or three hours of this are not amongst the most pleasant of things; but it has its glories, nevertheless.23

Another who appreciated the “glories” despite the tortures of a norther was José María Sánchez, who was with Térán’s expedition of 1829. One day, as an ominous cloud bank appeared in the northwest with an “almost continuous glare of lightning,” the expedition prepared for a norther.

. . . The growing rumbling of thunder that seemed to fill the entire desert increased; and, seeing the clouds gathering with incredible velocity, we hastened to secure the tent ropes, but the storm came up even before we had finished this operation. The roaring of the wind was horrible and the thick mass of clouds that covered the sky came down upon us in a furious rain that began with hail that measured more than an inch. The sky . . . resembled a vast sheet of fire; while the formidable and loud peals of thunder were deafening. The wind howled in the frightful struggle and the trees both large and small groaned under the rude strain. The horses neighed and fled for refuge in all directions, while the men, awed by the grandeur and magnificence of the mighty spectacle in
which nature seemed to battle with itself, were silent. We all had to struggle with the ropes to hold the tents, which were shaken by the wind, and in this exhausting work we spent nearly an hour, the time the storm lasted. Then the sky became clear, the moon shone in all its splendor, and the rest of the night was peaceful. We suffered only from the cold of the northwest wind, which had triumphed in the struggle. This hail that sometimes accompanied the norther caused serious damage not only in terms of flattened crops, stampeded herds, or broken windows but even broken heads as well. The historic Coronado expedition was buffeted by hail while in the Panhandle region, and the chronicler of the expedition, Castañeda, said, “The hail broke many tents, and battered many helmets, and wounded many of the horses, and broke all the crockery of the army, and the gourds, which was no small loss….”

A norther was never so bad as when it was accompanied by sleet or a freezing rain. The occasional fall of snow was not nearly so hard on man, animal, or vegetation. Snow could easily be shaken off; if deep enough it could even provide a sort of shelter; and the animals could usually paw through it to the grass below. Sleet, however, could freeze one as stiff as a board; it defied any pawing through; and it wrecked havoc with power lines, highways, and rail traffic. August Santleben, who was a San Antonio freighter for many years, has described seeing a timber grove near Fort Concho where “the buffalo had eaten off the small limbs from the trees as far as they could reach,” for the grass had been covered by sleet for days. If animals could find no such limbs to eat they were apt to starve to death or fall prey more readily to the cold, as did 60 mules of another San Antonio freighter near this same place.

Though sleet was a terrible killer, it could also be a thing of beauty, making the landscape glisten as in a fairyland. One
of the early Spanish missionaries, Fray Gaspar José de Solis, traveling in Texas in 1768, reported that the sleet storms “come in such a manner that the trees and bushes are as if they were made of crystal.”27 And a Falfurrias rancher of more recent days, George Sealy Cone, reported awakening one morning in 1908, after a freezing, wet norther had blown in, to see what he described as, “one of the most beautiful sights I ever beheld . . . everything covered with ice and icicles, resplendent in the beautiful sunshine of a clear wintry day.”28

While northers have brought some snow to northern Texas almost annually, its deposits of the fluffy stuff in the southern half of the state have been rare. The charming Mary Maverick recalled one such exception which occurred in San Antonio in the early days. She writes:

> Early in February, 1838, we had a heavy snow storm, the snow drifted in some places to a depth of two feet, and on the north side of our house it lasted five or six days. Anton Lockmar rigged up a sleigh and took some girls riding up and down Soledad Street.29

Fifteen years later a heavy snow storm struck San Antonio which damaged the Maverick house. Mary says, “The excessive cold and the snow together had cracked our cement roof and it was leaking badly.”30 Thanks to the norther, most Texans in their lifetime get to see that rare beauty with which snow alone can carpet the earth.

Though the northers are stingy with their snow in Texas, they produce ice more readily, now and then freezing ponds and rivers and once in a great while even Galveston Bay. The “mother of Texas,” Jane Long, is said to have spied a bear crossing the ice of Galveston Bay towards her in 1821; she put him to flight with “her faithful old muzzle-loader.”31 Another early Texas immigrant, Captain John Ingram, reported seeing the Brazos river “crusted over with ice from
shore to shore” in 1821 near the crossing of the San Antonio road.\textsuperscript{32} At such times as these, of course, the northers were a thorough nuisance as they froze the water buckets with which one had to wash and shave and even, as Josiah Gregg reported, froze the ink and rendered it “so pale as to [be] almost unintelligible.”\textsuperscript{33}

As the above incidents indicate, the norther in addition to being sudden and windy is cold. The coldness of the norther, however, is somewhat illusory; it is not reflected in sub-zero temperature readings which rarely, if ever, appear in most parts of Texas. Except in the northern part of the state the norther seldom drops the temperature below 25 or 30 degrees F. But coming on the heels of warm, sultry weather and possessing an unusually strong penetrating quality, thanks to its sharp wind, the norther feels much colder than it really is. Thus visitors not infrequently have mentioned that the norther’s cold was “more intense than anything I ever before experienced,” whether they came from England, Germany, Kentucky, Maine, New Hampshire, or even Minnesota and Colorado. Some spoke of Texas in a norther as being as cold as Greenland, Siberia, or the North Pole. Whether it was this cold or not, the fact that many thought it was is significant enough.\textsuperscript{34}

As if the norther didn’t have trappings enough already, it sometimes added to its bag of tricks by blowing along clouds of dust or sand in its path. In the arid west and after periods of drouth in the east the dust was particularly severe. “During the prevalence of a norther,” said General Richard Johnson, “... there is dust in the eyes, ears, mouth, in the sugar, and in the coffee. In fact, it is in everything and on everything—dust everywhere.”\textsuperscript{35} The blowing sand was especially a nuisance along the beaches of the coast. In addition to blowing along the dust and sand, the norther also
propelled tumbleweeds, leaves, and even birds in its van.

All in all a full-blown norther was quite a dramatic force. One of the most vivid descriptions that has appeared is that of N. A. Taylor, who wrote the following account in 1877:

It is excessively warm. No summer day could drag more oppressively than this. The sun exerts his fury, and the air is deadly—unnaturally—still. Not a blade of grass bends its tall head, but stands bolt upright and motionless. A haze issues out of the ground, or is it the atmosphere so motionless that it becomes visible? This, I utter audibly to myself, is the very condition that precedes an earthquake, when all nature falls paralyzed through dread of the approaching catastrophe. Herds of deer are hurrying over the plains toward the mountains, some with their tongues hanging from their lips, like dogs panting for coolness. Far to the north I observe a little black, ragged, wispy cloud, hanging above the horizon, with its base sunk beneath it. It lifts up and shoots out great black arms with singular rapidity, as if some powerful propulsive force attended it. It seems a thing of life, so instinct is it with motion. In the meantime the deadness of the atmosphere has become more appalling, and the sickly heat has increased. I take off my coat and vest and unbare my bosom to the broad prairie, saying like the fainting nymph: "Come, gentle air!" My horse is as wet with sweat as if he had just emerged from a lake and he pants with heat. I think of loitering in cool saloons and sipping iced juleps, being so hot that my imagination comes to relieve me with cool and tempting pictures. Looking again, the black cloud has covered half the heavens, shooting up great spires and puffing up shapeless masses with electric rapidity.

Suddenly, with no warning whatever, save in these portentous phenomena, a storm of Arctic wind is precipitated upon me. Its impact is peculiar. No light currents precede it as the messengers of coming change, but it strikes at once with full force, like a great rushing flood with perpendicular walls. It feels as if it had been caged for months in caverns of ice, or swept thousands of miles over fields of snow. It is like stepping out of a hot vapor bath into a snow-drift. Before I could get my discarded vest and coat upon me, I was chilled to the marrow, and to recover a comfortable degree of warmth seemed a hopeless undertaking.

This is a regular Texas Norther, and a more eager, nipping, searching wind does not exist. There are no intermissions of
quiet, no stopping to take breath, but the great stream of Arctic air pours on in a continuous flood. This continuity, this ceaseless activity, this perpetual motion is its terror. Each atmospheric particle eternally, irresistibly, pushing the particle before it, will penetrate every interstice of the garment and reach the naked flesh at last, in spite of all the fortifications of dry-goods that may be piled against it. To ride square into its face, as I do, over this vast prairie, where it has unobstructed sweep, is really terrible. It is like charging upon a deadly array of icicles, all with points keener than needles. The eyes, ears, and nose suffer fearfully; and entering the mouth, it not only stocks that cavity full of cold, but eliminates every drop of moisture, making it dry as a chip and extremely uncomfortable. The fingers become benumbed, and a heavy pair of boots avail little to protect the feet. The particles of raging atmosphere force each other through the pores of the leather, under the socks, and soon the lower extremities ache with exquisite pain. Truly, this is the most searching wind that ever blew. It will find out every part of the body, applying blister after blister of cold, until the last particle of warmth is expelled. The mercury has tumbled at once from about ninety to near the freezing point, an instantaneous fall of near sixty degrees; so that where summer reigned but a moment ago, it is now the bleakness and terror of winter. The annals of meteorology are without example of such rapid change elsewhere on earth. To make the matter worse, a driving misty rain begins to fall, making my situation to the last degree distressing.

Before giving Taylor the laurels for describing northers, one should consider Stephen Powers' claim. Powers visited Texas in 1868 while *walking* from "sea to sea"; of all the sights he saw the norther was just about the most impressive.

But not while I live shall I forget that first norther I ever experienced.

One day the atmosphere became almost as sultry as in July, and the next day it became oppressively warm, though the sun was shorn of half his brilliance, and shone with a strange and portentous gloom. Not a breath of air was abroad in all the woods. About the middle of the afternoon, the sun was totally obscured, though there were no clouds; and the gloom, and the stillness became deathlike.

Presently I see on the northern horizon a narrow rim of cloud, perfectly straight on its edge, and stretching far across
the heaven. It surges upward with appalling blackness and
swiftness, but never ruffles that even margin. The forest grows
dark. The cattle hasten into the ravines and stand with their
heads averted from its coming. Still that dread and sultry
silence. Still there is not the slightest whisper in the leaves.
At last they quiver a little, fitfully, and then are still again.
Now I hear a faint distant sighing, and the blast comes on
with a stately tread, and the sighing deepens rapidly into a
hoarse and hollow moan, which has in it more of a ghostly
and chilling terror than any other sound in nature. It rushes
on, not in fitful gusts, but with the solid and majestic tread of
an army, and strengthens itself mightily in its outrageous
fierceness. Every particle of warmth is chased away by bitter
cold; all the earth is darkened, the woods howl and roar
together;

"While trees, dim-seen, in frenzied numbers, tear
The lingering remnants of their yellow hair."

This fearful blast lasted all that night and the next day in
an unbroken hurricane, which seemed as if it would blow the
very moon out of the concave.

Writers have shown considerable variety in their efforts to
find a word or adjective by which to describe a norther most
suitably. Such words as "tornado," "tempest," "hurricane,"
gale," "blast," and "blizzard" have frequently been applied
as well as "howler," "whistler," and "stinger." And amongst
adjectives are found such examples as "arctic," "bleak,"
"eager," "nipping," "searching," "piercing," "unceasing,"
and "whiz-arrowing," but these pale before the even more strik-
ing terms: "cutting," "unrelenting," "raving," "heart-chilling,"
"wild," "pitiless," "dreaded," "clovenhooved." Less respect-
able adjectives have undoubtedly been used as well, and,
of course, epithets galore. The norther has never, however,
received a monicker, such as its close relative, the blizzard,
has. The blizzard is called the "Grizzly of the Plains" because
of its strength and ferocity; perhaps the norther should be
called the "Panther of the Prairie"; for the panther, like the
norther, strikes suddenly, swiftly, and cuttingly.

There are many different variations of the norther, though
there are only two basic types: the wet and the dry norther. The wet norther brings rain, sleet, or snow or perhaps all three, whereas the dry norther, except perhaps for a brief bit of precipitation, brings dry air and often blue skies. The term "blue norther" has often been applied to both types, and there has not been agreement—at least popularly—as to what a "blue norther" is. One writer definitely calls it a dry norther; the *Dictionary of Americanisms* calls it "a particularly violent norther," implying, I suppose, that the "blue" comes from the blue skin of the people caught therein; many think the blue refers to the blue skies of a dry norther but a wet norther is often followed by dry, blue skies after the brunt of the storm has passed. Professor Simonds, an expert on Texas geography, declared in 1905 that "when a norther is accompanied by a low, dark blue or gray cloud stretching continuously across the horizon, it is termed a 'blue norther.'" One of the best descriptions of a blue norther is that of Dr. John Washington Lockhart, a resident for sixty years on the Brazos, who wrote:

> Occasionally, what was called a "Blue Norther" would come up, and for three days it would almost freeze the life out of every living thing.... [A] very black cloud could be seen approaching from the north, and often its pace would be very swift. As it arose above the horizon its appearance would be angry in the extreme.... It had an inky blackness, its outer edges sometimes taking on a greenish cast.... [A]s far as you could see the main body approaching there rolled along in front of it a blue mist of smoke. This smoky appearance would be in some instances ten or twenty feet high and would roll over before the wind like a huge wave on the ocean. This peculiar appearance gave rise to the name—"Blue Norther."

A variation of the norther which leads to confusion is the "summer norther" which may sometimes be confused with a plain old summer thunderstorm that clears and cools the air for a time. On the other hand, some of these summer storms
are definitely northers coming down off the mountains violently and swiftly onto the super-heated plains and prairies. They may let loose a heavy fall of hail stones, but they are briefer and warmer than the winter variety and rarely penetrate very far southward. For most of the Southwest, northers are seasonal, and like the oyster are restricted to months with an “r.” They are most numerous and violent in Texas in November, December, and January, but strong northers may appear any time from early fall till late spring.

Northers last longer than the usual squall or windstorm; rarely do they last less than twelve hours and they often last three or four days, although the second day usually finds them at their peak. Oddly, they seem to last longer, though they are less severe, the farther they are from their point of origin. Unfortunately, in winter time they last too long, in spring and fall they are too brief, and in summer their visits are all too rare.

At times a norther may be a blessing, at other times it may be a curse, but seldom, if ever, are its blessings or curses unmixed. In damage, death and suffering the norther works its full share. While some writers have tried to minimize, and others to exaggerate, the distinctiveness and death-dealing powers of the norther, there is too much evidence to deny its evil powers. The sleet of a norther is its greatest killer—of wildlife, livestock, and men. Writers have described finding birds frozen to their perches after a freezing rain; cowboys tell of cattle frozen fast to the earth, as well as of other cattle starving because the vital grass was frozen beneath a sheet of ice; men have frozen to death either in a saddle, on a stage, or by a cheerless camp-fire during the relentless fury of a norther’s sleet. Sometimes cold alone will work its toll; ill-clad men have succumbed to the chilling blasts as did many of Cabeza de Vaca’s almost naked comrades; new-born
lambs, freshly sheared sheep, or drought-weakened cattle have been unable to withstand the low temperatures of a late norther. The frosts accompanying a late norther have killed many a sprouting cotton or corn crop or ruined a peach or grapefruit crop. And after a particularly sharp cold spell along the coastal waters, fish by the millions, stunned, helpless, and dying are to be seen floating along the rim of the Gulf. The rains of a wet norther may cause damaging floods, harmful erosion, or colds and pneumonia from wet feet, wet clothes, and chilled bodies.\textsuperscript{44}

While to most immigrants from the north ("Damn-Yankees") and from Europe the norther was welcomed for its exhilarating effects, native Texans and southern immigrants took a dim view of the cold waves. One Yankee, Thomas North, upon arriving in Galveston during a norther, expressed his surprise to see the people so bundled up and hurrying so frantically along the streets—the Galvestonians were acting as if it were thirty below zero, but, in fact, it was thirty above.\textsuperscript{45} Some writers observed that the northers often made the settlers cross, and Frederick Law Olmsted told of asking a Caldwell, Texas, blacksmith to shoe a horse during a norther, only to have the blacksmith snap back that "it was too d---d cold to work" and that he was going hunting, "refusing to make a shoe while this d---d norther lasted, for any man." This was not the only instance which Olmsted found when Texans refused to work during a norther; he mentioned that the Bastrop weekly temporarily was not published, "the editor mentioning, as a sufficient reason for the irregularity, the fact that his printing-office was in the north part of the house."\textsuperscript{46}

Others also noted that the Texans closed up shop when the norther arrived. Solms-Braunfels commented:

When a norther is blowing, the American cannot be
The Texas Norther

moved. Since such winds continue at least two days, this time can be counted as lost. . . . If two such northers unfortunately follow successively, then six or seven days are generally lost before one realizes it.47

Ferdinand Roemer observed that “The Texas farmer at their [the northers’] first approach quits his work in the field and waits at his fireside until they subside.” And Adolphus Sterne reported from Nacogdoches in February, 1841, that thanks to a norther there was “nobody stirring, shops nearly all closed.” Even the Indians behaved in this manner, for De Vaca had reported that when the norther blew, “the Indians themselves remained in their huts and abodes, unable to go out or assist each other.”48

But the norther is not an “ill wind,” for it blows some good. It is the norther that brings an end to the oppressive heat of summer or scatters the miasmic atmosphere of the fever-infested lowlands. The norther was credited by Dr. Ashbel Smith with ending Galveston’s yellow fever epidemic of 1837—no doubt blowing most of the mosquitoes far out into the Gulf or chilling them to death.49 The terrible yellow fever epidemic of 1859 also was brought to an end by a kindly norther; the Houston Telegraph of November 14 announced the good news:

Come Home, Runaways!—On Saturday we had a norther that amounted to something. It came about at 8 A.M., at which hour the thermometer stood at 80 Fahrenheit. By 3 P.M. it had fallen to 45. This showing the remarkable change in temperature of 55 [sic] in less than 24 hours! The wind continued all Saturday night, and Sunday morning found ice everywhere, ice in the prairie, and ice in the town, ice in the gutters and ice in the houses, ice in the kitchens, and ice in the bed-rooms. And cold?—guess it was cold! Cold enough to keep lazy people and invalids in bed half the morning; cold enough to make a man dance a hornpipe;—cold enough to freeze the horns off a Billy goat! And of course, cold enough to freeze Yellow Jack’s ears off. Runaways can come back now. The frost we have has killed the fever if frost will
do it. Last night we had another heavy frost. And today is bright and beautiful, but not brighter or more cheerful than the faces of our citizens, who are all rejoicing that the dark days are over. And it was the norther which dispersed *El Vomito*, the deadly humid air, which formerly settled each year over Vera Cruz and Tampico. Also the cold blasts kill the parasites and troublesome insect pests which otherwise would make Texas almost unbearable. The dryness of the norther has helped the farmer cure his meat; as N. A. Taylor has said, the dry northers “give to the frugal countryman the only showing he has to save his bacon. Without the norther, there would not exist a single ham or clear middling in Texas save what comes from the northwest.” Lockhart commented that in time of a dry norther “a man could kill a beef, tie a rope to a quarter and draw it up into a tree, above the reach of blow flies, and it would remain pure and sweet until eaten.” And if Texans are more vigorous than their brethren in the Southeast, it is probably due in part to the stimulating effects of the bracing air which the northers bring. The wet northers carry needed moisture to the grassy plains and fill the water basins and revitalize the navigable streams. The relentless wind of a norther blows the windmills of the rancher and farmer and has speeded many a ship on its way across the Gulf. And whether for better or worse the norther has given Texans something to brag about, visitors something to howl about, and literary artists something to write about with vivid effectiveness. Finally, the norther has played a definite role in historical events, and a look at some of these events may serve to give the norther its just due.
THE NORTHER'S ROLE IN HISTORY

The first white men to set foot in Texas were almost literally baptized by a norther. These were the members of Panfilo Narvaez' ill-starred expedition which had failed so miserably in Florida and now came to disaster on the shores of Texas in November of 1528. The men had been sailing along the Gulf Coast in a fleet of horse-hide boats which they had made in Florida, and, as they approached Texas, the norther began to blow. Once they were blown far out to sea by the norther's blasts and required three days to regain the coast, but the next norther scattered the boats and storm-tossed some of them into the raging surf off Galveston Island, the survivors reaching shore in a near-frozen condition. The great hero of this expedition, Cabeza de Vaca, recorded that it was "bitterly cold" and that the shivering men survived only because of the kind treatment of the Indians who took them to their village, building fires along the way to warm them. Narvaez managed to reach the shore further south with his boat intact; however, a short time later another norther whistled in while Narvaez and two of his men were sleeping in the anchored boat, which was torn loose and they were carried out to sea and to oblivion. For six years de Vaca wandered through Texas, suffering greatly each winter from the norther's cold, which decimated the ranks of his countrymen, until finally he and three survivors reached the northernmost Spanish settlement in Mexico along the Gulf of California in 1536.¹

During the three centuries after De Vaca's extended tour of Texas, a few Spaniards, French, and renegade Americans
visited Texas and battled the northers and the Indians, but made little progress towards developing the area. Credit for transforming Texas from a wilderness into a place of flourishing civilization has been given rather universally to Stephen F. Austin, “The Father of Texas.” Yet, but for the cruel blasts of the norther, Stephen’s father, Moses Austin, would probably possess that title today, for the idea of the Texas settlement was Moses’, and it was he who launched the project by journeying to the wilderness of Texas in 1820, visiting the northernmost garrison town of San Antonio, and negotiating there for the famous grant which opened the doors to American settlement. However, on Moses Austin’s return trip to the United States, riding across the bleak Texas prairies, now in the teeth of a norther, now in a torrential downpour, he suffered so badly from exposure that he died shortly after his arrival home. Moses Austin was the first but by far not the last American to fall victim to a norther.²

Stephen F. Austin took over his father’s project and directed it with remarkable success. During the seventeen years that he lived in Texas, Austin wrote many letters about the new region, but rarely, if ever, did he mention the norther. This can be accounted for in two ways: first of all, Stephen F. Austin was a very intense man who had little time for the amenities of life; he was strictly business—though it was a fine business, to be sure; rarely did he let his pen flow into mere chit-chat; upon the occasional moments when he unbosomed himself, he had more important things to speak of than the weather. Secondly, Austin was a promoter of a great venture; he needed colonists and he was not going to mention anything that might discourage prospective immigrants. In his Description of Texas written in 1828 Austin mentioned nothing about cold weather at all: “The climate of Texas
The Texas Norther is mild, salubrious and healthy; it lies between 28° and 34° North Latitude, and is gently fanned throughout the summer by pleasant and refreshing sea breezes.” The winter “freezes” from the other direction were not mentioned. In a later description of 1831 he gave a veiled hint of coldness: “its climate is diversified, salubrious, and pleasant”—the word “diversified” served to cover a multitude of sins.

Stephen Austin’s silence on the northers was not maintained by other members of his family. In April, 1839, writing from Houston, his cousin Henry cursed the climate: “I have had a frightful winter of it. I left here the day before Christmas to return after the holidays and remained here until I could . . . escape from the detestable country—a frightful ride through ice, mud, and water on a Siberian day . . .”

Henry’s sister, Mary Austin Holley, who made several visits to Texas during the 1830’s, wrote one of the first detailed descriptions of Texas, and, though she attempted to minimize the nature of the northers somewhat, she did not fail to mention them. Like Stephen, however, she called the climate “salubrious,” and she said the northers “give to the climate of Texas a blandness which is rarely enjoyed . . . in the low country of the Southern United States.” To shivering newcomers “blandness” hardly seemed to be the proper word to use to describe the effect of one’s first norther.

As empressarios and land speculators sought to encourage immigration to Texas, many emigrant guide books were forthcoming which equalled the wildest claims of present day Chambers of Commerce. One such author wrote in 1838 that “The climate of this region is delightful, and probably not surpassed by that of any portion of the globe.” Another propagandist, George W. Bonnell, called the Texas climate
The Norther’s Role in History

“mild”—a term which Texas norther and the summer sun have thumbed their noses at ever since; Bonnell found only one fault with Texas—it was “too level”—a fault which Texans have attempted to ameliorate by naming a modest hill near Austin, “Mount Bonnell.”

Truthful or not the guide books helped to attract a flood of immigrants to Texas, some of whom, arriving in the teeth of a norther, turned around and went right back home. One writer said, “Long before there were any railroads in Texas Colonel Backus said that it was the best country in the world for such roads, ‘for,’ said he, ‘any one coming out here and experiencing a norther would like to get out of the country as rapidly as possible, and would thereby patronize the railroads.’” An English visitor, Josephine Clifford, upon meeting a norther gave up her plans for a long stay and took the next boat back to New Orleans. Some others who were surprised at the norther did what Mary Austin Holley said was “much less excusable” than going home, they gave “vent to their morbid feelings by detraction and slanderous misrepresentations of the country.” Mary probably turns over in her grave every time the poem “Hell in Texas” is recited! Most immigrants, of course, accepted the norther as a “cross to bear” and directed their attention to the opportunities which the new land afforded.

It was in war time that the norther was particularly important; it both added to the misery of the participants and affected the fortunes of battle. The Texas War for Independence found the norther at times fighting on the side of the Texans and at other times on the side of the Mexicans. John C. Duval, whom Frank Dobie has called “First Texas Man of Letters,” had an amazing series of experiences during the war, and the norther was the source of some of them. Duval was
one of the volunteers from Kentucky, and he sailed to Texas from New Orleans. According to Duval:

The second day of our voyage about sunset, we observed a black cloud towards the north, which spreading rapidly soon obscured the whole heavens. Sails were hauled down and reefed, the hatches secured, and every precaution taken for the safety of the vessel in the approaching "norther"—one of those fierce winds that frequently occur during the winter season in the gulf of Mexico, as well as on the prairies of Texas. We had scarcely made "all snug" when the norther struck the schooner with unusually violent force, carrying away our maintop mast, and forcing the vessel almost upon her beam ends. She soon righted, however, and away we flew before the blast that whistled and shrieked through the cordage in a way not at all pleasant and enlivening to the ears of a landsman. In a little while the waves began to rise and the vessel to toss and pitch like an unbroken mustang, and feeling some of the premonitory symptoms of sea sickness, such as a frantic effort to throw up my boots, I retired to my coil of cable below; but the tossing of the schooner, the rushing of the waves along side and the trampling of sailors on deck effectually drove away sleep.

