

The Woodbox  
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The midst of winter is a good time to remember the wood box that resided in the entry to our old farmhouse for many years. My mother cooked and baked on a cast-iron wood stove that was hungry for wood. It was the job of my brother and me to keep that wood box filled, and in the winter the need was endless. She also needed kindling to start the fire in the morning, and it was our job to find and split pine stumps for kindling.

Our farm house was located on cutover land that had been logged for its white pine around 1918. The loggers cut the timber, took out the logs and left. The land was cheap and either homesteaded or bought outright by Finns, Swedes, and a few Norwegians, who set up subsistence farms to raise their families. Our land was dotted with big white pine stumps that in the early years we would tackle with an axe to split off high-quality kindling wood for that insatiable stove. That required going out in the pasture and gathering an armload of wood to bring home.

Later on, Dad hired Paul Saari to come in and blast stumps using dynamite. It was exciting to watch, when the explosive went off the pine stump would rise in the air, sometimes splintered and sometimes whole. It was our job to pick up that lovely pine wood and bring it in to feed the wood box. My mother loved pine kindling because it burned quickly and hot.

The main firewood was acquired by going out in the woods on our property and cutting down poplar and birch trees. All of this work was done on weekends, as Father worked in construction during the week and we boys had to join him to branch and pile trees for later transport. Most of the trees were relatively small — perhaps 5 inches or less across. After we had accumulated a reasonable quantity of trees, we would go and borrow Hank Kiesling's horse Fanny, who was experienced in the woods. She dragged a long chain and hook behind her which we would wrap around 10 or 12 trees, which she would then drag to a central collection point. She only had to be led once to the central wood pile, and from then on, she would pull the load there and stop without further instructions. She was a good horse, albeit one that always looked like she was starving to death, with ribs showing through her long winter hair.

The next step was to cut the wood up. Dad had an old one-cylinder engine with a big flywheel that he hooked via a long belt to a saw rig. Because the engine always stood for a year between uses, it generally needed a little persuading to start. Dad would be cranky before he finally got it started, and then the next part of the ritual began. The engine would be banging away, and my brother was assigned to the tail end of the tree, which we then fed into the saw. Dad cut the wood into lengths, and my job was to grab each piece of wood and throw it on a pile.

When all the wood was cut up, we had the job of piling the wood in neat rows. That was the wood that got us through the winter, and eventually provided the heat to cook our food, bake our bread, and heat our washing water in the tank alongside the firebox of the stove. Each day, we had to go out to the woodpile and split wood into pieces that would fit in the stove. It took quite armfuls to fill that big wood box. We had a pine stump that we split the wood on. That was the arrangement for the first several years that we lived on the farm. Electricity didn't arrive until 1938 or '39, and bottled gas was a good deal later. It was a great relief when we switched over to a stove powered by bottled gas, and life was never the same. Now we don't even recall the labor that used to go into the job of heating that cook stove!