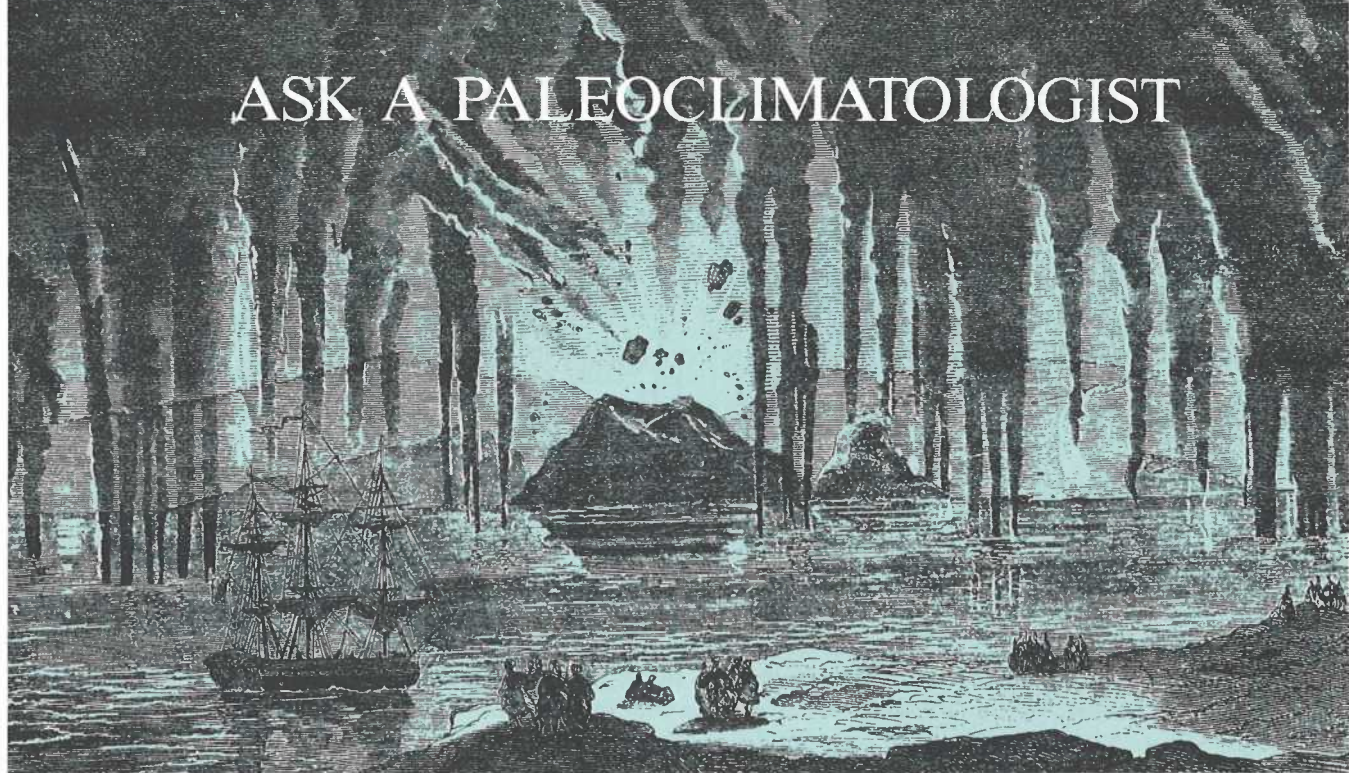


ASK A PALEOCLIMATOLOGIST



The eruption of Mount Tambora, Indonesia, in April of 1815 may have caused Vermont's year without a summer.

When you want to plan your weekend, you can check with the weatherman to see if it will be sunny. But if you want to know what the weather was like hundreds of years ago, you will need to ask a paleoclimatologist. Paleo is a word for old. A climatologist is someone who studies the climate and weather. Put the two words together and you have a person who studies historic weather patterns.

A paleoclimatologist looks through old diaries and newspapers for weather observations. He might also look at farm account books to see how much grain was produced and how fast it grew. He also studies nature. He can guess the amount of rain in past years by looking at the size of growth rings on a tree stump. Thicker rings mean that more growth and, therefore, more rain occurred. Paleoclimatologists use these and other methods to see how changes in the weather have changed people's lives in the past.

Paleoclimatologists say that 1816 was part of the "Little Ice Age," which lasted from 1650 to 1890. Then the average temperature was a few degrees colder than today. This was enough to shorten the growing season and make farming harder. The years from 1811 to 1820 were the coldest of all and, of course, 1816 falls right in the middle of this time.

There is another theory. A volcanic eruption in 1815, on the other side of the world, may have caused the cold snap. The eruption sent a vast cloud of ash into the sky. Scientists think this cloud blocked some of the sun's rays from the earth.

Why would anyone care about the weather 175 years ago? Knowing how weather and climate affected people back then might help us right now. There are still starving years, like 1816, in many parts of the world. The work of paleoclimatologists leads to an understanding of global weather patterns today and supports the fight against world hunger.