The next morning the storm had abated, the sun shone out clear and warm, and from that time until we reached Velasco we had no more bad weather.\(^{11}\)

This was not to be Duval's last annoying experience with a norther, however. For a brief time he served as a marine on one of the ships of the Texas navy; one day while the marines and a few sailors had landed on Galveston Island, a norther suddenly sprang up, and the men hurried back to the boat. Unfortunately, one of the sailors had wandered off too far and had to be left on shore, as it was urgent that the ship put out to sea. The ship was blown far out into the Gulf, and it was three days before it could return to the island. The sailor was found, but "his mind was considerably affected by exposure to the norther, his fear of wild beasts and savages, and the apprehension of our failing to return," wrote Duval.\(^{12}\)

Soon Duval was assigned to Colonel Fannin's army, and in January, 1836, the army marched from Copano to Goliad,
braving some northers along the way. Dr. J. H. Barnard, who was a surgeon with Fannin’s army, described what happened near Victoria on February 6, 1836.

About nine in the morning started for Victoria. After about an hour a Texas norther sprang up, accompanied with rain. This we found uncomfortable, yet we endeavored to keep along together and in some kind of order, but as there was no shelter on the prairie and the storm began to increase in violence, it became necessary for each one to exert his utmost powers to get to our destination as soon as possible. Consequently, we all became separated and scattered, the most vigorous getting ahead and some distance in advance, and the weakest drifting along in the rear. We saw at a distance a large drove of Mustangs, and under other circumstances would have enjoyed and had much delight in the spectacle; but a Texas norther gives one no time to indulge in pleasurable sentiments. With us it soon became sauve qui peut or “devil take the hindmost.” After about four hours exertion we reached Victoria, drenched, benumbed, and exhausted. We stayed here the succeeding two days to let the Norther abate and to dry our clothes and baggage.13

The Mexican army that was moving towards Goliad from the south was also having its troubles with northers, in fact, the biting cold was harder on the Mexicans than on the better acclimated Texans. The troops of General Urrea, marching northward from Matamoras and seeking to intercept Colonel Grant’s forces, ran into trouble on the 25th of February. The general reported that “At seven o’clock that night a cold and penetrating norther began to blow. . . . Six soldiers of the battalion of Yucatán died from exposure to the cold.” Urrea did not let this stop him, however; on the next day he wrote:

It began to rain at three in the morning and looked like snow. . . . Taking advantage of the bad weather I moved forward immediately. . . . The night was very raw and excessively cold. The rain continued and the dragoons, who were barely able to dismount, were so numbed by the cold that they could hardly speak. Nevertheless, being as brave as they were faithful, they showed no discouragement and we continued our march.14
If a norther couldn't stop these men, it is no wonder that the Texans had trouble doing so. The next day, while the norther was still blowing, Urrea's army captured the fort at San Patricio. Three days later he moved north to intercept Grant's force, and said, "The north wind was very strong and the cold was extreme for which reason I decided* to wait for the enemy ten leagues from San Patricio, at the port of Los Cuates de Agua Dulce where he would have to pass." This was an ill wind for Grant's men, for the next day they were decimated at this spot which the norther (and Urrea) had selected. However, two weeks later a norther came to the rescue of a group of Texans who were besieged in the Refugio mission, for they managed to escape Urrea's trap thanks largely to "the darkness of the night which a strong norther and the rain made more impenetrable and unbearable." As Urrea headed for Goliad and Fannin's army, he was delayed by a norther on the 17th of March: "Our troops," he said, "were obliged to bivouac all night, exposed to a continuous rain and a strong north wind which made the cold unbearable." Without this delay, Urrea probably would have reached Goliad before Fannin had abandoned the Mission, and the Texans then would probably have had a better chance of resistance, instead of being captured so easily on the open prairie twelve miles away.15

Only a very few of Fannin's men managed to escape the horrible massacre of prisoners that followed. One of these, however, was John C. Duval, who through the smoke and commotion of the massacre, broke for the river and managed to swim to comparative safety. With two other escapees, Samuel Brown and John Holiday, Duval hid in the chaparral from the searching Mexicans. Unfortunately, a series of

* Italics mine.
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norther's came to torture the trio. The second night they

... encamped in a thick "mot" of timber without water.
An unusually cold norther for the season of the year was
blowing and a steady drizzling rain was falling when we
stopped. Brown, who had pulled off his coat and shoes before
he swam the San Antonio river, suffered severely, and I was
apprehensive, should we be exposed all night to such weather
without fire, that we would freeze to death.16

Thus Duval decided to risk the danger of being detected and
built a small fire; fortunately the fire was not discovered and
the three men "passed the night in tolerable comfort." The
weather continued cold and drizzly for several days, and
three nights later another norther blew up; however, as un-
comfortable as this may have made the three refugees, the
disagreeable weather probably discouraged the Mexicans
from further pursuit. All three of the young men eventually
reached safety.17

Another survivor of Goliad was a German boy, Herman
Ehrenberg, who arrived in Texas as a volunteer in the New
Orleans Grays on the overland route (Camino Real) and par-
ticipated in Milam's capture of Bexar prior to suffering the
misery of Goliad. Ehrenberg spent his first night in Texas at
San Augustine and was greeted by his first norther that very
night.

... [W]hen we were comfortably seated in the com-
modious living-room of an old colonist who had put some of
us up for the night, the first norther of the autumn came
sweeping through the forests of northeastern Texas.18

Ehrenberg and his comrades were chilled, and they all
huddled close to the fire, and when they retired, their "beds
consisted of heaps of bear and buffalo skins. . . ."19

Ehrenberg's first taste of action was at the siege of San
Antonio de Bexar in 1835. The siege of Bexar was carried on
during some particularly cold weather. A resident of the
town, Sam Maverick, who was held a prisoner by the Mexicans during part of the siege, kept a diary and noted the norther which blew in. November 20, 1835, a very cold norther arrived; by the 23rd Maverick was writing:

The weather very cold (very unusually so, as S——— says). Thermometer down to 28 degrees after sun-rise. Water in the house froze over as thick as a dinner plate. No frost out of doors, by reason of the wind.20

It was in weather like this that Ehrenberg followed "Old Ben" Milam in the storming of Bexar. At 2 A.M. on the morning of the surprise assault, Ehrenberg and his fellow soldiers were mustered from their sleep.

We got up quietly and soon stood in line with our rifles slung over our shoulders and our rugs held closely about us. The cold air was penetrating, and as the icy gusts whistled about our stiff limbs, we shivered while awaiting the signal for our departure.21

The norther "howled" around their shivering bodies, but they dared not light any fires. As the assault began, their "feverish" activity helped them to forget "the cutting edge of the north wind."22

Another member of the New Orleans Grays who participated in this battle was Charles B. Bannister; in later years he described the action and confirmed the presence of a norther on that fateful day. Bannister added an interesting detail, for, he said, "The weather being very cold and dreary, with a stiff breeze blowing from the north, we had great difficulty in loading our rifles, as the wind blew our powder away."23

Most of the New Orleans Grays including Herman Ehrenberg joined Colonel Fannin at Goliad after the victory at San Antonio de Bexar. Bannister, however, had had enough of warfare and since his enlistment term was up, he set out to return to New Orleans. Traveling on horseback with several
companions, he was enjoying a pleasant ride when he ran into trouble.

It was indeed a splendid morning. . . . The air was pure and still, but it was not long before there was every symptom of a severe norther, which is not a very trifling matter exposed on the open prairie to its keen, cold biting blast without the least protection excepting one's blanket which makes him wrap it tight and close to his body; we had hardly leaped into our saddles before it came with sudden and tremendous fury, raging and tearing along the earth, as if seeking to find some object upon which to expend its power. It was with much difficulty we could keep our seats; sitting firm as possible, we rode on, our teeth chattering, limbs shivering, and tears rolling from our eyes, every blast piercing through our thin coverings to the very bones, until we became nearly frozen; on came the norther colder and fiercer than ever, gaining fresh force every moment. It became at last necessary to do something to preserve our lives; perceiving a skirt of timber some distance ahead, putting spurs to our horses and riding swiftly forward, we soon gained its protecting shelter, when building a big log fire, we were in a short time as comfortable as circumstances would permit. . . .

The heavy rains which accompanied these northers in the spring of 1836 helped to flood the streams of Texas, adding an additional hardship for those fleeing families of the "Runaway Scrape" and for the retreating army of Sam Houston. However, the pursuing Mexicans weren't finding the weather particularly to their taste either. Although the decisive battle of San Jacinto was fought in mild weather, the norther returned soon afterwards to badger the retreating remnants of the Mexican army and to help complete its demoralization.  

It is interesting to note that the Texas Republic itself was born on the wings of a norther. Colonel William F. Gray was a visitor at Washington-on-the-Brazos when the convention assembled that decided the issue of independence; Gray's diary of March 1, 1836, reads:

Yesterday was a warm day, and at bed time I found it necessary to throw off some clothes. In the night the wind
The Texas Norther

sprung up from the north and blew a gale, accompanied by lightning, thunder, rain and hail, and it became very cold. In the morning the thermometer was down to 33 degrees, and everybody shivering and exclaiming against the cold. This is the second regular norther that I have experienced.

Notwithstanding the cold, the members of the Convention, to the number of _________ met today in an unfinished house, without doors or windows. In lieu of glass, cotton cloth was stretched across the windows, which partially excluded the cold wind.\(^{26}\)

As picturesque as was this first "capitol" of Texas, it certainly was not comfortable as George Childress made his historic motion that a declaration of independence be drawn. Nor was it much more comfortable on March 2nd when the Declaration of Independence was adopted and signed, for Gray records that day as being "clear and cold." However, as if to give its benediction to the performance, the norther blew itself out that day, and under a bright sun the temperature gradually rose, and the new republic was on its way.\(^{27}\)

Shortly after the victory over Santa Anna at San Jacinto, which virtually brought an end to the war, Texas received a blow from another enemy—the Indians. On May 19, 1836, Indians descended upon Parker's Fort murdering five of the surprised occupants, capturing five others, and scaring off the rest.

Among the captives were several members of James W. Parker's family, including his daughter, his grandson, his nephew, and his soon-to-be-famous niece, Cynthia Anne Parker. James Parker took the remainder of his family to safety and then set about to recover the captives. After failing to get much help from the government, he set out alone in October to search for them himself. He headed northward and crossed the Red River on October 2nd; the next day, alone on the prairie, he was overtaken by a norther. His recollection of this storm follows:
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The rain fell in torrents whilst the almost unceasing flashes of lightning and deafening thunder, made me feel, in my lonely condition, as if “the war of the elements, the wreck of matter and the crush of worlds,” was about to be consummated.

Where I stood the water was at least two feet deep. About two o’clock in the morning, the wind changed to the north, and in less than one hour my clothes were frozen upon me, and I felt that I could not live until morning. Though unable to direct my course in the dark, I was compelled to keep in motion, or freeze to death, so I promenaded a space of forty or fifty yards, in the water a foot deep, until morning. During this time the snow fell fast, but melted as it fell.

As soon as it was light I pursued my journey, with little hope of being alive at night. My progress was very slow and difficult, as the grass being about two feet high, was matted together by the ice. On reaching the woods, I seated myself upon a log to rest. I had sat there but a few minutes when I found it very difficult to keep from going to sleep. This was produced by the extreme cold; my feet and hands had lost all sense of pain, and I knew I was fast freezing to death. I attempted to rise, but could not. There was a small tree within my reach, and taking hold of it I succeeded in rising to my feet.

To remain stationary was certain death—so there was but one alternative left—move I must. There was an old dry log about fifty yards from me, and my life depended on my being able to reach it and strike a fire. Letting go the tree I ventured on this hazardous experiment, and moving my feet but a few inches at first, I succeeded, after much exertion of nearly an hour, in gaining the log. Having cut some dry pieces of cotton from my shirt, and loaded one of my pistols with them, I discharged it against a dry part of the log. My agonizing fears and suspense were soon relieved by the success of this effort to start a fire, and soon my frozen clothing began to yield to the influence of the heat, and it was not long before my sense of pain returned.

Now Parker was to find that the thawing was more painful than the freezing, for he said: “Had my hands and feet been held in the fire until consumed, the pain certainly could not have been greater.” His skin peeled off his hands and feet. But he was able to travel at last and that night built a larger fire and, despite the norther, slept profoundly. In the morning
he found, he said, that “my clothes were frozen to the ground, my hair a mat of ice, and my limbs benumbed....” However, Parker recovered from this ordeal and continued his search. Not until 1838 was his daughter recovered, and her son remained a captive until 1843, by which time he was more like an Indian than a white boy. Cynthia Anne Parker remained a captive for twenty-four years during which time she bore several half-breed children including the famous chief, Quanah Parker. Oddly, Cynthia Anne’s recapture was aided by a norther.

In December of 1860 a company of Texas rangers led by Captain Sul Ross set out on an expedition against the Comanche Indians; when near the Pease River Sul Ross stumbled upon the Indians unexpectedly. Ross, had he been seen by the Indians, would have been almost certainly destroyed, but, he said, “a piercing north wind was blowing, bearing with it clouds of sand, and my presence was unobserved and the surprise complete.” The Comanches were successfully attacked and many captives were taken, among them the thoroughly Indianized Cynthia Anne Parker.

When the year 1836 passed into history it carried away with it Texas’ most illustrious leader, Stephen F. Austin, who died on the 27th of December. Like his father before him, Austin seems to have been a victim of the Texas northers, for shortly before Christmas he took a chill in his drafty, cold office, which was located in a flimsy wooden shack at Columbia; the chill soon turned into pneumonia and in a short time Austin’s life had slipped away at the early age of 43. So much had been accomplished but so much more remained to be done!

Another norther, this one in 1840, nearly put an early end to the promising career of one of Texas’ finest statesmen, John
H. Reagan. Reagan was traveling alone on the prairie southwest of Nacogdoches in October of 1840; he went to sleep under the stars near Wills Point one night but awoke under a far different sky.

When I awoke before day, one of the fiercest northerers I ever felt was blowing. My body was warm enough, but my head and feet were cold. I found everything was freezing and debated with myself whether I should lie still and risk the blankets' freezing so as to imprison me, or break out of them and risk freezing myself. I took the latter chance. I looked for wood to make a better fire, but could not find it. I threw the blankets over me and stood over the little fire I had, making such efforts as I could to keep warm. By daylight it had cleared off and the ground was covered with the spewed up ice. I managed to saddle my horse, and made my way to the westward. I came to Kaufman prairie, at what was afterwards known as Beck's Mound. From there I could see King's Fort ten or twelve miles to the southwest, and I headed for it. I became after a time so cold that I dismounted to walk for exercise. I soon found that my feet were being cut by the ice and were bleeding, my mocassins and socks not protecting them very well. I remounted, and tried by swinging my arms and hallooing to keep up the circulation to prevent freezing. I struck the trail leading to the fort at Cottonwood Creek, about four miles away. By this time, however, I could no longer exercise or guide my horse. He took the trail himself and carried me to the fort, stopping at the gate. I could not speak or act, though still conscious. I knew where I was. Mr. John Ford, happening to come to the gate, saw me, took in the situation, called others and I was carried inside. The men started to take me to a block-house where they had a fire; but my old friend Charles Gilmore told them that would not do. So they took me to a block-house where there was no fire. Mr. Gilmore had, for some purpose, made a large cedar tub, which they filled with water from the spring and put me in it, clothes and all. After a while I was thawed enough to speak, when they put me in bed before a fire. If I had not been thawed out as I was, I certainly would have lost my life. The skin on my face, neck, arms, and legs came to look as though it had been scalded. There were no medicines in camp, though the men had some bear's oil with which they greased the parts that were burst, and I had for a good many days a burning fever. So I know what it is to be
The Texas Norther

almost frozen to death; I had passed the state of pain some

time before reaching the fort.\textsuperscript{32}

Though the battle of San Jacinto brought a virtual end to
the Texas War for Independence, hostilities never completely
ceased until the close of the United States’ war with Mexico.
The three most dramatic engagements between the Texans
and Mexicans in these years before annexation were the
Texan Santa Fé expedition of 1841, the Mexican capture of
San Antonio in 1842, and the Mier expedition of 1842. The
norther made its appearance at all three of these dramatic
episodes, not so much as an influence in the outcome, but
mainly as a burden for the participants to bear.

The best accounts of the Texan Santa Fé expedition were
by the New Orleans reporter, George Wilkins Kendall, and
the English spy and adventurer, Thomas Falconer, both of
whom accompanied the expedition and endured its hard-
ships. Little did Kendall know what he was in for, as he pre-
pared to accompany the expedition.

Not a word was said of the hardships, the dangers, the
difficulties we were to encounter—the biting “northers,” the
damp and dreary bivouac, the intolerable thirst, the gnawing
hunger—these were the dark sides of the picture, and were
never exhibited.\textsuperscript{33}

He added a footnote as a comment on the northers:

The prairies of Texas are visited, every season, by cold
rains and winds from the north, called “northers.” The winds
have full sweep directly from the mountains, and not only
animals, but men have frequently perished during their con-
tinuance.\textsuperscript{34}

Inasmuch as the expedition was setting out in the month
of June, there was little expectation of being confronted with
cold northers, but, next to the Mexicans, the northers were the
worst enemy the men encountered. Mid-August found the
expedition badly lost in northwest Texas, as the men
struggled to locate the Red River. Camping on the friendless prairie, they encountered their first norther:

During the night the wind veered round into the northeast, bringing with it a cold, drizzling and extremely disagreeable rain, which continued the next day. . . .

Night came, the cold rain and raw wind still continuing. We were camped immediately upon the stream, the banks of which were high, and flanked by a narrow skirting of timber. Under this bank I led my horse at dusk, and tied him fast to a small tree. Here he was protected from the piercing northern blasts, and to afford the same shelter, Doctor Brenham led thither his horse, a noble white animal of the best blood, and confined him to the same tree with mine.

Several of our horses were tied under this bank, the poorer animals being allowed to rough it upon the prairie in front of our encampment, hobbled, and many of them staked, to prevent the storm from driving them off during the night.35

No horses perished from this first norther, but Indians managed to steal some of those tied in the shelter of the bank.

As the expedition advanced over the Llano Estacado to the foothills of the Rockies, the weather grew colder, especially at night. To the Texans' way of thinking, they were still in Texas, for their claims extended to the Rio Grande, but in fact they were really experiencing New Mexico weather now. We shall still follow them, however, for the norther reigns in New Mexico as well as in Texas. As Kendall and his companions approached the eastern slope of the Rockies, "a raw, chill breeze sprang up" from the direction of the mountains.

It was the first cold weather we had experienced, and in our weak and exhausted condition the biting wind seemed to pierce directly through us. . . .

Our tough and most unsavoury meal over [they had just eaten their first horse meat], we spread our blankets in the ravine, where we could be partially protected from the biting northeast wind; but the cutting blasts found their way through our scanty covering, chilling our weakened frames to such a degree as almost entirely to prevent sleep. With the
The Texas Norther

ordinary stock of flesh and blood we should have been far better able to withstand the bitter wind; as it was, we could only shrug and shake, and pass a sleepless night.36

An inglorious fate awaited these hungry, shivering, bewildered members of the Santa Fé expedition; instead of capturing the town, they themselves were captured without a struggle near San Miguel; and on October 17, 1842, without ever seeing Santa Fé, they were led southward as prisoners towards Mexico City. Weakened by near-starvation, inadequately clothed against the cold blasts of the northers, and tormented by their cruel guards, the Texans suffered to an extent perhaps not again experienced by Americans until the infamous "death march on Bataan."

The very first night of the march south brought a norther from the snow-capped Rockies.

... [T]he day had been hot and sultry, with a shower in the afternoon sufficient to moisten the ground. The only baggage in possession of the prisoners, besides the slight and ragged clothing upon their backs, was a single blanket for each man. In this each immediately rolled himself, and then stretched his weary limbs upon the cold, damp earth, vainly hoping that he might obtain rest and forgetfulness in sleep—but no such good fortune awaited us.

As if to increase our sufferings, a chill, biting wind sprang up, at dusk, fresh from the snow-clad mountain north of us, and in less than an hour it was so bitterly cold that to sleep was impossible. In vain did we crowd close to each other, in vain did we nestle in the little hollows formed in the uneven ground; the piercing wind penetrated our scanty covering and benumbed our every energy. I tried to rise, as did many of the unfortunate prisoners; but the cold wind had so stiffened our limbs, rendered in the first place heated and sore by the long mountain march, that we could scarcely move or turn over without enduring tortures the most excruciating. In this way, and without one hour's sleep, we passed our first night on the long road to Mexico.37

The next night, though they had marched thirty miles and were herded like sheep into an open cow-pen for the night,
they fared slightly better, for Kendall says, "A fence, which enclosed our pen, here partially protected us from the biting north wind, and in the early part of the night we were enabled to catch a little sleep." This repose was of short duration, however, for

Towards morning . . . the weather changed to such a degree of coldness that farther repose was impossible—it was so cold that the frost was plainly visible on our thin blankets. So still and benumbed were the men by this time, from cold, want of sleep, and the excessive fatigue they had undergone, that even an order to rise at daybreak and continue the march was received with joy by all—it would at least enable us to obtain warmth, and lessen the acute pains we felt in every bone.

The worst was not yet, however; despite the fact that the prisoners were being led southward, the cold increased, especially as they drew nearer to El Paso and entered that desert with the evil name, Jornada del Muerto—"Dead Man's Journey."

On October 30th at Fray Cristobal, "the last camping-ground" before entering the jornada, the "almost naked" men laid down to rest and experienced another norther. The Englishman, Thomas Falconer, wrote:

A strong "norther" blew during the day, and at night there was a severe snow-storm. None of us had more than one blanket, in addition to our light clothing, and we suffered much. In the morning there was more than two inches of snow upon us.

Kendall, with a superior descriptive ability, painted a more vivid picture. As the snow began to fall, he said

I drew my blanket entire over my head, thought of home and its comforts, and while thinking of them fell asleep; for the snow, as it lodged upon my scanty covering, imparted a warmth to which I had long been a stranger.

When morning light came I raised my head and surveyed the scene. Far as the eye could reach the face of nature was clothed in white, the snow having fallen to the
depth of five or six inches. My companions were lying thick around me, their heads and all concealed, and more resembled logs imbedded in snow than anything else to which I can compare them. No one would have supposed that animated beings were under those little mounds were it not that from many of them a hollow, hacking, and half-suppressed cough proceeded.¹²

These colds which the men had contracted were in some cases to run into pneumonia as they traveled down the Jornada del Muerto. Falconer said that some of the starving men traded their clothing to their guards for food, and then the cold took its toll.¹³ A more bizarre journey than this one it would be hard to conceive. The ninety-mile trip down the Jornada was traversed without food, with only the scantiest water, and with scarcely any rest. At night it was too cold to rest, and almost gratefully the men kept moving. The first night they met a regiment of Mexican troops marching northward, and these fellows and their women, acclimated to a warmer clime, were suffering from the cold too, so much so that they set fire to bunches of grass on the desert and huddled around these bunches till they burned out. Kendall’s description is remarkable.

Wild and picturesque was the scene presented by the train of roadside fires, each with a little bevy huddling and shivering around the red-glaring and fitful lights, the lengthened and fitting shadows coming and going and losing themselves in the sombre obscurcation of the night. There would be seen the officer, cloaked and blanketed, standing side by side with one of his men, the head of the latter covered with a clumsy, bearskin dragoon cap, while he would share his sky-blue military cloak with some woman who had followed him, mayhap, from the tierra caliente, or sunny south, and was now, for the first time, visiting the region of snow. As tuft after tuft would fall away at the touch of fire, the wild group would hurry on to others, soon kindle them, and as they in turn would suddenly flash up, blaze for a few moments, and then as suddenly expire, away they would hie to the next. Eldrich and spectre faces came and vanished on that barren
The Norther's Role in History

moor, that did strongly remind me of the witch scenes in Macbeth.44

Unfortunately, since the dragoons had burned the grass along the trail ahead of the prisoners, they could not utilize this method of keeping warm until the second night when they encountered an area which the dragoons had crossed during the warmer temperature of daylight. Here the prisoners and guards lit the grass and shared in its transitory warmth.45

The men suffered terribly the first night on the Jornada from "the biting cold and the helpless drowsiness which cold begets," so that by morning many were staggering in a daze or falling by the road "with a perfect indifference for life."46 The stronger prisoners roused and prodded their weaker companions from this sleep of death, but a few of the worst stragglers were shot or brained by the cruel guards. At length, however, the Jornada was crossed, and El Paso brought a temporary end to the prisoners' suffering. There we shall leave them, for there ended their bouts with the norther.

The year of 1842 marked two successful Mexican attacks on San Antonio, designed as retaliation for the unfortunate raid on Santa Fé. On the night of the 5th of March, General Rafael Vasquez and 500 Mexican soldiers fell upon the surprised city and easily captured it; a norther was probably blowing, for Mary Maverick, who was one of the terrified residents, wrote that it was a "very dark and cold" night.47 After holding the town in terror for two days the Mexican soldiers withdrew, but in September they returned again, this time under the leadership of the hired Frenchman, General Adrian Woll. Once more they captured the city, and this time, when they withdrew, they took fifty-three prominent San Antonians with them as prisoners. Before the Mexicans withdrew, they were attacked by a band of Texas volunteers led by John
Coffee Hays, but they managed to beat off the attack outside the city and escaped into Mexico.

Among Woll's prisoners was James L. Truehart, who kept a diary of the march to Mexico City and the Castle of Perote. According to Truehart the party encountered a norther not long after they had crossed the Rio Grande. On October 8th he wrote:

> We arise early from our beds to prepare to march. A very severe Norther commences to blow at daybreak, accompanied by a drizzling rain, which [makes] the weather very disagreeable and cold.48

According to another one of the prisoners, Judge Hutchinson, who also kept a diary and noted this "severe norther," the beds which Truehart mentioned were "a bed of rocks." The norther continued all day and gave the prisoners "a miserable and disagreeable night." As the party ascended the mountains to Saltillo, the cold weather and high winds added much to the prisoners' discomfort.49

They remained prisoners at Perote for a considerable time, but in the spring of 1843 several of them, including Judge Hutchinson, were released through the intercession of Waddy Thompson, the American minister to Mexico. "Old Man Norther" still plagued the released captives, for upon their arrival at Vera Cruz they were prevented from sailing for three days by a strong norther.50

Following Woll's successful raid, it was the Texans' turn to seek revenge, and the disastrous expedition against Mier was the result. A large body of volunteers was assembled at San Antonio in November, 1842, and General Alexander Somervell was placed in command. Somervell's heart wasn't in the expedition, and he delayed its marching, refused to lead it across the Rio Grande, and led all but 300 die-hards back to San Antonio without have chastised the Mexicans. Thomas
Jefferson Green who stayed on to help lead the die-hards in an unauthorized assault on Mier, had little use for Somervell, and in his memoir of the expedition he contrasted his own situation with that of Somervell’s during a November norther outside of San Antonio.

