

Striking a Memory the Right Way

By Mike Elrick

This article was first published in the *Globe and Mail*, Facts and Arguments, Monday, February 9, 1998.

I have strong childhood memories of sitting on the ledge of our open fireplace after a bath on a cold winter's evening. While the logs crackled and sizzled, my brothers and I would toast our pajamas on the screen and slowly dress ourselves before bed.

These are good memories for me. So it was with great joy that I recently bought a secondhand airtight wood stove. The next step was to get it installed in my two-storey house with no existing chimney. No big deal, I thought, and off I went to one of the nearby fireplace dealers.

"Hello," I said, "I've just bought a secondhand wood stove, and I'd like to discuss some options about its installation."

I described my house and what I believed were the existing couple of possibilities. But, in the words of Arlo Guthrie in his famous song about Alice's restaurant, "there was a third possibility that I hadn't even counted upon!"

"Have you thought about switching to gas?" the fireplace man asked.

"Ah, well, no, not really," I said, a bit stunned. "As I said, I've already bought the wood stove," emphasizing the wooo-oo-od part.

"Well, you know gas is about three times cheaper to install and you don't even need a permit. And we've got some beautiful fireplaces here which look like real log fires!"

I paused for a moment, trying to absorb this. Fireplaces which "look like" real log fires? I replied that my house didn't have gas (which is true) and left. Frustrated and a bit disillusioned, I drove home and started to talk to myself.

Perhaps I needed to be more clear. I didn't want a "gas" fireplace. I like wood. I don't

want an instant gratification, switch-and-presto! "cozy fireplace in second" as a recent advertisement promised. I would have had no connection with this process. I wouldn't have split the wood, spent five minutes setting up and starting the fire, doing the old half-hour, stoke-and-poke. And besides, you can't tell me a gas flame compares to a real wood fire. They are just not the same.

A couple of weeks went by and my emotions settled. I walked by the cast-iron beauty sitting quietly on the back porch and promised, "I'll get you installed yet!"

My spirits were elevated because I heard of a man who quit his job 25 years ago to design and manufacture his own brand of wood stove. With a smile on my face, I buckled my two-year-old boy into his car seat and headed to the far side of town.

Take two.

I greeted a young man just inside the door.

"Hello, I've just bought a secondhand wood stove and I'd like to discuss some options about its installation."

I was full of expectation. A few more sentences about my house and . . .

"Have you thought about switching to gas?"

Thump went my proud shoulders and chest. What is it with you people? Am I the only one left in this world interested in having a wood-burning fireplace? "Are you the owner?" I asked.

"I'm the co-owner, but the original owner is in the office. He's more the wood-stove person anyway. I'll get him."

In a few minutes a healthy-looking, white-haired man approached me.

"Hello, I hear you are interested in having a wood stove installed?"

"Yes," I replied, chasing my boy around the store. This is the guy. I have finally found a kindred spirit. But after five minutes of discussion he too suggested the G-option. My throat tightened, and my heart sank. This time right to the floor.

He talked about the difficulties with building inspectors, the pain of cutting and hauling wood, the dust, the bugs! He told me he has installed gas in his house, and he repeated those desperate words, "And it almost looks like a real wood fire!"

Virtually at rock bottom, I asked the burning question.

"Do you miss the wood?"

"Well, not at home, but at my cottage I only burn wood."

Aha, a flicker of hope. I looked over at my little boy, my thoughts fell into place and I began what I later realize is my testimony.

"You know, the more you talk about the splitting, hauling, dust and bugs, the more excited I get. That's what I love about a wood fireplace. Being and feeling connected to the heat and light

that warms me. I don't connect with gas in the same way and never will. I understand trees, wood, matches, fire. And (I was warming to my subject) I don't want my boy growing up thinking that this gas-flickering things is a 'real' wood fire."

Yes, that was it. I understood now. I'm worried about my son growing up believing that gas fireplaces are true wood fires. In fact, I'm worried about a whole generation of kids who will know only fireplaces that get started by a switch, not a match, and who think that wood comes from a ceramics factory, not trees.

I had said enough, perhaps too much. We briefly discussed the wood-stove installation again. He had a person who does it. And would have him come by to give an estimate. Well, no one ever dropped by or called.

Strike two.

After two attempts, I was left alone with my wood stove and worries. In the end I decided to install it myself. The building inspector was great, and it works like a charm. I did it just in time for the big ice storm as well. Our power, though, only went off for two hours. Too bad. But what ignites my heart the most after this whole experience is when my little boy points at the wood stove and says, "Make a fire, Papa," and I say, "Yes, let's make a fire."

