The Year without a Summer

1 The eruption of the Philippine volcano Mount Pinatubo in June 1991 sent a huge cloud of gas and dust encircling the globe. The dust and ash from Mount Pinatubo was blamed for a two-year decrease in global temperature, changes in weather patterns, and damage to the ozone layer. The situation brings to mind a time now remembered as "The Year without a Summer," a meteorological event that occurred 175 years earlier. At that time, harsh weather conditions plagued much of eastern North America and, to a lesser extent, northern Europe.

2 April 1816 brought typical spring weather to upstate New York and New England; trees budded, and farmers prepared to plow and plant. In May, however, the expected warm temperatures failed to arrive. Most people remained optimistic, waiting for the summer that was "just around the corner." They waited in vain. During the first week of June, ten inches of snow fell on New England. Throughout the month, temperatures rarely rose above the 30s. Many farmers replanted crops several times, only to see them stunted or destroyed by sleet, hail, and icy winds. July and August brought little improvement. During most days the temperature stayed in the 40s. Farmers' diaries document the farmers' daily struggles with near-freezing temperatures, failing crops, and dying farm animals. The few crops that managed to survive were killed by frost in mid-September. Winter came early in New England and was unusually severe. Even the South was affected; on July 4, the high temperature for Savannah, Georgia, was only 46 degrees Fahrenheit!

3 Some religious leaders warned their congregations that the unusual weather meant that the end of the world was drawing near. Other leaders attributed the cool weather to unusual sunspot activity. The proliferation of the newly invented lightning rod was also blamed as some people believed that lightning rods had interrupted the natural temperature balance of Earth, causing the cooler temperatures.

4 It was not until October that the first plausible explanation for "The Year without a Summer" was suggested. Friedrich Bessel, a German astronomer, reported seeing thick clouds of dust in the upper atmosphere. He theorized that these dust particles screened portions of Earth from the warming rays of the sun. It was discovered that in April 1815, Mount Tambora, an Indonesian volcano, had erupted with such force that it had sent an estimated 100 cubic miles of fine dust into the atmosphere. Witnesses to the eruption reported that the sky remained dark for two days. The dust then rose high into the stratosphere, where it encircled the world for several years to come.

5 Skeptics in 1816 doubted that a faraway volcano could steal their summer. However, most present-day researchers believe Bessel's explanation to be generally correct, demonstrating the global nature of weather. The dust in the atmosphere eventually settled, and the spring of 1817 was back to normal.