This brought about the 17th of November, and with it a most cutting north wind, which was as uncomfortable to those men without blankets, lying still in an open prairie, as General S’s [Somervell’s] luxurious indulgences in the city, were to those who had blankets. During the cold weather, it was told in camp that the general would have been out “that day,” but had stopped that night to attend another fandango. Many of the volunteers found their summer “pantaloons too thin for the sharp weather of November,” and they scattered out into the prairie to transfer “in the shortest time . . . the covering of many an unwary buck to their own legs.” Those soldiers who weren’t resourceful enough to shoot a pair of trousers, “returned home, as they said, ‘to get some warm clothing,’” but usually, they did not come back.

At last Somervell’s expedition set out for the Rio Grande, but did little more than that little king of nursery rhyme fame who marched his soldiers up the hill and then marched them down again. After a splendid display of force before the peaceful paisanos on the north bank of the Rio Grande, Somervell decided to march home for Christmas. Three hundred determined Texans, including Green, George “Mount” Bonnell, and “Big-Foot” Wallace, refused to leave, elected William Fisher their commander, crossed the river, and captured Mier with little difficulty on December 23, 1842. When they tried to cope with Mexican reinforcements under General Ampudia, however, they met disaster and were nearly all captured. One who was not captured was our friend, George Bonnell, who was killed in an attempt to escape seizure. Without much delay they were marched down along
the river to Matamoras. On New Year’s Eve they had anything but a celebration; Green wrote:

That night they reached the Rio St. Juan, opposite the town of Comargo [sic] and encamped with but little fuel; consequently, they had small fires, and a most black norther blowing. Our men suffered greatly here: all their blankets, worth taking, had been stolen by the cavalry; and when the fires would burn down, they, to keep themselves warm, would rake away the burning coals, and lay in piles in the ashes.53

The prisoners were soon marched southward to a fate worse than the misery of a norther; the drawing of the beans and the imprisonment at Perote cannot be told here, but we can be grateful that Thomas Jefferson Green drew a white bean and lived to write a dramatic history of the Mier expedition.
CHAPTER III

"EL NORTE" AND THE MEXICAN WAR

The annexation of Texas to the United States in 1845 was followed rather quickly by the Mexican War (1846-1847), which was partly caused by the annexation itself. At no other time has the norther played such a big role or been so fully chronicled as during the Mexican War. While, as in the case of the Texas Revolution, the norther did not affect the final outcome of the war, it did delay battles, affect strategy, burden combatants, and also—for a change—it helped to save many lives, in addition to taking some. The norther was a frequent visitor to the American army's camp grounds; it was a participant in the sieges of Tampico and Vera Cruz and in the critical battle of Buena Vista; and it was discussed, cursed, and chronicled by privates, colonels, and generals.

One of the principal reasons that the norther played such a large role in this war was due to the international nature of this big wind. The "Texas" norther sweeps across the Rio Grande, not only unimpeded but often with added force, and pays chilling, stormy visits to the northern Mexican mountain regions around Monclova, Saltillo, and Parras and even penetrates into the valleys of Monterrey and Victoria. The Mexican seaports are especially prey to the norther, for it comes down across the Gulf and lashes the coastal ports as far south as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the great jutting peninsula of Yucatan.

South of the Rio Grande the norther is called "El Norte," and is thought of with mixed emotions, for while it is a great enemy to "El Vomito," the yellow fever, it often blows with destructive force along the coast and makes shipping very
The Texas Norther

precarious during the months of its ascendancy. The early Spanish explorers commented on these northerly winds of the Mexican coast and at times fell victim to them. The Discoverer of Mexico, Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, encountered one of these adverse winds near the northern tip of Yucatan in April, 1517; one of his chroniclers recorded that "a northeast storm blew so strong that the ships kept dragging anchor toward land, as that coast is to leeward and the north and northeast winds reign there." After riding out the norther for two days, the ships were able to continue their voyage. However, another exploring party the following year did not escape unscathed from the blast: Juan de Grijalva lost two ships on the coast of Yucatan, though the bulk of his fleet got through safely. It was partly to search for the survivors of these wrecks that Hernando Cortez visited Yucatan on his memorable voyage of 1519. Cortez found some survivors, but they were not of Grijalva's party, for these castaways had been thrown up on the shores of Yucatan in 1512 and had so thoroughly learned the Indian language and lore that they became valuable interpreters for Cortez in his conquest of Mexico. It is recorded that Cortez spent some time in searching for a harbor on the Mexican coast that would offer protection against the northers and finally chose the somewhat inadequate bay where he founded the town of Vera Cruz. Ironically, it was not the northers but Cortez himself that wrecked his fleet, for, in order to halt intrigue and prevent news of his intended conquest from reaching his enemy and superior, Velasquez, Cortez had all but one of his ships wrecked on the shores of Vera Cruz and sent the other directly to Spain.

Many a ship sailing the Mexican coast in the next three hundred years met disaster from the northers. In fact, the
"El Norte" and the Mexican War

norther were as much dreaded by the sailors of the Gulf as they were prayed for by the natives to whom they meant relief from the stifling miasmic air. Alexander von Humboldt, the great German scientist, who made quite a study of the currents and winds of the Gulf, said of "El Norte":

The seasons of the black vomit and the norther do not coincide. Consequently both the European who is coming to Mexico and the Mexican of the high plateau who for business reasons must sail abroad have to choose between the danger of navigation or the danger of a mortal illness.⁵

An Englishman with the regal name of Henry Tudor, who visited Vera Cruz in 1832, wrote:

For some days prior to my setting off, the atmosphere had been completely purified by two or three tremendous gales of wind, called "norther," which are, with certain intervals, as much to be wished for by a stranger while remaining on the coast, as to be dreaded by him when traversing the waters of the Gulf. During the period of their continuance, and for some time afterwards, a person may feel himself secure from an attack of yellow fever, as they drive away, with hurricane-like violence, the mass of stagnant air, hovering over the city, and charged with miasmata. . . .⁶

Ten years after Tudor's visit an American warship, the brig Falmouth, visited Vera Cruz on a friendly mission, and one of the midshipmen aboard, John McIntosh Kell, was quite impressed by El Norte.

. . . [W]e sailed for Vera Cruz, coming to anchor under the island of Sacrificios, this being the only safe anchorage from the violent norther that blew across the Gulf of Mexico. . . .

Our first precaution after anchoring was to moor ship securely, with our two bowers and sheet anchors so planted as to resist these violent norther, also sending down our lower yards and housing topmasts. In a few days we had reason to congratulate ourselves upon being so well prepared, for we experienced one of those storms in all its fury, making it dangerous for a man to hold his head even above the rail of the ship. We were quite ready and relieved after
the severe experience to receive the order to “get ready for
sea.”

That the benevolent and evil effects of the norther were to be of much consequence to thousands of Americans was never dreamed of prior to the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846.

When Zachary Taylor was dispatched to Texas with an “Army of Occupation” in July, 1845, he was prepared for trouble with Mexicans but not for trouble with northers. Taylor had been stationed with his army at Tampa Bay in Florida, and, since Corpus Christi Bay, where he took up his headquarters in Texas, was on the directly opposite shore of the same warm Gulf, he made no other arrangements for the shelter of his army than the light tents in which they had lived in Florida. The result was disastrous for many a soldier. To a Texas norther a tent is merely something to blow down or through, and when the late autumn rains and winds began to beat down on the army at Corpus Christi, the tents proved to be a poor protection for the army. As a result, the suffering of the men was intense, and it was reported that “at one time, one-sixth of the entire encampment were on the sick report, unfit for duty... Dysentery and catarrhal fever raged like a pestilence.” Sometimes “the men, at tattoo, lay gasping for breath in the sultry night air, and found, at reveille, their wet blankets frozen around them, and their tents stiff with ice...”

Both Taylor and the Quartermaster Department were criticized for this inadequate preparation. One critic, writing in 1846, said:

Two-thirds of the tents furnished the army... were worn out and rotten, and had been condemned by boards of survey... Transparent as gauze, they afforded little or no protection against the intense heat of summer, or the drenching
rains and severe cold of winter. . . . During the whole of November and December, either the rains were pouring down with violence, or the furious "northers" were shivering the frail tent poles, and rending the rotten canvas. For days and weeks, every article, in hundreds of tents, was thoroughly soaked. During those terrible months, the sufferings of the sick, in the crowded hospital tents, were horrible beyond conception. The torrents drenched, and the fierce blasts shook the miserable couches of the dying. Their last groans mingled in fearful concept with the howlings of the pitiless storm.¹¹

One of the officers who were serving under these trying conditions was young George Gordon Meade who was to reach the height of his career at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, eighteen years later. In his letter to his wife, Meade complained about the conditions at Corpus Christi and especially of the changeableness of the climate. On October 21, 1845, he wrote:

Though I should not call the climate bad, I by no means call it good, for it is very changeable, the mid-day sun excessively hot, the nights cold, with very heavy dews; so that you have to be most careful in your clothing, and dress yourself three or four times a day to suit the various temperatures. Then again, when the "Northers," or winds from the North, blow, the thermometer will fall forty degrees in a few hours, and from having been burned by the sun, you are frozen by the cold air, so that it requires a pretty stout constitution to stand the racket.¹²

Meade observed that the northers seemed to cause outbreaks of diarrhea, a phenomenon noticed earlier by Roemer and still experienced by unacclimated visitors to Texas.

Writing in December, following a scouting expedition along the Laguna Madre, Meade was taking a still dimmer view of the Texas climate:

We had very bad weather upon our expedition, and I was much exposed. Upon two separate occasions my tent was blown over my head, and I wet through and through. Indeed, I returned much the worse for my exposure, having become quite bilious and slightly jaundiced. The weather has been
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extremely cold, and the high winds that constantly prevail here, prevent you from getting your tent comfortable. Indeed in all my experience of field service, I have never been so comfortless as now. I feel the cold here more than in Maine, because there we had no wind, and plenty of fuel, and could encamp in the woods. Here it is all open beach, where the wind sweeps in gales, day and night, and there is barely wood sufficient for cooking purposes, to be procured. It is a fine climate in summer, when the wind tempers the burning rays of the sun, but now, when the winds are from the north, and cutting cold, it is the most disagreeable and trying I was ever in. I shall consider myself lucky if I can get out of it without rheumatism or some such pleasant remembrance of it.¹³

One of Meade’s fellow officers at Corpus Christi was Captain Ephraim Kirby Smith, whose brother, Edmund Kirby Smith, was to become almost as famous a general as Meade—but in the Confederate forces. Ephraim had had a rosy concept of Corpus Christi as his transport sailed from New Orleans for the Texas coast; “Corpus Christi is represented by every one as the most delightful spot on the globe,” he wrote to his wife.¹⁴ But two months later his views had been changed by the same northers which had dampened Meade’s spirit.

We have had some severe northers since I wrote last, accompanied by rain. They are terrible visitations to an encampment, sweeping everything before them by their violence and with their icy breath freezing our very vitals. I slept in a wet bed two nights, and only kept alive by having a large camp kettle of coals by my side.¹⁵

The bulk of the army survived this winter at Corpus, and on the 8th of March, 1846, Taylor’s army broke camp and began the fateful march to the Rio Grande that led to “American blood being shed on American soil” and touched off the War with Mexico.

Taylor set up his new camp across from Matamorras and constructed his main supply base at Point Isabel at the mouth
of the river. Though it was now spring-time and the weather almost uncomfortably warm, occasionally a norther or a tropical storm would pay a cold wet visit to the camps. On the night of April 8, 1846, a sudden, furious storm struck Taylor's camp flattening most of the tents and drenching the men to the skin. Ephraim Kirby Smith complained: "Such a night as last night I have never known in all my soldiering," and he and his brother, Edmund, had all they could do to save their tent from being blown over like the rest. Smith described the scene:

The rain and gale were still at their worst, when I began looking about to see "the state of the nation." In every direction the tents were overthrown and their contents scattered in the mud. My own company had almost entirely disappeared, a few despairing wretches, groping about in the mud for their arms, were all that were left. Another officer who recorded this sudden storm, which, as he said, "made me stop short in my journal," was Brevet Major Philip N. Barbour. Though this storm may not have been a norther, there was no doubt about the storm of April 12th, for Barbour wrote:

This is a very cold night, really winter weather, a surprising fact in lat. 25° in the month of April. Hatch is on picket tonight and I shall appropriate his blankets.

April 13th—The weather continues very cold, so much so that we are compelled to have fire coals in our tents to be comfortable. On the 30th of May came another ducking for the camp; Smith wrote:

One of the most violent storms which has assailed us in this region is now raging and it has cost me a good ducking and much labor to secure my tent. Several of my brother officers are at this moment standing about in the rain, their tents completely blown away and their trunks, bedding, etc., lying about in the wet and mud.

Truly the elements were proving to be more formidable than
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the Mexican army, for the Americans had won the Matamoras region from the Mexicans with slight losses. As late as June 18th, it "come up a bleak norther," and even during the summer, blustery, if not so cold, northers paid their visits.19

One of those who described these visitations to his wife, was the later president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, who was commanding a regiment of Mississippi volunteers. The memoirs of his wife give us a colorful picture of the camp at the mouth of the Rio Grande.

It was a sandy neck of land, covered with mounds blown up by the northers that swept the country with great force.

While they were there, sometimes every tent in camp was prostrated by the norther, and during its prevalence, great confusion reigned in camp, as in their exposed position the sharp dry sand blew into the men's eyes, and the keen cold wind pierced them. My husband never could control his risibles when he told of a certain civilian colonel who did not know how to pitch his tent. After he retired a norther blew it and the rest of the regimental tents of his command down over their inmates. They were all greatly startled and rushed out in their night clothes. The greatest confusion prevailed, and in the darkness no one missed the colonel, but presently he was described creeping cautiously out from under the debris. When he gained his feet he began to prance up and down in front of the men, crying aloud, with chattering teeth, "My men, if you are afraid just look at me; see how cool I am"; and then he would strike his breast and repeat, "only see how c-o-o-l I am." But the shock was so great to him that it was some time before he could recognize his officers.20

The camps directly on the Gulf suffered the worst from the blowing sand. An up-and-coming young officer fresh from West Point, George B. McClellan, had few kind words for his first post. "Little Mac" complained:

Brazos [de Santiago] is probably the very worst port that could be found on the whole American coast. We are encamped on an island which is nothing more than a sand bar, perfectly barren, utterly destitute of any vegetation. . . . Whenever a strong breeze blows the sand flies along in per-
fect clouds, filling your tent, eyes, and everything else. To
dry ink you have merely to dip your paper in the sand. . . .

[T]he surf breaks with the greatest violence. It is often
impossible to communicate with the vessels outside for ten
days or two weeks at a time. 21

Here the problem of disease was similar to that at Corpus
Christi the previous year, and many a soldier paid the final
price without even seeing battle, and was laid to rest under
the sands of Padre Island. Lew Wallace, who was to gain
distinction both as a soldier and as a novelist, has described
the awful mortality in these camps:

. . . even then the poor men were not always allowed
their natural rest in the sands of the dunes where we laid
them, for the winds, blowing fitfully, now a "norther," now
from the Gulf, thought nothing, it seemed, of uncovering a
corpse and exposing it naked. 22

The winds that blew the sands also blew ships and men
ashore. One of the most interesting accounts of a shipwreck-
ing norther during the Mexican war is that by a surgeon
attached to Taylor’s army, Dr. S. Compton Smith. Smith first
encountered a norther as he was sailing to Galveston in a
small schooner; the little ship took refuge from the storm in
Sabine Lake, which Smith said used to be the refuge of “the
Gulf Bucaneers . . . from the ‘northers’ so prevalent upon the
coast.” 23 Sailing from Galveston to Point Isabel, Smith’s ship
was buffeted by a severe norther and driven ashore at Padre
Island, fortunately without loss of life. However, the troubles
of the castaways were only beginning, for they had stripped
off their clothing “that they might the easier reach the shore,”
and now “a pitiless storm of sleet which accompanied the
norther” chilled their naked bodies, and “the sleet and drift-
ing sand cut like knives.” 24

Fortunately there was at least one survivor in the group
who had kept his wits about him and was able to meet the
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emergency; that was a Texan named Roberts, a veteran of the
dismal Santa Fé expedition of 1842, who before leaping from
the ship had gathered up and cast into the sea armfuls of
clothing which the other passengers had stripped off, and the
waves eventually washed the clothing ashore. Roberts had
not been able to throw enough clothes off the ship to clothe
everybody, so, hero that he was, he shared some of his own
clothing with those who had none.

Fortunately the norther blew itself out, and warm air from
the Gulf brought its welcoming balm to the party—but not
for long. As the castaways waited for wagons to be sent from
the army camp at Point Isabel, another norther paid a visit.

Dr. Smith's account continued:

The morning was excessively hot, with hardly a breath
of air in motion. It was just such weather as, in that latitude,
always precedes those cold northers, like the one that had
driven us upon the island. . . .

The clouds . . . indicated the approach of a norther.
Rapidly the dark scowling vapors crept up from the northern
horizon; then a hissing sound came over the waters, followed
immediately by a freezing wind that cut to the bone, whirling
the sand about like drifting snow. The sharp crystals cut like
needles, as they were blown with force against our persons.
Roberts, being almost naked, suffered extremely; his shirt and
thin cotton drawers were no protection to the stinging sand
and cold wind. Then came the rain, accompanied with hail
and sleet. It was fortunate for us that I had brought a blanket
along. This we divided between us, by placing our arms
around each other's shoulders, and each holding a corner in
front. The storm being at our backs, we were able to scud
before it. To stop now to await the approach of the wagons
was impossible, as the most rapid locomotion was necessary
to keep the blood from congealing in our veins. We proceeded
along in this way, the storm increasing in violence as the day
advanced. The night, dark and gloomy came upon us; and
still we were obliged to move along, guided by the white line
of surf that broke over our feet. Hour after hour we toiled
before the pitiless storm, that goaded us onward, till at length,
when nearly exhausted, we sought the shelter of the leeside
of the sand-hills beyond the beach. Lying down, side by side, upon the sand, and drawing the blanket over us, we sought to snatch a moment’s repose.

Had we suffered ourselves to yield to the sleep our exhausted limbs demanded, it would have been the long last slumber to us. Scarcely had we congratulated ourselves upon the partial protection we found from the storm, when we found we had another enemy to dread in the drifting sand, which would even have buried us alive. We had, therefore, no other resource but to take to the beach again, and anxiously hope for the coming day.

At length the wished for light returned. . . .

Dr. Smith and Roberts still had one more cross to bear, however, for daylight soon disclosed a pack of wolves along the beach; but though the wolves approached within arms-length, they did not attack. This final danger over, the two men managed to reach the camp at Point Isabel in safety that day.  

While most troops arrived by sea, some arrived by land and received their first taste of a norther in the interior of Texas. Such an experience was described by William A. McClintock, who has left us one of the very best Mexican War diaries. While near New Braunfels, McClintock wrote:

I have heard and read much of the “northers” of this country. My curiosity on this score is perfectly satisfied. Last night, about eleven o’clock I was lying in a new frame house three sides of which was open, so warm, as to require no covering.

I heard a roaring of high wind to the north for perhaps a minute when it came down upon us like a hurricane. In a few minutes, I was chill’d through. I wrapped in my blanket and shivered throughout the night and forenoon today—. . . . [W]e traveled 20 or 25 miles today, and lay down in the prairie and slept to morning the wind still blowing cold from the north, the sky was clear “darkly, deeply, and butifully blue, beyond description” or comparison. . . .

In the late summer of 1846, General Taylor advanced his army to Camargo, 125 miles from the mouth of the Rio
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Grande, preparatory to moving on to Monterrey. Camargo was a perfect “hell-hole,” so far as weather goes; it was too far from the Gulf to benefit significantly from its breezes, and it was not far enough to be beyond the reach of the norther. When George B. McClellan’s outfit left the mouth of the Rio Grande for Camargo, the men were “without tents, provisions or working utensils, and a cold norther blowing all the time,” but Camargo was even worse. Here “Mac” said, “Now I am in camp, the wind blowing the dust in such perfect clouds that it is perfectly horrible—one can hardly live through it.”

Most of the army, however, had moved south-westward from Camargo in late August and fell upon Monterrey on the twenty-first of September. Many of those who had survived the ordeals of storm and disease at Corpus, the Rio Grande, and Camargo, fell in this first major battle of the war. Among these was our able chronicler, Brevet Major Barbour, whose death was described by Ephraim Kirby Smith:

> When struck by the ball which caused his death in a few seconds, he immediately drew from his bosom his wife’s miniature, opened it and exclaimed: “Tell her I died on the field of victory!” put it to his lips and instantly expired. . . .

At this moment, Barbour’s beloved wife, “Mattie,” was keeping a long, lonesome vigil at Galveston, where she had come to be nearer her husband. Unknowing of the tragedy that had happened at Monterrey, she perhaps sensed, in the blowing of a norther on the 26th, the cold hand of death. Her diary for the 26th reads:

> This morning on waking found it very cold. The wind was blowing from the north. I felt much like having a chill. Had to put on winter clothes and sit over the fire for some time.

During the second night of the assault on Monterrey, “a cold and pitiless rain fell in drenching torrents,” but no mention is made of a norther by name. However, though the
army was moving southward, it did not move far enough to escape the northerners. As a detachment under General Quitman set out for Ciudad Victoria in December, a norther was encountered near Montemorelos. Quitman's secretary recorded on December 18th:

It has been very cold for four days. The changes of the weather in winter are much more sudden and violent here than with us at home, owing to the northerners, which fall as swift and withering as misery upon the poor.34

He added on the next day:

It was very cold, and, though the creek rushed along smoking as if it had just boiled up from a volcano, it made our bones ache as we waded it, and the water came as high up as the thigh, and it seemed to cut like a knife. . . .35

And this was near the Tropic of Cancer!

Victoria fell without a struggle, and among those occupying the city when the new year rolled around were the Mississippi riflemen of Jeff Davis. William Rogers, one of the regiment, described their New Year's Eve:

New Year is here. . . . Last night was a boistrous night—a norther sprang up and raged with intense fury until about 10 o'clock today. My tent fly under which I was sleeping blew down early in the night and I found it impossible to make it stand—so I slept in the open air exposed to the severe wind all night. I did not sleep much.36

Meanwhile part of Taylor's army had moved westward from Monterrey and occupied Saltillo. The mile-high altitude of that old city made the temperature chilly enough without any added assistance, but here too the northerners found their way. As late as March, Rogers, who, with Davis's regiment, had marched from Victoria to Saltillo, wrote:

The first spring month is here but at this place none of its evidences are brought with it. Here the northerners blow with rude and boisterous strains and in camp all is dust and smoke.
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[Two days later:] It is very cold and my bed is composed of three blankets, on one I sleep and with the others I cover. I did have another blanket but I gave it some weeks ago to a poor soldier—I think he ought to feel grateful, and for aught I know he does.97

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Battle of Buena Vista, which was fought just six miles south of Saltillo was waged under the chilling supervision of a norther. Dr. Smith described the scene as a cold, north storm struck the opposing armies on the night of February 22-23:

... [A] cold rain began to fall, which proved excessively annoying to our men, who were forced to sleep upon their arms, with no other shelter than their threadbare blankets afforded them, and without fires, as material for the latter could not be found on the field. Those of the troops, however, who were posted on the side of the mountain, and who, being more exposed to the force of the storm, suffered more than their comrades on the plateau, had gathered together the dry clusters of the nopal, and other light plants growing in the crevices of the rocks, and kindled little fires. ... The troops of both armies suffered greatly during this gloomy night—the Mexicans no less than our own men. "In our position," says the Mexican engineer, in his report of the night's operations, "we passed the night, which was absolutely infernal, owing to the cold, rain, and wind, which last almost amounted to a hurricane, while we had neither food nor fuel."98

During the battle on the 23rd, a "tremendous storm" burst upon the fighting armies, bringing with it "a tempest of hail and rain" driven by "powerful gusts of wind."99 After another "cold and fireless night," the morning of February 24th dawned to reveal that Santa Anna's army had departed under cover of night, and the fighting in northern Mexico was virtually at an end.10 The Mexican army had fought well at Buena Vista, as the heavy toll of American lives demonstrated, and among the 267 American dead was another of our correspondents, William A. McClintock.41

The scene of warfare was now to shift to the Mexican coast,
as President Polk's administration had determined on an amphibious assault on Vera Cruz under the direction of Major General Winfield Scott. In preparation for this big operation, Scott, as supreme commander, had already stripped Taylor of many of his forces, and ex-Taylor regiments were convening at the mouth of the Rio Grande from many quarters: Saltillo, Victoria, Monterrey, and Camargo.

Ephraim Kirby Smith was pulled out of Saltillo in January, and on his march to the Brazos Santiago he encountered one norther after another. The first night out of Saltillo, Smith and his outfit had a visitation. It was a cloudless night, but—!

Many of the officers [wrote Smith], relying on the uniform dryness of the weather, neglected to pitch their tents. I, however, believing that everything in Mexico is deceptive, pitched mine. About midnight came a sudden downpour which . . . drove several of my brother officers to my tent for shelter. . . . They were "dimmition, damp, cold, disagreeable bodies," and my liquor case suffered a fearful diminution in warming up their shivering clay.12

Thanks to the norther, the next day was "cold" and "the ground frozen for ten miles."43 A week later came another visit:

Before morning, January 19, we had a regular norther. The wind pierced us to the very marrow but notwithstanding the weather our reveille was beaten at half-past two and we broke up our encampment and marched before five. The morning was as dark as possible, and how we got along our wild path . . . I cannot tell, for actually a man couldn't see his file leader. We, however, stumbled along until after daybreak, blindly groping our way through the drifting sand.44

At the end of that miserable day Smith's column reached Camargo which was even more disagreeable than usual.

Our camp is the most watched [wretched] place imaginable, the storm continues unabated and the filthy débris of numerous previous camps ground to dust is whirling about us; it is really insupportable!45
A few days later, while the regiment was awaiting a steamboat to take them down the Rio Grande, Smith gloomily reported:

I feel very much indisposed to write. . . . An ugly norther is blowing and I am tired and sick, my tent is cold and it is half-past ten at night.46

When Smith reached the embarkation camps at the mouth of the Rio Grande, there was his old friend the norther!

This afternoon [February 3] a violent north wind has been blowing and it is growing cold very fast. It will be almost insupportable before morning. We cannot embark before the wind moderates. I am field officer of the day, and am shivering in my tent over a pan of coals, having to sit up this cheerless night. . . .47

Another who came downstream from Camargo to be met with a norther at the mouth of the Rio Grande was Ethan Allen Hitchcock, grandson of the Green Mountains hero, and writer of a particularly fine Mexican War diary, which will be referred to later.18

Here at the mouth of the Rio Grande and at Tampico, Scott’s amphibious army was gathered, and here the army sat for weeks as the northers delayed its embarkation and advance. No doubt, close attention was paid to the barometer which hung in the quartermaster’s office at the mouth of the Rio Grande; it was said that “it was used only for the ‘northers’”49 but there were so many northers this season that it must have been used all of the time.

