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Firewood costs more than you think

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—The hills are alive with the sound of...chainsaws.

Americans in the tens of thousands are out cutting firewood to keep warm this winter. We burn wood because it's around, and it appears to be cheap.

This is the same rationale my stone-age ancestors used when they lived in caves. (I found a videotape in the ancestral attic in which Seltzer males tell their wives to go out and rustle up some wood while they loll around a cozy fire smoking home-made cigars and telling lies about whose mammoth was bigger. The Seltzer women quickly realized that they would do better tending their own fire in a different cave. This led to the invention of the electric space heater, and then everyone moved into bungalows.)

Firewood is a small footpath in America's road to energy independence, and one that is not without second thoughts.

Many writers romanticize working up winter wood. Lyrical, they grow, in the briny vapors of split oak.

Drenched, they are, in perspiration honestly beading on ball-capped brows. Work-sweat is noble, unlike the fear-sweat currently pooling on Wall Street from yet another reverse, upside-down, double-backward, four-and-a-half twist, inside-out, dippy-doodle, ding-a-dong-ding derivative, future-pluperfect-option-credit swap...coming apart.

As sweat-work goes, I rank firewood above fencing-building and sticking hypodermic needles in cattle. I rank it below hot chili and sex.

As to cheap, here is Henry David Thoreau's updated account of firewood's cost:

- 100 acres of woods - \$400,000 purchase price
- 600,000 25 years of mortgage interest
- 2008 3 mpg American pickup truck - 0 (with rebates, incentives and bribes)
- Chainsaw - 450
- Logging equipment - 100
- Safety equipment - 200
- One overpriced cigar - 7
- One absorbent sweatband - 1
- One more cigar - 7
- Back surgery - 7,500

I'm sure economists will quibble with my adding in the cost of a second cigar.

Alert readers will have noticed that Thoreau and I did not factor in the combustion costs of heating homes with wood, including

- One 30-ton, inefficient stone fireplace - \$30,000
- or
- One very efficient woodstove - \$2,000
- One expensive dog to sleep picturesquely on expensive, fire-proof mat in front of fire - 1,000
- Three large fire extinguishers - 150
- Increased homeowner's-insurance premium - 200
- One toe-nail-pulling operation to fix foot after dropping log on it - 4,500
- Shortened career trajectory due to inhalation of wood smoke and stove ash; lost income equals - 200,000
- One high-volume air conditioner to cool sauna-like living room in winter - 600
- One Steinway piano to replace wife's \$300 used upright, now ruined by fire-dried indoor air - 35,000
- Four visits to nose specialist to jack-hammer nasal crusts during winter months - 4,000
- One super-sized humidifier - 300
- Guilt over contributing to global warming - PRICELESS

Despite wood heat's favorable economics, as shown above, every fair-minded reporter must note its few downsides.

Wood smoke is a nice-smelling air pollutant. Straight up the chimney it's worse than coal.

Wood's second negative is that each stick has to be lifted at least three or four times, from stump to stove. Come March, this is harder on your mind than your back.

Creosote can accumulate in chimneys and cause your house to burn down. This can cause the local VFD to turn its hoses on you in the middle of a January night, which can cause pneumonia (or at least a really runny nose), which can cause you to be discharged for spotty work attendance, which can lead to foreclosure, which lowers your credit rating and increases your body-mass index, which causes erectile dysfunction in some and compulsive shoe-buying in others, either of which becomes a really bad mark on your permanent record card.

Still, all in all, wood heat is my choice because it's so cheap.

Anyone who runs a chainsaw should wear heavy boots, protective chaps and a helmet with face screen and hearing muffs. No exceptions.

Chains can now be field-sharpened electrically using a small, inexpensive grinder that draws power from a vehicle's battery. It beats hand-filing.

The best back-saver I know is a tie pick, a long-handled, axe-like tool with a pointy metal head that allows you to load firewood into trucks without bending over and picking up. (Go to www.forestry-suppliers.com ; click on forestry button; click on log-handling tools; look for "hookaroons.")

I like to take my daughter's serial boyfriends up in our woods to see how they do. One kid from Manhattan's Upper East Side expressed pre-tryout concerns about rattlesnakes and rednecks.

On the way into the woods, I assured him that Molly's story about our 20-foot-long rattlers having evolved the ability to jump into the back of a moving truck was hooey. "They don't jump," I told him. "It's more like a Slinky toy stepping in."

I also calmed his fears about unscheduled events with people he might meet. "These days, most of them just wing Yankees; I know only one guy who still shoots to kill and he's 90 and can't see much more than 1,000 yards."

Molly and I reassured him that the local bears had no taste for urban teenagers. I proved this by poking around some fresh scat, which contained no cell-phone remains.

I also told him that he could ward off feral parrots by rubbing stinging nettle leaves behind his ears.

Electricity and natural gas may be more convenient for heating, but neither is as handy for evaluating boys for your daughter—a job that is not sufficiently appreciated, especially by daughters.

I've often thought as I've gotten older that getting up wood is increasingly about other stuff and less about saving a few bucks. It keeps us connected to our early roots-- when McMansion meant a fire pit under a rock overhang.

It also lends itself to a family-unit activity, from which we all benefit despite the costs, which I better not list.

Curtis Seltzer, land consultant, is the author of *How To Be A DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property* at www.curtis-seltzer.com. He holds a Class A residential contractor's license in Virginia and has lived in a now 90-year-old

farmhouse for 25 years.

Contact: Curtis Seltzer, Ph.D.
Land Consultant
1467 Wimer Mountain Road
Blue Grass, VA 24413-2307
540-474-3297
curtisseltzer@htcnet.org
www.curtis-seltzer.com