

The Day the Pipes Went Up

By Jean Mackie

PHOTOS BY ROY FAWCETT

STOVEPIPES, I believe, were invented by someone who hated both mankind and womankind. I say this because I recall the upheaval they caused in my parents' home and the chaos they caused in mine.

My parents were reserved people, not subject to emotional upsets or giving way to their feelings. Our home was usually a serene abode — except for one day each fall when the stovepipes were cleaned.

Usually this chore was done in September. One morning there would be a chill in the air that held a promise of winter and hoar frost would whiten the roofs of the barn and the big shed across the driveway from the kitchen window. Inevitably, someone would remark: "I guess winter will soon be here."

"Yes," Father would answer heartily — a false heartiness, we knew. "I must get the storm windows up and the stovepipes cleaned."

At the sound of the word, "stovepipes", Mother would seem to grow paler and tinier. We children, however, were quite unaffected — usually we were in school when the stovepipes went up and we missed all the "excitement", as we called it. Excitement — I've learned — is the wrong word, now that I have a large country house of my own equipped with two impressive strings of stovepipes. The word is chaos.

I've also learned there seems to be something about stovepipes that brings out the worst in men in general. No matter how docile and domesticated they may be at any other season of the year, they simmer at the first mention of the hated chore, and by the time the pipes are pulled from the chimney and the first length removed to the back yard, dripping ebony soot, they come to a slow boil. Let me tell you about my own experience just last fall.

It was a Saturday afternoon, nearly four o'clock, and a fine chilling rain had started to fall. It was the week before the plowing match (the best time for women to get men to help them with household jobs). My husband and our hired man came in from the barn and my husband stepped into the chilling dining room to use the telephone.

"Rather cold in there," he said, coming back to the cozy kitchen where the range threw a comfortable warmth and an appetizing scent of the first batch of cinnamon rolls I was making. "We really should clean

those pipes and have a fire going in there before going to bed."

"Yes, that would be a good idea," I agreed with a smile. (Chores of this kind are best done when the man who is going to do them is in the mood for it, even if it is not a convenient time.)

So they began and I continued making my second batch of cinnamon rolls. My husband called for a "door opener", then marched through the kitchen to the back door with a length of pipe, preceded by one small son to open the door and followed by one small daughter to close it.

I left my baking for an instant to whisk up several daubs of soot that had fallen on the clean kitchen floor and was back at my dough before he returned. The job seemed to be well organized . . . until they met their Waterloo in the form of an upright section of pipe that ran into the dining room. The long section turned at the bottom and then ran several feet before turning down again to the stove. Evidently the pipes would not come apart easily or else Father didn't have his ladder in just the proper spot. Whatever the reason — there was a resounding crash, followed first by eloquent silence, then by an excited flurry of voices. The children scurried through the dining room to see what was going on and were promptly despatched back to the kitchen. I resolutely whacked at the dough. At a time like this, a wise woman keeps her distance. Through the door drifted a few misplaced and well-punctuated phrases.

"What did you do that for?"

"I just couldn't get my hands on it, that's all. It came apart when I didn't expect it."

"Catch that other piece, quick! It's come out of the hanger!" There was another crash.

After a long, dismayed silence in both kitchen and dining room, the men hustled past me, carrying lengths of stovepipe followed by curling spirals of fluffy black dust. Outside I could hear them bumping and brushing pipes before they tramped back through the kitchen and into the dining room. Finally it was done — the pipes were cleaned and replaced, and the men came in for supper. Both were red-faced and scowling, speaking only in curt monosyllables. I could see the hired man casting about in his mind for suitable, safe sub-

jects of conversation.

However, supper seemed good and the cinnamon rolls were light and tasty in spite of the rough treatment they had received under the stress of the moment. And I had made lots of strong, hot coffee. By the time supper was over, the men were able to look each other in the eye without considering mayhem and even laughed together at the antics of the television set. I laughed a bit, too, but not as heartily. I knew what lay ahead of me. After supper, Father got up and put on his coat.

"Come on, kids," he said. "You might as well come out with us tonight and feed the calves." As he passed through the kitchen, he cast a look of compassion in my direction, then vanished.

When they had all vanished into the barn, I cleaned up the table, packed the dishes in the sink, drank cups of scalding coffee straight, put on a sweater and ventured into the dining room to reconnoitre. It was a sight to gladden the heart of a vacuum cleaner salesman. The soot that wasn't on the floor clung to the walls, the furniture, the steps, the bannister, the window sills, and behind the pictures. Resolutely I went back to the kitchen for the equipment for the job and started to work.

I won't go into the unhappy details — any woman who has ever cleaned up soot will know what I had to do as I now know what my mother had to do. Eventually the upstairs, the stairway, and a pathway to the dining room door were clean, the kitchen floor was in a respectable state and the dishes were washed. By the time my family had returned from the barn, I was in a reasonably good humor.

After the children were tucked into bed, I looked over the situation in the dining room and decided that, Sabbath or no Sabbath the next day, it was too much to expect from one woman, and I retired to a warm bath and bed to brood on the vicissitudes of life.

Next morning, as soon as the men had gone to the barn, I slipped downstairs, set a brisk fire roaring through the clean pipes and by the time I was dressed, the dining room was warm enough to work in comfortably. It really wasn't such a dreadful job after all — it was finished by the time the men came for breakfast. And on the frosty winter nights when they basked in the warm of the stove, the men forgot the stress and strain of that day. But I haven't just as I know my mother hadn't during the days of my carefree childhood.

This year I have decided to ask Santa for an early Christmas present — a vacuum cleaner. And I intend to ask him for it the week before he goes to the plowing match — and I intend to have it before the stovepipes are cleaned again. And Father (I mean, Santa) being a reasonable man, will surely see things from my point of view.

True of Many Early Communities !!