

The Catch

COCORAHS WELCOMES ILLINOIS—AND SOME OF US FIGHT WITH HORIZONTAL

FORT COLLINS, CO — Wednesday, November 15, 2006

A short background introduction

Today Illinois has joined CoCoRaHS. This has some personal significance for me.

As a native of east central Illinois, I grew up loving the fascinating progressions of Midwest weather including things like winter thunder, frighteningly severe spring storms (my high school was twice hit by tornadoes), moist and fragrant spring breezes, marvelously rich summertime humidity and the sweet smell of fast-growing lush corn fields (I never minded the heat and humidity—but I was younger then), crashing thunder, colorful falls, geese migrations (when Canada geese actually flew south for the winter instead of hanging out on the local golf courses) and the occasional (too rare for my liking) thrill of winter snow and terrible ice storms.

I always dreamed of being a climatologist in my home state of Illinois. But alas, life produces unanticipated twists and turns. I reached my goal of becoming a climatologist, but ended up in Colorado instead of Illinois. That has brought it's own climatic advantages, though. I always tell folks that Illinois weather was usually more interesting than Colorado's—more clouds, more rain, and more opportunities to fear for your life from potential tornadic storms. But the local variations in climate caused by being on the highest spine of the Rocky Mountain chain in the U.S. makes this an amazing place to be a climatologist and watch the sky. Furthermore, I get to see more snow :-)

I wish I could call my dad today and have him sign up for CoCoRaHS. He and I used to share an enthusiasm for seeing how much it rained and then comparing our totals with our neighbors. (Sound familiar? :-)) We would go out together to check our rain gauge after every storm—the little glass cylinder compliments of the bank in Ogden. He kept a journal where he would write down the temperatures, precipitation, cloud conditions as well as family activities and expenses. I still have some of those journals. He died nearly 25 years ago, but I still miss him—especially today. We had no idea at the time that he would help

inspire me, many years later, to set up thousands of rain gauges from one end of the country to the other. In either 1968 or 1969, I was thrilled to find in the hardware store the large 4"-diameter high capacity rain gauge. It was the perfect gift. They just started making them back in the 1960s as plastic became increasingly popular. I took some of my savings and bought him a gauge for Christmas (they cost about the same amount then as they do now—close to \$25). He kept meticulous records with his new gauge and continued measuring and recording precipitation until he died of cancer in 1982. I studied his rainfall reports, and compared totals from one year to the next (sound familiar??).

So today, as Illinois joins CoCoRaHS, my thoughts are with my father and the impact he had on his weather-loving son. The three Doesken kids (my two sisters and I) moved away, and I don't know of any relatives left in Illinois. Otherwise, I'd be calling them up and inviting them to join CoCoRaHS today. But I do know the Mayor of Royal (one of my grade school classmates), so I better give him a call.

So—if you happen to know of any friends or family back in the Midwest who may have that sparkling interest in tracking the weather, do encourage them to sign up.

Also, if you are interested in the climate of the Midwest, the Midwest Climate Center (located only about 25 miles from where I grew up) has a nice website.

<http://mcc.sws.uiuc.edu/>

I could never have imagined in my wildest dreams having so much climate data and information at my fingertips. Enjoy!

Measuring horizontal snow

Many of us have had our first snow of the fall, and many haven't. I've said it before and I'll say it again—snow is VERY AMAZING and VERY IMPORTANT. As I get older, it's a little less thrilling and a bit more annoying and sometimes frightening (like the time 9 years ago in Colorado's October 1997 blizzard when we spent the night stranded in my boss's car along I-25 north of Denver), but it's well worth trying to measure. The only problem is that measuring snow is not easy. It melts, it settles, it blows around, it sticks to the outside of the gauge, sometimes it blows out of the gauge—and furthermore, it's darn cold.

Yesterday, we had a spectacular horizontal snow squall. One minute it was sunny and nearly 50 degrees F and the next minute it was snowing so hard and blowing so strong that we could scarcely see or stand up. When it was done (about 10 minutes later) the ground was still bare and there was scarcely anything in the gauge—but the outside walls of our building were dripping wet.

So did it snow?? Of course, but since it did not accumulate on the ground we must report a trace for the day.

I got a nice e-mail yesterday from one of our observers up in North Park—east of Steamboat Springs and not too far from the small town of Walden. It's a beautiful place, and the snow they receive is critical for the ranching economy of the area. Unfortunately, most of the snow that falls there falls horizontally accompanied by furious and frigid winds. They asked me some good questions. "Where should we put our snow measurement board?" "Do we clear it and lay it on top of the snow after each observation?" "Should we measure in the open near our rain gauge or in the trees where the snow doesn't blow as much?" "What do we do if the total depth of snow on the ground is deeper than our yardstick?" I tried to answer as best I could, but when it comes to windblown snow, perfect measurements may not be possible. Instead you must rely on your best judgment and do an average of several measurements (or eyeball assessments) over both drifted and wind-scoured areas. Our gauge may not catch all the snow that actually tried to fall, so you may need to find an area where the accumulation of new snow appears to represent an average for your neighborhood. Take a core sample of the new snow on the ground there to get a better estimate of the water content of the precipitation.

Again, if you haven't done so already, we encourage you to look over our snow measurement instructions on our website or view the Snow Measurement Video (not recommended for those with dial-up access—unless you are extremely patient.

Thanks so much for helping CoCoRaHS—and keep spreading the word to find a few more volunteers.

Nolan

P.S. There will be freezing rain in the Midwest, South and East this winter so we will soon send around some tips on measuring freezing rain without getting hurt.