

Blue-Moon Mystery Solved? by Donald W. Olson and Roger W. Sinnott

Someone, somewhere, sometime (perhaps recently) decided that the second full Moon in a calendar month should be called "blue." Philip Hiscock traces this usage back to a pair of *Sky & Telescope* items written in

the 1940s by J. Hugh Pruett and L. J. Lafleur, both of whom cite the *Maine Farmers' Almanac* for 1937. But regional almanacs, like old telephone books, are seldom saved for very long and are notoriously hard to find.

We sought the help of librarians Margaret Vaverek (Southwest Texas State University) and Ewa Basinska (Harvard), and they succeeded where others had failed. In its reserve holdings, the Maine State Library in Augusta proved to have the 1937 edition of this almanac, and its page for August of that year, re-

produced here, does indeed give a calendrical meaning of the term "blue Moon."

But wait! The almanac prominently flags August 21st as one such date. Our calculations confirm that the Moon was full that day, but obviously not for the second time that month. Further, this blue Moon seems to go against the almanac-maker's own explanation of the term, because 1937 had just 12 full Moons, not 13. Discovering the rule used in this almanac requires further research, and the distribution of full Moons among the four seasons may provide a clue. Whatever this rule was, it boosts Hiscock's count. We are looking not at the seventh, but at the eighth meaning of blue Moon.

If the Maine almanac-maker was not the originator of the second-full-Moon-in-a-month meaning, then who? Writing his article from Oregon (*S&T*: March 1946, page 3), Pruett does not appear to have seen the Maine almanac firsthand. He merely expands on Lafleur's earlier note. And Lafleur had quoted the almanac's account but omitted any mention of a specific blue-Moon date. It was Pruett who wrote, "Seven times in 19 years there were — and still are — 13 full moons in a year. This gives 11 months with one full moon each and one with two. This second in a month, so I interpret it, was called Blue Moon...."

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AUGUST, 8th month.—Begins on Sunday 1937



D D M W	Aspects, Holydays, Weather, Etc.	Farmers' Calendar
1 C	1st Sabbath. Lammas.	THE MOON usually comes full twelve times in a year, three times in each season. These moons were named by our early English ancestors as follows:
2 1	☉ runs high. ☽ in perigee.	Yule
3 2	♁ ♀ ☽. 3h. 51m. morn.	0 Moon after Yule
4 3	♁ rises 1h. 10m. morn.	1 Wolf Moon
5 4	High tides 10.6 ft.	2 Lenten Moon
6 5	♁ in ☉. ☽ ☉. Clear.	First Day of Spring
7 6	Shaula S. 8h. 8m. eve.	3 Egg Moon
8 C	2d Sab. ♁ ♀ ☽. ☽ on eq.	4 Milk Moon
9 1	Rasalag S. 8h. 4m. eve.	5 Flower Moon
10 2	♁ sets 11h. 42m. eve.	The Long Day
11 3	Altair S. 10h. 7m. eve.	6 Hay Moon
12 4	Polaris el. E. 10h. 2m. eve.	7 Grain Moon
13 5	Vega cul. 8h. 50m. eve.	8 Fruit Moon
14 6	♁ ♀ ♀. ♁ ♀ ☽. ☽ in apo.	Summer's End
15 C	3d Sab. Low tides 7.1 ft.	9 Harvest Moon
16 1	♁ in aphelion. ☽ runs low.	10 Hunter's Moon
17 2	7* s rise 9h. 56m. eve.	11 Moon before Yule
18 3	♁ elong. E. 27.4°. ♁ ♀ ☽.	However, occasionally the moon comes full thirteen times in a year. This was considered a very unfortunate circumstance, especially by the monks who had charge of the calendar. It became necessary for them to make a calendar of thirteen months for that year, and it upset the regular arrangement of church festivals. For this reason thirteen came to be considered an unlucky number. Also, this extra moon had a way of coming in each of the seasons so that it could not be given a name appropriate to the time of year like the other moons. It was usually called the Blue Moon. There are seven Blue Moons in a Lunar Cycle of nineteen years. This year (1937) has a Blue Moon in August the same as 1918. In 1934 and 1915 Blue Moons came in November. The next Blue Moon will occur in May 1940 as it did in 1921. There was a Blue Moon in February 1924. In olden times the almanac makers had much difficulty calculating the occurrence of the Blue Moon and this uncertainty gave rise to the expression "Once in a Blue Moon."
19 4	♁ stationary. Dry.	
20 5	♁ rises 8h. 0m. eve.	
21 6	Blue Moon.	
22 C	4th Sabbath.	
23 1	☽ on equator.	
24 2	♁ ♀ ☽. ♀ near Pollux.	
25 3	♁ sets 1h. 10m. morn.	
26 4	High tide 9.9 ft. at Port.	
27 5	♁ ♀ ☽. ♀ near Antares.	
28 6	☽ in perigee. Sultry.	
29 C	5th Sabbath. ☽ runs high.	
30 1	Low tides 8.1 ft.	
31 2	♁ stationary.	

THE [No. 119]
aine Farmers' Almanac
 FOR THE YEAR OF OUR LORD
1937

the first after BISEXTILE OR LEAP YEAR, and the one hundred sixty-first, one hundred sixty-second of our COUNTRY'S INDEPENDENCE
 The Astronomical Computations are made
 Lat. 44° 18.4' N. and Long. 69° 47.0' W.
 altitude and Longitude of the Capitol of the State of Maine, at
 Augusta, and are given in Eastern Standard Time, at the time
 of the several-tide meridian west from Greenwich.
 the State, 33,000 Square Miles. Population in 1930, 800,000

DANIEL ROBINSON

Children of meat! Not that your eye sees
 In pride of life the ages of your race,
 but that you think clear, feel deep, bear fruit well,
 The friend of Man desires."

AUGUSTA
 CHARLES E. NASE & SON
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