OUR NICE OLD WOOD PILE

I happened to stop at a real old fashioned farm auction a while back, it reminded me of how things were when I was a youngster growing up on our farm. It was nice to hear the auctioneer as he worked the crowd for the highest bid. I noticed that there were as many men in business suits as there were in overalls. I thought about antique hunters when an old hand potato planter and an old corn planter brought three times as much as they cost brand new.

I was in for quite a surprise when I heard the final bid on an old round oak heater stove, like the one we used to set up in our dining room during the winter months. Still a greater surprise when I heard what the price of a cord of stove wood brought, it all made me wish I still owned our old stove and our wood lot too. It made you feel good to know some people still liked some of the things we used to have.

On the farm, wood stoves were all we had to cook our food on, do all of the baking, and keep us warm during the long cold winters. Most farms had a wood lot and we were kept busy cutting it down, chopping it up, and stacking it neatly. The farmers that didn’t have a wood lot helped a neighbor and took wood in payment for his labor. I’ll always remember our old wood pile, it
started at the old gnarled snow apple tree, in the
backyard, wound past the outhouse and ended at the
chicken coop. In the winter months it was a snow
barrier and in the summer it was a good place for the
old hens to dust themselves and teach their little
chicks to scratch for bugs and worms in the rotted bark
and sawdust. Many times the old wood pile was used as a
means of discipline, to be straightened up and raked
nice and neat.

As you drive through the country these days all the
wood piles are missing, there’s no place for a big red
rooster to perch when he starts out a new day with his
early morning crowing. I guess, with all the hens shut
up in the laying houses, there’s really no use for a big
red rooster any more either. With all the electricity,
gas and oil that is used for heating nowadays, the art
and pleasure of making fire wood is almost gone too. It
was a chore that had to be done, some of it was hard
work but there was a lot of pleasure too. After we had
the team hitched to the big sleigh, all the saws, axes,
chains and wedges loaded and last but not least, a big
kettle of soup to be heated for lunch, the horses even
seemed to want to get started as they pawed the frozen
ground, pranced down the lane and across the frozen
creek to the wood lot.

For those who never heard the cawing of a crow from his perch in a high tree top, the rat-a-tat-tat of a woodpecker searching for grubs, the scolding of a blue jay on a frosty morning back in the wood lot in the north forty, or heard the ring of an ax, the sing-song whine of a cross cut saw... well they have missed a mighty nice sound.

There was never any given amount of wood that had to be cut. Whatever was cut was just piled up with what was left from last year. There was always enough left that it all had time to dry out and become seasoned.

Much care was taken so as not to cut any trees that would be good for the future. Only those that might be crooked or growing too close together, and the dead ones, which would make good kindling to get quick hot fires going in the morning, were hauled out.

Every winter the brush piles were burned and in their place a variety of berry bushes would grow up making the wood lot look more like a park. All of the trees that were cut down were trimmed of their branches and loaded on the sleigh, the branches were piled in other piles, which made homes for rabbits and other small animals, until later when they would be burned too. When there
was a big enough load on the sleigh it was hauled back home and stacked near the wood pile to wait till spring when it would be sawed into stove lengths. This was a job for everyone, big and small, to pile up the wood with the rest of the pile. It was everybody’s job to keep the wood box in the kitchen filled, especially during the winter, and we always needed extra wood on the baking day. There were different kinds of wood for different kinds of fires. For the big round oak heater in the dining room, that heated the rest of the house, there were big chunks of dry wood for day time and bigger chunks of greener wood that would burn slower during the night. What a great feeling it was to dress in front of that nice warm stove on those chilly winter mornings.

I don’t suppose there’s too many people around that can remember walking from the barn after doing the early morning chores and watching the blue-white smoke, and smelling it’s wonderful aroma as it slowly spirals up from the chimney. I wonder how many remember going on into the kitchen to sit down to a good breakfast of buckwheat cakes covered with maple syrup, bacon and eggs, fresh muffins just out of the oven to be spread with homemade jelly or freshed churned butter. Well,
that's the way it used to be, when all we used was wood to cook and keep warm with on our farm long ago.