

Mount St. Helens eruption

Professor says people didn't realize impact

By Julie Hintz

The first Mount St. Helens eruption was the most-warned about geological event of the century, but still people did not realize its geological impact, according to an Arizona professor.

Thomas Saarinen, a geography professor at the University of Arizona spoke Friday to the UNL Geography Department. He has looked at geological hazard warnings

all over the world and has studied public reaction.

Initially, the National Science Foundation wanted to finance \$60,000 for research on warnings and responses from people in the Mount St. Helens area before the eruption, Saarinen said. However, the eruption occurred before his studies began.

As a result, Saarinen, who received a Ph.D. in geography from the University of Chicago, concentrated his work on the disaster's aftermath. He conducted 100 interviews with Washington officials about public reaction to the warnings. He also handed out questionnaires to the public, he said.

Tourists flooded the area before and after the eruption, Saarinen said. Shops and information booths selling T-shirts and souvenirs were abundant, he said.

"They were right on the button concerning where the mountain would blow first, although the blast was bigger than expected, so the radius of the ash fall was a little off which meant more rivers were flooded," Saarinen said.

A federal emergency planning agency set up technical information networks to inform the public about health effects, and how to deal with the ash, Saarinen said.

"People started rumors which were not true, such as the eruption would be a Hawaiian type in which a person could stand and watch the lava flow. Networks tried to clarify the facts so people knew what was going to happen," Saarinen said.

"Roadblocks were put up everywhere, but to no avail. Citizens proceeded. Officials often resorted to physical force," Saarinen said.

He said that many of those missing after the eruption were believed to be people curious about the whole ordeal.

Saarinen said that after one cubic mile of matter was

blown out of the mountain, most parts of the state reported a lot of ash buildup.

"Highway patrolman brought cars into town which had gotten stuck on the highway. Many cars were ruined because ash went into their air filters," Saarinen said.

Saarinen said that by wetting down the dustlike ash, then grating it off the road was successful in removing the ash, except when a heavy wind blew it back on the roads.

Saarinen said that crop damage was rare because irrigation and rain assisted in washing off the plants. In some regions, farmers reported above average amounts of wheat. Home gardens were sprayed off with hoses, he said.

No ash fallout effects seen in state's crops

Agricultural experts in Washington are predicting a big increase in wheat production this year because of the ash fallout from Mount St. Helens.

The ash has acted as an insulation against moisture after rainfall.

This finding aroused a great deal of speculation as to how the fallout has affected wheat and corn production in Nebraska. UNL soil experts said, however, that they have seen no effects of the eruption on Nebraska agriculture.

Robert Sorenson, professor of agronomy, said, "We have not done any study of the ash fallout here at UNL, but its effect in Nebraska agriculture is probably negligible."

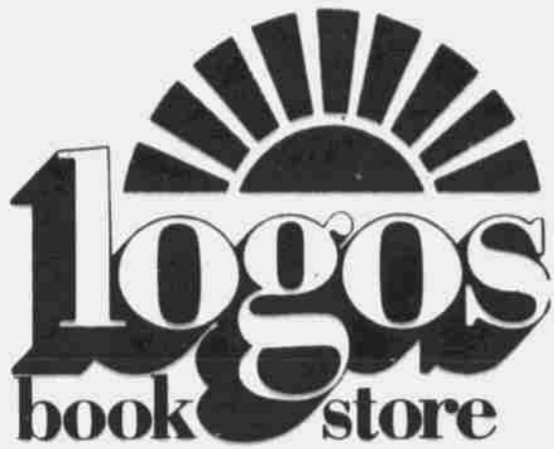
As far as ash being good for the soil, Saarinen said that in some areas two or three years after an eruption, tree ring analysis shows substantial growth, however, climate is a big factor.

"Data on the effect of the eruption on weather will be studied very closely," he added.

Saarinen said no one knows the long-term health effects of breathing the ash, although no severe effects have been reported. Persons with bad lung problems have noticed some harsh symptoms though, he said.

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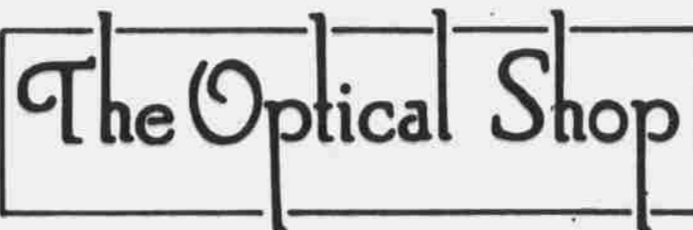
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