



FUEL FOR HEATING THROUGHOUT THE YEARS: FROM WOOD TO NUCLEAR ENERGY

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This story originally appeared in the former Enterprise-Bulletin newspaper on February 20, 2015 under the title Home Heating Throughout The Years. This is an expanded version of that story.

Most of us take it for granted when we turn up the electric heat thermostat or switch on a gas fireplace that heat will be produced. Little, if any, thought is given to the convenience this affords. It wasn't always this convenient, and many people can remember when heating took much more effort.

For a very long time throughout history, wood was the fuel most readily to hand and a wood fire somehow, even today, appeals to some primal part of our being. The flames of a wood fire represent a number of things: light against the dark, warmth against the cold, and even a sense of protection and comfort against danger and the unknown. During the Christmas season in Victoria, Shaw Cable has a channel for the

“Holiday Fireplace”, a video on a continuous loop of a real wood fire in a masonry fireplace being tended periodically by the plaid shirt-clad arm of a man who, from time to time, pokes the fire and adds more wood. This was originally filmed by a cable channel employee who, in 1986, had set up a video camera in front of his fireplace so that they would have something to show on their local 24/7 channel and yet give their employees time off with their families over Christmas. Besides the entertainment value of the video, it created a deluge of telephone calls and letters from women wanting to know who the man was and if he was single—all they ever saw of him was his arm and yet somehow this, along with the cheery, loudly crackling fire, appealed to the basic human needs for light, warmth and protection mentioned earlier in this paragraph. The Shaw Fireplace video was re-recorded a few years ago using a 100-year-old hearth in a cabin in North Vancouver according to the CBC and is now watched by millions during the holiday season. The name of the mystery man is a “closely guarded secret” which only adds to the mystique of the video. The Shaw fireplace is just one of many such videos that are available on the Internet.

Regarding poking a fire, some of you may remember an episode of *My Three Sons* from the 1960’s in which Fred MacMurray’s character Steve Douglas claimed that there wasn’t a man alive who could resist poking a fire. This too seems to appeal to

some primal part of our being. Keeping the fire going could have meant the difference between death and survival in ancient times and some part of that resonates today even if it relates only to tending a wood stove, fireplace, barbeque or campfire.

From the late 19th Century and throughout the first half of the 20th Century and beyond to about 1960, coal reigned supreme as the fuel to run factories, ships, railway locomotives, and for heating large public buildings as well as homes. There were other fuels, of course, like wood, oil and propane.

In Collingwood there were two main sources of coal. The coal dock on Heritage Drive was stocked by self-unloading ships which deposited three huge separate piles of different types and sizes of coal. (Since the coal dock was not fenced off, I wonder how many pails or sacks of coal disappeared under cover of darkness courtesy of the “Midnight Coal Supply”.) Because the Shipyard had a huge appetite for coal, it too was stocked by the same ships that replenished the coal dock. The shipyard had, well into the 1950’s, three cranes that were steam powered. In addition, the huge pile of coal outside the boiler house/pump house fed the steam boilers that powered the machinery to pump out the two drydocks and also to heat buildings. One day in the late 50’s I rode my bike down to the harbour just in time to see the self-unloading coal boat restock

the three large piles adjacent to the Sheer Leg Crane and then move over adjacent to the Shipyard and replenish the pile there. The other main source for coal in town was suppliers including Girdwoods and D. G. Cooper who received car loads of coal by rail.

Public buildings required large amounts of coal. At the old Victoria School on Maple St. the coal bunkers were on the west side of the main building and from classrooms on that side we could watch the men replenish the supply by means of Frank Seymour's dump truck and a conveyor belt. A lot of the heat produced went up the chimney. I recall the blackboard being quite warm in one of those classrooms where the chimney was behind the wall. [In its earliest days in the 1880's, both buildings of Victoria School were heated with cordwood and stoves, the coal-fired steam radiators not being installed until 1897.] The 1925 Collingwood Collegiate building on Hume St. had coal bunkers under the large front porch with a coal chute on either side of the front steps. The coal chute for the former Bank of Montreal building at the south-east corner of Hurontario and Simcoe Streets is still visible on the Simcoe St. side of the building.

