



March 9, 1994

### THE COAL FURNACE

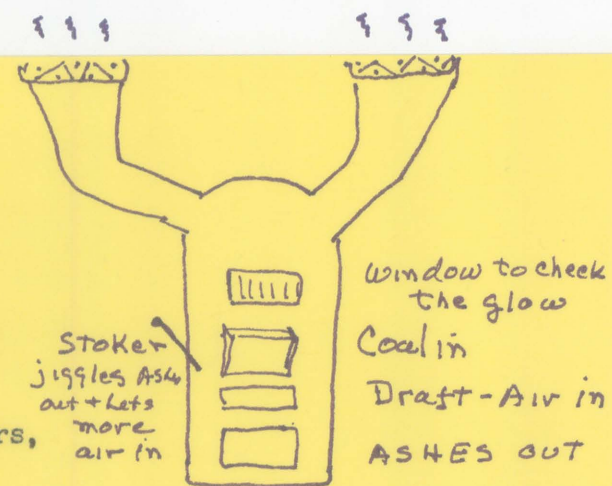
My foot felt cool, dangling out from the covers as I laid in bed, coming fully awake. I thought, "It's good I don't have to go shovel coal into the furnace." Then I tried to remember what it had been like to get out of bed on those cold mornings after the fire had been "dampered" all night. Stoking it in the morning was generally Dad's task. Us kids were not often asked, nor allowed, to "throw some coal on the fire."

On Dewalt, in the '40's, most all the houses had coal furnaces. No blowers, the heat rose up by convection through metal pipes that are remembered as enormous. Scrap wood and the coal were kept in the basement. When the farm house was remodeled in 1951, plans included the coal room. It could be filled by a dumptruck from outside and had a strong inner door not far from the mouth of the furnace. By 1946, there were some homes with gas heat. But gas explosions were common and coal was considered much safer. As children we walked by the ~~found~~ empty foundations of houses that had blown apart. Occassionally it was solemnly said that entire families had lost their lives in household explosions and fires.

My parents were among the last to convert to gas heat, and they did not do so until after I has gone to college. I remember haw cold the radiator seemed blowing gas heated air. By 1962, we were displaying bits of bituminous and anthracite coal in glass cases to show to children who had never seen it. During a chilly April, 1978, I was in Budapest. The grey, polluted air smelled wonderfully rich and sulphurous to me. It took a day to recollect the smell. They were burning coal!!

My grandparents also had lived in houses heated by big coal furnaces. Grandmother told this story about her husband, Earle, which happened in their young years. Grandpap was a quiet man, slow to speak. He always had his Morris chair or overstuffed arm-chair in a retreat out of the line of traffic. He would go there and spend hours listening to the baseball games on the radio or just smoking his pipe and thinking. One day grandmother went down to the basement to find him in his retreat behind the coal furnace. "Why, Earle, you look scared," says she. "I am!", he replies. "we have five children!"

When Earle and Dorothy were living at the form, about 1945 - 1950, the coal furnace was in the basement, which was unfinished. There was a shallow flatstone foundation and the rest was just dug out of the clay. Boards were laid across the dirt floor to go from one work point to another... to shovel coal or do the laundry in the electric wringer-washer. I don't recall the look of that furnace, but I do remember the effect on the first floor. The pretty metal radiator vents were large rectangles set in the linoleum floor. If you stood on them in your stocking feet, the silent heat rose marvelously. It made your skirt stand out and warmed your whole body. As children, we'd go to the radiator immediately upon coming in from the cold. Then some obliging adult would come to help remove coats and mittens while we stood planted in the fabulous warmth.



*Earle*

