

The Reader of Time: News of the Drought in Ceará, July 1877

Anapuena Havena

HAVENA, Anapuena. The Reader of Time: News of the Drought in Ceará, July 1877. American Society of History, Arts and Letters, 2026. Disponível em: <https://www.theamericanshal.org/portal/publicacoes/the-reader-of-time-news-of-the-drought-in-ceara-july-1877>.

<https://www.theamericanshal.org/portal/publicacoes/the-reader-of-time-news-of-the-drought-in-ceara-july-1877>

Área: Produções Acadêmicas

Publicado em 31 de agosto de 2026

Rio de Janeiro, July 10, 1877

The first hours of my day follow a ritual. In the city there are no roosters to tear us from sleep, as on the farms of the interior; even so, the birds take it upon themselves to announce the birth of morning with their festive song.

I rise from bed, change my clothes, arrange my hair before the mirror, and while I finish getting ready my husband also prepares for work. It is at this hour that our children usually come into the room, still drowsy, to bid us good morning. We go together to the dining room, where breakfast already awaits us.

Before leaving, my husband has the habit of acquainting himself with the news printed in the papers. I believe he does it partly to stay informed, and partly to show his friends and clients that no event escapes him. I follow him in the reading, though my eyes almost always seek out the literary serials. At present I am following *A Cadeia Fatal*, by E. Daudet, published in the feuilleton of the *Gazeta de Notícias*.

That morning, however, I never reached the serial. I stopped at a report printed just above that section, and could not look away from it.

"Ah, my dear... how sad the news from Ceará is!" I lamented.

My husband, seated in the chair across from me, raised his eyes from the paper in his hands. "What has happened?"

"The drought is punishing that land."

"I have read some reports about the drought in the North. What does today's paper say of it?" he asked, taking interest.

"Listen to what the paper brings:

"The news from Ceará continues most distressing. Here are several extracts from correspondence from the interior of the province, published in O Cearense:

Quixadá, June 19. The circumstances of the backlands grow worse by the day: to hunger has now been added an almost Adamic nakedness, and disease is spreading and claiming victims. You cannot form an idea of the misery that lays waste and passes through here. Daily there unfold before our eyes the most horrifying scenes, capable of cutting the heart."

I stopped for a moment. I had not expected to begin my day with news so full of suffering. My husband watched me attentively, anxious for the rest.

I went on: *"It cannot be described. On every road one sees a continuous procession. On one road alone, which comes from the center and passes the door of Captain Manuel Luiz, 4,619 migrants had passed by the fourteenth of last month, counted by that gentleman! From this, form an idea of what has passed*

along the other roads. Ah, my friend, only one who finds himself in the theater of events can measure the greatness of our ills."

I lowered the paper. "Four thousand six hundred and nineteen people on a single road!" I repeated. "Where are they going? What fate awaits them? Will they find any refuge?" I asked, disquieted.

"That is truly astonishing... It is not common to hear of so many families abandoning their lands all at once."

"The letter is from the Reverend Scaligero, vicar of the parish of Quixadá."

The words printed in that newspaper shook us profoundly and seemed to bring into the room the dust of the roads and the suffering of people I had never seen. Words failed us. I suspect that in that instant my husband was also imagining the painful scene, as I was. For some seconds we heard only the clink of china in the kitchen and the distant laughter of the children playing in the next room.

"Now the news from Sobral:

Sobral, June 14. Our situation is appalling. Sobral, which enjoyed a certain general well-being, has been left utterly destitute. I believe only some eight persons remain standing, and even they much shaken, with considerable losses. The rest are left poor. It is a horror, such as one cannot imagine in the places along the coast. The center of the province is drained of everything."

"It is truly lamentable, what our brothers of the Ceará backlands face," my husband observed, taking up the cup of coffee that rested on the table.

"I do not know whether you recall, but I have relatives in that province."

"I did not recall it, my dear," he said, in a tone still more concerned.