The frequency of the northers prevented any sailing in January. On the 4th of February Ephraim Kirby Smith wrote:

We are still lying in Camp Palo Alto and I see no immediate prospect of our departing. The weather is boisterous and it is impossible to embark on this coast except in a calm.50

Several days later he reported that “General Scott has been much annoyed at the delay,”51 but the norther was not subject
to Winfield Scott's orders.

Meanwhile the men were being annoyed by the cold blasts and the whirling dust which accompanied the northerns. One of the most entertaining of all descriptions of a norther was written at this time by Thomas Ewell, a younger brother of one of the Confederacy's greatest generals, Dick Ewell—"Old Baldy." On February 12th Tom wrote to another brother, Ben:

Yesterday there was a sweltering heat—we lolled our tongues out at drill—we panted in the shade—we rushed by shoals into the sea, but then found no relief for in the words of the poet—

"The sun's perpendicular rays
Illumined the depths of the sea,
And the fishes beginning to sweat
Cried—Damn it how hot we shall be."

but in an hour last night everything was changed. Admiral North came down in a hurricane, and now the sand is drifting about like snow, the tents are taking unto themselves wings and flying about, and there is a nose-nipping coolness. We are very uncomfortable for more reasons than one. The last Norther, we were washed out of our tents by the sea. However, it is an ill wind that blows no good. A great number of turtle were blown ashore, so numbed with cold that they were easily taken, and calipee and calipash somewhat consoled us for our disaster. If this wind continues long we can sing "we're afloat, we're afloat in the fierce rolling tide."

This must have been the same norther of which Lee's great but unpredictable Civil War general, "Pete" Longstreet, wrote:

On one occasion during the winter a violent north wind forced the water over the beach, in some places far enough to disturb our camps, and when they receded, quantities of fish were found in the little puddles left behind, and turtles more than enough to supply the army.

In a few days Tom Ewell, Pete Longstreet, and the rest of the army were "afloat," all right, but bound for the rendez-
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vois off the Mexican coast. General Scott had picked the tiny Lobos Islands for this rendezvous. “At New Orleans,” he said, “I fortunately heard from old shipmasters that tolerable intermediate anchorage might be found in the terrible northers, behind the Lobos Islands—a group a third of the distance from Tampico toward Vera Cruz.” Ephraim Kirby Smith indicated that the islands still left something to be desired as a protection from the northers.

The little Isle of Lobos looks like a green speck gemming the bosom of the ocean. It is in fact but a mile in length, and half a mile in breadth, and affords but a poor lea in a norther, the only gales which we are likely to encounter here.

They did encounter some northers at Lobos which made it impossible to land, not even to bring a soldier who was fatally injured aboard Smith’s ship. This vessel was badly overcrowded, with 421 men being aboard though it was fitted out to carry only 302, thus the inability to land was particularly discomforting. A stream of ships from the Rio Grande and Tampico continued to arrive at Lobos, “coming down before the gale like race horses.” Once all assembled and blessed with favorable winds, the fleet would advance to the main objective, Vera Cruz.

The difficulties of assembling a fleet along these norther-ridden shores can be appreciated from the reports of some of the ships. The brig, John Potter, left Tampa Bay for the Mexican coast on New Year’s Day, 1847. Ten days’ sail brought it to the coast, but that was only the beginning; George Ballentine, an English adventurer serving with the American army, described what followed:

We had the cable all on deck, and considering the voyage ended, we were congratulating each other upon the short and withal pleasant trip we had made. But we were rather premature, as it fell out, and our voyage was not to be over so soon as we anticipated.
Instead of making port that night, the captain decided to wait till dawn, probably, thought Ballentine, in order to finish the good stock of liquor he had aboard.

The captain, therefore, resolved upon tacking off and on during the night, and taking his chance of a change of wind in the shape of one of those violent gales called northers, which are prevalent at that season, and which was the contingency so much dreaded by the mate from former experience on that coast. . . .

The appearance of the morning was rather suspicious, being slightly cloudy and showery. . . . At eleven o'clock we were within a couple of miles of the anchorage, and the pilot coming off to board us was only about half a mile from our bows, when a heavy, dark-looking cloud which had been gathering ahead of us for the previous ten minutes, began to sprinkle the deck with a few large drops. At the same time the whistling and hissing sounds, amongst the running gear and shrouds, changing finally into the wild roar of the hurricane, as the vessel careened over nearly on her beam ends, showed that there was no time to be lost; the gale was on us, and our only chance was to "cut and run," as the sailors term it. . . . Indeed but for the extraordinary exertions of the officers and sailors composing the crew, I believe we should have been driven on the sands; and some days afterwards, when the gale had moderated, the captain confessed that we had a very narrow escape. In the meantime, under close-reefed topsails we were scudding through the water with fearful velocity, far more anxious now to get out from land, than we had been a few hours ago to approach it.59

They got away from land all right; in fact, it was a long time before they managed to see it again.

Steadily and without intermission for the next three days the cold bitter north blast continued to blow. I have never seen a gale last so long with such continuous and unmitigated fury.60

By the time the norther blew itself out, the John Potter was so far from Tampico that it took her over a week to regain the lost ground, and it was not until the 25th of the month that she dropped anchor in the harbor, and by this time the men
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had been put on short rations, for the food supply was nearly exhausted.64

Among those who experienced this same misfortune was the artillery officer who was to command the fateful defense of Ft. Sumter in 1861, Robert Anderson. This officer has given us what is probably the best-written of the many fascinating journals of the Mexican War. On the 25th of January he wrote his wife from Tampico harbor, saying:

Here we are at anchor off the bar at Tampico. . . . We have had two or three pretty severe storms, but preserved by the Father of all mercies, we are now at our destined port. Tomorrow week we were where we now are, and were blown off by a Norther.62

George Meade, who was at Tampico at this time, said:

. . . [I]n transporting so many troops upon this dangerous and stormy coast, we must expect embarrassments from the elements, but one “norther” will scatter the fleet of transports to all parts of the Gulf, and it may take weeks to reassemble.63

Not all of the ships were fortunate enough to be scattered out to sea, for some were piled up on land; Meade reported that “as this is the season of ‘northers,’ already many wrecks have taken place.”64

The horses on the ships especially suffered from the tossings which the northers gave the vessels; Anderson said that “the sea is so rough when it blows strong from the north that the horses on board ship are almost always badly hurt.”65

Anderson and Ballentine went ashore at Tampico, where they found the northers somewhat easier to ride out than at sea, although the native houses were anything but warm. Ballentine described the huts as “covered with palmetto leaves, which are also interwoven with the bamboos to exclude the cold wind of the north gales which blow during the
winter.” The “only fireplace” which Anderson found in Tampico was at the doctor’s quarters, and he managed to spend considerable time there, as the weather was “uncomfortably cold—sufficiently so to make sitting by a fire very comfortable.” As the cold continued, Anderson said, “I must purchase an earthen pot, and have a charcoal fire in my quarters.”

Many writers have commented on the failure of the Mexicans to provide adequately against the northers. In 1850 John Russell Bartlett noticed that no indoor fireplaces were to be found in El Paso although it was cold enough to form ice in the Rio Grande. Friar Diego de Landa, an early missionary among the Indians of Yucatan, reported that during the winter there “the north winds prevail and cause severe colds and catarrh from the insufficient clothing the people wear.” Thus it is not surprising that Anderson had such trouble locating a stove in Tampico.

The natives had told Anderson that the northers did not usually blow after the middle of February, but he was still reporting them in late March. One which “raged . . . with considerable force” on the night of February 20th, reminded him “of some of the stormy nights we had at Tampa Bay.” Another norther was blowing on the 26th, as Anderson, George Meade, and other soldiers boarded the S.S. Alabama at Tampico, and the storm prevented their sailing for several days as “the breakers were so high on the bar that no vessels went out.” Soon, however, the Alabama joined the fleet at Lobos, and all was ready for the final journey.

For several days the fleet was delayed at Lobos by head winds from the south, but on the 4th of March a norther came in to give fast locomotion to the fleet and carried it from Lobos to Tampico in one day’s time. Nathaniel Lyon, the
short-lived hero of the Union conquest of Missouri in 1861, reported on the evening of March 4th that “after a detention in the offing for thirty-six hours from head winds, a Norther sprang up at two o'clock this morning, taking us down opposite to Vera Cruz at sunset.”73 No norther of the Mexican War was as thoroughly and accurately reported as this one, for now almost all of our correspondents had gathered at the same place, and their accounts coincide even to the time of the norther's beginning—2 A.M. Ephraim Kirby Smith said it was “a cracking breeze,” and he was thrilled at the “crowding sail” and the fast time that was made.74 Meade called it “a violent ‘norther’,” and didn’t think it was so pleasant, though he said “our ship behaved most beautifully.”75 Anderson and Hitchcock also mentioned this storm which put the fleet in motion and brought an end to the long expectancy.76

Even then there was another delay, however, for first a reconnaissance had to be made, and before the troops could be set ashore, another norther forced a twenty-four hour delay.77 Finally on the 9th of March conditions were favorable for a landing, and the troops established their beachhead. Except for the shells from the fortress of San Juan de Ulloa, Mexican opposition was almost negligible; however, the north wind brought conditions remindful of the beaches at the mouth of the Rio Grande. The northers also prevented the landing of reinforcements, heavy guns, and ammunition. Smith described the situation on the 13th:

The weather is extremely disagreeable, a north wind blowing violently, nearly burying us in sand and preventing all communication with the ships. We regret very much that we cannot get our mortars and heavy guns on shore until there is a calm, as little can be done here until our batteries are in position.78

Had the Mexicans been able to muster a strong counter-
attack while this norther was blowing, they might have driven
the American troops into the sea.

For two weeks the northers prevented the landing of the
necessary equipment, and at least one ship was driven ashore
and wrecked by the surf. Even when the winds abated, the
surf ran dangerously high. Meanwhile the troops on shore
were digging trenches which the northers tried to fill up
again. McClellan found this trench-digging in the wind and
rain anything but pleasant. “We . . . bivouacked on the wet
green grass without fires—hardly anything to eat—wet and cold,” he
said. While McClellan’s men were building an earthworks
for guns on the 20th, “a very violent norther arose” and he
let his men work on the sheltered side of the mound.

Smith was dug in with his men on top of a sandhill in a
forward position when the norther hit on the 13th; “here we
remained twenty-four hours,” he said, “drenched with rain
and nearly buried in the driving sand.” It rained “nearly all
night,” and in the morning Smith was not only “dirty, wet,
cold, and hungry” but covered with chigger-bites as well. On the 20th and 21st, he said, “the fine sand [was] pricking
our faces like needles and nearly putting out our eyes.”

The 23rd was even worse:

On the morning of the twenty-third, I was ordered to the
trenches with a working party of one hundred men. A violent
norther had arisen during the night, which blew the sand
back almost as fast as we threw it out. The enemy were fir-
ing but little. . . . Our batteries, too, were obliged to slacken
their fire as the surf during the gale prevented any landing
from the ships, and the shells brought on shore were nearly
expended.

Ethan Allen Hitchcock was having his troubles too. On the
13th of March he reported:

Yesterday we had a severe “norther,” during which I rode
on horseback to the right of the third line—General Twiggs’.
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It was the most severe ride I ever performed, on account of the terrible violence with which the sand was blown. Some of the sand-hills are 300 feet above the sea, two or two and a half miles from the city.85

Under such bad weather, it is not surprising that several days later, Hitchcock reported that General Twiggs, who was soon to lead an impetuous charge at Cerro Gordo, was “particularly uncomfortable,” suffering from “a bad cold.”86

On the night of the 14th Robert Anderson reported that his tent was “full, till after Tattoo, of Naval officers kept on shore” by the “Norther [which] has been raging all day.”87 On the next day he reported that the wind was again “blowing very violently.”

Yesterday we had a very respectable blow, which lulled after midnight, and this morning though there was a cloudy horizon, I enjoyed a most magnificent view of the peak of Orizaba. . . . We are now witnesses to the truth of the saying, that when the Orizaba is plainly seen, you may be sure that the Norther is close at hand. The wind commenced freshening about nine this morning, and soon became a gale which is now sweeping the sand so rapidly through our camp as to make it very difficult to find our way from one tent to another. Our only chance of comparative comfort is either to remain at home with closed tent, or to move with handkerchiefs closely drawn over the head.88

Near the end of the siege Anderson and Smith suffered nearly parallel experiences. As Anderson was returning to camp on the 24th, he said:

[W]e were overtaken by the severest norther I have experienced; on coming into camp, blinded with dust, we found many of the tents down. Mine still stands, a wreck, the fly torn to pieces and the tent torn nearly through along the ridge pole.89

For his part, Smith reported:

On the morning of the twenty-sixth I was ordered on picket. The wind was blowing a gale (you will think it is all wind
here, but there is a goodly sprinkling of sand), my tent had just been blown down, not only down, but in pieces, and the few articles which I possess here had been scattered about and buried in the sand. I, however, headed my company and left everything to its fate. . . .

This same norther of the 26th was "making the trenches very disagreeable" for "Little Mac" McClellan, but there was in that wind, besides sand, also a steady stream of shells that were being hurled upon Vera Cruz and the fortress of San Juan. It was under these conditions that a truce flag came out from the city, and the surrender was arranged. The warship, Princeton, had intended to sail that morning with dispatches for the government, but the norther prevented her leaving, and when she left on the 27th, she carried with her the news of the fall of Vera Cruz and the completion of the first phase of Scott's strategy.

Scott wasted no time in moving his army out of Vera Cruz and setting it in motion for Mexico City, for, as El Norte had about run its course, it was due to be replaced by El Vomito. Scott himself acknowledged that the northers, which had played such mischief with his movements, had not been without this benefit. "Fortunately," he said, "the frequency of the gales, called northers, had kept off the vomito, as an epidemic, though a few cases had occurred in the city. . . ."

As the troops began the ascent into the mountains behind Vera Cruz they left both El Norte and El Vomito behind; "I was glad enough to get into the green country away from the sand hills," wrote Smith; ahead lay only the Mexicans.

But the Mexicans were no trifling opponents, fighting now in terrain they knew and loved so well. Consequently, the long, hard-fought march to Mexico City took its toll. One of the first to fall, just three weeks after the surrender of Vera Cruz, was Dick Ewell's brother, Tom, who had so sprightly described the norther at the Rio Grande encampment. Dick
went on to great military fame; Tom, so full of zest and spirit, might have risen even higher had he not been cut down at Jalapa. And in the very sight of the final goal, Mexico City, fell another of these able, interesting chroniclers of the war—Ephraim Kirby Smith, who was cut down at Molino del Rey the morning after he wrote his last line: "I am thankful that you do not know the peril we are in. Good night."
THE SUCCESSFUL conclusion of the Mexican War brought Texas a degree of peace which it had not known for a long time. A flood of new immigrants and settlers swarmed into the new state and pushed forward its frontier to the semi-arid regions, and the discovery of gold in California in 1848 caused Texas along with other regions of the West to become a highway for a swarm of gold-seekers and adventurers. The several routes through Texas were thought to be less severe in climate and terrain than the great central overland route to the gold fields, but, as the journals of the "Forty-Niners" who chose these routes show, the northers brought some surprises.

The experience of one such party of "Forty-Niners" is described by one of their number, George Evans. The party was crossing Texas in the spring-time when they anticipated that the weather would be particularly mild. On the 29th of March, however, near San Antonio their illusions were dispelled. Evans wrote in his diary for that day:

Day broke, but we could not say, as did a happy fellow, "Let it break and be d_____d; he owes me nothing"; for it was our fortune—or misfortune—to meet daybreak drenched to the skin and our tents, hats, clothes, and every light article blown to a distance. We have, in Texas words, been overcome by a norther, in all its terrific fury. This terrible storm came on at 12 o'clock last night and lasted only half an hour, but so sudden was its approach that our tents and loose clothing were flying with the tornado before we could spring from our beds to secure them. I have experienced strong winds and very violent storms in Ohio, but they were nothing compared with this terrible norther. After the wind abated the rain began, and at day-light not a blanket or coat remained dry.
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Some of our men slept the afterpart of the night on ox yokes around the fire, and were thankful for this bed and the comfort they had in prospect. This storm was attended with thunder, loud and almost deafening, and vivid flashes of lightning. The roaring of the wind was so loud as to drown the noise of two trees that were thrown down by the wind in pistol-shot of the tents.¹

A week later Evans' party met up with another wet norther, and on the 14th of April he described still another repeat performance:

Passed a night of rain and storm. Another norther, with all its chilling effects, paid us a visit of five, long, weary hours, without the ceremony of an invitation. We had chosen a fine spot for camp, and I anticipated a fine snooze after my guard hours, but my happy anticipations were dampened, at the moment the relief guard was called, by a perfect deluge of water. The rain descended for five hours, and the only protection we had was our saddle and other blankets, as we had no tent pitched. But we wore out the tedious hours and when day dawned our misery was complete.²

The next night they made sure they had their tents up, for it was “very cold” and the wind had a “sharpness” to it.³ A week later “hail, as large as pullet’s eggs” dropped on them, but their remaining days in Texas were devoid of any further wintry treatment.⁴

Another “Forty-Niner,” who took this route a short time after Evans’ party, was another former Ohioan, C. C. Cox. In late April Cox encountered a severe storm near La Grange; he said, “[I]t rained, hailed, and blew as it never did before.”⁵ Then in June on the first day of summer near the Guadalupe Mountains, Cox welcomed a norther, for it brought relief to his parched group. His diary for that day reads:

Our prospects are brightening which contrasts strangely with the Elements at this moment—a dense cloud has almost converted day into night and the thunders roar, the lightenings flash and the increasing Norther, indicate the approach of rain. Already I hear the crystal drops descending upon my
Even in California he was reminded of the northerns, for in December he wrote: "The 17th was a cold, rainy, stormy day, such a one as I have often experienced in Texas during the Equinox."

In the autumn of 1849 Captain Randolph B. Marcy and a company of dragoons were ordered to provide a convoy for a large party of "Forty-Niners" taking the Southwestern route from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to Santa Fe and thence to the gold fields. Marcy left Ft. Smith in early April, and encountered a snow-storm as he moved across the Indian Territory. In May near the Cross Timbers a real blast hit the party:

This evening there suddenly arose one of the most terrific storms I ever witnessed—it was a perfect tornado; the first blast laid nearly every tent in the camp flat upon the ground, and sent beds, trunks, and tables whirling and tumbling in every direction. Our camp presented for a few minutes a most perfect scene of confusion. As I looked out from under my tent (which had fallen upon me and held me fast), I saw, by the incessant flashes of lightning, officers and men running in all directions through the rain—some trying to find shelter, and others following up a hat, blanket, or tent which the gale had seized upon and was carrying off upon the prairie. Nothing could resist the violence of the storm. . . .

However, it was too far along in the spring for the party to experience more than a buffeting and a soaking. In the fall, however, as Marcy returned across Texas from El Paso to Preston, cold northers were encountered. On the 13th of October near Double Mountain fork of the Brazos River in the Panhandle of Texas, "a cold north wind" suddenly sprang on the party and brought with it a downpour of rain. Marcy's narrative records that they

had much difficulty in making a fire, as everything had been saturated with water. Our road has been heavy, and the cold "norther" has had an effect on our animals which I did not
The situation, instead of getting better, got worse. On the next day, Marcy wrote:

We have had during last night one of the most terrific storms I have ever witnessed in the whole course of my life. The wind blew a perfect tempest from the north, and it appeared as if the whole flood-gates of the heavens were suddenly opened, and the accumulated rains of a year poured out in torrents for fifteen consecutive hours upon us. The whole surface of the earth was deluged; even upon the tops of the hills there were three inches of water, and it filled every ravine and hole about us. The creek upon which we are encamped had but very little water in it last night: it is now full to the top of its banks, and would float a steamboat.

Our poor mules have suffered severely from the effects of the storm, and twenty-five have perished. I trust, however, that the violence of the storm has passed, and that we shall be enabled with care, to preserve the remainder. I have had several of our wagon covers cut up and made blankets to cover the weakest of them. We cannot move from here until the creeks run down, and our animals recover some strength, as at present many of them are but barely able to walk.

The storm forced Marcy to alter his plans somewhat, and he was forced to reduce the rations of his men.

Previous to the storm, we were moving along finely at the rate of about sixteen miles per day, and our mules were doing as well as could be expected; but the loss of thirty-three in one night has placed a very serious obstacle upon our movements, and I am obliged to leave a part of our wagons, reduce the amount of our baggage as much as possible, and endeavor to get on with what we cannot dispense with, after the ground becomes a little settled.

Marcy was particularly disappointed in the failure of the mules; he had "required the teamsters to pay the most un-
remitting attention to them," but all of the care was of little avail. Consequently, he concluded that the Mexican mules "cannot endure one of these bleak northers upon the prairies." On the other hand, his "oxen did not suffer in the least from the storm," so he cast his vote for oxen as beasts of burden for the Texas prairies.\textsuperscript{13}

On the 15th of October the norther continued, and he let his animals rest and regain their strength, while he had five wagons dismantled, and whatever goods could not be carried in the remaining wagons were cached. "The cold wind continues to blow from the north, with intervals of rain," he said, "but I think the storm is nearly over. . . ."\textsuperscript{14} Sure enough, the next day the south wind returned, and it became bright and warm. The party's sufferings were not yet over, however, for on the 19th Marcy reported:

Last night was one of the coldest I have ever known at this season of the year. About dark the wind turned to the north, bringing clouds and rain, and this morning the surface of the ground is covered with snow. Our mules fortunately found cover in the timber or the creek, and did not suffer so much as we were fearful they would.\textsuperscript{15}

In December of that same year near the same camp where Marcy lost so many mules to the norther, a similar tragedy occurred to the party of Lieutenant Michlin. Michlin reported that his party

. . . suffered most severely from cold northers, heavy rains, and terrible sleet. Our mules had already become very weak, in consequence of living upon grass alone—the latter having lost most of its nourishment from the killing frosts which night after night lay upon the ground. The cold affected the rest; and nine of our animals were either frozen to death or left so stiff with cold as to be unable to be moved. Our loss would have been greater had not the men divided their blankets with their animals, and built immense fires to protect them as much as possible from the cold. We found it necessary to change the party from mounted to foot men, and
replace the wagon mules by saddle mules. The commence-
ment of the winter setting in so severely, we knew not what
might come to pass ere we returned to the settlements.16

Probably the most important government expedition in
Texas in the fifties was the party sent to survey and draw the
American-Mexican border. A joint commission supervised the
boundary survey, and the head of the American delegation,
John Russell Bartlett, wrote a journal of his travels during the
work of the commission, and this journal includes some of the
most interesting references to northers in all of the literature
of the Southwest.17

Bartlett's party landed in Texas in September, 1850, and
set out on the long overland march to El Paso where the
commission was to meet. Not until the 10th of October when
they were about twenty miles west of San Antonio did they
encounter "one of those sudden storms . . . which are so
common in this region." On this occasion a tent was blown
down, and the men got soaked, but nothing worse happened.18
During the rest of October they encountered some extremes
of heat and cold, the thermometer varying between 90° and
36°, but no severe storms.19

As they reached the Pecos River and entered into the
month of November, they began to fear the onset of a severe
norther. On the first of November the wind was ominously
from the north, but, wrote Bartlett, "our fears of a 'norther,'
so much dreaded by all prairie travelers, subsided with the
appearance of a bright sun."20 The sixth of November was a
different story, however; Bartlett's entry for that day reads:

Was aroused in the night by the whistling of the wind.
Feeling a great change in the temperature, I looked out of my
carriage window, and to my surprise found the ground
covered with snow. There was no sleep after this; and as soon
as morning dawned, I got up to inspect the condition of the
party and animals, and to see what could be done for their
comfort. The dreaded norther I had so much feared when near the Pecos, had now come upon us with all its fury and in its very worst shape, accompanied with snow. But bad as our condition was, it might have been worse. . . . But our poor animals had no shelter from the pitiless storm, there being not a tree to break the force of the keen blast which seemed to pierce them to the quick. A few isolated bushes grew near the camp, but nothing that afforded a covering. During the day, many wandered off, probably to seek a shelter; and at one time, ten men were gone in pursuit of them. Some of the horses had strayed seven miles before they were taken.

The only means to add to our comfort were to bank the earth around the tents to keep out the snow and cold blasts; to bring our overcoats and India-rubber garments into requisition; and to keep up as large fires as the broken wagons and boxes would admit of.

Finding it very hard to keep warm even by the fire, with the cold wind and snow beating on my back, I laid aside my heavy blanket, put on my India-rubber cloak and long boots, and took my double-barrelled gun to see what virtue there was in a little sport by way of exercise. The result proved to be better than remaining still, roasting and freezing alternately by the fire. The excitement and exercise restored the circulation, and the satisfaction of procuring several brace of ducks amply repaid the hardship of facing the storm. Removing my India-rubbers I again wrapped my blanket around me, seated myself in my carriage with Dr. Webb, and there spent the remainder of the long day in reading Erman's Travels in Siberia, a proper book for the occasion. The young men took it very calmly, spending the time at the camp fires or in their tents. So passed the day.

The next day, November 7th, found the camp still battling the norther. Bartlett's entries for this day are also interesting:

Passed a cold and sleepless night. The sharp wind found its way through the openings in the carriage, which all the blankets I could pile on would not keep out. The young gentlemen crowded themselves in their tents, and lay as close as possible; while the teamsters, laborers, etc., stowed themselves in the wagons. The morning was sharp and cold; the snow continued to fall, and the wind remained at the north, though blowing less than the previous day. . . .

Before leaving San Antonio my friends told me that at this season of the year we could hardly expect to escape the
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Northers, and advised me if overtaken by one not to move, but encamp at once, and keep quiet until it had passed. Since Bartlett's teamsters also advised against traveling in the storm, saying the mules wouldn't be able to stand it, Bartlett decided to remain where he was, and, since he was short of provisions, he sent a small advance party ahead to El Paso to seek aid.

The advance party had no easy going, as the storm continued with heavy snow; balls of snow formed in the horses' hoofs, giving them pain and slowing them down considerably. As night came on, the men could find no fuel and had to camp without a fire. However, the party did get through and sent back some mules and provisions which were badly needed by Bartlett, for, though the main party had been able to set out on the 8th, many of the mules played out and had to be abandoned. On the 13th of November the expedition reached El Paso.

Even in El Paso the norther was still a problem, especially since the citizens did not use indoor fires, feeling that the winter season was too short to warrant them—"The people get along somehow through the winter without them," said the shivering Bartlett. This is remindful of the inadequate facilities for cold weather found in Tampico in 1847.

