

Burning Corncobs

By Hap Hansen

For many people in this country, particularly in the Northeast, it was a tough winter. In fact, some areas are reporting that the winter of 2016-2017 was one of the worst on record. More snow, more ice, more sleet, more wind and more cold required higher heating expenses. This past winter may have been more reminiscent of the winters we used to have. Or did it just seem colder back then? It seemed windier too. Snowdrifts were higher. And the cold and the wind started earlier in the fall and stayed later in the spring. When I was a kid, I recall digging through snowdrifts at least ten feet deep so we could carry feed to the cows and slop the hogs. We also built gigantic snow caves in the drifts so we could hide from doing our chores.

Wait! Did I do that? Or have I absorbed a story told by my father? Come to think of it, my grandfather told the same story. I'll bet his father and grandfather told him the identical tale. Today, I wonder if there ever were ten foot snowdrifts. I know I have fading memories of how it was. Yet, I recall seeing the pictures. When they were taken, I don't remember. It is no tale though, that our heating needs were huge during those severe winters and we didn't have the benefit of a central heating system using gas or electricity. Our heat came from two sources. The main source was the kitchen cook stove. Secondly, we used the pot-bellied stove in the living room, which would glow bright red after an hour or so of use. That stove was only used when it was bitterly cold or when some of the neighbors or relatives had come to call. Usually, the kitchen cook stove was it. In that stove, we burned wood if we could find it, coal if we could afford it, and corn cobs after harvest and shelling. Those cobs burned hot, but they also burned fast. I was usually the one who bundled up and had to go to the cob pile with a bushel basket, because I was too young to do hard labor and too old not to do anything. I remember putting on scratchy woolen long johns and knee socks, many of which had been handed down to me by my three older brothers. Most of the handed-down, nearly worn-out overalls, shirts, sweaters and jackets had patches on the elbows and sleeves and were sometimes threadbare.

One year, when the value of corn was five cents a bushel or less, we didn't bother shelling it, except enough to feed the cows. We burned corn in the cook stove, kernels, cobs, shucks and all. I didn't like turning up my thermostat in the recent colder months, because I knew my utility bill would increase. But I would much rather do that than make a bitterly cold trip to the cob pile, dragging a heavy wooden bushel basket.