"Some of my forebears settled in the backlands of Ceará. Over the years some of the family moved to the Court, but many remained there. I cannot help worrying about them at this moment," I said.

My husband set the cup down on the saucer. "Your distress is understandable, my love. Not only for your relatives: before such news, any sensitive soul must pity the sad reality the people of the North are facing, especially in Ceará."

"Let us have faith that all will be well, but I fear we shall yet read difficult news."

"Is that all the paper brings?"

"I have not finished, unfortunately. Let us see whether we find any hope among these lines."

I continued the reading: *"Pacatuba, June 26. The caravans of migrants continue, entering this town every day in search of bread and clothing. Some, mistrustful of the small government ration distributed by the relief commission of this town, pass on to the capital; most remain here: the able-bodied and the women*

work; the old and the children fill the streets of this small town, begging. Nothing reaches these unfortunates."

I paused a moment. It was becoming difficult to go on reading. Each place in that province communicated its suffering. These were painful reports, hard to digest.

"Nothing reaches them... Many will read this paper, but people who have never had any contact with a drought can hardly understand its effects."

"What do you mean?"

"The destructive power of a drought is enormous. When the rain fails for so long, one loses tranquility and, worse still, hope. Water grows scarce; there is no harvest. Food is lacking at the table, sustenance is lacking, the body wastes away. The cattle, without pasture, weaken and die of hunger. Then, to save the little that still remains to them, the families begin to leave the backlands."

My husband listened attentively. He did not know that reality at close hand; he knew only what the papers reported. I, however, with roots in Ceará as well, knew how destructive a drought could be in the backlands.

"At least many seem to find shelter in other places..." he said, perhaps trying to comfort me.

I shook my head. "It is not a simple situation to resolve. These families were rooted in their lands. They had a house, a piece of ground to plant and raise their animals, and relatives living nearby. Most had certainly never left the region where they lived. For many, life was that place; the backlands were the only world they knew. Now many are without ground beneath them, heading for lands that are strange to them and depending on the charity of strangers — if they find any help at all."

I looked out the window. Carriages passed along the street; people walked at their tranquil pace. Everything seemed perfectly normal. And yet, hundreds of leagues to the north, thousands of people were dragging themselves along the roads in search of survival.

I sighed, seeking some breath to continue, and took up the reading again: *"Telha, June 5. The drought grows more horrifying by the day. God alone can help us. Our losses are incalculable. It is said that people are already beginning to die of hunger at Bom Sucesso, in this parish. Yesterday Major Prudente received word that an old man had died of hunger at Bom Jesus. He was a widower and left eight children who are close to sharing their father's fate."*

"They are already dying of hunger!" I murmured. But the paper had not finished.

"Crato, June 14. We are grappling with the drought; the emigration is astonishing; it seems to me that mortality from hunger will be greatest here, because resources fail and there is nowhere to seek them. Yesterday work began on the dam on the river of this city, which is nearly dry, because the waters are held back at the springs for irrigation. So many people flock to the work that there is a surplus, for want

of employment; and yet they content themselves with the meager wage of four hundred réis a day, at their own cost. Poor souls! They submit to everything in order to suffer less. I believe I shall have to witness very sad scenes."

Another letter from the same locality says: The drought is horrifying. The Cariri region is overflowing with people from outside, above all from the province of Paraíba. The number of migrants already rivals that of the inhabitants here. The small and scanty harvest of the Cariri would barely suffice for the people of the place; imagine, with the arrival of convoys and the increase in population, what will become of these poor people. Provisions rise in price progressively."

My husband listened in silence. Those letters no longer seemed like news, but like calls for help coming from every corner of Ceará.

