

Fires, then and now...

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My husband of 57 years who now resides in Heaven was an expert at fire making. I never asked him if his short stint as a Cub Scout whetted that appetite, or whether six weeks of Pioneer camp when he was a preteen solidified his expertise. I only know he knew how to make a fire that initially flared hot and brilliant. And then, with special tweaking, nuance—a piece of kindling here, a new log there, an added poker proficiency—the fire smoldered and spit and crackled and hummed, giving off a comforting glow, a steady heat as long as we were able to enjoy it.

Olfactory memories are purported to be most profound and for me the smell of burning wood, especially in my own living room, conjures an immediate response. I'm back in the day when we first bought the house I have lived in for 51 years. We were thrilled to have a house on an acre of land with 300 year old oak trees hugging its perimeters. And we had a wood burning fireplace! At first we had no furniture in our cathedral ceiling-ed living room. But that did not stop us from enjoying fires. Often we would lie on our backs, facing the fireplace, watching flames leap, hearing the spitting sounds, feeling the warmth. And then as flames waned Bob would jump to his feet and grab a log from the large copper pot which contained a plethora of logs. He'd grab the heavy steel poker, stir the coals, prod away and soon the blaze would ignite wood so dry it had no choice but to flare into flame.

Now when I think of the copper pot and the andirons, the fireplace utensils, poker, shovel, I remember the day we bought them in an antique shop in Richmond, Illinois. I remember it was late November. Our house was still in process, we wouldn't move in until January. Browsing in that shop we spotted the huge copper pot, hand-hammered, vintage and knew it would be perfect to house logs. And then the extraordinarily large and heavy steel andirons, an ash bucket, additional fireplace accoutrements. We might not have a couch to sit on, but we would have a fire.

Fires became the stuff of our life with children stretched out on eventual couches or draped upon wing-backed chairs. Then later grandchildren snoozed in sleeping bags as Bob fed the fire and I read favorite stories before sleep. Even later, as empty nest-ers and on regular nights when it was just the two of us, Bob would say, "I think I'll make a fire." I would watch

him carry wood in from the outdoor wood-holder clutched in his arms or toted in the heavy canvas bag. I remember his cheeks would be winter-pink, his steps firm. We always had well enough firewood, as wind-blown branches fell in our back woods, and chopping wood was a part of living on Indian Knoll Trail. I'd clean up the kitchen, or play the piano 'til the fire was a beautiful roaring thing. And then I couldn't resist. It would call us both to the red velvet wing-backed chairs, drawn close. We might read, we might be listening to music, or we might be sitting in comfort, alone in our thoughts, or intermingling, a word here or a word there all we would need to complete a time of sweet reverie.

Do I make fires now? I have to say I have a certain hesitancy, a fear perhaps? I wonder, is the flue open? Or did I close it last time to deter an errant bat or bird from flying out into my living room? I did have the chimney swept and the fireplace tuck pointed after Bob died as I remembered he had mentioned it needed to be done. I've had grandson Jack haul in wood, check the flue, and build a number of perfect fires. I know all of those six strong young grandsons of ours have the know-how and likely the finesse to do Papa proud.

But fires are likely going to be one of the many tasks I let go of as I age and relinquish to the past. Like jeep trips, and downhill and cross-country skiing, and walking over hill over dale, and cycling miles on end, and errand days with impromptu stops for soup or Starbucks, or forays into Chicago to see the lights at Christmas. I could feel sad or bereft (and sometimes I do) but mostly I am filled with gratitude. For what I had but also for what I have. Oh it was and oh it IS rich.