

#119 FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: January 14, 2010

No pipe "unthaws" before its time
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—Like much of America, we in Blue Grass are slowly “unthawing,” which is how we phrase it out here.

For 20 days after Christmas, two-thirds of the land of the free was moaning the frozen-pipe blues as temperatures stayed closer to zero than 32.

Many Americans have at least one good frozen-pipe story in our oral histories.

The best are about hot and cold lines buried in ceilings that broke during dinner parties so that the crystal chandelier over the first-floor dining room turned into liquid performance art, and no diner asked for extra gravy.

I often discourage visits from unwanted guests by noting that the waste-water lines serving our spare bedrooms are frozen. This strategy is less effective in the summer.

Like many old farmhouses, ours was built before FDR declared indoor plumbing an inalienable right. Indoor came to Blue Grass in the late 1930s, and our pipes have been acting up ever since.

Chinese made pipes out of reeds 3,000 years ago, then bamboo. Others fashioned them from clay, lead and wood. Modern materials with the best freezing characteristics are copper and plastic, either of which can be installed directly against baseboards on uninsulated, North-facing walls for optimal vulnerability.

I have found prayer to be of little use against frozen pipes. Neither His rod nor His staff ever does as much good as a heat gun and hair dryer.

Frozen pipes always follow the **Four Iron Laws of Country Life**.

1. Bad things usually happen at the worst moments.

If pipes froze in July, or even September, it would be a lot better. Water repairs are always more pleasant when you're not wearing mittens.

Livestock follow this rule religiously. They always break through fencing on dark and stormy Sunday nights. They prefer blizzards, but will settle for Class 4 hurricanes.

Similarly, water-proof boots always fail when you're standing in water, never when they're sitting high and dry on your mudroom floor.

Wood fires go out when you're cold; ladder rungs break when you're standing on them; and tires go flat when you're driving somewhere, although recent improved models will go flat just as you're about to go somewhere.

2. Good things resist happening when you most need them.

When you really need a nice-as-pie day, it comes in September with all the others, not January when it would lift your spirits. Rain, I should point out, rarely comes during a drought

Every farm-carpentry project sooner or later presents a philosopher's dilemma--a choice between good character and its opposite.

The character path requires undoing what you've done and redoing it better to reach the point at which you currently are only different. Doing over will require a 75-cent part that you have to get from a town 35 miles away. This, however, is the proper way to do the job.

People who do things the right way the first time got good-citizenship stars in the third grade. They were the Robins. I was tracked into the Crows, a demotion from K through 2 spent in the Grackles.

The other choice is to fetch a super-sized nail, bang it in with a sledge hammer and hope that it either doesn't double over into a yoga pose or split the nail-to wood (which will require driving for the part).

Over the years, I have usually chosen the nail after weighing four variables: 1) how disgusted I have become with the cosmic uselessness of the project at hand; 2) how angry I am at still being a Grackle; 3) the odds that my wife, Melissa, will see me fail after cheating on the right way to do things; and 4) my testosterone level.

I can report that, so far, bigger nails bend worse AND split the wood. No nail I have ever used was big enough. Failure forces me to conclude that I should have used an even bigger nail. We address many problems this way.

Fortunately, hammering a railroad spike into a frozen water pipe usually breaks the blockage.

3. Jamming the pedal to the metal almost always makes things worse.

Men understand that kicking any dysfunctional machine is always the best and cheapest way to fix it. I have kicked photocopiers, soda dispensers,

freezers, ATMs and cell phones with uniformly excellent results.

It follows that stomping on a gas pedal is the gender-appropriate way to improve the performance of any stuck machine that runs on four wheels and the liquid remains of ancient ferns.

I have gunned it when I've been marooned in floods, hung up on stumps and wallowing in mud holes larger than Maryland. Results have varied, but rarely exclude the catastrophic, which I figure is the result of not gunning it enough.

Wet, grassy slopes are the blood-oath enemy of the heavy foot. I have personally witnessed the slope down to my creek plotting the wreck of my farm truck by calling in a cloudburst from a sunny April sky.

When facing a slope, slimy with ice or mud, flooring your truck's gas pedal will always get you 85 percent of the way up...and not an inch more. The more times you make a run at it, the lower you get each time. Many of our finest public policies draw inspiration from the Law of Diminishing Returns, which started behind our barn.

Gas-pedal gods are easily angered. They hang out in the rear differential where they feast on wet-slope rage. Rouse them, and you will find yourself either doing a forward roll off the road or at the bottom of a ditch the size of the Panama Canal.

The ditch, by the way, is always too steep to get out of by gunning it. You are then forced to get help from a kind-hearted stranger, or your wife, who, for unknown reasons, doesn't spend half her life in messes of her own making. It goes something like this:

Her: Need a hand, big boy? Again.

Me: #\$\$%^&*.

Her: Want me to get the tow chain and the tractor?

Me: Let me gun it one more time.

Her: It's too deep.

Me: What do you know?

Her: Remember the last time?

Me: That was then, this is now. I have better tires.

Her: You'll end up over the side...like last time.

Me: Have a little faith in my judgment.

Her: ...I'll get the tractor. Just to keep the battery charged, of course.

I have not had good luck kicking frozen pipes, or even stomping on them. They respond a lot better if you douse them with gasoline and toss a match.

4. All farm work scheduled for Sunday afternoons during football

**season
shall be postponed to protect local endangered species.**

I've shown Melissa the tunnels of the Four-Eyed Mottled Mole that only hunts once a week in the fall between 1 and 7 p.m. on Sundays. It is America's most endangered rodent, owing to the recently observed fact that both females and males prefer the company of barn cats to each other. It's also one of the few mammals that's invisible to the human eye.

Our farm appears to be its last remaining habitat. I've told Melissa that federal authorities have ordered me not to do farm work during their Sunday hunting season.

"That's fine," she said. "Stay inside...and unthaw the pipes."

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