I went on: *"Jardim, June 12. Extract of a letter from Lieutenant Colonel Belarmino G. de Sá Roriz: We are doing badly, very badly, with the drought. So many are the migrants who reach us at every turn that the roads are always full and the doorways of the houses crowded with beggars. The streets and the small settlements are like encampments, with makeshift shelters; it wrings the heart to see so many women and children weeping with hunger and asking for something to eat, for the love of God! The poor of the parish are in almost the same state, and will soon suffer the toxic effects of the mucunã and the maniçoba, on which they are sustaining themselves."*

(Mucunã, maniçoba, carnaúba, and gravatá are wild plants of the Brazilian backlands, eaten in times of famine; several are toxic when they are the only food.)

I came to the news from Lavras: *"Lavras, June 11. The state of this town could not be sadder or more deplorable. For a long time the population here has fed on mucunã, carnaúba, and gravatá, and these are now exhausted in this place, while the mucunã is becoming hard to find for the distance one must go to seek it."*

My husband frowned. "They are living on plants from the bush?" he asked, incredulous.

"On what they can still find," I answered sadly. And I continued: *"Our situation is horrible. In Lavras people have already died of hunger, and will go on dying if the government does not remember us. The migrants who pass through here present a picture of anguish and pain. Ragged, barefoot, their feet bleeding, they arrive here almost starved. Many have abandoned their infants here in swaddling clothes, whom the vicar has baptized, standing as godfather."*

I paused in the reading. I thought of the abandoned children and, instinctively, my eyes sought out my own.

"Children are being abandoned..." my husband said, almost in a whisper.

"Left by their parents because, perhaps, they no longer have the strength even to carry themselves."

"São Pedro de Ibiapina, June 4. The little rain we had from the end of April to the tenth of May served for little; it gave only an illusory hope, now entirely dispelled. There were no crops in the backlands; there is no pasture for the animals, our only means of transport. We shall be marooned. The emigration from this district alone is presently reckoned at twenty thousand souls, and continues by the thousand. It seems no one will remain in the backlands. How to supply these people, in want of everything? We have salvaged some produce; part was lost. Those who arrive work in the wetlands, but how are they to live without resources for six or eight months, until the harvest comes? The government can build a granary at Granja, but how are provisions to be carried from August onward across twenty leagues of scorched backland? Great, enormous is the calamity!"

I let the paper fall onto the table. For some moments neither of us spoke. My husband's face showed how struck he was by that news. In silence, he looked at his pocket watch. He was late for work.

"I must go," was all he managed to say. He rose, kissed my forehead, and left the room.

I watched him go. Through the window I saw him step into the carriage and set off for his office. I turned back into the house. The coffee was still on the table. The children went on playing in the next room. My routine would be the same, except for the weight that now occupied my heart.

I looked at the newspaper. My eyes ran across the page and found the serial I had been following. On any other morning I would have gone on through those lines. That day, however, I could not. The news from Ceará occupied all my thoughts. Something told me that this news was only the beginning. That presentiment disturbed my peace.

Historical note

This chronicle was built from correspondence from the interior of the Province of Ceará, published in the newspaper *O Cearense* during the great drought of 1877 and reproduced in the *Gazeta de Notícias* on July 10 of that year. The documentary passages were reproduced with modernized spelling to ease contemporary reading.

It is worth noting that, at the time, the term "Northeast" was not yet used in the regional sense adopted today. In the newspapers and official documents of the Empire, Ceará and the other provinces of the region were referred to as part of the "North" of Brazil, or as the "northern provinces". For that reason, this narrative preserves the terminology used in the nineteenth century.

Telha was the former name of the present-day municipality of Iguatu, in Ceará.

Anapúena Havena — President of the Brazilian Academy of History and Literature. From the series "The Reader of Time".

Translated from the Portuguese original published by the Academia Brasileira de História e Literatura.

COMO CITAR

HAVENA, Anapuena. The Reader of Time: News of the Drought in Ceará, July 1877. American Society of History, Arts and Letters, 2026. Disponível em: <https://www.theamericanshal.org/portal/publicacoes/the-reader-of-time-news-of-the-drought-in-ceara-july-1877>.