One week after Bartlett arrived in El Paso a norther struck and wrecked havoc among the weakened mules of the expedition. He wrote on November 20th: "A severe norther came on, bringing with it the cold blasts from the snowy mountains, which had such an effect upon the poor creatures, that twelve or fourteen mules and horses perished." During his stay in El Paso that winter, several times Bartlett was unable to cross the Rio Grande because of the ice in the river—and this was on the southern border of the United States!
When Bartlett’s work was completed in late 1852, he returned through northern Mexico to Corpus Christi, Texas. Here on the 3rd of January, 1853, while he was waiting to sail for New Orleans a norther paid a farewell visit. His journal reads:

A violent norther arose during the night and we had it piercing cold today. When in the house, we were seated by fires, and when outside the door, wrapped in our overcoats. Yet in spite of all our efforts, it seemed almost impossible to keep warm, so penetrating are these winds to systems which have become relaxed.

When these winds blow so violently, they drive the water from the lagunes into the Gulf, and increase the difficulty of navigating them. Many of the bars are then nearly dry. There is one in particular, across the mouth of the Nueces Bay, which deserves to be noticed. When the tide comes into this bay, as well as in all others, it is resorted to by large numbers of fish from the Gulf, to feed. The water may then be from five to ten feet deep, and is of the same temperature as that of the Gulf. But after a norther has blown for twelve or twenty-four hours, its temperature is so much reduced, that the fish become chilled, and not having strength enough to make their way over the bar, now more shallow than ever, they often lie there in heaps. At these times the people go to the bar with their wagons, and with a spear or fork pick up the finest fish, weighing from ten to a hundred pounds, and thus carry away loads. Many were brought in today, and they proved a great luxury to us.

This phenomenon of fish being stunned by northers is familiar to all Texas Gulf Coast fishermen and still occurs, as, for example, in January, 1951, when millions of fish were killed along the coast by the same freezing norther which wrecked the Rio Grande Valley grapefruit industry. Bartlett stated in a footnote that this freezing of fish was first mentioned by none other than Cabeza de Vaca, who told how the Indians kept track of the time by the seasons such as “when the fruits come to ripen, the fish to die, [etc.] . . . ”

The norther which kept Bartlett from sailing and supplied
him with fish was a "humdinger." On the second day, he wrote, "The wind blew violently during the whole night, and the morning opened upon us as cold as ever. The buckets of water that stood outside the door were covered with ice an inch thick." But the norther subsided almost as abruptly as it had sprung up, and in the afternoon, he was able to board ship and sail away, only to be _becalmed_ outside of the harbor!

Considering the trouble which Bartlett, Michlin, and Marcy had with mules in Texas' cold northers, one might not have been surprised if the government had experimented with Siberian yaks or hardy alpacas from the Andes, but instead the government attempted to introduce the African camel into the Southwest in the 1850's. This brain-storm of Jeff Davis' never was successful, but strangely it was not the cold northers which wrecked the experiment. Governor Lubbock, who kept a herd on his ranch during the winter of 1858-1859, found that "this herd did not seem to suffer from the cold . . . , though they had no protection but a skirt of timber on the north." He said that the heat seemed to bother them more than the cold. The irrascible tempers of the animals, the sharp rocks of the Southwest terrain, and the heat, but not the norther, can be blamed for the failure of the camel experiment.
Chapter V

The Norther and the Civil War

Many of the leading actors of the Civil War served on the Texas frontier in the decade preceding that conflict and found the norther to be quite an antagonist. As Albert Sidney Johnston’s 2nd U.S. Cavalry crossed the Red River into Texas it numbered among its junior officers such soon-to-be-famous Confederate leaders as John Bell Hood, Edmund Kirby Smith, William Hardee, and Earl Van Dorn, and such destined Union greats as George Stoneman, Richard Johnson, and Kenner Gerrald. Two other famous officers of the 2nd Cavalry, Robert E. Lee and George “The Rock” Thomas, happened, fortunately, for them, not to be with the regiment on this particular march—having special duties to perform at the time.

The 2nd Cavalry was marching from Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, to Ft. Mason, Texas; the regiment had been on the road since October and had had a fairly easy time of it, but Texas had a surprise in store for the column. “While still on the elevated table-lands some sixty miles northeast of Fort Belknap, the regiment was caught by a terrible norther.” Colonel Johnston has given a fascinating description of this storm:

Norther! It makes me cold to write the word. I do not believe that any of the hyperborean explorers felt the cold more intensely than did my regiment. Noble fellows! Officers and men, they will always be found at their post, wherever duty calls them. Think of a northern blast, sixty miles an hour, unceasing, unrelenting (the mercury below zero, ice six inches thick), coming suddenly down on the highest table-lands of Texas, 2000 feet above the sea, upon a regiment only a few moments before luxuriously enjoying the balmy, bland south breeze, and dissipating in a moment the sweet, illusive hope
that, having traveled far into the sunny South, we had escaped the horrors of a Northern winter!

This wonderful change in temperature occurred on the night of December 22nd. I had just received and finished reading your letter [from his son, William Preston Johnston], in which you mentioned the delightful weather with which you were blessed in New York. I rejoiced that the rude blasts had not visited you all too roughly, but pitied you in the future. Blind mortals that we are! I could not know that what I so dreaded for you would in a moment be inflicted upon myself. From the 22d to this time [Jan. 17th] it has been severely cold, but it is moderate now. On the 23d I did not march, as we had a ration of corn on hand for our poor, benumbed horses. On the 24th we were compelled to give up the shelter offered by a skirt of timber, and take our route over the prairie. This was a hard day for all. I do not go much into detail, because you have with me faced a Texas norther, and you will comprehend that it was fortunate that our course was southwest. I think we could not have marched northward. On the 25th, having overtaken our supply train the evening before, and having a ration of corn for our horses, we remained in camp, the best sheltered by timber that we could find for so large a body of troops, but not good. This bright, clear, beautiful day was the coldest of all; the ground was covered with snow, and the small quantity of water to be found was nearly all congealed, so that with great difficulty an insufficient supply was obtained for our horses. On the 26th we were compelled to take the route again and go on to our depot of corn, and there encamped without water for our horses and with very little for our men. On the 27th we reached Belknap, and encamped near the post until the 2d of January, when we marched for this place [Ft. Mason]. We are now comfortable and begin to forget the past.

Johnston did not forget this march too easily, for shortly after arriving at Ft. Mason “he was attacked by a violent remittent bilious fever, brought on by the exposure of the march.” His son said that “the disease nearly proved fatal,” but Johnston slowly recovered. Albert Sidney Johnston was lost to the Confederacy in 1862 at the bloody battle of Shiloh; the Confederacy’s loss would have been even greater had the Norther conquered him on the Texas Plains in 1855.
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The severity of this norther can be gauged by the fact that a supply train coming from the Gulf Coast at the same time lost 113 oxen, animals which, as Marcy pointed out, usually withstood the cold pretty well. John Bell Hood's biographer says that as this storm hit the column, it sent the men scurrying for the shelter of timber, and "as Hood shivered behind the fringe of trees riding out his first norther he was learning the first of many lessons about the Lone Star State," whose sons he was to lead into action in many a Civil War battle.

Another officer in the 2nd Cavalry who has left an interesting account of this particular norther was the quartermaster, Richard W. Johnson, who later rose to the rank of Major General through his heroism in the Civil War. Johnson reported that:

. . . . Water froze in our tents. So intense was the cold and so fierce the wind that Colonel Johnston determined not to move forward on the following day. My wife and children remained in bed as the only place where they could be at all comfortable, while the cook and myself attempted to get breakfast. About noon there was a lull in the storm, and I had the tent repitched, facing southerly.

On the following morning it was "bitter cold," but the command moved out and made a short day's march. . . .

Johnson's horse was tethered to a tree during the storm, and in an effort to keep warm, the horse walked round and round the tree until it wrapped the rope so tightly its neck was broken. Another interesting sidelight, which Johnson mentioned, was that Captain C. J. Whiting helped Johnson's family get warm by rigging a tin plate in the side of their tent through which they were able to pass a stove pipe without danger of setting the tent afire.

Though Robert E. Lee missed the awful norther of December, 1855, he did not miss one at Fort Mason in April of 1857. He had just ridden all of the way from Indianola
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unscathed when a norther greeted him as he reached his destination. He wrote to Mrs. Lee of his experience:

I arrived here yesterday in a cold norther, and though I pitched my tent in the most sheltered place I could find, I was surprised to see this morning, when getting up, my bucket of water, which was sitting close to my bed, so hard frozen that I had to break the ice before I could pour the water into the basin. On visiting the horses in the night they seemed to suffer much with cold, notwithstanding I had stretched their picket line under the lee of a dense thicket to protect them from the wind.

Fitzhugh Lee, Robert E. Lee's nephew who became famous in his own right during the Civil War, joined the 2nd Cavalry, fresh from West Point, in the summer of 1856. Fitz had plenty of experience with northers and Indians during his four years in Texas with the 2nd Cavalry. One of his colleagues, E. M. "Jack" Hayes, recalled that once in 1859 Fitz had led out a detachment of twelve cavalrymen in pursuit of Indians in spite of a howling norther. Hayes said: "The wind was blowing a gale and the snow drifting so as to make our progress very slow." The snow obliterated the trail in part, and the Indians had tried to disguise their direction, but Lee's men were not fooled for long. They were forced to camp out in the snow, but by morning, said Hayes, "the norther had blown itself out . . ., but it was still very cold, and, no fire being allowed, we breakfasted on hard tack and frozen pork. When the time came to mount our horses, some of the men were so stiff they had to be assisted into their saddles." When the Indians were finally overtaken, Fitz Lee had himself a whale of a hand-to-hand fight with a big Indian and came out on top.

Another officer who was stationed on the frontier of Texas in the fifties was the redoubtable cavalry officer of the Union, Phil Sheridan. Sheridan got his first taste of Texas in 1854
when he was ordered to Fort Duncan at Eagle Pass on the Rio Grande border. Landing at Corpus Christi he marched to Fort Duncan by way of Laredo in the early spring and was greeted at Laredo by his first norther.

We arrived at Laredo during one of those severe storms incident to that section, which are termed “Northers” from the fact that the north winds culminate occasionally in cold wind-storms, frequently preceded by heavy rains. Generally the blow lasts for three days, and the cold becomes intense and piercing. While the sudden depression of the temperature is most disagreeable, and often causes great suffering, it is claimed that these “Northers” make the climate more healthy and endurable. They occur from October to May, and in addition to the destruction which, through the sudden depression of the temperature, they bring on the herds in the interior, they are often of sufficient violence to greatly injure the harbors on the coast.11

The troops at Fort McIntosh in Laredo were cursing the norther, for, says Sheridan, “just before the norther began these troops had completed a redoubt for the defense of the post . . . but as the parapet was built of sand—the only material about Laredo which could be obtained for its construction—the severity of the winds was too much for such a shifting substance, and the work was entirely blown away in the storm.”12 After reaching Fort Duncan, Sheridan took action to combat these Texas northers and built himself a rude shack in which he weathered the winter much better than his comrades in their tents.13 Nevertheless, he must not have enjoyed his winter very much, nor his summer either, for he has been quoted as having said that “if he ‘owned Texas and the infernal regions he would leave the State and reside in the other place.’”14

In February, 1861, Texas joined the Confederacy, took over the forts of the United States within the state, and readied herself for the war which began in April, 1861. Texas,
like Florida, being on the extremity of the Confederacy, was not made much of a battleground; therefore, the norther was not permitted to play a very big role in this great conflict, but it was in evidence.

Considering its source, name, and color, the “blue” norther must have assuredly been an ally of the Union; however, there is no indication that Texans called it a “Yankee wind” or tried to change its allegiance. It made life miserable for the defending Confederate troops, but on at least one occasion it dealt a blow to the men in Blue. When General Banks’ forces attempted an amphibious assault on the Texas coast in October, 1863, a norther blew down and scattered the convoy. This was only a temporary respite, however, for three days later the fleet was reassembled and succeeded in landing on Brazos Santiago at the mouth of the Rio Grande. The Union was never able to do more than occupy thin slices of the Texas coast or make hit-and-run raids and blockade the harbors. One serious attempt by General Banks to invade Texas by way of the Red River was a dismal failure. Instead most of the fighting of Texas troops took place in Louisiana or with the main armies east of the Mississippi.

Garrison and patrol duties in Texas was not always easy, especially when the norther blew. The early volunteers were poorly equipped when they had to face the northers in the spring of 1861. A group of volunteers under James Buckner Barry who were preparing to take over the Federal forts in West Texas was struck by “a big sleet” near Ft. Belknap on January 31st, and the men suffered severely, since they were “without any tents to cover up.” In March a company of volunteers met up with a norther along the Medina River west of Castroville. Luckily they found a camp which Mormon refugees from Nauvoo had built and abandoned. “We
could not but be grateful to them for the excellent shelter
the old fellows had provided for us against the keen, cold nother
blowing,” wrote R. H. Williams, an ex-“Border Ruffian” from
Kansas, now in Texas service. Williams found that one of
the best protections against a nother was his “Spanish manta,
which is impervious to water”; Williams was able to sleep in
this great cloak, but the manta alone was not enough during
the winter of 1863-64. He called that December “the coldest
month I ever experienced in Texas, for even down on the
prairies we had constant frosts, severe enough to freeze the
shallow pools and lagoons.” For protection Williams and his
buddies built “good warm bush huts.”

But there were not always “Spanish mantas” or “good warm
bush huts” to be had. One Confederate soldier, H. C. Med-
ford, was camped near Houston in a nother in March, 1864.
He wrote in his diary:

This day [March 15] has been cold cloudy and windy. I
have not enjoyed life today. So to bed upon the cold earth.
Cor summum via una [The highest courage is the only
way].

On the next day he had a more dismal entry:

How cold it is for the time of year in this latitude. It is
now the warmest portion of the day, 3. P.M. and I am sitting
here in the woods near Houston, doing this little writing, and
the weather is so intensely cold, I can scarcely write a legible
hand. My fingers are almost numb. Old Notus comes the nigh
way and without mercy to a poorly clad soldier.

During this same severe winter some Confederate soldiers
lost their lives due to the cold northers. Governor Lubbock
served with the army upon the expiration of his gubernatorial
term and wrote of the misery caused by the northers.

Our service on the coast during the latter part of the
winter of 1863-64 was at times very hard owing to the se-
verely cold weather....

We lost quite a number of our gallant young soldiers who
The Texas Norther

were frozen to death in an attempt to make an attack upon a
detachment of the enemy that had landed upon our coast
from the blockading squadron.22

According to the editor of Lubbock’s memoirs the clothing of
these soldiers had become “saturated with water. Not being
able to secure fuel, or to reach a fire, they were frozen to death
and their bodies found by a searching party sent in quest of
them next morning.”23 Lubbock himself narrowly missed
death that cold night.

The same night I made a very narrow escape on a trip
down Galveston beach. I was ordered to go down the island
on a reconnaissance; the night became very cold—for that sec-
tion extremely cold. I was in my saddle until near daylight,
when I rode up to Colonel Buchel’s camp, almost in a lifeless
condition. I was lifted from my horse and placed in the music-
cians’ tent between the warm blankets of a bed just vacated,
where I went to sleep. Awaking about noon, quite revived, I
was supplied with good strong coffee and breakfast. I then
proceeded to headquarters. Had I not reached the refuge as
soon as I did I would have lost my life.24

A somewhat similar mishap was described by a Confeder-
ate soldier, D. S. Howell, who was stationed near Gainesville,
Texas, in the fall of 1864. Riding back to camp from Gaines-
ville one day with a comrade, Howell met a bad norther just
west of the Cross Timbers. After trying to buck the norther
on the open prairie, the two men turned back to the Cross
Timbers for shelter, where they spent the night fairly well
protected.

On the following morning [wrote Howell] it was colder
still, but we had to be on our way. We saddled up and set out
across the prairie with a severe north wind whipping our
clothes. After riding about two miles we came to a draw, the
north side of which was marked by a bluff. I was riding a
short distance ahead of Jim and turned into the draw for pro-
tection. I dismounted at once and began to exercise to raise
my circulation. Jim rode up; his horse stopped; and he made
no motion to dismount, just sitting there leaning over on his
The Norther and the Civil War

saddle horn. I spoke to him, insisting that he dismount. He never answered. I spoke again and discovered that something was seriously wrong. The man was almost frozen to death! He could not have lasted much longer. I got him off his horse; began to rub his arms and legs, and finally made some progress at thawing him out.25

Dr. Edward A. Pye, who was with the Confederate Medical Service in Texas during the war, described the effects of the northers upon the army camps. Not only did the wet northers tend to put the men in bad humor and make new patients for “Hospital Slaughter,” but they also transformed the appearance of the camp. About the 1st of January, 1864, Dr. Pye wrote to his wife saying:

It is very cold to night—the whole face of the Earth is covered with sleet—we must keep up the fire. . . . It has been alternately raining & blowing from the North ever since a few days after Christmas—The low prairies are almost covered with lakes—I rode into Camp last Sunday—It presented a pitiful spectacle—Mud & water everywhere—The tents afford some little protection from the rain it is true—but many are without tents—They have made all sorts of contrivances for shelter such as piling up bushes over head—brush fences to the North—some with hides—fresh from the beeves just killed—stretched over little hoops just big enough to crawl under—little tents—made by stretching a blanket or quilt over a pole tent fashion. . . .26

During the fall and winter of 1861-62 a small brigade of Texans marched with General Sibley from San Antonio to the upper Rio Grande valley in New Mexico where it won a victorious battle over the Union forces at Valverde only to suffer a disastrous reverse several months later at Glorieta near Santa Fe. These soldiers experienced their full share of cold weather, from northers in West Texas to heavy snowstorms in the mountains of New Mexico. In his journal of the expedition, William Henry Smith said, “The weather is verry cold and chilly so that overcoats are verry comfortable
to soldiers that have to lie out on the mount with no cover save the blue sky above them and the damp ground beneath them." Because of the cold and dampness, many of the men contracted pneumonia and died even before the first skirmish took place.

Many Texans defended their state by manning the battle line which stretched down through Arkansas and Louisiana. Though they were out of Texas they were not out of the range of the norther. Joseph P. Blessington, who was with Walker's Texas Division, has related how the men suffered greatly in both Arkansas and Louisiana from the cold north winds and the snow, sleet, or hail which frequently accompanied them. The men called their frigid camp on the Grand Prairie of Arkansas, "Camp Freeze Out." As they took up positions further south in Louisiana in the fall of 1864, they encountered "a cold norther" at Camp Sumter, and as they marched towards Minton, "the weather was miserably cold and a regular norther blowing." At Minton they established Camp Magruder, and they set about building warm cabins which helped them weather the cold of that last winter in the field.

As our friend Medford said in his diary, "Old Notus comes the nigh way and without mercy to a poorly clad soldier." This suffering is the main story of the norther in the Civil War; the suffering was limited to a relatively small number of men, because the scale of fighting was small. But had operations in Texas reached the proportions that operations attained in Virginia or Tennessee, "Old Notus" would have reaped a heavy toll of suffering and perhaps might even have affected the outcome of the fighting, for it was easier to advance southward with a norther than to take a stand facing against one.
THE NORTHER SINCE THE CIVIL WAR

The end of the Civil War did not bring an end to fighting in Texas, for there was still the Indian to be reckoned with, and for a brief time the French troops in Mexico as well. Moreover, the demands of Radical Reconstruction necessitated military occupation of Texas for nearly a decade. As a result, military duty in Texas was the fate of many a soldier and army officer in the years following Appomattox.

Just as officers who later gained fame in the Civil War served Texas in the decade before the catastrophe, so also did some of the heroes of that conflict serve in Texas after its conclusion. Phil Sheridan returned in a different role than the protector of the frontier he had been in 1854; now he was the military ruler of the Southwest and helped to enforce Congressional Reconstruction policies in that area. He had his headquarters in New Orleans and spent but little time in Texas. However, in 1868 he resumed his old role as protector of the frontier when he was placed in charge of the Department of the Missouri. The Indians were resisting the efforts to place them on reservations, and Sheridan organized a winter campaign against the Cheyennes in western Oklahoma not far from the Texas panhandle. It was this expedition in which "Wild Bill" Hickok served as a scout and George Custer commanded the Seventh Cavalry Regiment and which led to the heavy defeat of the Indians at the Battle of the Washita. The expedition was buffeted by a number of plains blizzards, which Sheridan called "northers" following his experience in Texas. Of one particular storm near Hackberry Creek he wrote:
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... a "Norther," or "blizzard," as storms on the Plains are now termed, struck us in the night. During the continuance of these blizzards, which is usually about three days, the cold wind sweeps over the Plains with great force, and, in the latitude of the Indian Territory, is weighted with great quantities of sleet and snow, through which it is often impossible to travel; indeed, these "Northers" have many times proved fatal to the unprotected frontiersman.1

This particular storm was a "lulu," and Sheridan's army spent a hard day and even harder night.

... [N]o one could sleep, for the wind swept over us with unobstructed fury, and the only fuel to be had was a few green bushes. As night fell a decided change of temperature added much to our misery, the mercury, which had risen when the "norther" began, again falling to zero ... [the men] had to tramp up and down the camp all night long to keep from freezing.2

Four days before the Battle of the Washita, Sheridan's army was blanketed by a heavy snow-fall at their base camp—Camp Supply. George Custer awoke that morning "at four o'clock to find the ground covered with snow to a depth of over one foot, and the storm still raging in full force." Custer was elated: "Just what we want," he said, for the army "could move and the Indian villages could not."3 Sheridan gave Custer his blessing, and the latter led his regiment out of camp "to the familiar notes of that famous old marching tune, 'The girl I left behind me.'"4 The snow and the cold provided the element of surprise and immobilization of the Indians which the army needed, and Custer's attack was a devastating success.

Custer had had experience with a similar snow storm the year before while attending the great council with the Plains Indians at Ford Larned in April, 1867. Of this experience he wrote:

It was our good fortune to be in camp rather than on the march; had it been otherwise, we could not well have escaped
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without loss of life from the severe cold and blinding snow. The cavalry horses suffered seriously, and were only preserved by doubling their ration of oats, while to prevent their being frozen during the intensely cold night which followed, the guards were instructed to keep passing along the picket lines with a whip, and to keep the horses moving constantly.\(^5\)

Custer had received ample preparation for such experiences with blizzards for he had served in Texas for a year following the surrender at Appomattox. While Custer himself wrote of his experiences chasing Indians in Kansas and Wyoming, he did not cover his sojourn in Texas, but fortunately this period has been described by his wife, Elizabeth, who accompanied him to the Lone Star state in the autumn of 1865.

Elizabeth and George Custer had never seen anything quite like a Texas norther before, and they were duly impressed by their first one which they encountered at Hempstead.

Our first experience with a Texas norther surprised and startled us. It came on in the night, preceded by the usual heavy, suffocating air which renders breathing an effort. After this prelude, the wild blast of wind swept down on us with a fury indescribable. We heard the roar as it approached over the stretch of prairie between us and the sea. Our tent, though it was guyed by ropes stretched from the ridge-pole to a strong post driven far into the ground, both in front and at the rear, shook, rattled, and flapped as if with the rage of some human creature. It was twisted and wrenched from side to side; the arbor overhead seemed to toss to and fro, and the wagon rocked in a crazy effort to spill us out. Though the ropes stretched and cracked like cordage at sea, and the canvas flapped like loosened sails, we did not go down. Indeed, rocked in this improvised "cradle of the deep," it was hard to tell whether one was at sea or on land. I begged to get up and dress for the final collapse that I was sure was coming, but my husband quieted me and calmed my fears, believing that the approaching rain would still the wind, as it eventually did. Next morning a scene of havoc was visible. Our neighbors crept out of their tents, and we women, in a
little whispered aside, exchanged our opinions upon the climate of the "Sunny South."  

When Custer moved his headquarters to Austin, Elizabeth had a permanent dwelling which afforded far better security against the northerers, though there was still plenty of excitement when one arrived. In a letter to her mother, Elizabeth described such a visitation:

Last Sunday it was uncomfortably warm. We wore thin summer clothes, and were languid from the heat. The thermometer was eighty-two in the shade. On Monday the weather changed from heat to cold in five minutes, in consequence of the sudden and violent winds, which are called "northers."

No one prepares for the cold in this country, but there was a general scattering when our first norther attacked us. Tom [Custer's brother] rushed for wood, and of course none was cut. He fished Tex [their negro servant] out from the kitchen, borrowed an axe . . . and soon appeared with an armful. As he took the sticks from Tex to build the fire, out dropped a scorpion to add to the excitement. It was torpid, but nevertheless it was a scorpion, and I took my usual safe position, in the middle of the bed, till there was an auto de fe. The loose windows rattled, and the wind howled around the corner of our room. I put a sack and shawl over my summer dress, and we shivered over Tom's fire . . . while father Custer took out his pipe, to calm the troubled scene into which the rush of Nova Zembla had thrown us.

Elizabeth Custer now realized that a norther allowed no time for preparations, hence she took pains to be ready in advance for the next one. She told her mother:

I have established the only Yankee woodpile in Texas. I don't mean to be caught again, and shrivel up as we did this time. You don't know how these storms deceive you. One hour we are so suffocated with the heavy, oppressive air, we sit in the deep window-sills and pant for breath. Along comes a roaring sound through the treetops, and there's a scatter, I can tell you. We bang down the windows, and shout for Texas to hunt the wood-pile, jump into warm clothes, and before we are fairly prepared, the hurricane is upon us. We really don't mind it a bit as it doesn't last long (once it lasted
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three days), besides it is so good to be in something that isn’t going to blow down, as we momentarily expected in a tent.

When Custer’s tour of duty was up in Texas, he and Elizabeth took a ship from Galveston to New Orleans. Not long after the ship left Galveston Bay a norther paid the Custers a farewell visit, which was nearly a complete farewell for all on board. Elizabeth wrote:

The day was sunny and clear as we departed, but we had hardly left the harbor before we struck a norther. Such a hurricane as it was at sea! We had thought ourselves versed in all the wind could do on land; but a norther in that maelstrom of a gulf makes a land storm mild in comparison.

We labored slowly through the constantly increasing tempest, and the last glimpse of daylight lighted a sea that was lashed to white foam about us. At home, when the sun sets the wind abates; but one must look for an entire change of programme where the norther reigns.

