

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Fateful Forecasts

In these tragic days of the BP Oil Spill, one may notice there is “nothing new under the sun” ... including the weather.

Isaac Monroe Cline (October 13, 1861 – August 3, 1955) was born near Madisonville, Tennessee. He attended Hiwassee College, where he studied chemistry, physics, mathematics, Latin and Greek. Although he considered becoming a preacher or a lawyer, in 1882 he eagerly joined the meteorology training program of the U.S. Army Signal Corps, then the parent organization of the United States Weather Service. The Signal Corps was a cavalry organization that trained its members in horsemanship and imposed a military discipline on its aspiring weather forecasters.

When Isaac Cline entered the weather service, it was drowning in a sea of scandal and held in contempt by the general public for its inability to accurately forecast the weather. The year before, the Signal Corps was in turmoil over allegations of embezzlement and fraud. An investigation began into the Corps' Chief Disbursing Officer, Captain Henry W. Howgate's, handling of fraudulent U.S. Government vouchers, totaling up to \$237,000. Howgate (also responsible for major Arctic explorations) was indicted, but slipped away from authorities while awaiting trial, running off with his mistress. He spent thirteen years evading capture, in which time he evaded the government and the Pinkerton National Detective Agency.

Secretary of War Robert Todd Lincoln sent Secret Service operatives down to New Orleans to stake out Howgate's hiding place, but Howgate spotted them and hustled his mistress off with him to Nebraska. During his years on the run, he worked as a reporter and operated a New York City antiquarian bookshop. Isaac Cline would eventually own an antique store in New Orleans, but not before he made history of his own.

The Signal Corps' track record for predicting storms when Isaac Cline joined was extremely poor, competing in newspapers with the forecasts of astrologers. Forecasting methods were so primitive that the service was hesitant to allow its junior members to publicly forecast weather, fearful they would be in error. In this time of corruption and ill regard for the weather service, Cline was given a post in the weather station in Little Rock, Arkansas, where he earned a medical degree from the University of Arkansas in his spare time. He was assigned in 1885 to the Fort Concho station, then to Abilene, Texas, where he met and married Cora May Ballew.

At the time of Cline's posting in Arkansas, Alexander Graham Bell was making great progress in the development of the telephone, and Little Rock was selected as the location for one of the exchanges. To finance it, stock was offered at \$100 per share. Cline's colleagues bought shares, but Cline would not budge. He couldn't see telephones' range beyond "one or two miles". In twenty years, one share at \$100 "had paid stock and cash dividends to the amount of \$50,000". That was a big mistake, but not Cline's biggest.

In March 1889, Cline was sent to oversee and organize the weather service's Texas section, established at Galveston. At the time of his transfer, the island city of Galveston was one of the most important cotton markets in America with a population of just around 35,000. Cline remained with the office when it became part of the U.S. Weather Bureau in the 1891 transfer from the Signal Corps to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In 1892, Isaac's younger brother, Joseph Cline, also began his job as a meteorologist at the Galveston Weather Bureau.

Cline was the first meteorologist to offer reliable forecasts of freezing weather. And he was successful in providing some of the first available flood warnings on the Colorado and Brazos rivers. But in 1891, through what one could only call hubris, Dr. Cline made the worst forecast of his life. That year, he wrote a two-page article in the *Galveston Daily News* in which he gave his official professional opinion that the thought of a tropical cyclone (his name for a hurricane) ever doing any serious harm to Galveston was "a crazy idea". Many of the city's residents had called for a seawall as coastal protection, since an 1886 hurricane erased the town of Indianola, located 150 miles further southwest on the Texas coast, killing 125-150 persons. They wanted a seawall, but Cline's statement helped to prevent its construction. Anyone thinking a hurricane would materially harm Galveston, Cline wrote, was "the victim of an absurd delusion".

He was proven deadly wrong on September 8, 1900, when the Hurricane of 1900 hit Galveston. Between 6,000-12,000 people lost their lives in what remains as the deadliest natural disaster in U.S.

history. Tragic mistakes led bureau officials to dismiss warnings about the powerful storm. America's stance toward Cuba at that time prompted ignored forecasts from Cuban meteorologists, who had accurately predicted the Galveston hurricane's course and true power. Cline's wife, Cora, pregnant with their fourth child at the time, was one of those who died in the storm. Cline himself was knocked unconscious and nearly drowned, but fought to survive in order to save his youngest daughter, six-year old Esther. His brother Joseph saved his other two daughters, Rosemary (eleven) and Allie May (twelve). Faulty government forecasts had failed the people of Galveston.