Delivery to homes was another matter. If the truck could pull up beside the access hatch for a basement coal bin, they would place a metal chute down through the opening and shovel the

coal down the chute. If the truck could not get near the access to a residential coal bin, the men had to shovel coal into large sacks, hoist one onto their shoulder, and carry the heavy sacks from the street to the chute opening over and over to fill the coal bin. This was heavy, dirty work (even heavier work when carrying sacks of coal up to a second or third floor apartment on Hurontario St.) requiring a strong back and I'm sure it also created ready employment for chiropractors and repeat visits to the drugstore for liniment.

Basement hot air coal furnaces looked like a giant octopus with huge round metal pipes radiating in all directions to vents in the floor above. They required a lot of attention. For the fire to last from bedtime through the night and into the next morning the furnace had to be "banked". Fresh coal was placed on top of the fire and the air vents were partly closed to slow down combustion so that the fire would smolder through the night. This resulted in a bed of glowing coals in the morning when the vents would be fully opened and fresh coal would be shoveled in to warm up the house. In situations like this people could not go away for more than a day in the winter because the furnace would go out and the house would freeze. I leave the reader to contemplate the consequences for the water pipes. Some home furnaces and many public buildings had a "stoker" which saved much time and effort and kept the heat constant.

This was a large mechanized steel machine with a hopper that would be loaded by hand every few days with “pea” or “nut” coal” (small size), and when the thermostat upstairs called for more heat, an electric motor would activate an auger that would automatically feed fresh coal from the hopper into the furnace. The brand name for these machines was “Iron Fireman” made by the Iron Fireman Manufacturing Company, starting in 1923. They called it “The machine that made coal an automatic fuel”. The trademark symbol was a tin man with a shovel full of coal. The factories were in Portland, Oregon, Cleveland, Ohio and in Toronto and Montreal in Canada. There were models that used Bituminous coal and others that used Anthracite. People fortunate enough to have a stoker in their basement could go away for a few days in the winter while the stoker kept the heat uniform.

Around 1975 I learned that Alberta lump coal was still available from a supplier at the harbour in Midland so I drove over there to get some to supplement my supply of firewood to burn in the fireplace. The man I talked to at the Midland coal sheds clearly had a strong dislike for his boss and was in a foul mood that day. When I asked for fifty pounds of coal he shoveled the big lumps into a burlap sack, handed it to me and growled, “There! Does that feel like fifty pounds to you?” (he did not weigh it). I had no idea what it weighed but it was fifty pounds he charged for (I also bought a sack for the next-door

neighbour). When I got home, using the bathroom scale I determined that he had given me about sixty-five pounds of coal.

Many homes in Collingwood still burned wood in the mid-20th Century. Collingwood's "Mr. Centennial" Mr. McKechnie was still chopping wood at age 90. In the 1950's there was a wood yard on the east side of Maple St. part way between 6th and 7th Streets where logs were sawed, split and stacked for delivery. Some people, like our neighbour Ethel Fry who lived on Robinson St. behind us, had longer lengths of wood delivered to their home every autumn and a man would come around with a tractor that had a large buzz saw mounted on the rear and he would custom cut the wood to size for stoves onsite. The whine of that big blade as it bit into the wood was a familiar sound around town in that era just as was the rattle of coal sliding down a metal chute into someone's basement coal bin—familiar sounds that, along with the wail of a steam locomotive whistle, are part of the past. In the earlier years of their marriage my parents bought wood and coal and, later, stove oil from Girdwoods before switching to natural gas much later in life. I still remember the wood and coal cook stove in our kitchen when I was small and I still have a mental image of my father taking the stove pipes outside once a year in the summer to clean them. That stove was succeeded by a

propane model that was followed years later by an electric stove.

