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Byline: [Andrew Scoggin](#)
Byline ID: andrew.scoggin@indystar.com
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Hard times in raging heat

1936 temperatures, hardships trump current weather

[Andrew Scoggin](#)

Despite what the record books say, the summers of 1936 and 2011 bear little resemblance.

Yes, Thursday's high of 90 in Indianapolis did tie the record of 19 consecutive days of 90-and-above temperatures set in 1936. With a high forecast near 90 again for today, there's a chance that the record could be broken.

But Indiana experienced weather in 1936 that Hoosiers haven't seen the likes of since.

That summer, residents withstood temperatures of at least 100 degrees a record 12 times, including a nine-day streak. There was a separate 14-day, 90-and-above heat wave earlier in the summer -- the fourth-longest on record. And Collegeville hit 116 degrees on July 14 of that year, the highest temperature ever recorded in the state.

The summer of 1936 is the benchmark for heat waves in Indiana, said Ken Scheeringa, an associate state climatologist from the Indiana State Climate Office.

Add in the Great Depression, extreme drought and minimal air conditioning, and 1936 made for a miserable time for many.

As many as 5,000 people died in 1936 nationwide from the extreme heat, said Daniel Johnson, a geography professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

About 500 people died from extreme heat that summer in Detroit alone, he said. Death totals from the heat that year aren't available for Indiana.

But Ruth Sawyer, 90, lived through it as a 15-year-old on the Eastside.

Her family's two-story home didn't have air conditioning or fans, so they often spent nights sleeping on blankets in the backyard, rather than in their upstairs bedrooms. Her father, Emmett Welch, worked as an upholsterer, and she said some days he'd come home sick from the heat.

"Those were some miserable, hot days," she said. "So many people were poor people at the time. It wasn't just us."

Few at the time had refrigeration or air conditioning, and fans came at a premium. Fans ranged from less than \$1 to as much as \$35, according to Indianapolis Star archives, at a time when the average U.S. household income was about \$1,500 a year.

Sawyer said her house had an ice box to keep food cold, and an "iceman" would drop off blocks of ice to store inside it. Kids would chase behind the delivery truck, she said, to get the shards of ice that fell off the back. A Penny Ice Fund, ran by The Indianapolis Star and Salvation Army, raised funds that summer so needy families could buy 25 pounds of ice for 1 cent.

Sawyer and her 11-year-old sister, Blanche, spent most days jumping rope and playing hopscotch in front of the house, staying cool by putting wet washcloths on their necks and heads. Her family often waded in the White River at night, while her dad kept watch by shining the headlights on the family car.

"That was so much fun for us," Sawyer said. "It was just like a million dollars, to get to do that and cool off a little bit."

The summer of 1936 came in the heart of the Dust Bowl era, which by that time had spread to Indiana, said Johnson, of IUPUI.

That extreme drought added to the heat, similar to what's happening now in the lower Great Plains, Scheeringa said.

"When it dries out, it heats up," he said. "It's just a big cycle that just kind of feeds on itself. It goes out of control almost."

While that's a factor in this year's heat wave, Scheeringa said there are other elements at play. He said a cooling in ocean temperatures, known as La Nina, can push the jet stream farther north than normal, meaning warm air can spread farther north as well.

Sawyer said she likes the living conditions today more than during that summer of 1936 - at least in terms of the extreme heat. Now, she's able to stay inside in air-conditioned comfort, like most Americans these days.

But among her favorite memories was a trip that summer to Madison to visit family. Her dad stopped along the way at a gas station and came back to the car with 5-cent Cokes.

"We were a happy family going through hard times," Sawyer said. "My brother and I often say, 'Weren't we the happiest family in the world.' "

Call Star reporter Andrew Scoggin at (317) 444-6125.

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The WFMS FairTrain has added a stop on its route to the State Fair. Get prices and departure times. » B3

2ND



Matthew Tully
COMMENTARY

IPS chief sees chance for district to reinvent itself

Eugene White and the Indianapolis Public Schools district he leads will soon start a uniquely challenging year.

Within days of the start of classes Monday, the state Department of Education is expected to announce plans to take over up to six IPS schools. Those schools that are taken over will spend the next year in transition, still controlled by IPS but under the watchful eye of turnaround operators who would move in next summer.

Amid that uncertainty, the district remains haunted by budget cuts, poor student performance, decreasing enrollment and increasing pressure from reformers. Still, when White and I sat down this week at a Dunkin' Donuts in Downtown, the IPS boss, now in his sixth year, was calm.

"It's not going to do any good for me to get angry," he said. Even if the state orders the takeover of all six schools, he added, "We have 57 more to worry about. We're not going to sit around and cry. We're going to try to reinvent ourselves."

I've directed plenty of criticism at IPS over the years and remain frustrated by the lack of urgency that too often defines the district. But I've also noted the admirable work White has done to increase options for parents and students — from magnet and alternative programs to stellar elementary schools. As we talked, White said such programs are the future of a district that must find ways to retain its current student population and lure back some who have left for charter and township schools.

