

The Hearth that Defined a Family



by Wendy Chapell-Dick

We made our pilgrimage to Lehman's Hardware, the famous Amish outfitters in Kidron, Ohio. We were there to change our lives; we were there to buy a wood-burning cook stove.

"It will be a two-year wait," said the salesman eyeing my husband, Andy, and I like we were city-dwelling yuppies. It was the era of Y2K, and our attraction to off-the-grid technology undeniably coincided with that 1999 spike in Lehman's sales numbers.

I felt tears come to my eyes. "But we don't have a stove. We just moved, and we need something to cook on!"

"You mean you're actually going to use it?"

"Well, yes, of course."

"I'll ship it right out; we keep a separate inventory for our real customers."

Four strong friends and an elaborate chimney later, The Stove rested in our kitchen.

When Andy and I were in college, we virtually inhabited the Peace and Conflict Studies department. Once we settled into adult life in quiet small-town Bluffton, we felt cut off from activism, paralyzed by a lack of inspiration to save what was left of a troubled world. Living with two babies in my grandmother's house, we examined the one thing we still felt connected to: our daily lives.

We dreamed of going off the grid. We dreamed of a simple life of minimal waste. We imagined digging into our life like a garden, planting seeds of community and a commitment to place, a quality foreign to our generation.

A cook stove was high on our list. We knew that cooking and heating with wood was not a sustainable solution for

everyone. We were aware of particulate emissions and dwindling forests. But we determined that our energy was to come from a resource that surrounded us. As a self-employed furniture maker, wood was something that came to Andy consistently. Wood scraps, fallen or felled trees he was asked to take away, and even the wood rejected on trash day all contributed to the growing pile around his workshop.

We had selected the lowest tier of cook stove aesthetics. No shiny chrome or nostalgic trim, this wood stove was the one welded together in an Amish man's backyard near to Andy's home in Ontario. But to us, it soon became a treasured friend and workmate. Our children woke to the sound of kindling snapping and a warm glow spreading through the house. A water pipe ran through the firebox, the hot water naturally rising to an insulated tank we installed in the hallway above. The stove cooked our food--lovely beans forgotten on the corner, and perfectly done by supper. The hot places boiled and the cooler places warmed, and the number of pots was unlimited by burners. We quickly learned to gauge the oven with a bare hand briefly inserted, and the crusty breads produced by our fire-breathing dragon were second to none.

Ah, but the other pleasures of this simple steel box ... long hot guiltless baths using recycled heat. Laundry or mittens that hung beside and above the stove dried quick and fresh even in the winter months. A spirit of warmth drew us in from all corners of the house. Soon favorite chairs and rockers found permanent homes surrounding the stove, drawing family and guests to a central gathering place, the hearth and heart of our family.

Our wood stove brought the earth into our lives in ways we didn't expect or strategize. Slipped treks to the woodpile on bright frosty mornings opened our senses to weather and time. Our family carried wood together, even the children, their chubby arms filled with sticks. They knew their contribution was connected to the food they ate and the rays of heat that warmed them. Unloading, chopping and stacking the wood was hard work, but so vital, so real compared to a fluorescent-lit exercise room in an expensive gym. The scent of wood, the comfort of smoke, the multitasking of food, heat, water, and soul balanced us with the elements of life.

One simple tool. With it, the necessity, not choice, of hard work and homemade pleasure. Our family had discovered a hearth, and with it, the inspiration for a better world. 🌱