

Reflections on a Summer's Woodpile
October 2020

Author's note: This musing was written well before the inception of the Cameron Fire, burning in northwest Colorado, and the Mullen Fire, south and west of our town, which as of October 4, has burned 137,000 acres. I decided to go ahead and post this musing, if nothing more than as a tribute to the mountain trees which have perished but which, when living, gave so much.

In late summer—if the weather turns, we call it early fall—the mountains, which have provided us so much leisure, provide us an essential resource, wood for our woodstove, our partial source of heat for the long winter months.

It is still late summer, though, and the sun, even as it slants more and more, beats down on where I sit in the backyard. Even with sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat, I squint, for the sun reflects off the garden's white picket fence, the concrete, the page of my book. Seeking comfort for my eyes, I look to the woodpile. My husband has recently split and stacked the wood, two tiers deep, against the redwood-stained slatted fence that defines our small backyard property. This wood was gathered last summer and is now dried out enough for my husband's ax to deftly, swiftly split the short, round logs into pieces that will fit into our woodstove and burn well, keeping winter's chill in abeyance. Certainly the coziest of houses is one where wood warms.

I find that I must leave my chair and my book and walk to the woodpile. If I breathe in slowly, I can smell the scent of fresh cut timber. I place my palms on bark. What I touch was once a tall lodgepole pine tree, standing with others of its kind, the wind causing the slightest sway, the wind creating song as it flies through the branches. These trees cooled the ground below, played shadows on small rocky outcroppings. The bark, now black and ready to fall from the lighter wood beneath, was wrapped around a tree that fell from age, or wind, or pine-beetle infestation. Part of our backyard stack, it is a giving tree.

My husband always seems to know how many pickup loads of wood we need. He says he just estimates, but we are never short, even when winter digs in its claws of ice and growls that it will not budge. He purchases his estimated pickup loads from the Forest Service. For each load, he is given a permit card, which must be nailed in full sight on one of the exposed logs. When we remember to bring the hammer, that's my job. Otherwise, John uses a fist-size rock. I find a rock impossible for nailing, but then, I am not a woods woman. But oh, how I love to carry the wood and build the pickup load, as John saws and saws.

I don't just feel the bark of the giving tree on this late summer day. I feel memories, mostly good. The bad ones, we now laugh at.

When I married John, I moved from Dubois, Wyoming, where I taught high school, to a house with newly furbished wood floors, newly built bookcases, and a woodstove surrounded by a hearth of moss-rock. My husband did all this work, even gathered the moss-rock from a friend's ranch. It was a beautiful house, and this woodstove was my first. I would vie with two dogs and a cat for space near it. John bought a chain saw, and the late summers of our wedded life became defined by our wood-gathering trips. Even as our family grew, we gathered firewood.

The decades have slipped past us; our pace has slowed. Once upon a time, we filled the truck bed before lunch. Our task completed, we stretched out on the cool undergrowth of a tree and, entertained by bird song and chipmunk antics, leisurely munched sandwiches and cookies, slurped slices of watermelon, and slowly drank lemonade, as that was the way to truly quench our thirst. More recently, we have lunch midway through the task, or—much preferred—we fill the truck, pack up, and drive late in the afternoon down the mountain to the Woods Landing restaurant and, our fatigue and hunger great, have “the best meal we’ve ever eaten.”

I cannot lift as much as I once did. I cannot carry as fast or as far as I used to carry. However, unless one of our sons is in town or a strong friend volunteers, I accompany John. I may lift little, but I can still pack the truck bed so precisely that our load is a darn good one. John, as well, appreciates the company, I appreciate a day in the mountains, and the saying still holds weight that there is safety in numbers. We are a team.

We’ve always been a team. Our oldest and only son at the time was but two years old when we decided we could take him with us to gather a load of wood. John did most of the work while I watched and entertained our car-seated son. When the truck was full, we three laughed and clapped and I sang some silly song about heading down the mountain. As I hit a high note, John noticed that our tires had sunk deep into mud. Reading each other’s minds, we efficiently unloaded the wood, jockeyed the truck till it was free, reloaded the wood, and headed home.

John’s first chainsaw was a machine of dubious worth. If he could get it to run, it cut well, but getting it to run was iffy. I often spent the first hour or so standing back, holding my breath, uttering prayers that the motor would keep running. Too often, the song was the same: rrrrr, rrrrr, rrrrr. And then quiet. A few birds chirped, a chipmunk chattered from a fallen—and promising—pine. As if to heap irritation on our day, further in the distance came the incessant, healthy sound of a working chainsaw. Neither of us was proud of the college-learned vocabulary that spewed forth when the chainsaw ceased its rrrrr rrrrr altogether, but neither scolded.

During the era of the first chainsaw, I learned to glean. As John dealt with the unreliable rrrrr rrrrr’s, I searched the forest floor, gathering what others didn’t see or dismissed. I collected the too long, the too short, and the gnarled. On two occasions, I filled the entire truck bed with misfits. The first saw had a few good days, but when we replaced it, neither of us shed a tear.

Now, in the dry, hot summers, our biggest fear is a single spark. We don’t want that, so we play the waiting game, waiting for rain or even snow to soak the high country. Winter is not welcome yet, but a chill and some moisture would make us feel more at ease. At our ages, we want ease.

We are growing older, and we wonder how many more summers we have to build the woodpile in the backyard. To bring in a load of wood for the evening. As elderly as she was, my grandmother arranged to have firewood delivered to her Vermont house, which she heated with two woodstoves. It is that sweet, earthy smell of burning wood that makes me often exclaim, “I just got a whiff of Grandma Maynard’s house.” Although my sons live far away from us now, I want them to know and remember that same smell, for it comes from the trees that give. It comes from wood gathering. It comes from a home where wood warms. It comes from the memories of a crisp forest and teamwork. What more need there be to a stack of firewood?