

Perquimans People

Warming up to wood heat

By MIKE McLAUGHLIN

There is something infectious about wood, the smell of its burning, or the feel of a well placed blow with a maul or an axe that can make an oak log fall into two pieces.

And of course there is staring into an open fire or backing up to it and getting your pants so hot that they make you dance a little bit.

Wood has a special attraction that, combined with spiraling oil prices, has sent a lot of folks scurrying into the woods with chainsaws and logsplitters, looking to stockpile fuel for their newly installed wood heaters.

But for some people, heating with wood is nothing new. George W. Barbee is one of them, and for Barbee, wood is more than just a cheap way to stay warm.

A lifetime of cutting, hauling, splitting, stacking, loading and stoking has given him a genuine feeling, almost a passion for the stuff.

Barbee is the reigning wood man of Hertford. His front porch groans with enough wood to keep a blaze roaring in the living room grate for weeks. Out back are stacks and stacks of wood of varying ages, sheds full of blocks for starting fires, enough wood to heat for at least two years by his own conservative estimates.

And he keeps buying more. He collects the stuff. "My wife tells me I ought to burn what I've got before I buy anymore," he said, but he finds a good load of wood hard to resist.

The most valued of Barbee's collection is a stack of red oak heartwood, aged eight years to prime perfection.

But Barbee isn't that picky. He likes any kind of wood. Taking knotty pieces that nobody else wants saves him

money on a truckload, and he can afford to buy it green and wait for it to cure out.

Some folks might call him wood crazy, but Barbee practically came into the world with an axe in his hand. It all started 81 years ago.

"I was born in a log house with a stick and dirt chimney," he said. When Barbee was a teenager his father was incapacitated by a stroke and his mother moved the family to an 18 room hotel in Spring Hope.

She would operate the hotel as a boarding house to support the family. Every room had a wood heater, and Barbee and his brother had the responsibility of cutting wood and keeping fires in them.

"My brother and I cut wood with a cross cut saw and would carry it three and a half miles with a one horse wagon," he said.

In 1921 Barbee left Spring Hope and went to work at a saw mill in Halifax County.

There he took up residence in another wood-dependent boarding house.

"The woman there cooked with wood, heated with wood, even the locomotives burned wood," he said. But Barbee was carrying too much of the burden for too little of the proceeds, his work day stretching to nearly twice that of the contemporary working man.

He was offered a job as drier at the Major Loomis lumber mill in Hertford and decided to make the move. On May 8, 1923, Barbee arrived in town. Shortly thereafter he met his wife to be, Dorothy.

It was 17 years ago that Barbee purchased his present woodstove, a Sears Homart, and it cost him \$93. He bought that particular model because its firebox was deep enough to take the 22" staves he picked

up from a company that made whiskey barrels in Windsor.

Between the stove, his fireplace, and several seldom used gas heaters, Barbee's house stays in the neighborhood of 70 degrees.

His own special recipe makes starting a fire in the huge living room fireplace a simple matter. He sticks a row of kiln dried blocks under the grate, takes an old detergent bottle full of kerosene and squirts it across the ends of the blocks, then lights a match to them, and "poof," instant fire.

Barbee picks up the blocks from the Northeastern Lumber Company in Windsor, and when he first started buying them they were two dollars a pickup load. The last time he bought a load, though, the price had jumped from \$12 to \$15.

"I gave the fellow the money and he said, 'That'll be three more dollars.' I handed him the money and told him, 'put that in a frame, I ain't gonna' buy no more,'" Barbee said.

He conceded, though, that he will keep buying the blocks.

These days Barbee's health won't permit him to do a whole lot of cutting and hauling wood, though there was a time when he sold it for a profit.

"I haven't cut down a tree for wood in 15 years," he said. But when he feels up to it, he can still get out in the yard and split the stuff, and he always keeps his fires fed.

Activity is what Barbee thrives on, and if it's not splitting wood, it's pulling water skiers behind a boat at Sandy Point Beach. The Barbees have devised a vacation retreat in the campground, and spend a good part of their summers there.

"I've pulled more people

than any three men down there, including the manager," Barbee said. Dorothy, a retired teacher who will be 74 in August, still enjoys sailing her catamaran at Sandy Point.

Besides the stacks of wood, the most impressive thing about the Barbee's Hertford residence is the number of cars parked around it. "We are wood and car poor," Mrs. Barbee said. Most of the cars have more than 100,000 miles on them. One Ford pickup has only 55,000, but a chevy wagon has registered more than 230,000 miles. Again the penchant for collecting is evident.

Asked why he never installed central heat, Barbee teased that it was a matter of economics. "I've been poor all my life," he said. "I've always been just one jump ahead of the wolf. In fact, the wolf's about to get me now."

Then, more seriously, "I like wood heat. I like an open fire. I didn't have electric lights 'til I was 14 years old."

One thing about wood heat is its dependability. When oil is scarce and even more costly than it is today, Barbee predicts there will still be plenty of wood around.

"I've got land with enough wood on it that my grandson couldn't burn it up in his lifetime," he said.

There is a certain comfort and security in knowing you can survive without the modern creature comforts that are becoming an ever more burdensome expense (which translates into having big piles of wood).

"I can stay warm and I can eat if I don't get no more gas," Barbee said. "Of course I'd like to have enough to ride around on," he added. Riding, of course, includes pulling water skiers.



Stoking the fire

G.W. Barbee, the wood man of Hertford, stokes the fire in his living room fireplace. (Photo by MIKE McLAUGHLIN)



Fuel inventory

These two corner woodpiles represent a small fraction of Barbee's backyard fuel inventory. (Photo by MIKE McLAUGHLIN)

White backs bond vote

Mary White, Hertford Grammar School PTA President, was one of five PTA presidents invited to attend the Legislative Research Commission on School Facility needs in Raleigh last week.

About 375 school, county, and PTA officials gathered for the hearing designed to consider what recommendation to make to the June short session of the Legislature on the funding of school facilities.

Many of the speakers Friday called for a statewide bond issue referendum in the November election, citing the condition of their school facilities as a reason.

"Why should students who happen to live in the Northeast, through no choice of their own, not have the same opportunities as those students who live in wealthier, more industrialized areas?" said White, who added that Perquimans County schools have worn floors, crumbling walls, as well as obsolete electrical, heating, and plumbing systems.

White was among those arguing for a \$600-million state bond referendum rather than county bonds because of the state's increased borrowing power over that of the individual counties.

Deadline

February 15 is the deadline for the display of 1980 tags and stickers.

Perquimans County residents may purchase 1980 tags and stickers at the Chamber of Commerce office located in the Municipal Building on Grubb Street in Hertford.


The Chamber office is open from 8:30 a.m. until 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, and 8:30 a.m. until 12 noon on Saturday.

A spokesman from the Chamber of Commerce office said as yet, lines haven't been long.



Pride of the woodpile

Barbee displays a piece of Red Oak heartwood. Aged eight years, the heartwood is the pride of his woodpile. (Photo by MIKE McLAUGHLIN)



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