



Fuel

by Lenore Salvaneschi

Shoveling out the driveway from the old schoolhouse to the garage during the snowy winter of 1936. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

It didn't seem possible, but just as the bobsled came into view, it vanished. Struggling in the drifting snow, the horses stumbled, the sleigh turned over, and the precious load of coal vanished into the snowbank.

Anxiously we watched as the men reappeared above the snow. To have this happen, only an eighth of a mile from home! Guiding themselves by the tips of the fence posts, the men plunged through the blizzard to our house to warm themselves, and to get fresh mittens and scarves which had been warmed on the oven door of the kitchen range. Frantically, in that -8° temperature, with the snow whipping into their faces, my father and a neighbor managed to scoop half the load out of the snow. As soon as the neighbor had delivered this load to his house up the hill, he hitched up a new team of horses and set out again for the lumberyard,

a mile and a half away. Loading another ton of coal, he brought half to the teacher's family and half to our house. By then both men and horses were exhausted, but the coal had to be brought in out of the snow. Just before the blizzard obscured the sun altogether, my father and brother managed to throw the wet lumps of coal into our basement and help the neighbor get the other half of the morning's load out of the snowbank, into the sled. The temperature dropped to -19° , the blizzard continued through the night and closed the roads again, but for a few hours there was a sense of respite in our house.

It was not that my father had been improvident in that severe winter of 1935-36. A man who thought it prudent to allow himself an extra half-hour "for a flat tire," no matter the length of the distance he intended to drive or how carefully he had just checked the tires, would hardly have failed to provide enough

fuel for the season. As a matter of fact, his records showed that on September 4, 1935, he had "laid down" four tons of Indiana coal at \$7 a ton; then on December 18, had spent \$23.62 for another load of coal. If this was again Indiana coal, presumably he bought about three tons; if Kentucky coal, it might have been only two. Adding the one-half ton of that blizzardy January 7 in 1936, and two more tons for which he paid \$21.38 on March 2, he would have purchased at least eight and one-half tons for the winter season, and spent around \$80 for coal alone. On a salary of barely \$1,500 a year, this was a sizable sum.

From the entries of my father's diary, the winter of 1935-36 was unexpectedly and "crazily" severe. One blizzard after another closed the roads. From December 14, 1935, until February 18, 1936, his entries listed thirty-four days of snow, much of it in the form of driving blizzards. From January 20, 1936, until March 4, there were twenty-eight days of temperatures below zero, sometimes descend-

ing as low as -25° . The roads south and north of us were closed to all traffic, except pedestrian and sled, from January 20 until February 23, the first warm day in 1936. At noon of that day, the temperature rose to 40° , and the snowplow almost made it through the one and one-half miles from our little town. One-fourth mile north of our house the plow broke down, but thirty-seven men spent the rest of the afternoon clearing that last segment. By evening, the road was open to the village. On March 4, the snowplow came through the mile from the south, and once again we had access to the old Lincoln Highway and to our "metropolis," Cedar Rapids.

Not only was the weather a factor in nearly defeating my father that winter. The parsonage was old and very difficult to heat. Often, his diary had the terse statements, "can't get the house warm," "got up at one—at three [and almost invariably at five] to look at the furnace," "banked the foundation [of the house] with snow," "the wind takes all the heat out." The main source of "centralized heating" in the parsonage was a coal furnace in the basement. The only source of coal was the lumberyard a mile and a half away, to which consignments of Indiana soft or Kentucky hard were always sporadic, if not erratic.

