

**PAM IN PORTLAND**

by Pamela Fry

Sitting in my cosy livingroom the other day I was thinking complacently about modern methods of heating. So very efficient and convenient, unless, of course the oil man fails to turn up, or there's a hydro cut. But even such problems seem minimal when compared to the reign of the all-powerful furnace.

I began to remember my own battles with these temperamental monsters. Two, in particular, I shall certainly never forget. I met the first one in Kingston, right after the Second World War. My husband, fresh out of the army, had found a job there. But due to the severe housing shortage, the only place we could find to live was a rickety old frame house, far too close to the railway tracks.

At that time, furnaces had been in existence for about fifty years. But there had been practically no change in their design since they were first invented. Indeed, I remember one expert furnace man telling me there really wasn't much improvement possible. Their life span was supposed to be about twenty five years. But unless you had just bought a new one, there was no way of knowing how old your furnace was. Except through its performance.

Well, the furnace in this Kingston house looked normal enough. It was of the hot air variety and it loved to be lit. Then we discovered that none of its dampers worked. If you tried to check the fire down one of two things would happen. The furnace would go out, or it would start, resentfully, to produce huge amounts of coal gas. Fatal of course, to human beings, if you breathe in enough of it. We soon found that the only solution was to let the furnace have its head. Within twenty minutes it would be roaring away, devouring coal at an incredible rate.

This created another set of problems. For some strange reason, our old and drafty dwelling had only two hot air outlets. One small grate on the second floor landing and one huge grate in the livingroom. It was the exact size of the top of the furnace, which lay immediately beneath it. And, very soon, this top would begin to turn red hot. Apparently the furnace wasn't insulated, so when you looked down you could see the cheery crimson glow, with sparks flying in all directions. The sight tended to make us very nervous. Also, the livingroom would quickly become incredibly hot, while the rest of the house remained icy cold.

Finally, we found the only practical solution. We would light the furnace, open all doors, upstairs and down, and wait until the heat became unbearable. Then we'd let the darned thing

go out, lighting it again when the place got really chilly. That furnace never minded how often it was lit. Frequently, this was as often as three or four times a day.

Luckily this situation didn't last long, because we found an apartment. Just as well, since we would have certainly gone bankrupt. At the height of its performance that furnace was consuming close to four times as much coal as was normal.

Then came the hot water furnace we encountered when we moved to Montreal, about a year later. We had rented one of those railway type apartments, one room behind the other, very common in Quebec. At the back of the kitchen was a small shed, and this was where the furnace lived. You reached it by walking down six wooden steps.

During our first year there, the furnace took every advantage of our inexperience with hot water furnaces. By the second year we were feeling a bit more confident. We actually believed we had achieved the whip hand.

We were wrong. The furnace had every intention of proving, once and for all, who was boss. First, as a sort of advance threat, the grates in the bottom of the firebed broke. Twice. On both occasions, it took half a day to replace them.

Then came its final revenge. Right in the middle of the morning there was an ominous clanking sound, immediately followed by a tremendous bang. Rushing to the back of the house we found the shed full of smoke and steam, with the furnace apparently floating in several inches of water. A jet like stream was pouring from its top. Around its base sailed shovels and pails, and all the rest of our cold weather equipment.

For a moment we stared at it, panic stricken. What was going to happen next? Was the whole thing going to blow up? Sanity returned, and we rushed to the telephone to call the fire department. Rescue came in full force. Three or four fire engines, ladders, hoses, axes, and the inspector's car. Also the firemen, who went tearing down the long hall toward the back. About twenty of them. They all pured into the shed, where they could be seen splashing and milling around. It was rather like a Marx brothers comedy, and I felt myself becoming slightly hysterical.

But, by now, the furnace had subsided. No more smoke or steam. It was just weeping quietly, no doubt exhausted by its efforts. The firemen were calm and kind. They turned off the water at the main and deposited what was left of the furnace fire in the snowy backyard. They told us that one of our boiler sections had burst, and suggested we call a plumber.

I would really rather not remember the next, nightmarish period. For

one thing, there was the long, muddy track of firemen's boots from the front door to the furnace room. And practically everything else was covered with a thin layer of soot and water. Also, since it was well below zero outside, the place was growing colder by the minute.

The plumber and/or furnace man came. He shook his head sadly and explained that the reason the boiler had blown up was because the furnace was so very old. So old, in fact, that he didn't know if he could even find the necessary parts to repair it. "Don't know if they even make that kind anymore," he kept saying.

Our landlord, when contacted, also shook his head sadly. But the most he was prepared to do was to put in a couple of smelly oil heaters. To keep the pipes from bursting. People, he seemed to imply, were on their own in a crisis like this. We were not really surprised. The post war housing shortage was still much in evidence, and the

milk of human kindness was also in short supply amongst city landlords.

Well, it took three weeks before the necessary parts were finally found. I think they came from Winnipeg. In the meantime, we camped out with a series of generous friends. We certainly put a strain on the bonds of friendship. After all, there were four of us, my husband, myself, our daughter, and our son, who was only three months old.

When we were finally able to move back into our apartment the furnace had acquired a slightly lop sided and rakish air. Quite a few things seemed to be tied together with wire. But it worked, even though we remained convinced it was ready to blow up again at the drop of a hat. Or a shovel.

Fortunately, it never did, and eventually we moved on to other, and safer, pastures .... Remembering all this I sighed, smiled, and got up to adjust my thermostat. So much for the good old days.



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