

Cottage Memories

Chronicles of A City Boy's Life In The Country

WOOD RULES

By Craig Nicholson

Everyone should have a position on wood. Mine is flat on my aching back. Prior to my proneness, I took wood for granted. It stands in forests. Rests in stacked piles. Clutters roads after storms. It gets trimmed, tapped, sprayed, stood under, stood in, carved, built with, cut and burned. Wood is a fact of rural life. And now, a hard fact of mine.

Wood is deceitful. The noun "wood" appears to be singular - "woods" being where deer hang out. So how can wood have so plural a reality? When neighbours ask: "Can you help us move wood?"; do they ever mean only one piece?

I first encountered the reality of wood when my wife and I bought our cottage. The realtor had estimated an annual hydro bill in the low hundreds. He must have meant for that year with multiple power outages. When my bill sky-rocketed in my first month of winter, I lowered the baseboard heater setting in cost-saving desperation.

Then one night inside, I bumped into an icicle that turned out to be my wife. She suggested using that dirty old stove in the basement. "I'm way ahead of you," I exclaimed proudly. "That's where I burned the hydro bill." She proposed burning wood instead. I couldn't be certain, what with all her shivering and tooth chattering, but she may have also used the word "blockhead". Another kind of wood, I presume.

Getting wood sounds simple. I can cut it, buy it or wait for it to fall on my boathouse. Not real thinking work. If I had thought, my first one would have been how to stop doing it. For between that majestic tree and my old stove lies a veritable purgatory of overheated suffering. Even finding a tree to cut is a chore. After eliminating live ones, loved ones, owned ones, infested ones, nested ones, tangled ones, Crown ones and huge ones, I could hardly see the only tree left in the forest of rejects.

Foolishly undeterred, I got to work that summer with my new chain saw, promptly discovering my first rule of wood: Don't move fast while the saw's revving to avoid ending up with a wooden leg. A broken chain and sliced britches later, my second rule of wood materialized: Wood's hot from the first cut to the last ash. That's

because of wood's third rule: Wood's never where you want it and moving it generates rampant body heat. Great way to fend off winter cold, I thought, before swarming insects reminded me that one of nature's little foibles is that wood cutting usually occurs when the temperature's already too hot.

Hence, my fourth rule: Wood needs to be handled at least four or five times. There's never a direct route from tree to stove. Wood must be moved from tree to pile to truck to stack to basement to stove. These multiple transfers create enough heat to replace hydro - if only it were winter. Thus, my fifth and sixth rules of wood: Most of the wood heat generates is lost without ever getting into my cottage. Also: Splitting wood at the final stacking location avoids having to move many more pieces each time.

At our first burning, my eighth and most important wood rule resulted: Husbands want to hoard winter wood; wives want to burn it. Maybe I'd been getting too close and personal with my wood. What with all that shugging and sweating, I knew many pieces by name. So when my wife wants to burn my first piece in the fall, it's like losing a close friend. But she looks out in them thar woods and says something like: "Yup, thar's plenty more whar that come from!" Meanwhile, I'm thinking, "If she needs that much heat now, what's it gonna take in winter, a forest fire in the basement?"

So we compromise. I promise not to rev the chain saw inside the cottage if she leaves the wood-stoving to me. Then I add: "If you want a fire so early, here's another axe!" To which she replies: "Honey, burning those handles doesn't generate much heat."

These heated exchanges have cut down on our wood consumption. That and the new space heater, sheep slippers, long johns, down robe and snug sack to keep her warm. Me, I just move more wood and contemplate my newest wood rule: Get a pellet stove!

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