We were never wasteful of fuel in that house. In those days, conservation of energy was not a government program but a family necessity. Upstairs, only the bathroom received a modicum of heat early in the morning and again at bedtime. Our beds were provided with Amana blankets and homemade woolen quilts, and with a featherbed kept for the grandmother and the youngest child. Downstairs, the kitchen was the warmest place in the house because the cookstove was kept going throughout the day. The basement furnace had to supply heat to only three rooms. In normal times, this could often be reduced to two, but in the winter of 1935-36 my mother became an



On the way to Atkins in January 1929, on the road north of the parsonage, by means of a pair of horses, a wagon, and sleds. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)



A familiar mid-October scene at St. Stephen's Lutheran Church in Atkins: chopping wood for winter. The Reverend G. Rickels and daughter, Lenore, by the woodpile at the parsonage in 1921. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

invalid and the davenport in the parlor was made into her bed.

That winter the whole family often carried mattresses down the stairs and made beds on the dining room or study floors. Sleeping upstairs was both too cold and too dangerous when the winds were too strong to keep a very hot fire in the furnace. Our chimney tended to respond by "blowing out" periodically, showering the wooden shingles of the rather steeply pitched roof with a dangerous amount of sparks and tinder. One Christmas Eve, in fact, our family had returned from the children's service in the nearby church to find the attic crawling with young men from the congregation who were putting out a chimney fire. It must be confessed that so long as our precious *Weinachtsbaum* was safe in the parlor, my brother and I thought our Christmas celebra-

tion considerably enhanced by the excitement.

Fuel, the lack of it and the danger of it, were lessons learned in childhood and never really forgotten, no matter how comfortable the homes I have lived in since. Retelling the incident of the coal sled that overturned in the snow brings back the images of wheelbarrow, cob basket, and coal bucket. All these were associated with my father's never-ending concern to keep his family warm, and with his children's equally never-ending chore of keeping those receptacles filled.

Every fall, before the colored maple and oak leaves had fallen, Father would have contracted with a family in Iowa County, near the Amana Colonies, to have several loads of wood brought to our house. The wood was dumped unceremoniously beside the old schoolhouse.

Literally, it *was* the old schoolhouse of the congregation, converted into a garage and several storage rooms for both summer and winter fuel for the parsonage.

The image of the wheelbarrow is always associated with that woodpile. My father's childhood in the Maquoketa timber had taught him how to split chunks of wood into perfect firewood. As he did it, with a carefully honed axe, the job was both a practical and aesthetic exercise. No golf professional ever coached a pupil with a better eye to perfect control in stance and swing than my father did in teaching my brother and me to chop wood. Moreover, in the art of splitting wood there was no sexual discrimination in our house. Nor was there any discrimination in the work of carrying the fire-

wood indoors. My brother and I loaded the stuff, armload by armload, from the pyramids of kindling into the wheelbarrow, hauled it to the old schoolhouse, and unloaded it into the bin. This was the reservoir from which we had to replenish, again armload by armload, the stack of dried kindling in the house. Just carrying the wood into the basement, piling it up there, and carrying it up again to the kitchen could have provided plenty of demands for an allowance, had such a thing not been abhorrent to my father. Given to understand that such work was all part of honoring the Fourth Commandment, my brother and I could only harbor our protests in silence.

In addition to having enough coal or wood on hand, there was the matter of providing corn-



"Mother was a stickler for drying clothes outside, whether the sun shone or not." Ruth and Lenore Rickels hang out the laundry on a cold day in mid-March 1923. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

cobs, another form of fuel, useful for both winter and summer. After the periodic corn shelling, some farmers were generous in donating a load of cobs to the preacher, hauling it over in a wagon, and even cheerfully scooping the load into the cobshed. Other farmers, who couldn't resist charging whatever the traffic would bear, preferred taking our cash to having piles of excess cobs rotting in their barnyards. These farmers would also haul the precious source of energy to our yard, but often they simply dumped the cobs on the ground. From there, we had to carry basket after basket into the cobshed. Morning and evening, and often during the day, we hauled heavily-laden cob baskets into the house. Some of these baskets were simply old wooden bushel baskets, left over from the season's canning. These were easy to carry, but a great annoyance to our mother, for the cob dust sifted through the bottom of the baskets onto her clean linoleum kitchen floor. Her favorite basket, but not ours because it was so much heavier to carry, was a big galvanized basket which fit next to the kitchen stove. Behind it, we piled the kindling under the faucet of the silvered hot water tank. As long as there was a fire going in the cookstove, that tank provided our one source of hot water. Lined up in orderly fashion on the other side of the cob basket was the metal coal bucket. This important item, always painted black, had a wide back and high handle, enabling one to pile in large chunks of coal; the front end tapered and sloped so that one could pour finer bits of coal into the stove top, and later empty out the ashes gathered from the grate of the stove.

