

# The Outside Story



## A Woodburning Life By: Laurie D. Morrissey

At about 9:00 on an overcast November Saturday, a group gathered at the edge of the Hopkinton/Webster Transfer Station (hereafter referred to as the dump, since that's its real name and will never change). They sipped coffee, pulled on gloves, and adjusted ear protectors. Then they started to work. There were loggers, tree care experts, high school students, police officers, doctors, farmers, and lawyers. There were whole families, a guy on crutches, a few dogs, a legislator or two. (This is New Hampshire, after all.) By day's end, they had cut and stacked more than 21 cords of firewood, and delivered most of it to the homes of their neighbors. What was left would be available throughout the winter to anyone with an unexpected need for fuel and a way to burn it.

The funny thing is, lots of the people who volunteer their labor have their own wood to get in: cords of it. It's a challenge finding the time and energy to cut wood for someone else. Some of the volunteers handle wood for a living, and might like to forget about it on Saturday. But people want to do this. Those who pitch in want to help others in town, even if they haven't met them. It feels like the right thing to do — and who knows, they might need help themselves someday.

I think it goes deeper, though.

People around here understand wood heat. It has advantages that oil and electric heat don't have. Not to romanticize — heating with wood is hard and messy. But wood heat is more than just heat. I've sometimes thought that my children came home for winter weekends and holidays so they could sit near the wood stove, doze on the couch next to it, or back up to it and warm their buns. At least, I strongly suspect it's one of the key ingredients of what they think of as home. Cats, of course, are the ultimate wood heat appreciators. My cat lies near the hearth all winter as though dead. Wood heat penetrates your bones, connects you to the hearth and what's deep under it. Wood heat contains contentment as well as calories. When guests are coming, we light fires in our wood stoves and fireplaces, even if it's not quite chilly enough to need them.

My connection with firewood goes back a long way. My brother and I sold trunk loads of split hardwood to campers at the state park where we grew up. The wood came from trees that were cut down over the winter. Our father, the ranger, taught us the art of splitting, and we took in \$2 per load. (We also sold bait to the fishermen.)

Later, as a member of the University of New Hampshire Woodsmen's Team, my favorite event was dot splitting (a timed event in which you try to split a log into four full-length pieces, each with a bit of the red circle painted in the center.) I also liked sawing. My partner and I competed in not only college meets but the Deerfield Fair, where we took fourth in the two-man crosscut sawing competition (three cuts through a green 10x10 pine cant). The fifth place team, with the names of Harvey and Doug, wasn't too pleased to be out-sawn by a Laurie and a Cathie.

When my husband and I lived in Maine with our two babies, we installed a small Atlantic box stove in the living room and a wood furnace in the basement. We were in our Mother Earth phase: never ordered a load of split wood. We have the scars to prove it. That stove went into storage in our basement when we moved to New Hampshire and got a lovely blue enameled Vermont Castings, followed by our side-loading Jotul. The Jotul is super efficient. But the other feature that makes me love it is its arched glass window. When clean, it's like an ad for a ski area condo. Even when it's clouded with carbon and fly ash, its orange glow makes me feel content.

I like splitting, moving, and stacking wood, although I realize how fortunate I am to have other options — namely, nudging the thermostat up and sending a check to the oil delivery company. One of these days, I imagine, I'll say the heck with it, and that'll be the end of splitting, carrying, loading, stacking, sweeping up wood dust, and dumping ash. Not just yet, though.

Our old Atlantic is in our daughter's home now, warming her little ones. Whenever my granddaughter passes the stove, summer or winter, she holds out her hand and says, "hot,"

as though it's the name of the object. It's the first lesson of a woodburning life. I expect it will be the first of many.

*Laurie D. Morrissey is a writer in Hopkinton, New Hampshire. The illustration for this column was drawn by Adelaide Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine: [northernwoodlands.org](http://northernwoodlands.org), and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: [wellborn@nhcf.org](mailto:wellborn@nhcf.org)*

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