Also at this time, oil began to supplant coal and the oil trucks of several dealers were a common sight around town delivering furnace oil and stove oil from a long hose to their customers' oil tanks. Some coal furnaces were converted to oil burners or were replaced with new oil furnaces. Homes without a basement had oil stoves called "space heaters". These required careful, attentive lighting. Stove and chimney fires were frequent because people would carelessly let too much oil into the stove before lighting it or they would light a stove carefully but leave the door open creating too large a draft, then get distracted doing something else and meanwhile the stove and stove pipe would become a raging inferno requiring a visit from the Fire Department.

By the late 1950's the era of natural gas was dawning when the pipeline from Western Canada reached Simcoe County sixty years ago in September of 1958. An 80-mile pipeline from the Trans Canada Pipeline near Barrie was constructed serving Stayner, Collingwood, Thornbury, Meaford and Owen Sound. When the pipeline was buried adjacent to Highway 26 and the CNR tracks at the Craigleith railway station (now the Craigleith Heritage Depot) many of the lilac bushes there were ripped out to make way for the excavating equipment and I remember my

mother lamenting the loss of those bushes and their beautiful and fragrant spring blooms (fortunately they grew back). A firm named Pemrow Pipelines installed the gas mains in Collingwood and were a familiar sight as they trenched and tunneled all over town. Before electric heat became commonplace, gas was touted as the new, modern way to go; it was fast, efficient, convenient and clean and there were no clinkers and ashes to take out. Basement oil tanks and coal bins would soon become a thing of the past and the square footage they occupied could now be put to other uses. I can still hear the commercial for the Consumers' Gas Company that used to blare at us over the radio from CKBB in Barrie circa 1958-59. Based on the perceived division of labour between the sexes, a male and female chorus sang:

Natural Gas, Consumers' Gas, The finest modern fuel for any home, [men]

For water heating and cooking, it does your drying too, [women]

No storage or delivery problems facing you, [men]

Efficient, automatic, from basement to attic, you just can't beat natural gas heat, [all]

Ask your neighbour! [all].

One place that had used a lot of coal was the Gayety Theatre for heating not only the theatre but the stores at street level and the Gayety Apartments on the upper floor (the front portion of the building was once a hotel prior to 1911). When the Russ family switched over to natural gas Sam Russ gave me and Rod Johnston a tour of the boiler room. Sam told us that the new gas-fired boiler could produce steam in twenty minutes, whereas the old coal-fired one “took two hours just to get up heat”.

The heating of our homes has come a long way from wood and coal, to oil and gas, to electricity and even solar. I recall being told by a forward-thinking gentleman in the early 1970’s that the day was not far away when each home would have a miniature nuclear reactor [!] as a “clean” source of heat and energy. Thankfully that hasn’t happened. At the opposite end of the heating spectrum, some people in rural areas still heat with wood. I was once part of that culture when, back in the 1970’s, there was a resurgence in the use of airtight wood stoves. My first home here on Vancouver Island was heated with two such stoves for 14 years, from the late 70’s to the early 90’s. A second-growth forest on the semi-rural property provided plenty of timber. Logs were bucked up and split during the summer months and stacked to dry, a benefit of which was great exercise and lots of fresh air. The next benefit came when the dried wood was burned with great satisfaction

the following fall, winter and spring. The electric heat in that house was never used during those years, the breakers being turned off.

For the past quarter century Pam and I have lived in a building heated with gas-fired hot water baseboard radiators fed from a central boiler room. Yet still today the increasingly rarely heard sound and aroma of dry wood burning and crackling in a wood stove or open fireplace has a charm that can't, and never will, be duplicated by nuclear energy. We don't have a fireplace and so we frequently turn on the Shaw Holiday Fireplace on TV and enjoy the comforting sights and sounds of years past.

The next time you casually turn up your thermostat, think for a moment what previous generations had to do to warm their homes—it often took far more than just a simple motion of the wrist.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. He and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B. C.