There was an art to starting a fire in the cookstove, and on the skill of the fire maker—and tender—depended the success of most country cooks. Just enough cobs below, with a few sticks of kindling, would start off the fire. Then more sticks of wood, topped off by a good shovelful of coal to get the kettle boiling for the



A typical winter evening's activity: Mrs. G. Rickels crocheting a rag rug. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

first pot of coffee, and the water in the bottom of the double boiler hot enough to cook the cracked wheat which had been soaking since the night before. Later came the real firing-up, when the bread and cookies and maybe a roast had to be baked. Before that, as the oven warmed up, a tray of clothespins might heat briefly so that fingers wouldn't freeze as they attempted to attach instantly-stiffened sheets to the outside line.

Mother was a stickler for drying clothes outdoors, whether the sun shone or not, and some of the more grotesque patterns remembered from childhood were long-legged union suits and overalls distended into a ghostly frieze above the snow. By afternoon more cobs and wood were needed in the kitchen stove, this time to bake the corn bread and to fry the bacon and sliced apples which would serve as supper. Some towels and heavier underwear, still not thawed from lack of sun, probably hung above

the warming oven of the stove, giving off steam and absorbing a redolence which indisputably told our schoolmates the next morning what we had had for supper the night before.

After the supper dishes were washed, the oven served another purpose. With still more coal and wood added to the stove, the open door radiated an inviting warmth which drew all members of the household. Those whose legs were longer—my father's and my brother's—kept their chairs on the outside; the rest of us, the shorter ones, drew up close. Then came the tricky business of resting one's stockinged feet on the oven door—not too heavily or the spring would break, or just inside the oven—but gingerly, or else the heels would be singed. Mother crocheted or mended; my brother and I did our homework; Father puffed his pipe, and when the homework was done,

read to us from his fairly well-stocked library. We did have a radio in the dining room, but the old Philco was so carefully wired and grounded that there was never any thought of its being portable. The party-line telephone attached to the wall, also in the dining room, might have provided further entertainment had we preacher's kids not been too well brought up [*sic*] to listen in on the delicious gossip provided by the various "rings."

The blissful moments of warmth around the stove were welcomed by all before the clock struck nine and Father's inexorable rule, bed by nine o'clock, went into effect. Once he began winding his pocket watch we knew it was time to draw as much heat into ourselves as we could, run upstairs and shuck our daytime clothes in the bathroom, and make a dash for the Amana blankets.

The coal used in both the furnace and the kitchen stoves could be either soft Indiana coal or hard Kentucky anthracite. It was always dirty. From the time it was thrown into the coal bin until it went out in the form of soot through the chimney, it caused the despair of many a fussy housewife. By March the house was dingy, and while the windows could be washed from the inside, there really was not much else that could be done until the furnace no longer had to be fired. It is not difficult to understand why a fastidious housewife longed for the April showers which ushered in the annual orgy of spring housecleaning. That this orgy was usually extended for a full month was a point of honor with many housewives in the congregation. That it tended to stretch into at least a month and a half in our house was a sad indication that ours was the parsonage. With the annual Mission Festival coming the second Sunday in June, Mother considered it a point of honor as a preacher's wife not to finish the housecleaning until the Saturday before Mission Festival, the high point in the domestic, as well as the congregational, year. □



Another wintertime activity: Lenore and Robert Rickels listening to the radio in the dining room of the parsonage in late December 1927. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)