Perhaps most exciting is the plan to open what White called "a boutique college-prep" high school on the Northwest-side next year. White, who promised highly rated teachers and a national search for a top principal, said the school would give priority to students who have gone through IPS Montessori schools, the Centers for Inquiry and gifted-and-talented programs. Too often, students depart the district after eighth grade because of concerns about the poor quality of IPS' high schools. This new school, he said, will address that problem and be followed by two other prep schools.

"Of course, that's predicated on us being able to stop the bleeding," White said, referring to budget cuts stemming from tax caps and declining enrollment.

As he sipped on a Diet Sierra Mist, White made the strongest defense of IPS that I've heard him make. He offered ideas and plans that if implemented would be welcomed by many in the city.

For instance, he embraced the notion that Indianapolis is now home to an educational "free market" and that the district must further embrace that by having a wider range of school options. He talked of trimming the district headquarters and pushing more money into the schools. He spoke of giving school leaders more autonomy and forcing locally driven turnarounds at underperforming schools.

And, he said, new state laws will help him rid the district of teachers who are not up to the job. White insisted that IPS has some of the nation's best teachers, a notion that, after spending hundreds of hours in schools in recent years, I second. But, he added, roughly half of all IPS teachers underperform, and about 20 percent do such a poor job that "they have to go." I hope he will be equally tough on school administrators.

At one point, I suggested it must be stressful to lead a district in such sweeping transition. White disagreed.

"It's a chance to regroup and reinvent yourself, to learn from your mistakes and hopefully become more stable," he said. "In three to five years, you'll see a leaner and more proficient school district."

Let's hope so. Because promises have been made time and again, and the future of this city depends in part on a much-improved IPS.

★ Reach Matthew Tully at (317) 444-6033 or via email at matthew.tully@indystar.com

Plea deal in baby-selling case

POLICE STILL LOOKING INTO ANOTHER CASE INVOLVING COUPLE

By John Tuohy
john.tuohy@indystar.com

Even with guilty pleas in the works, authorities continue to probe the pasts of a Southside couple accused of trying to buy a baby from a homeless man and his girlfriend.

Marion County prosecutors said Michael Overby, 57, and Debbie Overby, 50, have agreed to plea bargains.

Michael Overby would serve four

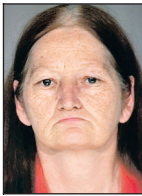
years of community corrections and two years' probation in exchange for a guilty plea to forgery and conspiracy to commit child selling, according to Deputy Marion County Prosecutor Mary Hutchinson.

Debbie Overby would serve two years of community corrections and one year's probation for her guilty plea to conspiracy to commit child-selling charges.

A hearing is set Aug. 17 in Superior Court; a judge must approve the plea agreements.



Michael Overby



Debbie Overby

Investigators said the Overbys agreed to pay a homeless woman, Rose Faucett, 37, about \$300 for her daughter, Anna Marie Rose Overby. Faucett gave birth to the girl April 2 at Wishard Memorial Hospital.

The Overbys by law could not have adopted Anna Marie because both have criminal records. Michael Overby was convicted of child molesting in 1984 and was sentenced to four years in prison. Debbie

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THE STAR UNDATED FILE PHOTO

The Salvation Army and Indianapolis Star Penny Ice Fund helped bring ice for a penny to needy families during the summer months in 1931 to 1957.

HARD TIMES IN RAGING HEAT

1936 temperatures, hardships trump current weather

By Andrew Scoggin
andrew.scoggin@indystar.com

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THE STAR 1936 FILE PHOTO

The Salvation Army-Indianapolis Star Penny Ice Fund truck delivered ice to Indy families that had fallen on hard times.

Lawn companies get creative

By Jeff Swiatek
jeff.swiatek@indystar.com

Central Indiana's heat wave and dry spell have depressed landscape businesses' lawn-mowing services, forcing companies to deploy their summer-swollen workforces into other jobs, such as building decks and retaining walls or manning watering trucks.

Hittle Landscaping in Westfield, one of the largest area landscapers, has cut back on its mowing crews but doubled the number of workers for its water trucks, which are running twice as often

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IMA concession stand to get into nature

Yellow poplar will be transformed into 'Chop Stick' in 100 Acres outdoor park

By Rachel Stark
rachel.stark@indystar.com

The Indianapolis Museum of Art wanted an inventive concession stand to feed visitors at its year-old art and nature park.

It found the answer in the middle of a Hoosier forest.

"Chop Stick," dreamed up by a Swedish architecture duo, is a yellow poplar tree that will be turned on its side and converted into a snack shop, as well as a

place to sit, swing and marvel. The stand will open next summer in 100 Acres: Virginia B. Fairbanks Art & Nature Park.

A team of architects, structural engineers, a construction firm and IMA employees will create "Chop Stick" using primarily one tree. "Construction" began with the chopping down of the tree in June.

The goal is to make the best use of the tree and inspire visitors to think about the relationship of art and nature in novel ways, said Sarah Green, the IMA's curator of contemporary art. About 100,000 people have visited the park

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY IMA

A drawing shows how the inventive concession stand will look after it's completed next summer.

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