

FIREWOOD

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When my wife Andrea and I bought our farm in southwestern Michigan in August of 1981 one of the key provisions of the contract was that the owner would leave the turn-of-the-century round woodburning stove that graced the front room of the farmhouse. As a long time suburbanite I had virtually no prior experience with wood stoves, but I knew they had a special mystique for people who spent their weekends and vacations in the country, and I had read that they were finding a renaissance among energy-conscious full-time country residents. If a stove could both provide psychic satisfactions and save me money, I was not going to pass up the opportunity to have one.

Before we could begin to enjoy these benefits, we had some not insignificant labor to perform. The stove sat on the same shiny yellow-green rubber-backed carpeting that covered most of the downstairs of the farmhouse, and sparks and embers had melted numerous black holes in front of the stove. The holes, along with other even worse features of the carpeting (such as those caused by the former occupants' dog), made its removal imperative. Not only did this require hours of effort to scrape the carpet off the floor (it had been glued down), but it also meant that we had to move the stove.

An ornate cast iron woodburning stove five feet high is heavy, but Andrea and I finally managed to tip it onto a small wooden dolly and roll it into the kitchen. We then had the new carpeting laid, and we put a sheet of fireproof board on top of it where the stove would sit. The board was no more attractive than the old carpeting, so we decided to cover it with some bricks which we had brought back with us after a visit with Andrea's parents in St. Louis. But how were we possibly going to hoist the stove up onto a bunch of loose bricks?

The answer was that we weren't. We would lay the bricks under the stove. To accomplish this we rolled the stove back into the front room on the dolly to the place it was to go, then inserted two long two-by-fours under it. Using the two-by-fours as levers, we raised first one side, then the other, resting the ends of the two-by-fours on concrete blocks. We laid the bricks neatly under the stove, then lowered it onto them with the two-by-fours. The technique worked like a charm.

The final step in making the stove ready was reconnecting it to the chimney. This required a determination of the proper number of stove pipe sections and elbows necessary to reach from the chimney to the stove's new location. The hard part was assembling the stove pipe sections out of the flat pieces the fireplace store sold me. I also had to put a hook in the ceiling with a piece of wire attached to suspend the stove pipe because of its length.

Now we needed only something to burn. I could have simply bought some firewood from Jack, my next door neighbor, who heated his whole house with a wood-burning furnace and had maybe ten cords stacked in his back yard. Or I could have ordered a rank of firewood from one of the numerous ads in the *Galien River Gazette*, the local newspaper. (A rank is the standard measurement of firewood in southwestern Michigan; it constitutes one pickup load, which is said to be approximately one-third of a cord.) In the fall of 1981 there seemed to be a lot of people with time to cut firewood in order to raise a little cash.

But I rejected these alternatives. Having just purchased an eighty acre farm, more than half of which was wooded, I was not going to carry coals to Newcastle. I would cut the firewood myself, from my own land. Indeed, by doing so I would be furthering one of the economic justifications I had used (but have since discarded) for buying the farm, which was to enjoy the appreciation in value I foresaw as my woods, most of which was abandoned pasture, grew into commercially valuable timber. In order to enhance this appreciation I intended to cull out some of the undesirable trees, but I couldn't do this until I had decent trails into the woods. And I couldn't have decent trails until I cleared a lot of fallen wood out of the way. There was my firewood, at least for the first winter. (I wasn't quite ready to cut any live trees; I didn't know for certain which ones should be cut, and I wasn't sure I could

keep them from falling on my head if I did.)

One of the first things I had done when I bought the farm was to locate my western property line, which divided the farm from the wooded state park adjoining it. I remembered that there were numerous logs near this line which had to be removed if I was going to have a trail there. Since this was at that time the most familiar part of my woods, it was where I would start.

Another thing I had done upon purchasing the farm was to investigate the kinds of vehicles available for getting around the place. I had decided that a pickup wouldn't do, because a truck was too big to get into some of the places I wanted to go. A small tractor was ideal, especially if I could get one that would do other chores as well. Now that I was ready to cut wood, I had my excuse to proceed with the purchase. How else would I haul my wood back to the house?

