

Winters You Can't Forget

So we're going through an energy crunch or crisis. When I was what they then called knee high to a grasshopper, we had them every Winter and there wasn't a word in the newspapers about any problems in our house, or any house for that matter.

Of course, we didn't have millions of automobiles then. And those were years before everyone got spoiled with kitchen gadgets, gas or oil or electric heat and things like that.

They were, one might say, frontier days—in the respect that you made do with what you had and no complaints.

OUR SANITARY facilities, so-called, were in the form of an outhouse and talk about crunches! It was a real crisis when nature called and you had to go "out back," all bundled up and facing the crisis of having to



By
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unbundle in a bitter-cold shed. Either that or use an under-the-bed jar that more than a few times froze solid over night.

We made our Winter plans early in those days. Of course, my father having to earn a living by peddling house to house took care of the horse first. The barn was loaded with hay and oats and corn. And everyone had a huge, smelly horse blanket for the steed that pulled the buggy or wagon.

How I used to feel for my dad when he went to the barn on a frozen morning to hitch up the horse and set out wrapped in every bit of warm clothing he could get around him.

I PRACTICALLY wept for the horse. My father could go into a house and warm up on his "business" route. But the horses — they stayed out there in the cold. The only "winterizing" they got was being "sharp-shod," meaning their shoes had cleats to help the animals get traction on ice.

The horse would come home in the dread Winter days — it seems the cold months were colder then and that snow was much, much heavier — all covered with

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frost from the icing of their breath and freezing of their perspiration.

If you think you're having an energy crunch today, let me tell you that my father and his horses annually confronted something a hundred times worse.

But the energy crisis was not just with my peddling father. At home it was quite a story, too.

THOSE WERE the days before paper cartons. Everything came to the grocer's in wooden boxes — oranges, other fruit, vegetables and whatnot. And woe betide the household where the youngsters didn't do a top job of begging for these crates in the Summer and Fall.

Without the crate-boards, how were you to kindle a fire in the stoves?

Having put in a supply of the crates, then came the more important matter — getting the house supplied with coal.

All Summer long, coal wagons would go from house to house. Our coal was stored in a shed at the rear of the house and we had to carry buckets of the stuff to the house practically every day. Man, was that a cold, cold job!

But we didn't think of the situation in terms of a crisis. It just had to be done.

IN TERMS of today, coal wasn't expensive, but in terms of 1917-18 it was a costly commodity and many's the scuttle of coal we gathered up from along the railroad tracks that ran a few hundred yards behind our home.

We'd "march" the tracks two or three days a week and every so often a fireman or engineer on a passing train would toss us a few lumps.

Inside the house there was one "crunch" after another. When we used kerosene lamps for lighting, mom was always after us to "turn down the wick!" when we

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weren't using the lamp for something important like doing school homework.

"We're not in the coal oil business," mom used to admonish us, and later when we were graduated to gas lights and to electric lights, we heard the same warning: "We need not make the gas (or electric) company rich."

YOU WHO haven't tried to warm a whole house on a living room pot-bellied stove or the kitchen cook stove haven't had a real definition of "crunch."

As I have related on other occasions, at the first approach of Winter, all of us were handed Winter underwear of the scratchiest kind. I think the underwear — long sleeves and long legs — was made of wool ground up with wood splinters and the person who didn't sit around scratching was asked whether he had developed a tough hide.

So we had the two stoves, both coal-burners, and so the warm rooms were either the kitchen or, as we called it, the "front room."

Our meals were in the kitchen where we could eat in some kind of warmth. I say "some kind" because those lucky enough to sit near the stove usually got a little scorched and those at the other end of the table got the chills.

AFTER dinner, we gathered in the "front room" where the stove was kept blazing. But shortly it came time to go to bed. As you may know, practically every house was two-storied in those days — with the bedrooms up above.

We could come up with the durndest stories as to why we should stay downstairs by the stove a little longer, or even sleep downstairs. But it seldom worked with mom. School was tomorrow and upstairs with you.

Was that a crisis in the frigid days! Imagine having to go into a freezing room and undressing down to the underwear and then getting into a cold bed. It was great if you got to sleep with a brother because you could wrap yourself around him.

ANOTHER ITEM that helped was that our dog liked

me better than the others — or so it seemed — and he eventually sneaked upstairs and crawled in under the covers with me and my brother. Mom would complain all the time about the very idea of sleeping with a dog, but I think she really wasn't as angry as she sounded.

One thing about Winter at our old house in Indiana was that we didn't have to bother with the ice box. Who needed ice-deliveries when meat and milk and other things that could spoil could be placed on a window ledge, or out on what we called our "sun porch?"

If you haven't awakened to find that the bottle of milk had frozen during the night and had pushed up the cap an inch or two, you are an amateur in the "crunch" department. How many times a perfectly good bottle of milk was found shattered from the frost I couldn't count.

But we survived it all.

WE LEARNED that with the Winter came the necessity of building new fires practically every other morning in both the stoves. We'd bank the fires with ashes, but somehow they'd find a way of going out. And then we had to empty ashes and start a new one — abetted by the sticks we'd collected.

I can remember two great achievements in the department of keeping warm. One was when my father had a hole cut in the ceiling of the "front room" so that heat from the pot-bellied stove would get upstairs.

But the great day was when he was able to achieve a basement — a cellar — and install a furnace. We thought we were living in Miami Beach when we could turn that gadget with two chains attached — one to open the furnace damper and the other to close it down.

NONE OF YOU has had any "crunch" if you haven't confronted the horrible job of carrying out ashes. Or carrying in coal. Or going to a bathroom located in an unheated shack 100 yards back of the house. Or wearing woolly underwear or tramping a mile through hip-deep snow to school.

How times have changed!