Elizabeth was terrified by the tossing of the ship and “the creaking and groaning of the ship’s timbers,” but George was there to calm her—at least until he fell prey to seasickness. During the night there was “a fearful crash, the quick veering of the boat, and her violent rolling from side to side.” A water pitcher plunged down on Elizabeth in her berth, and she thought the end had come. Indeed a huge wave had dashed in the wheel-house and put the engine out of commission, but since the ship carried auxiliary sails, these were hoisted and enabled the ship to ride out the gale.

New Orleans looked mighty good to the Custers after that last taste of a Texas norther. They were to experience many “weather vagaries” in Kansas, but Texas had prepared them well for life on the Great Plains.

Another noted soldier of the Civil War who helped to conquer the Indians of the West was General Nelson A. Miles. Miles had a most amazing military career: winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1892, he managed to par-
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ticipate in nearly every important engagement in which the army participated from 1861 to 1898. His life was full of excitement, hardship, and danger, yet he still found the Texas norther a very impressive phenomenon—one which he never forgot. In 1874 while pursuing the Kiowas and Comanches in the Texas Panhandle, Miles' army met up with a norther.

The period of heat and sunshine [said Miles] was finally followed by such an overshadowing of the heavens as created an impression of grandeur and awe. The threatening elements were not long in showing the force and fury of the storm that had been gathering. First there came a few scattering drops like shots as one approaches a battlefield, giving warning, and at the same time impressing one with their force. These were accompanied by the distant roll of thunder and occasional flashes of lightning, followed by a drenching flood of water, and then came the fierce onslaught of the terrible storm in all its wild and relentless fury. It was at first refreshing, but afterwards pitiless in volume and extent and in its incessant raging. The tethered animals, unable to break away, turned their heads from the storm and huddled together as best they could to escape its fury. Fortunate indeed were those able to back up against some strong tent or covered wagon which would partly protect them from the beating hail and rain. It is remarkable how quickly changes occur in that country, from extreme heat to what is there called the “norther”; the cold harsh winds that are filled with particles of ice which neither man nor animal can face. These storms are undoubtedly the result of a cold current of the atmosphere coming in contact with a warmer one near the earth. To attempt to move under such circumstances would have been extremely injudicious, and all that could be done was to patiently wait until the storm should be over and the earth dry again.12

But that winter Miles had occasion to be grateful to the northers, for their blasts helped to wear down the Indians’ ponies, and Miles saw that by keeping the Indians on the run he would, with the northers’ help, be able to destroy their mounts. The strategy was successful; hundreds of Indian ponies died on the cold, bleak plains that winter and the Kiowa and Comanche resistance was broken.13
During Miles' campaign in the Panhandle a small detachment of six men was sent with messages to Camp Supply in the Indian Territory. On September 12, 1874, at a place known as Buffalo Wallow, which is in present Hemphill County, Texas, a band of about 125 Kiowas and Comanches attacked the small party. The men assumed a defensive position, but without aid, their situation was hopeless. Aid, however, came in the shape of a sudden storm. "About three o'clock a black cloud came up in the west and in a short time rain fell in blinding sheets." The rain not only brought desperately needed water to the parched men, but also, as it turned to hail, the Indians lost interest in continuing the siege. "Indians dislike rain, especially cold rain . . .," the wife of one of the survivors, William Dixon, has explained.

Colonel Richard Irving Dodge, who spent a number of years in the campaigns against the Indians on the Plains, had considerable respect for the fierceness of the norther. Dodge experienced his first norther when on duty in Texas before the war, and, when he later roamed the Great Plains to the north, he met northers there also; in fact, he even referred to "a most furious 'norther,'" which was "cutting like a razor" in the Black Hills of South Dakota as the army tried to evict some trespassing gold seekers in 1874. Dodge has given quite a description of a Plains norther.

The winters [on the Plains] are remarkable. For a week each day will be clear and bright as a mild October day in the East; then oftentimes without the slightest warning, a wind will come from the north, so piercing that an exposure to it for any length of time is certain death to any living thing. The thermometer may not indicate such excessive cold; the danger is from the sharp wind, which drives the cold like icy daggers through the body, and penetrating to every part, drags out the vital heat, leaving only a stiffened corpse of him who is so unfortunate as to be long exposed to it. But this danger can always be avoided if it is possible to get out of the
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wind. A day which would be death on the high Plains may scarcely be uncomfortably cold in a thicket at the bottom of a narrow cañon. Indians, plainsmen, and all indigenous animals understand this perfectly, and fly to shelter at the first puff.

When this "Norther" is accompanied by snow it is simply indescribable; worse than the "tourmente" of the Alps. The deepest cañons and most secluded thickets often afford no protection; tents are blown down, horses stampeded, fires put out, and the wretched sufferers can only wrap their blankets about them and bury themselves in the snow.18

According to Dodge the northers and blizzards had a cruel effect on many of the American soldiers who participated in winter campaigns against the Indians. He said that during the winter of 1872-73 there was 70 "capital amputations" at Ft. Dodge alone, principally from frost bite.19

H. H. McConnell, a cavalryman who spent five years chasing Indians in Texas after the war, has described some of his tussles with northers. One New Year's Eve a norther brought sleet and snow, and, despite "huge log fires," the soldiers barely kept warm.20 On another occasion a "harry-cane" coming out of the northwest leveled McConnell's camp.21

It is the suddenness [he said] with which the norther comes up (or down), and the consequent rapid fall in the mercury, often from 80° to 85° to the freezing point, or several degrees below it, that makes them so piercing. Generally before the advent of one it is rather more still and sultry than usual; as evening approaches, a dull, dark bank begins to rise on the northern horizon, and about sundown the "cold wave" comes, often accompanied by a wind with a velocity of thirty to forty miles an hour.22

Part of the job of protecting the Texas frontier after the Civil War was assumed by the Texas Rangers, who now, however, spent more of their time chasing desperadoes than chasing Indians. Naturally, in their outdoor pursuits, the Rangers encountered many northers, but being hardened to the elements, they usually took these cold blasts in their
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stripe. Occasionally, however, even these Rangers were thoroughly vexed by one. Mrs. Dan W. Roberts, who accompanied her husband for six years while he was in the Ranger service, reported a severe encounter that took place on a warm night near Dripping Springs in 1875:

Were you ever on a bleak hill when a blue Texas norther came up? Well, that is what happened to us that night. We almost froze to death. When one of the Rangers lay down, the other called to him, “Get up and die like a man.”

Napoleon Augustus Jennings, a Ranger who could also write a good story, has described a January norther which caught up with him on his way to Laredo in 1875:

It was on this journey that I first experienced a Texas “norther.” It came upon us early one afternoon. Will Ross and I were riding about a mile ahead of the wagon. We were coatless, and our shirts were open at the throats, for the heat was stifling. Suddenly, without the slightest warning, an icy wind swept across the prairie from the north. It chilled us, through and through, in a few seconds.

“Hello! a norther’s coming,” said Will Ross. “We’d better go back and get our coats.”

We turned back to the wagon, but when we attempted to ride in the teeth of that terribly cold wind, we suffered so that we gave up the attempt. We dismounted and stood in the lee of our horses until the wagon came lumbering up. Then we bundled into our coats and overcoats and rode on to a creek, a mile or so ahead. There, under the shelter of one of the banks, we built a great fire and went into camp, to remain until the “norther” should blow itself out. This, Ross knew from experience would be in two days.

A “norther” invariably blows from the north for twenty-four hours. Then it comes back, almost as cold, from the south for twenty-four hours more. The third day there is no wind, but the cold continues gradually abating until, on the fourth day, the temperature is what it was before the “norther” came. [Jennings’ generalization is true of only some northerns.] I have been in New Hampshire when the thermometer marked forty degrees below zero; I have passed a night, lost in a snow-storm, in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado; but never have I suffered so from the cold as I have in a Texas “norther.” One’s blood gets thin in a warm climate, and it is not so easy
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to resist cold as in Northern latitudes. Not infrequently thou-
sands of cattle will die, frozen to death, in a Texas “norther.”
During the winter months the “northers” sweep over Texas
about once in every two or three weeks.24

In Albert Bigelow Paine’s biography of the famous ranger,
Captain Bill McDonald, he described the experience Mc-
Donald and another ranger had with a norther as they were
riding across the prairie:

It was late in the year, now, and suddenly in the swift
Texas fashion a norther came down, with piercing wind and
fine driving snow. If the reader has never seen a Texas
norther, or a Dakota blizzard, he will hardly understand this
predicament. The wind leaps up in a wild gale almost in an
instant; the air from being balmy takes on a sudden bitterness
that wrings the body and numbs the heart and pinches the
very soul. Then the snow comes, fine and blinding—sharp and
hard as glass. No living being was ever created that could
survive long in the face of a storm like that. Cattle know
when a norther is coming and find shelter in canyons or
gather into thick bunches in the open, their heads to the
center. Birds speed away to the south, ahead of it, or find
shelter in hollows and crannies until the demon has passed
by. A storm like that always means death. The Texas norther
and the Dakota blizzard have strewn the prairies with
bones.25

McDonald and the other ranger let their horses “drift” before
the storm, as they dared not head into or across the norther
and could scarcely have forced their horses to do so anyway.
They nearly froze but fortunately came upon some haystacks
and “burrowed themselves and their horses into them, allow-
ing the latter to feed liberally from the hay. There they re-
mained all night and until the afternoon of the next day.”26

As the Indian menace died down, Texas still remained a
busy area for the army, for now it was chosen as a principal
training area for troops, largely because Texas had plenty
of undeveloped space and, in spite of the norther and the
summer heat, the climate was considered favorable the year
round for outdoor activities. In 1898 Teddy Roosevelt came to Texas to recruit and train his “Rough Riders” for the Spanish-American War, but he missed the season of the norther so had to wait until San Juan Hill for some excitement. During the First and Second World Wars, however, many, many servicemen did not miss a norther as Teddy did, and their stories of Texas and Texas weather are legion, though they have not often found outlet in print.

Lieutenant-General Barney M. Giles, who was deputy commander of the Air Force in World War II, has given a good story of the reaction of servicemen to Texas norther. Giles himself is a native Texan and in 1917 after enlisting in the Air Force [Signal Corps then] and being sent to Mitchell Field, Long Island, he found himself being sent back to Texas to complete his training.

We [Texans] told the cadets from other states that Texas was the only good place for primary training, that it was nice and warm during the winter months and that we could fly every day! There were two train-loads of us who headed south in December, 1917—one going to Kelly Field and the one I was on, to Ellington Field at Houston. Believe it or not, we rode into Texas on the crest of a blue norther, and we almost froze to death, even we Texans! We took plenty of ribbing. Some of the boys, I remember, said they would concede that Texas was the largest state in the Union, and, also, had the biggest weather liars in the world! We were quartered in barracks with no steam heat and only one pot-bellied stove in the center. Even though we rolled ourselves completely in the three Army blankets issued to us, it was practically impossible to keep warm.27

Another Signal Corpsman who arrived at Ellington Field that same December is my senior colleague, Floyd Seyward Lear. Professor Lear recalls a “howling norther” that blew in on January 11, 1918, bringing with it a tempest of lightning and thunder and dropping the temperature from the mid-70’s to 11° in a short time and coating the field with sleet. Like
General Giles, Professor Lear found the wooden barracks of Ellington Field anything but adequate during the northers, and the men desperately huddled around the “pot-bellied stoves” which General Giles mentioned. The arrival of a blue norther was the signal for the medical corps to give the airmen “blue pills,” as it was thought that the northers had a diuretic effect on the men. The barracks and the pills were an improvement over the inadequate care given the American soldiers in the Mexican War, but the northers were still a curse to the servicemen of 1917 and to most of those since.
CHAPTER VII
DEFENSES AGAINST THE NORTHER

As the preceding pages have indicated, the norther has snuffed out a number of lives throughout its history, but its power as a killer has been exaggerated by some writers. Instances of teamsters, stagecoach drivers, and cowboys freezing to death have been recorded, but to say such cases have been frequent is wrong. The norther's toll of livestock and wildlife has at times been heavy, but it is hardly the great killer that its big northern brother—the blizzard—is. Besides, some found the northers healthfully exhilarating, and, of course, they did end the yellow fever. Nevertheless, the norther has caused plenty of misery of one sort or another to settlers and visitors of Texas.

There is little doubt that the northers sometimes helped to bring on cases of pneumonia, catarrhal fever, jaundice, diarrhea, and the common cold, as well as making victims of rheumatism and malaria—the ague, as the pioneers called it—suffer renewed attacks of their chronic disorders. A visitor to Anahuac in 1834 noticed that

The north winds are the coldest and most unhealthy here after the season of fevers begins, which is somewhat later than this time. Inhabitants represent them as being remarkably unfavorable to health. Children often begin to droop when they begin to blow; and usually revive when a south breeze sets in; and in cases of sickness adults are often sensibly affected by the changes. The temperature sometimes varies 40° in twenty-four hours.¹

Even such a boomer of Texas as Melinda Rankin, admitted in her guidebook of 1850 that northers were perhaps unhealthy:

The climate of Texas is one of alternate spring and summer, with the exception of a few weeks during the winter of
excessive rains. During this season the prairie portions of the country are subject to violent winds called “Northers,” which exhibit a sudden transition from heat to the most intense cold. They are of short continuance; their effect, however, is somewhat deleterious to health, especially to those who are not accustomed to such piercing blasts.  

One of the main reasons Texans seemed to suffer ill effects from the northers was that their clothing and their housing was often ill-suited for resisting the wind and cold of these storms. The controversial Carl, Prince of Solms-Braunfels, observed that the Texan’s “clothes are of thin cotton and always look ragged. . . [and] with the wind blowing through his rags and chilling him to the bone, the calomel produces no good effects.” Braunfels also stated that “the house of the American is a poorly built log house through which the wind blows freely.”

Many Texas visitors bemoaned the airiness of the Texas dwellings. “Oh these open houses!” complained Colonel William Gray in 1837. “What a people to live in such barns! The log huts of the poor negroes are more open than the log stables in Virginia, and some of them have no chimneys. No wonder they sicken and die; and wonder is that any of them live.” Matilda Houstoun, who with her husband in 1844 made what must have been one of the first pleasure cruises to Texas, said, “The north winds blow through and through their paper houses, and they heed it not.”

The famous Yankee traveler and journalist, Frederick Law Olmsted, found refuge from a Texas norther in a cabin of a hospitable settler in 1854; the refuge wasn’t much, for Olmsted says:

. . . . [A]s the inner door, from sagging on its wooden hinges, could not be closed at all, the norther had nearly free course through the cabin. A strong fire was roaring in the great chimney at the end of the room, and we all clustered closely around it. . . .
Defenses Against the Norther

We all sat with hats and overcoats on. . . . As I sat in the chimney-corner I could put both my hands out, one laid on the other, between the stones of the fireplace and the logs of the wall.

A pallet of quilts and blankets was spread for us in the lean-to, just between the two doors. We slept in all our clothes, including overcoats, hats, and boots, and covered entirely with blankets. At seven in the morning, when we threw them off, the mercury in our saddlebags, which we had used for a pillow, stood at 25 deg. Fahrenheit.

Lyman Brightman Russell, who lived in such a cabin as a boy near Helena, Texas, in 1853, says that . . .

... when an old-time blue norther struck the country along about the middle of winter, we children would stand around the fire in the stack chimney that my father himself built out of brick . . . and turn around like the spare-ribs hung in front of the fire to roast in hog-killing time. It was a common saying among us in one of these cold spells that it was a "shin-burner and back-freezer."

Z. N. Morrell, who for many years was a Baptist circuit rider in Texas, encountered many a norther during his travels and slept in more than one uncalked cabin. One March day on the circuit near Leona, Texas, Morrell was forced to swim his horse across a swollen stream. This was successfully accomplished, but before he was dry, "a blue Texas norther whistled around my ears," he said, "and appeared almost to penetrate my quivering limbs." His clothing froze upon him, but fortunately he came upon a cabin where he was able to thaw out his "almost frozen feet." He spent the night in the cabin but was anything but warm, for "the wind, 'tis true, whistled through the open cracks. . . ."

J. M. Franks tells of an amusing incident "that really happened" concerning an uncalked cabin and a norther.

We will call their names Smith and Brown, Mr. Smith lived on a ranch some six or eight miles from Brown. Mr. Smith had several girls and Mr. Brown would go courting over there quite often, and would sometimes stay all night.
Mr. Smith owned a good many cattle, and in those days cattle were bad to chew things—saddle blankets and everything they could get hold of; it was for the want of salt I think. . . .

So one night Mr. Brown went courting to Mr. Smith's and it got late before he hardly knew it, and he decided to stay all night. He was put in one of the little cabins to sleep. Along in the night it blew up what used to be called a blue norther. This little cabin had most all of the chinking out of it and the cracks between the logs were all open, and the wind just whistling through the cracks, so Mr. Brown thought he would keep out the wind with his pants; so he stuffed them in the crack and went to sleep. One of Smith's cows came along and licked out the pants and chewed them up. So next morning when breakfast was ready Mr. Brown had not shown up and the family all sat down to breakfast and in looking out they saw Mr. Brown going north. Well, he was running and the wind was blowing about 40 miles an hour. . . . Young Smith said he could have played cards on his shirt as he ran off.9

According to Franks, Mr. Brown never came back.

Even the hotels and inns left much to be desired in the way of a refuge in a norther in the early days. The Houstouns stayed in the "Houston House" while in Houston (and should have visited Sam Houston to have made the confusion complete) and found it anything but cozy. Mrs. Houstoun said:

A piercing norther was blowing and whirling wildly round the fragile house, and forcing its way through the cracks and crannies, and putting out both fire and candle; the cold also was more intense than anything I ever before experienced.10

Olmsted stopped at an inn at Caldwell during a norther and was so uncomfortable he had to keep his hat and overcoat on. Part of the trouble was that many window panes were broken, and besides, the kitchen was in a separate building, so that the door between the two was usually open, giving the norther free access.11 Even in more recent times some Texas hotels have not been a match for the norther; an eminent Houstonian, T. K. Dixon, reports that while he was staying in a San Antonio hotel in 1924 "a bitter norther" came up,
and "it was so cold, even in the hotel, that he ran the bathtub full of hot water to help warm the place up."12

Northers were especially annoying and at times, indeed, dangerous to those who had to travel or work in them. It is surprising how often one finds accounts of riders becoming absolutely benumbed by cold. The experiences of Lubbock, Reagan, Parker, and Howell in this regard have already been mentioned. Another account which deserves mention is that of Robert Hancock Hunter, who came to Texas in 1822 as a boy of nine and who has given us one of the most vivid and interesting accounts of a bout with a norther that is to be found in all of Texas literature. Mrs. Beulah Gayle Green, who edited the Hunter narrative but wisely did not change his fascinating style, is to be congratulated for making Hunter's interesting story available to the public. Hunter described his experience as follows:

Pa sent me up to Harrisburg with a shovel or a senter plow to have sharpened. While up there, a cold norther come. I went down [to] uncle Billy Vinces. I stade there 2 days. The norther broke off a little the second day. In the mean time my horse got a way from me. Mr. Vince let me have a horse, & I started home. Mr. Vince rapt me up in a blanket & an overcoat. It was 25 miles home, I got a bout half way home, when the norther sprung up a fresh, rained & sleted, & my lasy horse, I could [not] git him a long, & I got so cold that I had no feeling. The icicles, hung to my hat brim so that I could hardly see my way. I finely got home. I rode up to the gate, & pa come out to git some wood, & saw me, he cald me to git down. I heard him, but I could not speak. He came to me & took me off[f] the horse & stude me on the ground & I fell over. He took me up & carried me in to the house. Mr. Linch was in, tha told to bring him to the fire, pa told them to bring in a tub of water that was out under the eave. Tha donso & broak the ice, & pa put me down in the water & thawed the ice. Before he could git my clothes of[f], my mocassins was froze to my feet. That was in the evening, & I knowed nothing untill next day twelve oclock. When I woke up, I was all wright.13
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Mrs. Willie Newbury Lewis, in her interesting Book, Between Sun and Sod, has told of a somewhat similar experience that occurred to a young boy in the Panhandle in the 1880's. According to Mrs. Lewis, a young negro boy named Birl Brown was riding on an errand when a freezing norther struck.

He had been gone not more than half an hour when the norther struck that ushered in the memorable freeze of the 80's, the storm which broke many an individual and was the final catastrophe in the downfall of several big companies. Luckily Birl's horse trotted up to the post-office as the snow began to fall. Had he been many minutes later, his fate would have been that of the mail carrier whose driverless horses pulled into town late that afternoon with an empty stage as mute evidence of the tragedy.

Ralph Jefferson, the postmaster, and another man rushed out to carry the boy in, as he was already too stiff to dismount. He was wrapped in his saddle-blanket and placed before the fire, then once again given a drink of the liquid to which he was fast becoming accustomed. He was kept by his white friends till the storm was over and the warm sun made it safe for him to set out again alone.

Wharton J. Green, a son of the hero of the Mier Expedition, also had a comparable experience. In 1855 Wharton was coming to visit his father, following a long residence in the East, and he journeyed into Texas from Shreveport on horseback.

After a lonesome day's ride with scarcely a cabin in sight on the route, I struck a fence enclosing an improved plantation. My mouth watered at the prospect of anticipatory good cheer for the night, and suitable the time and occasion for just about that time an incipient "Norther" . . . put in an appearance accompanied by the most terrific rainfall that I have ever known, with one exception and that was on the Nile.

Following the fence for a mile brought me in front of a neatly framed house, whose piazza was almost on the road. I had heard of a drowned rat; I felt like two, with icicles trickling from collar to boots. Almost without waiting to ask permission I proceeded to dismount, and then came the ominous veto: "Don't get down, you can't come in."
Defenses Against the Norther

Green found himself looking into the mouths of a double-barrelled rifle. His protests against this inhospitality were unavailing, and he finally decided that it would be wise to ride on, the norther notwithstanding.

A mile or so further on we [Green and his horse, Jim] reached an unpretentious cabin, whose occupant was an in-born gentleman. He put me in front of a rousing fire, gave a drink of new corn whiskey to thaw me out, went out and groomed Jim, and then came back and did the same for me, rubbing me down in no gentle currycombing, for well he realized that I was on the verge of physical collapse. Then he wrapped me up in his old overcoat, made me take another stiff drink of the best tipple he had to offer, and then ushered me into the next room, where I sat down to the most enjoyable meal that has ever passed the lips of man. . . .

Corn whiskey and other such stimulants weren't reserved solely for the most frost-bitten victims of a norther; many a Texan on far weaker grounds sought relief from a norther's cold through liquid "warmth." In 1838 John Hunter Herndon reported that some of his Houston friends "for self defence" against a norther imbided rather freely and "got a little fuddled"; Herndon himself had "an apple toddy" but relied mostly on reading Tom Paine's fiery ideas for warmth.17 Another visitor in Houston at this same time (1838) mentioned that with "only three stoves in the whole of Houston, we used to light fires in front of the saloon in the evening, stand around them and enjoy—not excepting the President [Sam Houston]—hot drinks with merry speeches."18 Peppered food was another prescribed antidote to the norther's cold—one which the temperance folk could fall back on.19

One writer has said, "There just isn't any defense against a norther. One simply rides it out or succumbs."20 This is hardly borne out by the facts, however, for Texans have been quite resourceful in devising defenses against the norther.

A traveler caught on the open prairies in severe northers
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did not merely grit his teeth and ride on. First off he would stop and put on more clothing. Experienced prairie travelers carried blanket coats or Mackintosh slickers to put on, even though they might be traveling on a balmy, spring day. The gaily colored woolen blanket coats were widely used and often had high collars that came up around the ears; sometimes these great coats had hoods like eskimo parkas or the Spanish mantas. Lacking a blanket coat, a person could wrap a blanket around himself and often be even snugger than in a coat itself. The rubber Mackintoshes were especially valuable in wet and freezing northers, but even these at times froze stiff as a board. Mittens, ear-muffs, and even leggings were also put into service by the more cautious travelers. The Yankee, Olmsted, was unusually well-prepared, having in addition to his blankets and poncho, “extra underclothing, an overcoat, a Guernsey shirt, two hunting-shirts, and even Canada leggins.”

After loading on his extra clothing, a traveler would look for a ravine or creek bed where he could seek out the shelter of its protective banks, and if he was lucky enough to be near a timber belt he would hasten to that cover, where he would find the norther much less severe, though falling branches at times created a new hazard. When Olmsted was crossing the prairie north of San Antonio in 1854, he and his companions were overtaken by a whistling norther; in defense, he says “we galloped for the nearest ravine and, hurried on all the clothing we could muster.”

Since northers almost always last at least one or two days, it was the policy in the colder northers for travelers to pitch camp and not try to press on. Some sort of shelter would be erected, and as large a fire as possible would be built. If tents were available they would be pitched with their en-
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trance to the south. Sometimes dirt was banked up against the sides of the tent to keep the cold air from coming in.\textsuperscript{23}

It wasn't easy to keep a tent standing in a norther. Jack Elgin described such a problem on the Brazos plains in 1872. It was December and a "teaming hot" day:

I knew that the hot afternoon would bring a norther [wrote Elgin], so I took extra precautions in seeing that the tents were well staked down, and all the wood that we could gather, which was scarce at that spot, was collected.

At midnight the norther struck. Every tent was swept down at the first blast. The chuck wagon, which had been unloaded of all camp equipment and was quite light, containing only the negro cook and his assistant, was turned over. Some of the wagons were blown a hundred or two hundred yards by the force of the wind.\textsuperscript{24}

Certainly the norther has blown down many thousands of tents in its career and isn't through yet.