It's not nearly as easy to find out what kinds of small tractors are available as it is, say, to survey the market for cars, or television sets, or computers. After quite a few telephone calls to tractor dealers, I learned that at that time most, if not all, American-made small tractors were designed primarily for mowing lawns and only light duty elsewhere. The Japanese, however, had developed small tractors that were rugged and that had many of the features of large tractors, such as an honest-to-goodness power takeoff for implements, a three-point hitch, a hydraulic system for lifting implements, a diesel engine, and four-wheel drive. I guess maybe the Japanese farm smaller plots of land than we do, because as wonderful as these machines are, they are not powerful enough for real farming on an American scale. They were, however, perfect for my uses.

But wanting one of these little gems and being able to afford one were entirely different matters. A sixteen horsepower Kubota, which seemed to be the most popular, cost as much as a small Japanese car. The same was true of an equivalent Ford tractor (made in Japan). After numerous inquiries, I finally located a dealer who would sell me a fifteen horsepower Yanmar that he had been using as a demonstrator for four thousand dollars. With two cylinders rather than three it was noisier than the Kubota, but it had all the features

I wanted. And for an extra seventy five dollars I got a used metal cart that would hold my firewood.

I still needed one more thing before I could cut my wood, and that was a saw. Unlike small tractors, chain saws are extremely popular items in the American country, and there are books, magazines, friends and neighbors full of helpful advice on how to buy one. (I can remember wondering, in my old city/suburban existence, why on earth manufacturers spent so much money advertising such a limited demand item; little did I realize that virtually *everyone* in the country owns a chain saw.) There are considerable differences of opinion as to which brand is the best, but there is unanimity on one point: buy a chain saw that is powerful enough. Cutting wood, I was advised, is hard work; don't make it harder by using a toy. Consequently, when I saw that Sears was offering a model with a 3.6 cubic inch displacement and an eighteen inch bar for about two hundred fifty dollars, I snapped it up.

After assembling the saw and practicing a few starts, I was ready to become a woodcutter. I hitched the cart to the tractor, put the saw and a shovel in the cart, and headed down the road that runs along the south end of the farm until I came to the west property line. I turned off the road and into the trail we had begun when we did our surveying. About a hundred yards along the trail I came to a thick log, at least eighteen inches in diameter, that blocked further progress. This was what I was looking for. The log had lost its bark but showed no signs of decay. Hopefully it had been down long enough to dry out but not long enough to rot.

The trail at this point ran next to a ravine, and the log stuck out over the edge. I started cutting the log where it was suspended in the air. The saw went through the wood like butter, and the part of the log that had been suspended fell into the ravine; I would go down and try to salvage some of it later. This was easy, though for the first time I became aware of the intense noise and smell of a chain saw.

I cut the log again about two feet from my first cut. It was still cantilevered in the air here, but the round I cut did not roll down into the ravine. The second cut was just as easy as the first one. I rolled the two foot section of log over to the trail and lifted it into the cart.

It was heavier than I anticipated; I would make the next piece a bit shorter.

The remainder of the log was solidly on the ground. My neighbor and my saw's manual had warned against letting the chain get into the dirt, so I started digging a trench under the log where I wanted to make the next cut. This too was harder than I expected, but I finally did it and started cutting again. The cutting went fine until I was about three-quarters of the way through, when the saw seemed to slow down. I noticed that the top of the cut had become narrower; the edges where I was cutting were coming together and binding my saw because the piece of wood I was cutting off was dropping into my trench. I had learned firewood cutting lesson number one: think about what is going to happen when your cut is finished.

I managed to wedge the edges of the log apart and completed the cut. For the remaining cuts I took steps to make sure the saw wouldn't bind again, but this required more care and more time. I finally finished clearing the log from the trail, but it had taken me a total of more than two hours to produce a dozen rounds of wood (including two I cut from the piece that had fallen into the ravine). I was sweating and shaking when I finished.