"I believe that a sea wall, which would have broken the swells, would have saved much loss of both life and property," wrote Cline after the storm (contrary to his views in the 1891 article). He went on to say, "This being my first experience in a tropical cyclone I did not foresee the magnitude of the damage which it would do."

After Galveston, Weather Bureau Chief Willis L. Moore informed Isaac Cline that he was selected as forecaster in charge of a new forecasting office to be located in New Orleans. In early August 1901, Dr. Cline and his three daughters packed their bags and quietly left for the Crescent City and a new future. A year later, he married Margaret C. Hayes.

One useful area of expertise Cline brought to New Orleans was in flood forecasting. In early 1903, heavy rains presaged dangerous conditions on the Father of Waters. Cline issued warnings (without permission of the Bureau Chief) of a coming record flood stage of twenty-one feet for the Mississippi in the next three to four weeks. He was ordered to lift the warnings, but refused. The river did rise to 20.7 feet, but his actions again brought Cline in conflict with his superiors. He was almost shipped off to Honolulu, but the intervention of the Louisiana congressional delegation saved him from the transfer.

Successful forecasts of flood levels in 1912 and of the approaching 1915 New Orleans hurricane saved many hundreds of lives. Nearly every building in New Orleans sustained damage, but only 279 lives were lost, thanks to the Bureau's storm warnings. The *Presbytère* lost its cupola, and more city church steeples were blown down or badly damaged than remained intact. To the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, Cline was becoming a local hero: "The intensity of the storm ... proved the worthiness of Dr. I. M. Cline ... Never before, perhaps in the history of the Weather Bureau, have such general warnings been disseminated as were sent out by the local bureau in reference to the disturbance that passed over New Orleans Wednesday evening."

In 1926, Cline published his collected tropical storm research in a book entitled *Tropical Cyclones*. The *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society* reviewed it as "a notable advance in the collection and representation of precise data with regard to the tropical cyclones of the North Atlantic Ocean".

Isaac Cline's final great professional achievement came in 1927. Conditions in late 1926 and early 1927 indicated that the Mississippi Drainage Basin was in for severe flooding. As John M. Barry expertly details in *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*, he outlines how it would become one of the greatest floods in American history, changing the fortunes of many individuals (including boosting Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover's bid for the Presidency in 1928). And it was Cline who successfully predicted two weeks in advance the major stages of the Great Flood of 1927.

The New Orleans *Item-tribune* printed an article entitled "Doctor Cline, Unsung Hero of Big Flood". In it, Secretary Hoover praised Cline's work: "Too much credit cannot be given Dr. Cline for the work he has done. His flood forecasts have been absolutely uncanny in their accuracy, he has without a doubt saved the lives of thousands of people with these bulletins."

Cline's remaining years with the Bureau were quiet, but he remained popular with the locals. He was, after all, the Nash Roberts of his time. Residents used to observe Cline as he walked between his home in the French Quarter and the Bureau office to see if he carried an umbrella.

In 1935, Cline retired from his official duties at the Weather Bureau after over fifty-three years of service. But he wasn't about to hang things up. In 1936, Cline opened a small art and antique shop at 633 St. Peter Street called "The Art House". It featured fine art, porcelain and furniture. Dr. Cline was a passionate art collector, specializing in Early American portraits and Chinese bronzes. This pursuit made him a wealthy man. The rest of his spare time was consumed at the easel, painting. He continued his meteorological work, publishing in 1942, a scientific monograph, *A Century of Progress in the Study of Cyclones*. He also wrote a personal memoir *Storms, Floods and Sunshine: An Autobiography* (first published in 1945 and reprinted in 2000).

In 1953, Isaac Monroe Cline became very ill and had to sell "The Art House". He died on August 3, 1955, at the Touro Infirmary. He was 93. He is buried in Metairie Cemetery in New Orleans.

He had tried hard to make up for his mistakes at Galveston so many years before. His brother Joseph died only eight days after him, while another "tropical cyclone" worked its way along the coast. This time (thanks to the research of Dr. Cline and others), the forecasting was much more accurate.

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