While a tent—if it stood—tempered the cold of a norther somewhat, it still left a lot of room for improvement, and, while it was dangerous and suffocating to build a fire in any tent except an Indian teepee, at times pans or kettles of coals were brought inside the tents and helped considerably. Captain C. J. Whiting of Johnston's 2nd Cavalry worked out a scheme for putting a stove pipe through a tent which allowed a small stove to be operated in a tent, and this gave good warmth.\textsuperscript{25}

Those not fortunate enough to have a tent in a norther, worked out substitute means of defense. Some piled up brush barricades against the wind or actually crawled into a pile of brush itself. Captain Bill McDonald of the Rangers once took refuge in a haystack, and Noah Smithwick, in a similar plight, finding no haystack, made his own by reaping "great armfuls" of the "waist high" sedge grass of the prairies and then crawled into it.\textsuperscript{26}
Where grass and brush were unavailable, desperate men have sometimes dug holes into the ground itself. DeVaca was the first to adopt this means and he even pre-heated his holes. He described his method as follows:

I scratched a hole in the ground and threw in it much firewood . . . and built around the hole four fires crosswise, being very careful to stir them from time to time. Of the long grass that grows there I made bundles, with which I covered myself in that hole and so was protected from the night cold.27

Unfortunately, one night his straw caught on fire, and he was severely burned. The Mier prisoners tried a somewhat similar scheme, lying in the ashes of their burned out fires, and other such instances have been recorded.28

Sometimes men constructed a lean-to, made of blankets or buffalo hides, behind which they got some protection.29 At least two cases are cited, however, where frontiersmen brought the buffalo hides more closely around them—to their misfortune. The German novelist and traveler Frederick Gestaeker related an interesting tale which was told him round a campfire; it purported to be the experience of some hunters in a Missouri nother. “The wind was now blowing from the northwest,” said the raconteur, “almost cold enough to freeze the marrow in our bones, and the dry buffalo dung . . . made but a poor fire.” One of the shivering men, named Turner, stripped a green buffalo skin, wrapped himself in it, and went sound to sleep. In the morning he awoke to find the skin frozen tightly around him, and he couldn’t budge. His companions came to his rescue, however, “We rolled him to the fire, to thaw the skin, and set him free; the rolling and the heat made him feel rather giddy, but a hot marrow-bone restored him . . . ”30

A very similar experience has been recorded by Napoleon Augustus Jennings, the Texas Ranger. Jennings related a
story told him by Lawrence Christopher Criss, "an old Texas guide and buffalo-hunter," who swore that the incident was true. This classic tale is worth reproducing in full:

"It was along in the winter of '69 that I was out huntin' buffalo with a little hunch back we called Twisted Charley," said Criss, telling me the yarn one night, sitting by a camp-fire near El Paso, Texas. "We were up in the Panhandle, and dead oodles of buffalo grazed around us. We had run across a herd in the afternoon, and killed nineteen between us. Twisted Charley and I were skinnin' them, and were takin' off the hides of four or five when the worst norther I ever remember struck us.

"We piled all the wood we could find on the fire, but we couldn't begin to keep warm, and when night come on it got colder, and colder, and colder, till the coffee, boilin' in the coffee-pot on the fire, had a skim of ice on it that we had to break before we could pour the coffee out.

"Well, a bright idea struck me, and I took one of the green buffalo-hides and wrapped myself up in it, and in a minute I was as warm and comfortable as a man could wish to be anywhere. You know there is nothin' warmer than a buffalo hide, and this one was extra thick. Charley saw what I had done, and he went and got a hide, too, and wrapped himself up in it. We were not long in fallin' asleep after that, and I was peacefully dreamin' about skinnin' a Jicarilla Apache buck Injun to make mocassins out of, when, all of a sudden, I was woke up by the most awful howlin', I ever heard.

"I was sure the Injuns were down on us, and I jumped up and grabbed my rifle in a hurry. Then I saw that it was Twisted Charley who was doin' the yellin.' I went over to where he lay, wrapped up in the green buffalo-hide, and I gave him a kick to wake him up, for I thought, of course, he had a nightmare.

"'Help me out, help me out!' he yelled.

"'What's the matter with you?' I asked.

"'Don't you see I'm froze up in this hide and can't git out,' he howled.

"I took hold of the hide and tried to unroll it, but it was froze 'round him as hard as boiler-iron. He was warm enough, for he had wrapped himself in it with the hairy side next to him, but he wanted to get out bad.

"'I can't unwrap that hide anyway.' I said, after I'd made a trial at it.

"'Cut it open,' said Twisted Charley.
Another possible "port in a storm" when the norther blew was the hollow of a tree, and, if things got so bad that a heavy snow accompanied the storm, one could burrow in the snow like a sled dog and find a semblance of warmth and protection.32

Once one had made camp in a norther, there were additional measures one could take to keep warm. Certainly, a fire was built whenever any fuel was available—and the bigger the fire the better. Many writers speak of the huge fires that were built on such occasions—large enough "to roast an ox."33 If firewood wasn't carried and timber unavailable, there often were buffalo-chips or cow-chips readily to be found; as the poet put it

... and where the herd had passed  
Was scattered *bois de vache* enough to last  
Until the storm abated.34

At times boxes and even wagons were torn apart to provide fuel. The young German immigrant, Gustav Dresel, has described how he and some fellow travelers in 1839 "tried to put an empty abandoned log cabin on fire" in order to keep warm in a raging norther.35
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During dry northers, shivering travelers sometimes set fire to the clumps of bunch grass or sage for a fleeting few moments of warmth, as Kendall and Compton Smith have both described. Cabeza de Vaca resorted to carrying a lighted torch or fire brand for warmth while traveling the cold prairie, and he once warmed himself at a burning tree which lightning or some such “miracle” had ignited.

It could be fatal to lie still in a very cold norther, even with a fire burning at one’s side. The Abbé Emanuel Domenech, who arrived in Texas in 1848 to be pastor of the newly founded Alsatian settlement of Castroville, nearly froze by a fire during a severe norther near D’Hanis. “It was winter,” he said, “and the weather very inclement owing to the north wind, which brought with it from the Rocky Mountains a piercing cold, which froze my very vitals.” In addition to the cold wind, there was a “dense fog,” which added to the discomfort of the Abbé’s night in the open. The Abbé tells what followed:

We stretched ourselves on the earth, with our feet towards the fire, for a night’s repose. But such repose! Thanks to the fog, I felt, at the end of half-an-hour, as if I were in an iced bath. The fire scorched my feet, whilst my teeth chattered with cold. I shivered all over, and was so stiff that I could hardly move, while the Alsatian, who was the stronger man, and used to campaigning, snored as lustily as if he were at home in his bed. I had neither courage nor strength to awaken him, but lay on my bed of stone and mud, doubtful as to whether I should ever rise from it. Before daybreak the Alsatian woke up, and came over to me. He heard my dying voice, took me in his arms, and laid me before the fire, which he renewed with branches and briers. Animation was restored by degrees. After a little, I could move my limbs, and, as there were none of them frozen, we were able to resume our journey.

Thus at times men kept moving and exercising intermittently throughout the night and often kept the horses moving as
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well. Usually it was safe to go to bed, however, and that was the refuge of many travelers in a norther. As many blankets as could be found were heaped on one’s bed, but at times not even that provided sufficient warmth. Ferdinand Roemer, the German scientist, who was colder in Texas “than any time in Germany,” said that “Four woolen blankets would hardly keep one warm,” and Olmsted, after piling three blankets and a poncho on his bed and crawling in with his whole wardrobe on, still awoke “benumbed” with cold.

At such frigid times one could sometimes get another to “double-up” and share a bed or bed-roll. Lewis Garrard, who was travelling over the Santa Fé trail in 1846, has described such an arrangement in his delightful narrative, *Wah-to-Yah and the Taos Trail*. Garrard’s party encountered a “Texas” norther in the vicinity of Pawnee Rock, Kansas, and the following drama took place:

We awoke on the morning of the 16th [Oct., 1846], with a Norther penetrating our blankets. The river Arkansas, almost dry, and on whose north bank we were encamped, was covered with floating particles of thin ice. Drinker had but two blankets, and, on awakening, we found him lying near the remains of the “bois de vache” [cow chips] fire, the light ashes of which, on his clothing, gave the appearance of snow. We wore extra clothing during the morning’s ride, and Drinker looked badly, from the effect of last night’s wakefulness. . . . At length, after a long pause, he said: “St. Vrain and Folger sleep together. Chad and Bransford do too, hadn’t we better?” I acquiesced with pleasure. With saddles and overcoats, we had good pillows—the other clothing remained on us. Whenever camp was made, a place was selected by each couple for sleeping before dismounting (mountaineer custom); and, ere dark, the pallet of robes, etc., was always spread. We huddled around the miserable “cow wood” fires, chilled by the cold winds.

Though this incident transpired in Kansas, similar happenings have been recorded in Texas.

Thanks to all the devices that have just been mentioned,
the loss of human life that has taken place on the prairies resulting from the northers has been rather low, but the more defenseless wildlife and livestock have suffered heavy losses from these storms. The freezing and stunning of fish in the shallow coastal waters of the coast has already been mentioned. Birds suffered particularly from the cold blasts, occasionally being frozen to their perches in a sleet ing storm and more often perishing from the cold itself. The great American ornithologist, John James Audubon, visited the Gulf Coast in the spring of 1837 and recorded the plight of some of his feathered friends after several northers. On the sixth of April he wrote:

The weather having become very cold one morning, many humming birds were picked up dead along the beaches, and those which bore up were so benumbed as almost to suffer the members of my party to take them with the hand. The Scarlet Tanager . . . were restrained from proceeding eastward by the unseasonably cold weather.

The 7th of April brought "a severe gale from the northwest," the 13th brought another, and on the 25th, Audubon, who was then in Galveston Bay, wrote:

A heavy gale blew all night, and this morning the thermometer in the cabin is 63° [sic]. Thousands of birds, arrested by the storm in their migration northward, are seen hovering around our vessels and hiding in the grass, and some are struggling in the water, completely exhausted.

Deer, buffalo, and lesser animals also fell in large numbers before severe northers, but many of the bones that strewn the prairies in the northers' wake were those of highly-prized cattle and sheep herds, and the importance of the norther to the livestock industries deserves closer examination.
A norther was a far more serious matter to cattle than it was to man. In the event of a sudden sleet ing norther, man could avail himself of the shelter of his home, his tent, his wagon, or his slicker, cattle could avail themselves only of the partial protection of a thicket, a ravine, or their own milling herd. Often there was no thicket or ravine to be found, and the milling herd gave scant protection to those on the outside and at times caused trampled death to some of those on the inside. If no other protection could be found, the cattle simply drifted with the storm until something resembling shelter was found or until the norther had blown itself out. In any case traveling with the storm was less punishing than standing or moving against it.

Often cattle sensed a norther long before it arrived, and, as some of our “correspondents” have already pointed out, the cattle would begin to head southward or towards the nearest thicket before the first cold blast was even felt. Frank Dobie has said that the cattle’s “uneasy behavior presaged a norther many hours, or even a day or two, before it struck. They would stand with heads pointed to the north, sensing expectantly; they would low and bawl and look off south; they would be bunching up or sifting down from the uplands to sheltering breaks, their routine of grazing, watering and sleeping entirely upset.”

A famous San Antonio rancher and businessman, Max Krueger, has given a graphic description of a drift after it got underway:

On the open prairie where they can not find refuge in the cover of trees or underbrush the cattle begin to drift, and with heads hanging low to protect them from the icy blasts they
slowly succumb to the storm; and singly or in droves head southward until they find shelter or until a river or, in later years, a wire fence, stops their advance. Then they crowd together, an impenetrable mass, rendered helpless by the icy cold of the polar current. The weaker animals and those most exposed to the elements and sometimes even the whole herd freeze to death. . . .

According to Philip Ashton Rollins, in his justly famous book, *The Cowboy*, the norther seemed to have a "hypnotic" effect upon the cattle, and no longer thinking, they yielded to herd psychology, and became mere "muscle automatically working." Drifting did not spare them from suffering, and Rollins has given a pathetic picture of the almost senseless animals, as they finally came to a halt, and with "the water from their eyes freezing, with long icicles hanging from their lips, with their backs rime-coated, they stood, head down, moaning, hopeless."

Cattle might drift for days if the norther was a long and severe one. At the conclusion of the storm, the animals might be many miles from their home range. William Curry Holden, in his excellent book, *Alkali Trails*, said that after a bad norther in the '80's "many head from Tule Canyon and north of Pease River were known to have drifted as far south as Shackelford County [approximately 200 miles]." Krueger has said that after a severe norther "Texas steers, several years old, have been found on the head waters of the Nueces River in Uvalde County that were owned in Palo Pinto County, three hundred miles from home." In his grand biography of Charles Goodnight, the great Panhandle rancher, J. Evetts Haley claimed that the "blue blizzard of the High Plains" sometimes drove cattle from the Arkansas and Platte Rivers down into the Panhandle and drove Panhandle cattle as far south as the Blanco, Brazos, and Colorado Rivers, such drifts involving a trip of 400 miles or more.
“old pro” in this field, Frank Dobie, says in *The Longhorns* that at times during the eighties the cattle presented “a drama in drifting comparable to the migrations of the buffalo or the southward flight of the wild-crying wedges of sand-hill cranes.”

Drifting was a serious problem for the cowman, for it sometimes meant the irrevocable loss of some of the cattle, or the annoying mixing of herds, and always entailed the task of rounding them up and driving them back to their home range. That delightful British adventurer, Captain Flack, wrote in his book, *The Texas Ranger*, regarding the loss of cattle after a norther:

> When the cold “northers” drive the “gentle cattle,” for warmth and shelter into the forests, from the prairies where they usually graze, they sometimes become mixed up with the wild herds; and although the greater number return to their range when the “norther” has blown itself out, still a few sometimes remain with their wilder brethren, and become, in a short time, as wild as they are.

To combat the problem of drifting, cowmen adopted two methods: one was to detail the cowboys to stick with the herd during a norther, the other was the construction of long, barbed-wire drift fences. The one was a mobile defence, the other was static, and both had their advantages and disadvantages.

The cowboy didn’t stop the drifting, he merely controlled it. As one cowboy put it: “It was our business to follow the cattle until they stopped and then to head them back. To try to head them before the wind laid would have been like trying to turn back the norther itself.” Thus, though the cowboys couldn’t stop the herd, at least they knew where it was when the norther subsided; however, a round up of strays and the long trek home still had to be made.
Drifting with the herd in a norther was certainly no picnic for the cowboys. Richard Irving Dodge said of this:

These are the trying times for the cowboys. . . . The worse the weather, the worse the stampede, and the greater the necessity for the presence and activity of the cow-boys.

A terrible norther, during the winter of 1880, stampeded many herds in Southern Kansas and the Cherokee strip, some of which made fully ninety miles to the south before being got under control. With and among them were numbers of cowboys, with only the scantiest ration of bread and meat, with no shelter or bedding, with no protection from the terrible cold except the clothing they happened to have on when the stampede was announced.\textsuperscript{11}

A Texas cowboy, Jeff Morgan, has described what it was like to be caught in a severe norther while herding cattle. While herding for J. B. Slaughter near Big Spring, Texas, in 1897, Morgan encountered the first norther of the season, which was "a howler from the start."

That wind was reared up on its hind legs, squalling and walking yonder. It cut through a man's garments like a sharp knife. It had them pore cattle bawling and milling and stomping. They was doing their best to turn tail to the storm and drift with it, as is natural with a cow brute. But Slaughter had every hand in the saddle, trying to hold them.\textsuperscript{12}

Morgan soon convinced Slaughter that if he held the cattle he might lose the men, and the humane boss let the cattle drift. The cow-pokes rode back to camp, the "horses humping under the saddle, traveling stiff-legged," and gathered around the blazing fire, which "the wind whipped . . . so hard that a man either got burnt or felt no heat at all."\textsuperscript{13} The men had to sleep in drifts of snow or atop windswept knolls, and in the morning their fingers were too stiff to light a fire and some had frozen ears or frostbitten hands or feet. Not for eight days were they able to round up the drifted herd, and they "tallied up a loss of one hundred and fifty head of pore cows and calves."\textsuperscript{14}
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The big cattle companies on the High Plains co-operated in establishing lines of cowboys to turn back the cattle in a mild norther or to divert them in severe northers from drifting into settled regions or over precipitous canyon walls. Three different strings of such line camps were maintained in the Panhandle in 1883, and, according to Theodore Roosevelt, similar lines were strung out at the same time in the Dakota Territory. The winter of 1884-85 brought such a severe series of northers that the line riders were unable to do more than drift four or five hundred miles south with the herds.

Charles Adams Jones, who managed the big Spur Ranch in the Panhandle, has vividly described the cowboy on the line.

Picture the line rider of the plains as he tries to hold back cattle that are drifting south under the resistless force of a norther. Half frozen, he turns into his lonely camp at the end of an exhausting day's work, knowing that by morning his cattle, driven by the fierce blasts that are tattering his tepee-tent, will be miles below the line. But he has done what he could and shivers in his blankets until morning, when his work must be resumed.

In an effort to stop the long costly drifts cattlemen endeavored to string long lines of barbed wire fences from east to west across the range. The J.A. ranch pioneered in this method of control, and in 1882 a 200-mile drift fence was constructed across the Panhandle with the co-operation of the other ranchmen of the area north of the Canadian River.

The drift fence had its disadvantages, however, for in severe storms, unless the drifting animals succeeded in breaking the fence, it became a trap for them and large numbers of animals would pile up against the fence. There, finding no shelter, little or no grass, and no chance to keep moving with the wind, they often succumbed in great numbers, and their carcasses would line a drift fence for miles after a severe norther.
Cattle, Cowmen, and the Norther

Losses from the northers were often large, sometimes running as high as 20% after a series of severe storms. The winter of 1859-60 was particularly hard on cattle. James Buckner Barry, who kept a diary in Bosque County that winter, recorded that it was "a very bad winter so far great many stock frozen probably 1000 head in county." This gloomy estimate was far too conservative, for the editor of Barry’s diary reports that the losses in Bosque County that winter were 14,856 head of cattle. Very costly northers blew during the winter of 1871-72, and from 1881 to 1891 a series of bad winters wrecked the Texas range almost as disastrously as it did the even more unfortunate northern plains. While the severe northers of mid-winter reaped the highest toll, even the milder early spring northers were very damaging, for at that time of year the cattle were often in a weakened condition and were more susceptible to cold.

Not only did the northers cause drifting, suffering, and death, they also were sometimes the cause of stampedes. The wet northers, especially those of spring, summer, and early fall which were often accompanied by impressive electrical displays, were especially vexing. "Amidst storms like these," wrote Krueger, "the animals are naturally restless and easily frightened; and the fall of a rock, the sudden flight of a bird, the movement of a rabbit, may cause the most disastrous stampede." The lightning itself flashing across the horns of the beasts often set them into panic, as did the summer thunderstorms of the usual sort. One of the best descriptions of such a storm is that by Carl Peters Benedict who was working the range near the Pease River in the spring of 1894:

It was nearly dark when the day men went to the wagon; there was not a breath of wind, the air seemed oppressive, and a big cloud was slowly approaching from the northwest.

... [By ten o’clock] The coming storm was in plain view,
its mighty crest piled high with black rolling clouds and the lightning coming straight to the ground. To the eyes of a tenderfoot kid the night looked like it would be the last night of the human world. We all wore good slickers and the fear of getting wet did not bother me like the looks of that cloud. The blackness, the steady roar of wind and rain advancing with relentless speed behind what looked like a solid curtain of water approaching us across the hills, and the furious claps of thunder, all scared me bad for a while. Suddenly a blinding flash of pure white light blazed in my face; a streak of liquid fire hit the prairie just across the herd from me with a fierce metallic crack that jarred the ground under my horse's feet; a crash of thunder burst overhead that sounded as if the end of time had come, while the quick, thudding sound of hoofbeats told me the cattle were leaving the bed ground. In a second the rain was falling in sheets, while flash after flash of lightning blazed overhead, and many bolts of the white fire struck the hills around us.\textsuperscript{24}

The herd alternately stampeded and drifted and milled to keep the cowboys more than busy that night.

Fortunately for the cowboy, one of his biggest jobs, that of trail driving, took place in the season when northers were least common. However, sometimes the herd traveled out of season, and, then too, the norther has never been a complete slave to a calendar; consequently, severe northers were sometimes encountered on the trails to Kansas, California, and Idaho. One trail driver, Sol West, described such an experience while taking a herd up the trail to Ellsworth, Kansas, in 1874. A bitter norther was encountered, and the cattle turned about and drifted southward. The cowboys followed the herd, but the cold was so severe that some of the ponies froze to death during the pursuit, and before the storm blew out, the entire remuda of seventy-eight horses had perished.\textsuperscript{25}

In 1894 Alf Beadle was trail-herding from the Davis Mountains to the Panhandle:

One day about twelve o'clock a low cloud [sic] was seen in the noorth [sic]. Some of the boys said it was only the sand blowing on the plains, while others said it was a blizzard
coming. We were then going over the long prairie near the
Leon Holes and about 4 o’clock it struck us. It was a sand
storm and turned to sleeting. We were compelled to stand
a midnight guard with the horses as well as the cattle. The
cattle milled and ran most of the night. Could not bed them
at all and we made slow progress owing to the cold.26

Beadle mentioned a most interesting emergency measure
adopted by one of the cowboys to keep warm: he “burned a
rat den and after it had burned out he raked the ashes away
and lay down and went to sleep.”27 Cabeza de Vaca had done
something very similar 450 years earlier, but it is hardly likely
that the cowboy had ever read of Cabeza’s exploits. Some of
the other cow-pokes tried the same trick, but their hands were
too numb to even strike a match; one of the men had both
of his feet frozen.28

In A Vaquero of the Brush Country, Frank Dobie gives a
sterling account of a norther striking a trail herd. As a herd of
700 yearlings was being driven from Colorado City to Dawson
County in the Panhandle in 1892,

... about twelve o’clock one night a “blue whistler” snorted
down upon us. We were on the plains country, and no one
who has not experienced a blue whistler on the open prairies
of West Texas really knows what a cold north wind is like.
The nearest protection was the north star, but we had to stay
with the cattle and let all possibility of shelter go.29

The yearlings began to run, scatter, and drift, and the wind
blew a number of tumbleweeds into their midst.

The night was so dark, the weeds were so big, and the year-
lings were so little that we could not very well tell tumble-
weeds from dogies. One of the boys swore next day that he
had run a bunch of weeds at least half a mile trying to turn
them back before he discovered that they were not year-
lings.30

The wind continued and the cold was so intense that the men
dared not stop or sleep for fear of freezing to death in addi-
tion to losing the herd. Wolves howled; “the cold norther was
The Texas Norther

making them hungry." When the storm finally blew out, the grass was covered with snow, and the cowboys had to clear some of the grass with a make-shift snow plow to provide forage for the herd. As evidence of the changeableness of Texas weather, however, several days later the trail herd was threatened by a prairie fire driven along by a dry norther.

During one of the early cattle drives from Texas to California in 1854, several northers were encountered, even as far west as the Mohave Desert—at least the Texans labeled the storms northers whether they were officially so or not. James G. Bell kept a log of this drive, and on August 17th in southwestern New Mexico he wrote:

During the night a stiff norther sprung up, and the whole camp were aroused (unnecessarily) to take care of the cattle, consequently slept little; slight sprinkling rain...

On the Mohave Desert on the 30th of October he wrote:

A severe Norther sprung up on the night of the twenty-eight; and continued till tonight to twelve o'clock; the clouds of sand, with the piercing coldness made travelling exceedingly uncomfortable, and had like to have us froze out.

While Charlie Siringo was not a “typical” cowboy, his experiences with northers help to give us a picture of the problems which the norther created for the boys in chaps. Once Charlie encountered “a piercing cold norther” on the border between Kansas and Oklahoma, and, instead of persisting in traveling north, he turned like the cattle and drifted south to Texas. On another occasion when Charlie was traveling from Big Spring to Toyah, “an ugly looking black cloud in the north” rose up and soon brought wind, sleet, and snow. Charlie had chosen this inopportune time to come down with the smallpox, and he was brusquely turned away from all houses where he sought shelter. He was forced to ride on and on through the “cold norther” and nearly froze to death before he finally found refuge.
Cattle, Cowmen, and the Norther

Frank Dobie's biography of the vaquero, John Young, has a number of interesting references to northers. He compares the relation of the cowboy and the norther to that of the sailor and a gale.

On stormy nights when wild northwesterners rave,
How proud a thing to fight with wind and wave!
The dripping sailor on the reeling mast
Exults to bear, and scorns to wish it past.\(^{37}\)

As Mr. Dobie points out, a cowboy hardly ever scorned to see a norther end. Once near the colorful Palo Duro Canyon, John Young got wet crossing the Canadian River, and, as "a fresh norther" came up, "the wind seemed to blow the cold right into" him.\(^ {38} \) As he approached Tascosa, he heard shooting and found that the town was being shot up by "the boys," so that Young waited outside until the town quieted down, meanwhile nearly freezing to death in the norther.\(^ {39} \) It is surprising that Young didn’t brave the guns instead.

Frank Hastings, another very able raconteur, has given an interesting account of an October norther in the Panhandle:

The afternoon had been sultry, and I noticed great thunderclaps piling up in the northeast, but wind and weather do not count for much in West Texas when one has something to do. . . .

The atmosphere was sullen; scarcely any air stirred. There was a sort of oppressive hush. Greenish and yellowish tints hung like veils of vapor about the clouds. . . .

Beauty [his horse] was sweating; the air seemed almost hot. . . . A quarter further and we shot into a cool current of air, as if it were out of a hot bath into a cold room. The mare shivered; then we met a distinctly cold breeze, and on came the storm. Beauty turned as if struck, but responded promptly to the rein, faced it for a few yards, and then reared and turned. Again she took it, this time with the bit in her teeth, and went at it, as though trying to jerk a load through a mud bog, her blood up, and fighting hard. My head was almost on my breast; the rain beat with fierce force, and I was glad after ten yards of fight to have her turn again. We seemed to be in one glare of electricity and a roar as of a battle. We made for the settler's house. The horse lot was open and lightning
struck one end of the house gallery as we dodged under the shed.  

That night around the fire in the house, needless to say, the boys swapped stories about weather and storms.

One such interesting norther story comes from Mrs. P. E. Pedrick and appears in Mattie Wooten’s *Women Tell the Story of the Southwest*. It concerns a young cowboy of the Guadalupe Mountains region, George Jayroe:

One warm day in the fall of 1887 George was riding in the greasewood flats near the Pecos River. He stopped at noon and cooked his meal; he always carried a few supplies in his black goatskin saddle pockets. He noticed his horse, which he had unsaddled and hobbled out, was not grazing, but was standing with head up watching and uneasy. He rested for an hour or two then started south, not intending to make it back to camp that night. His horse continued the nervous chewing of his bits, and every little while would pause and paw the ground.

Finally George, too, had a sinister feeling and some instinct prompted him to head back toward camp. He had not ridden far when he was aware of a mighty calmness that had settled all over the land. It was the calmness and stillness of death. As far as he could see he saw the cattle gathered together in silent bunches, their heads in the air and their noses pointed towards the north. He looked out to the north and east and saw a great black cloud casting a purple shadow over the country and creeping, ever creeping, southward. He knew then what he was in for, one of those terrible western blizzards that would whip out of the north like an evil spirit and with icy winds and blasts of snow and sleet would nip the hides of the cattle like flashes from rawhide whips.

He knew just what he must do—he must put on that yellow slicker that was always tied onto the back of his saddle, he must drop the reins on his horse’s neck and he would go straight as an arrow back to the camp and to safety.