Before heading back home I strolled for a ways through the woods. As it was mid-October, there was still lots of fall color to be enjoyed, and the views into the ravine were marvelous. On my stroll I noticed for the first time a large number of black walnut husks, like small green oranges, that had apparently just recently fallen to the ground. (I remembered the look and smell of the walnuts from childhood experience at my grandmother's house in southern Missouri.) Could there be black walnut trees on my property? I had read that black walnut is one of the most valuable species of American tree for lumber purposes. At that time I had only a rudimentary ability to identify trees, but it wasn't hard to figure out that trees with black walnuts still hanging from the branches were black walnut trees. I spotted a number of them on the state park side of the property line, and a few on my side. The ones on my side were forked and crooked and probably worthless. Maybe that was why they were still there.

Then another thought hit me. Had I just sawed up a nice straight, sound black walnut

trunk into little two foot pieces? I had no idea what wood from a fallen and barkless black walnut tree would look like, but it *could* look like what I had just cut, and the log was in the midst of trees I could positively identify as black walnuts. I drove the tractor and cart back to the house in a decidedly dispirited mood, fearing I might have just made twenty dollars worth of firewood out of a thousand dollar tree.

Actually, my efforts hadn't even yet produced firewood. All I had was a dozen forty pound pieces, which took two trips to haul to the farmhouse in my small cart. Black walnut or not, it wasn't of any value at all unless I could put it back together or split it into smaller pieces that would fit into the stove. The latter seemed the easier course, although I would later begin to wonder.

I had never split wood before and didn't know much about it. I had heard that metal wedges were made that could be used with my sledgehammer for splitting wood, and I found one for sale at the local hardware store. I brought it home, held it on the top of one of my rounds, and started pounding. After several tries I managed to embed it in the wood so that I could hammer in earnest.

A peculiar thing happened. I hammered and hammered and the wedge went slowly into the wood, tilting to one side. The wood groaned and creaked as the wedge went in, and even parted, but didn't split. I finally had the wedge all the way in, and still the two halves would not separate. I couldn't pull the wedge out either. In desperation I got an ax and started pounding it into the other end of the piece of wood. Just as the ax was also about to disappear inside it the wood finally split. I felt a fleeting sense of triumph, until I considered the prospect of having to go through the same routine with all the rest of the pieces--and more than once for each piece--in order to produce stove-sized wood.

As I was starting with the wedge on the next piece my neighbor Jack strolled over. He must have been observing my feeble efforts, for he brought along what he told me was his splitting maul.

“You're going about this the hard way,” he said.

“What should I be doing?”

“You need one of these mauls. Here, let me show you.” He lifted one of the rounds of wood off the porch and set it on the ground. It was even thicker than the one I had had so much difficulty splitting. He spit on his hands, grabbed the maul, swung it back and down, and the round split neatly into two pieces. “Isn't that a lot faster?”

“I can't understand how the maul can make it so much easier.”

“Why don't you give it a try?”

I put a smaller round of wood on the ground and took Jack's maul. I tried to copy his motion in swinging it and felt good when it hit the wood right in the middle. But in my case the wood just stayed there unscathed, as the maul bounced off. Frustrated and a bit embarrassed, I tried again. Same result. And again, with no greater success

I thought I saw a trace of a grin on Jack's face. He took the maul back and delivered a blow to the wood. It split easily.

“Is this some kind of a trick?” I asked.

“I don't understand why you can't do it,” Jack said. “It's so easy.” To demonstrate, he took another piece of wood off the porch and split it cleanly. Then he proceeded to turn the half rounds lying on the ground into quarters and eighths, each time succeeding with one blow. As he did his wife, Clareann, walked over to see what was going on.

“Jack,” she said after observing the situation, “are you showing off again?” She turned to me. “Don't let him make you feel bad. He does this to everyone.”

“You mean not everyone can do what he's doing with that maul?” I asked.

“Not many,” Clareann said.

Jack was smiling broadly now. “I guess I was putting you on a little,” he said. “I've been doing this all my life. Also, I'm a bit bigger than you.” It was true that Jack outweighed me by a good seventy five pounds, most of which was obviously not fat. He was also at least ten years younger.

“Looks like I'd better stick with the wedge,” I said. “But why do I have so much trouble getting the thing apart once it's started to split?”

Jack leaned over and looked at the wood carefully. “Hell,” he said, “this here's red

elm. It's got what they call an interlocking grain, and it's some of the hardest stuff to split there is.”