After riding several miles he glanced back over his shoulder and saw that the cattle had begun to drift south, long droves of them, one behind the other, with heads down going for shelter. He was many miles from camp when the icy winds struck him and it wasn’t long until both he and his horse appeared as a block of ice moving through a country which was gradually being blotted out as the blizzard in-
creased in its raging fury. Mile after mile with hanging reins the cow horse fought the storm, holding true to his course. It grew darker, the ground was covered with snow; he knew somewhere out there stood his landmarkers, the old Guadalupes, but they were lost to his vision in the whirling mass of snow and sleet. Hour after hour the horse plodded on. George grew weary and cold and it seemed ages he had been in the saddle; when the horse stopped, George got off and found they were at the gate of his corral.  

Undoubtedly the cow ponies' sense of direction was a big help in a norther; sometimes, however, they returned with empty saddles.  

An Englishwoman, Mary Jaques, who spent some years on a Texas ranch, pointed out that the cowboys' comfortable western saddle was not necessarily an asset in a norther, for the cowboy did not get enough exercise to keep his blood circulating, since there was no posting or "rising in the saddle," and this accounted for some of the riders being frozen.  

Although cattlemen felt little kin with sheepmen, the problems of the latter were similar in so far as the norther was concerned. A sheep's woolly coat was not always sufficient protection against a freezing norther, especially as it was no substitute for food, and, when a norther struck after shearing season, a sheep was as vulnerable as Sally Rand without her fans.  

One of the most interesting pictures of the problems which the sheepman had with the northers is found in the interesting collection of letters compiled by the famous author of Tom Brown's School Days, Thomas Hughes, and appearing under the title, G.T.T., Gone to Texas, letters from Our Boys. Three nephews and a niece of Hughes went to Texas in the late seventies, and took up sheep ranching in the hill country behind San Antonio. The nephews were surprised at their first Texas Christmas in 1878; Willy wrote of this day:
We had an awful day... and nearly got frozen. I will give you a list of that day's proceedings: 5 a.m., got up from under wagon and found icicles all about. It was raining, everything was wet, sheep had stampeded and were at last found in three different places some miles off... It was awful cold and raining, and we thought we had lost our way, but at last we heard roosters crowing and got to the ranche, where we thawed and had coffee and "muscal," or brandy made from cactus. Then we started back and dried the blankets and things as well as possible in a rain, before a fire [big] enough to roast an ox.

A few days later it was "warm again... bully weather." Willy soon had developed considerable respect for the power of a norther; he wrote, "We have very strong north winds here, and they have blown Jem's hut a foot or two out of perpendicular."

The next winter (1879-80) was a hard one on the livestock; in February Harry Hughes wrote:

We have just had the longest spell of cold weather that there has been this winter, and it has just been bowling stock over like ninepins. However, it is an ill wind that blows no one any good—the buzzards have got so fat that they can hardly fly... The next February Harry wrote that "Willy has bought a lot of hay in case we should have any severe northers;... we lost half-a-dozen lambs at least last year, through having to turn out the flock in a severe norther." That fall Harry was as well-prepared for the norther as were the sheep with their heavy wool coats, for he wrote his sister, Madge, that he had bought

... a huge overcoat with a cape, which completely swallows me up, and the collar of which touches the rim of my hat when I put it up. It will be A1 for herding in, during a Norther.

In 1882 Madge visited the boys in Texas, and she soon had something to write about:

Three days after our arrival at the ranche, we had our
first experience of a Texas "Norther." It had been comfortably warm all day, but looked threatening. We were hard at work . . . when suddenly Willy appeared at the door, and exclaiming "Here it comes!" slammed the door to after him. The next minute a gale of wind began, which seemed to shrivel us up, and make us tuck our feet under us. . . . It rained at the same time, and during the night the rain froze as it fell on the tent, and made it as hard as a board before morning. We went to bed early, after trying in vain to get warm over the tiny cooking-stove, and after pinching my feet for some minutes, and putting every available article of clothing on my bed, I fell asleep. There were only three cots in the tent, and, as there were four people to sleep in them, my two brothers slept together in one, and I think they had the best of it that night. The next morning there was not much washing done, I am afraid, for the wind and rain still continued, and all we could do was to try to keep warm. The poor shepherd had to trudge out as usual, after being laden with all the great coats he could carry. 49

Though these English people were not strangers to cold weather the northers made quite an impression and made them "fully appreciate" their "socks and mittens"; in fact, in January of 1883 Willy found his hand was too cold to write. 50

Willy's brother, Chico, got into the act that January when he wrote:

Last Sunday, Monday, and I think, Tuesday, it froze hard, and has been thawing and drizzling ever since, but today it is beautiful. . . . The sheep will travel and scatter so in the bad weather, that one has to be pounding about all day without a moment's rest. I remember last Monday night, I had an overcoat, which had been damp, spread over my bed, and in the night it fell off; but it was frozen so hard that it stood up on its side against the bed . . .

. . . . . . . [O]n most days, when there's no norther blowing, it's so warm that I work down the well with nothing but a pair of breeches on. . . . 51

That January freeze was only the beginning of a hard winter for the sheepmen of the Southwest. In a letter to his grandmother, written in April, Willy detailed the devastation of the northers:

We have come through a pretty hard winter, which has
burst up a good many sheepmen. . . . An Englishman below us bought 900 head last fall; 700 died during the winter, and he sold the rest for 85 cts. per head (having given $2.50 cts. for them). He came off better than some fellows though. One man went into winter with 1800 head, and expected about 1000 lambs this spring. He only has 595 grown sheep, and six lambs now, and is about through with lambing. He had considerably overstocked his range. One of our neighbours lost over 300 grown sheep, and only saved about sixty lambs: he expected to raise about 350. The losses in cattle also were heavy.52

Chico also had something to say about this Texas winter:

Thank goodness we're about through the winter at last. We haven't had a norther now for some days, but my gracious, we did have one or two stingers! Food froze almost before we could get it down. This winter I experienced, for the first time, the unutterable bliss of getting into a frozen boot in the mornings. It's scrumptious. One can laugh at the winter now its back's turned; next year I hope we'll flummux it with a fireplace.53

According to Chico, the boys practically mothered the sheep, for he said that the tent was “full of sheep most of the time, when it was cold,” and on one occasion they even took the sheep into their house.54 When the sheep weren’t huddling in the tent or house, they were romping all over the range to keep warm; Chico complained that “it knocks the stuffing out of you, herding in winter, as sheep don’t get much to eat, and, in consequence, run like the deuce. . . .”55

Harry wrote an interesting letter to his father about this winter:

I don’t think Texas has been visited by such severe northers for many years as those we had last January and February. Old H—— (the German) says he can remember a far worse winter—“before the war”!! And Billy A——, who was raised here, cannot remember one at all. Stock of all kinds suffered fearfully, though not so much during, as after, the norther. We ourselves came off remarkably well; . . . mainly owing to Willy’s foresight in weaning the calves (an unheard of thing here), and providing unlimited feed for the sheep. . . . [S]ome
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poor fellows, who had scabby sheep, and not sufficient shelter or feed, lost all the way from thirty to seventy-five per cent of their sheep; and Capt. —— and others, who started into winter with poor cattle, lost tremendous quantities of them. Everything that isn’t dead already is now on the fair way to recovery, as the grass is splendid; and if the winter has done nothing else, it has given the old-method stock-raisers a lesson that will probably last a considerable time.58

Five years later, in 1888, a spring norther again wreaked havoc with the sheepmen of the Southwest; an unusually effective description of this norther has been given by Winifred Kupper in her very fine book, The Golden Hoof. It was from her uncle, Robert Maudslay, that she obtained the details of the storm. Miss Kupper rightly says, “The weather of the Southwest is a tricky affair.”59

There is, for instance, that peculiarly Southwestern phenomenon, the norther—a wind that (as any sheepman will tell you) is born at the North Pole and rushes straight down the Great Plains so fast it doesn’t lose one degree of the temperature that polar bears love and sheep do not. As the saying goes, there is not a thing to stop it but a barbed-wire fence. It rushes without warning into the balmiest day of the season, dropping temperatures fifty degrees within a few hours.

It dropped considerably more than that on a day in the early spring of 1888—a day that many a sheepman remembers still. The morning had been hot—so unseasonably hot that men of the Plains should have been suspicious of it. By mid-afternoon Robert Maudslay was lying in the shade of a tree, trying to keep cool. The sheep were shading, too; they stood in little bunches under spare bushes, heads lowered, rumps in the sun. . .

The afternoon grew even more sultry. Then the thing happened. The bright, sunny sky rapidly took on a duller cast. In the north a dark blue cloud was rolling over the Plains. . . Before it had got to them Robert Maudslay reached for his coat shivering. The sheep had pulled their heads out of the bushes and headed south toward camp. Ewes looked uneasily at loitering lambs and stepped out of the flock to wait. The old bellwether stretched his neck out in front and led the way, looking neither to right nor left, and the flock followed him without stopping to nibble grass.

The wind struck. Trees bent toward the ground, bushes
swayed, and Maudslay felt icy fingers clutching through his thin clothing. He hurried after the sheep and reached camp behind them. Quickly the two men [Robert's brother Harry was there also] penned the sheep in the brush corral on the south side of a hill. By the time they had finished and had run, numb with chill, to build up a fire and drag out blankets, they knew that this cold was already more intense than anything they had yet felt on the Plains, though little more than an hour earlier they had been sweating. By midnight the temperature had dropped from the ninety degrees of mid-afternoon to zero. The sheep huddled close in their sheltered pen to warm each other, but many a lamb chilled down and was trampled under the hooves of the others.

When the Maudslays went to their sheep the next morning they found many frozen. When the men dragged the gate open those that were left headed out of the corral and started running. They ran for miles, with Robert Maudslay close behind them. When he finally managed to turn them they ran for miles in the other direction. Not until late afternoon did they slow down and begin to graze.

In the days that followed, the Maudslays learned of thousands of sheep that lay dead on the Plains, victims of the terrible enemy from the north. This was the norther that froze the Red River a foot thick. In parts of Northwest Texas it caused a drop of exactly one hundred degrees in less than twelve hours.56

Miss Kupper points out that the timing of the norther is particularly critical. "The norther is most devastating when it swoops down in early fall after a late shearing and catches the sheep without their winter fleeces or very early in the spring, when lambs begin to drop."59 This poor timing of the norther caused it to be even more harmful to sheep than was the "Grizzly of the Plains"—the northern blizzard. Thus the norther—the "Panther" of the Texas plains and prairies—has proven itself a cruel antagonist of cattle, sheep, wildlife, and man.
THE NORTHER AS A FOLK THEME

DISPLAYING a typically human trait, Texans have learned to make a virtue out of a necessary evil insofar as the norther is concerned, for, being unable to do much about the norther, they have decided to adopt it, take pride in it, boast about it, and spin the tallest tales imaginable concerning it. Thus it is called the "Texas" norther, and thus Texans claim it to be the swiftest, strongest, ugliest, and most contrary wind that ever blew over the face of the earth. As Frank Dobie has put it, "the meteorological pride of all Texas, east, north, south, and west, is the norther—the Texas norther. The Texas norther, which, as the ballad has it,

'comes sudden and soon
In the dead of night or the blaze of noon.'”¹

Texans have boldly claimed tremendous feats for the norther especially its ability to plunge the thermometer down—even to the floor—and to operate so swiftly as to freeze fire. We have already noticed on earlier pages what extreme claims have been made for the huge drops in temperature caused by the norther, for example, General Johnson’s claim of a 70° or 80° fall and Winifred Kupper’s 100° drop.² The folk tale has extended this drop “to the floor” and has added some interesting tales concerning such drops. For example, Mody Boatright cites the cow-pokes’ tale of the ranch boss’ new thermometer which got its bottom knocked out by a plunging norther; but the boss then ordered a new type with “a rubber cushion in the bottom of the tube to take up the jar when the mercury fell”—and this type came into use “all over the Southwest.”³

It is the suddenness of the norther, more than its severity, of which Texans are especially proud, and this has been the main
theme of Texas folk-lore concerning the norther. Frank Dobie says, "It comes so sudden and soon that old Judge Clark used to always go provided with both a fan and an overcoat." And he adds, "One time one of these 'blue northers' froze a thousand ducks, before they could fly away, in a lake among the rice fields of South Texas."

This quick freezing of a lake or stream is a frequent theme. Mody Boatright's cowboys told of preparing for a swim one hot day, when, all of a sudden, the frogs started hopping into the pond from all sides, sensing the norther before the men could. The tale says:

They hit the water all right and went under, but them critters got fooled that time. They poked out their heads like they always do; and there they was froze tight as a hat-band in the ice.6

Benedict and Lomax have added a similar story:

So sudden is the drop that a standard, and not very untruthful, story tells about a too inquisitive fish that, desiring to see if the long, low cloudbank to the north meant a "blue norther," leaped out of the water only to fall back on the ice. . . .7

The writers added that this was, for the fish, "an unintentional case of burning one's bridge behind one," which could rank as the epitome of mixed metaphors were it not for the ability of the norther to freeze fire. This latter talent is the source of a number of tall tales such as the one in which Pecos Bill's "ole man" tried to blow out a lantern "but she wouldn't blow," for the norther had frozen "her" stiff. "Ole man" simply "raised up the globe," broke off the flame which was "froze stiff as an icicle," and buried it.8 These frozen flames, which were buried or cast aside, sometimes caused trouble when the returning warm weather thawed them out and started prairie fires or the like.9 William Davis Gill recorded a tale in which
The Norther as a Folk Theme

a Panhandle norther froze a boiling kettle of water “so quick the ice was hot.”¹⁰

The ultimate in these freezing stories is reported by one of Boatright’s cowboys in his rollicking Tall Tales from Texas; Joe, the cowboy, tells of a fellow who once dove into a deep swimmin’ hole, but the hot Texas sun dried up the water before he hit it. However, instead of breaking his neck, the fellow was saved by a sudden rainstorm which filled the hole; yet, when he came up for air, like the frogs, his head got frozen tight in the ice thanks to a norther. Joe added, “Least-wise that’s what he used to tell, but he was such a damn windy that you never knowed when he was tellin’ the truth and when he was tryin’ to load somebody.”¹¹

The contrast of the norther’s cold with the alternating summer-like heat, that’s “too hot for the devil and too hot for men,” has inspired a number of tales such as “Ole Man’s” loss of two oxen in the same hour, one by sunstroke and the other by freezing.¹² Another version of this story claims that it was a farmer in Collin County who was plowing with two mules, and, when one died from sunstroke, the farmer went to get a replacement but, said the farmer, “one of those durned blue northers came along and before I could get back to the plow the temperature had dropped so far that my other mule was frozen to death.”¹³

In a variation of this same story, Benedict and Lomax tell of an ox-driver who had two oxen succumb from the heat, but before he could skin them a norther had frozen them stiff.¹⁴ Pecos Bill had somewhat of a different experience; he used to skin buffalo alive but not so deep as to kill them, then he let them grow new hides; however, “one spring he skinned too early, and a norther come up, and all the buffalo took cold and died.”¹⁵ This story is no doubt based on the not infre-
quent fatalities suffered by sheep when a norther struck after shearing time.

Another somewhat traditional story which has had a number of variations is the tale of a man out riding on a very hot day when he suddenly saw a norther rise up, of the "'whiz-arrow-ing' variety," and he set out on a dash for home. Frank Dobie's version follows:

Immediately he put Spurs to his horse, hoping to outrun the rain and the freezing wind. The horse ran his best, but the wind was swifter than he—swifter than the hind part of him, at least. As he [the horse] plunged through the stable door into shelter; his tail and haunches were wet and frozen, while his steaming chest was at fever heat. The horse died of pneumonia.16

A very common Texas folk saying goes: "Only a fool or a newcomer [often reads 'Damn Yankee'] will try to predict the weather in Texas." Yet a considerable folklore has developed around the attempts to predict the coming of the norther. Here too the tall story has played its part, but also superstition, nature lore, and ingenuity have found considerable sway. A newcomer arriving in Texas in a norther is apt to ask the fatal question, "Does the wind blow this way all the time?" If he makes this fatal sally, the old-timer will spring the trap, "Naw, it blows the other way a part of the time."17

Frank Dobie can be thanked for preserving one of the most delightful of all tales regarding weather prediction in Texas; this tale, called "Old Prob's Visit to Texas," was written by John Duval, the same Jack who has already been quoted on the northers during the Texas Revolution. The tale concerns a Yankee agent of the weather bureau, called "Old Prob," who is sent to predict weather in Texas, and the story tells of his bouts with the unpredictable norther. "Prob" had all the latest technical guizmos, including an "isacthermal map," but they were not equal to the task of predicting the norther. "Prob"
invariably predicted, "High thermometer, low barometer, and no change in the weather... for the next forty-eight hours." Minutes after such a prediction, there would be a banging and whistling as "a reg'lar bull-headed norther" arrived. After three or four such misadventures, "Old Prob" packed up his "azimuth and horroscope" and jammed his hat on his head and headed north. Asked to make one last prediction for Texas he said "... [F]or Texas it will be hot as Hades, er cold as flugens, as wet as a drowned rat, er as dry as a dried apple dam, jist whichever it damn please." (For a delightful treat, read the full story in Dobie's John C. Duval, First Texas Man of Letters.) As Dobie has pointed out, other versions of this same story have given it the quality of a folktale.

More effective than "Prob's" instruments has been the reading of "signs" by Indians, old timers, and nature lovers. Just as the fuzzy caterpillars are watched for signs of a hard winter, so are various animals watched in Texas for the coming of a norther. Some say the wild geese "come just ahead of a 'norther.'" Ralph Selle says, "The measured chant of wild geese, even though heard through the hazy atmosphere of Indian summer, carries a storm warning that is more effective than the weather bureau. They come just ahead of a 'norther.'" A similar observation was noticed by Washington Irving during his "Tour on the Prairies" in 1832. In November of that year, near the Arkansas River, Irving wrote:

...[T]here were flashes of lightning in the east, with low, rumbling thunder, and clouds began to gather about the horizon. Beattie [his halfbreed guide] prognosticated rain, and that the wind would veer to the north. In the course of our march, a flock of brant were seen overhead, flying from the north. "There comes the wind!" said Beattie; and, in fact, it began to blow from that quarter almost immediately, with occasional flurries of rain.

Then Irving added:
The night was cold and windy, with occasional sprinklings of rain; but we had roaring fires to keep us comfortable. In the night, a flight of wild geese passed over the camp, making a great cackling in the air; symptoms of approaching winter.21

In his interesting article, "Weather Wisdom of the Texas Mexican Border," Frank Dobie mentions a number of interesting nature signs of northers. For example, in the fall "Owls are said to be . . . almost infallible in prophesying wet northers, even several days ahead," by their hooting in the daytime.22 Also if the Milky Way seems to be brightest in the direction of the north, or, if a "sun-dog"—a "rainbow colored splotch on the ground"—appears on the ground to the north of the sun, a norther is to be expected.23

As we have already seen, cattle, sheep, and horses sense a norther before man does, and by watching their behavior, one can often anticipate its coming. If they are sniffing the air, ceasing to graze, drifting, bunching, lowing, or even "lying down earlier than their usual bedding time," a norther is probably near.24

Also it is believed by many that northers follow a pattern. Thus, says Dobie, "An early wet norther in the fall is taken as a prologue to a wet winter," but an early dry norther is apt to presage drouth.25 Thomas Hughes' nephew, Harry, became interested in the theory that northers "occur on the same day, or very nearly so, every year." As a result he asked his father and sister to go over his old letters to record the dates of the northers which he had mentioned therein, such as the one when he and Willy "were reduced to sardines" or the "November (?) 1880 norther, when the icicles hung from the sheep's ears." With this information, Harry planned to check the truth of the theory "as it would be very useful to us if we could put any faith in the idea."26 Unfortunately, he does not report the results of his survey.
The Norther as a Folk Theme

A more accurate “barometer,” but not one to be envied, was reported by the colorful traveler of the Southwest, J. Ross Browne. He told of a San Antonian, who had been scalped by an Indian but lived to become a walking weather-bureau!

A thin skin had grown over the scalped part, but it was destitute of hair, and was so sensitive to atmospheric influences, that he could tell the approaching changes of the weather almost with the accuracy of a barometer. Indeed it was a common thing for the neighbors to go to him in order to find out when a norther might be expected. He seldom failed to give a correct prophecy, though it might be a day or two in advance.

This is the old “war-wound” technique of telling weather, which leads one to surmise that the local veterans’ hospital ought to be the best weather bureau in the state—the best outside of the regular U.S. weather bureau, that is, for in spite of the traditional lampoon of the “Old Prob” type and in spite of an occasional muff, our professional meteorologists have learned to read the “signs” with a rather high degree of accuracy.

The forewarning which Texans of today receive of a norther through their weather bureau, press, and radio has forearmed them to a degree that Texans of earlier generations never enjoyed. This has taken a bit of the sting, surprise, and dramatic effect out of the norther, but plenty of the drama is left: the first chill puff, the sudden banging of windows, the shivering, the cursing, the leaning into the wind, the drifting of cattle, the flying of geese and sand, the concentration of eyes on the thermometer, the rush for anti-freeze, the glow and scent of smudge pots, the hurried covering of cherished plants, and the huddling round the stove or heater—all this remains, and so too does the suffering and dying of live-stock and wild-life and occasionally of man; but so also is the
parched range given a rebirth, the air given a new vigor, and the Texan a new boast, for the norther means life as well as death, romance and fun as well as tragedy and suffering. How like life itself the norther blows: now ill, now fair, sporadically, unpredictably, but eternally.

In fact, the norther is perhaps the most eternal feature of the Southwest. The buffalo and the longhorn came and went; the Indian and the Spaniard had their day and departed; the pioneer and the dragoon represented but a passing phase; the ten-gallon hat and the oil derrick will, like the six-shooter, pass away; the cane-brakes, the grama grass, even the prickly pear have receded and may totally vanish; the very rocks and soil are constantly eroding; but, like the sea-breeze with which it alternates, the norther blows on and on; before man came, after man has gone, the norther pounces across the stage of the Southwest—next to the sun and the moon, the oldest actor of them all.
NOTES
CHAPTER I—INTRODUCTION

2. In a conversation with this writer, J. Frank Dobie said that if he were ever to write a history of Texas, he would begin with the Texas norther.
3. In the Pacific Northwest the chinook often comes from the southwest, but in the states east of the Rockies, the chinook generally comes from the northwest. For a fine account of the chinook see Enos Mills, The Rocky Mountain Wonderland (Boston, 1915), 69-75.
8. Edward King, The Southern States of North America; a Record of Journeys in Louisiana, Texas, ... (London, 1875), 112.
12. On the color of the norther see Charlie Siringo, A Texas Cowboy or Fifteen Years on the Hurricane Deck of a Spanish Pony (New York, 1950), 179; Mayne Reid, The Rifle Rangers, 9; (Mrs.) P. E. Pedrick, “A Cowboy of the Guadalupe,” in Mattie Lloyd Wooten, ed., Women Tell the Story of the Southwest (San Antonio, 1940), 357; W. J. Blewett, “The Northers of Texas,” in De Witt Clinton Baker, A Texas Scrap Book ... (New York,
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1875), 368 (Blewett's description of a norther is one of the best to be found); and Frank S. Hastings, A Ranchman's Recollections: an Autobiography . . . (Chicago, 1921), 168.

14. On the sound of the norther see especially Charles Hooton, St. Louis Isle or Texiana with Additional Observations Made in the United States and Canada (London, 1847), 59; (Dr.) S. Compton Smith, Chili con Carne; or the Camp and the Field (New York, 1857), 23; Therese Lindsey, Collected Poems (San Antonio, 1947), 31; Mary Mullin, "Howl on, Texas Norther," Southwestern, I, no. 5 (Dec., 1935), 23; Stephen Powers, Afoot and Alone; A Walk from Sea to Sea . . . (Hartford, 1884), 112-3; and John C. Reid, Reid's Tramp or a Journal of the Incidents of Ten month's Travel through Texas . . . (Selma, Ala., 1858), 70-1.
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18. Mary S. Helm, Scraps of Early Texas History (Austin, 1884), 34.
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34. For comparison’s of the norther’s cold see Houstoun, Texas and the Gulf of Mexico, II, 189; (Dr.) Ferdinand Roemer, Texas with Particular Reference to German Immigration and the Physical Appearance of the Country, translated by Oswald Mueller (San Antonio, 1935), 214-5; Andrew Forrest Muir, ed., “Diary of a Young Man in Houston, 1838,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly, LIII (1949-50), 286; George Meade, The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade (New York, 1913), I, 36-7; Napoleon Augustus Jennings, A Texas Ranger (Dallas, 1930), 17-8; and (Gen’l.) Richard W. Johnson, A Soldier’s Reminiscences in Peace and War (Philadelphia, 1886), 65-6.
35. Ibid., 65-6.
38. The sources of these names and adjectives are too numerous to be listed here; most of these names and adjectives appear in context elsewhere in this study.
42. Wallis, Sixty Years on the Brazos, 325-6.
44. See chapter VII of this work.
45. Thomas North, Five Years in Texas . . . from January 1861 to January 1865, A Narrative of His Travels, Experiences, and Observations . . . (Cincinnati, 1870), 30-1.
47. Carl, Prince of Solms-Braunfels, Texas, 1844-1845, translated by “a contemporary” (Houston, 1936), 99.
49. Chauncey D. Leake, ed., Yellow Fever in Galveston . . . by Ashbel
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50. Houston Telegraph, November 14, 1859. I am indebted to my colleague, Joseph Gallegly, for this item.

51. See chapter III for “El Vonzito.”

52. Taylor, The Coming Empire, 256.

53. Wallis, Sixty Years on the Brazos, 326.

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17. Ibid., 106-19.
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27. Ibid., 123.
29. Ibid., 17-8.
30. (Gen'l.) Adam Rankin Johnson, The Partisan Rangers of the Confederate States of America (Louisville, 1904), 33.
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34. Ibid., I, 64, footnote.
35. Ibid., I, 196-7.
36. Ibid., I, 255-7.
37. Ibid., I, 370-1.
38. Ibid., I, 373.
39. Ibid., I, 373.
41. Falconer, The Santa Fe Expedition, 55-6.
42. Kendall, The Texan Santa Fe Expedition, I, 404-5.
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4. Ibid., 87 and 130-2.
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16. Ibid., 35-6.
18. Blackwood, To Mexico with Scott, 55-6.
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32. Doubleday, Jourialns of Major Barbour, 163.
34. J. F. H. Claiborne, Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman . . . (New York, 1860), I, 283. The journal quoted was kept by Quitman’s secretary, John S. Holt.
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78. Blackwood, To Mexico with Scott, 117.
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81. Ibid., 65.
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10. (Col.) Martin L. Crimmins, “Jack Hayes' Story of Fitzhugh Lee's Indian Fight,” West Texas Historical Association Year Book, XIII (1937), 44.
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