I didn't tell Jack what I had thought the wood might be, but I was relieved to know that I hadn't destroyed a fortune in lumber. On the other hand, I now realized that it might take me forever to get it all split. Jack apparently appreciated my problem. Before I could say anything, he had removed the remaining rounds of wood from the porch and started swinging his maul like a madman. In ten minutes my firewood was all ready. The job would have taken me hours. I thanked him profusely.

“You don't need to thank me,” he said. “It was fun.”

The following weekend I cut and cleared some more fallen logs from the trail. These were smaller and apparently not red elm, so I managed to split them myself with the new maul I purchased. I stacked some of my output on the porch and the rest in the barn. I took great pride in my accomplishment.

The weather had by now turned cold enough to require heat in the farmhouse. We used the oil furnace in the basement to warm the place up quickly when we first arrived, but we found that once we got a good hot fire going in the stove, it would eventually warm the whole house all by itself. And the quality of the heat from the stove vastly surpassed that of the furnace. It was quiet and steady; it provided a special warm spot for one to repair to after coming in from the cold; and it served as a focal point around which to engage in spirited conversation and camaraderie. The ambience provided by the stove was made all the more special by the fact that I was burning my own wood cut from my own land.

Until about February anyway. We came over to the farm almost every weekend that winter, and whenever we came we fired up the stove. My pile of wood that had seemed so enormous in October was virtually gone by the end of January. I then had no alternative but to buy a few cartloads from Jack, as the snow and cold made it impossible to go cut more. I had to repeat the purchase again in March.

The following summer I vowed to cut more wood, but I had so many other things to do that I didn't get around to it until the fall. (The summers in southern Michigan are really

too hot for cutting wood anyway, I told myself.) There were still a lot of downed trees to cut up, but of course the good logs were a little further away than they were last year, when I had naturally taken the best and the closest to the house. I nevertheless managed to cut and split more than I had the first fall, though it took more time than I wanted to devote to the project. That winter my wood lasted into March, but I still had to buy more. This time I ordered it from someone who advertised in the paper. I had a greater appreciation of Jack's efforts in collecting his own supply, and although I knew he would sell to me however much I wanted, the fact that he wasn't offering to sell to anyone else suggested that maybe he considered his work to be worth more than the forty dollars a rank that seemed to be the going price. I certainly did.

The following fall I reluctantly gave in to my city-bred sense of time urgency, not to mention the increasingly unpleasant odor and noise of my chain saw and a little pain I had started feeling in my lower back after swinging a splitting maul, and purchased two full cords of firewood, which I stacked neatly along the outside wall of the barn. Some of it was still left in the spring, and I replenished it by purchasing another cord.

I still use my chain saw for clearing trails, a project that seems unending. (I haven't yet acquired the courage to start felling live trees, other than little saplings.) Most of the wood I cut I leave at the sugarhouse I built, where I burn it in my maple syrup evaporator. The evaporator has a much shorter season than the stove and consequently makes lesser demands for fuel. I do bring some of the wood back and split it up, just so I can feel that I am responsible for a little bit of that wonderful quiet, steady warmth.

I miss the satisfying sense of self-sufficiency I had when I cut all my own wood (or rather, most of it). But that self-sufficiency was an illusion, anyway, I tell myself. I certainly didn't make the chain saw I used to cut up the logs, or the diesel-powered tractor I used to haul the wood back to the house. I also wonder sometimes whether I am exploiting those country woodcutters who are willing to sell and deliver to me for forty dollars a quantity of wood that would take me all day to cut, haul back to the farmhouse, and split up. But I assume that they, like Jack, are just far more efficient than I, and that Adam Smith's invisible

hand is benefitting us both when I spend my time earning wages in the city practicing my specialty so that I can pay them for practicing theirs.

In any event, neither my loss of self-sufficiency nor my socialist concerns keep me from enjoying a cold winter's evening relaxing in front of our magnificent old stove. The mystique of the woodburning stove is, I have concluded, well justified. The pleasure of sitting near this radiating hunk of cast iron is remarkably similar to that of lying on a beach under the hot sun. Both pleasures operate on a basic, animal level. Of course, you can't get a tan sitting in front of a stove, but on the other hand you don't have to travel two thousand miles in the middle of January to find it.