



SITTIN ON THE STOVEWOOD BOX

One of my fond childhood memories is of the feeling of security, of warmness, of comfort, and yes the joy of sittin on the stovewood box.

Stovewood you see, was mostly pine wood, split into small sizes of about 1 to 2 ½ inches approximately square, and cut to the length to fit in the firebox of the wood burning cookstove in the kitchen. It had been cut and split long enough to have dried, and would burn fast and hot. Firewood was altogether different. It was much larger, usually hardwood (oak, hickory, poplar, gum), with only small amounts of pine. Although it had been cut several months prior, maybe a whole year, to let all the sap dry out of it, the smaller logs most times were not even split. It was cut to a length for Fireplaces or large wood burning Spaceheaters.

For most of my childhood until I became a fulltime farmhand, one of my chores was to bring the wood from the woodpile into the house. The woodpile was about fifteen yards west of the house. The firewood was to be neatly stacked on the backporch, up against the outside wall of the house. The backporch was on the eastside of the house. Here the firewood was out of the weather, would remain dry when it rained, and be handy to bring into the house to add to the fire. Stovewood, on the other hand, was brought into the house daily and placed in the stovewood box that was next to the cookstove in the kitchen. The stovewood box was on the same side of the cookstove as the firebox, and purposely located there so the wood would be handy to add as needed to keep the fire hot in the cookstove.

All farmhouse kitchens had their stovewood located at or near the cookstove, either in a stovewood box or some other arrangement, such as a pile in the corner. In our farmhouse kitchen the cookstove sat catty-cornered to the right just inside the door as you entered the kitchen from the backporch. Right next to the cookstove was the stovewood box – where I would usually perch myself when I was hanging-out in the kitchen.

Our kitchen furnishings, as I remember, from right to left as you enter from the backporch were cookstove, woodbox, slop-bucket under the window (for collecting cooking and table scraps which were fed to the hogs), and a shaving cabinet over the wash table that contained buckets of water and the wash pan. That was before we had a pump put in the well with one water faucet and small sink that replaced the wash table in the kitchen. On the next wall were the cornmeal and wheat flour bin, window, and pie safe; the third wall contained a table, door into the dining room, and another large long worktable. Later on I built Mom cabinets that replaced the large worktable on that third wall.

The wood was always brought in from the woodpile to the porch and woodbox before milking time late in the afternoon. There was three ways to move the wood from the woodpile to the house. One was my little red wagon. You slanted some sticks of wood in front and back, then lay wood crosswise until it was rounded up. Then you proceeded on your imaginary truck route to the backporch steps. The wood was then unloaded a few sticks at a time and placed in its designated place. Another way was to use the wheelbarrow, which I always overloaded, then lost control, and dumped the load before I got to the backporch steps. This required reloading the wheelbarrow, sometimes leaving part of the load, causing untold frustration. The last method was to bring the wood to the house by the armload, which I will describe later.

Mom seldom cooked at night – we ate leftovers from dinner (lunch). The noon meal was always referred to as dinner, and the evening meal was always referred to as supper – by everyone we knew in the country. Dad always got up first in the mornings and built the fire in the cookstove using old newspaper, kindling or lighter (fat pine), which we always had prepared at the woodpile and a small amount was brought in with the stovewood each afternoon. By the time Dad had the fire started, Mom was busy preparing the biscuit dough. She usually baked two large pans of biscuits each morning. Then if we were having eggs, or white gravy, and bacon, or ham, or sausage, she went from the biscuit preparation to that task. Sometimes, especially in the winter, she would also prepare hot oatmeal. While all this breakfast was being prepared, Dad and the rest of us menfolk were feeding the mules, and feeding and milking the cows and storing the milk in the “milkhouse”. When we finished those chores we all returned to the kitchen to “wash-up” for breakfast.

I usually got there first, and I immediately took my position on the stovewood box. It was warm there on cold winter mornings, it being next to the firebox of the cookstove, and even though it was hot there in the summertime I didn't mind. If Mom was in a talking mood, which was seldom in the mornings, we might talk while she was “getting a working mans breakfast finished”. Cold cereal (Post-toasties when we had them) were usually ate at supper.

Before I was old enough to work full days in the fields, or at other farm labor, I carried cool wellwater to the field workers mid-morning. When I returned, which often included some play and exploring with “Old Sandy” my dog along the way, I would usually go to the house where Mom was cooking dinner of fresh vegetables right from the garden from scratch. I would sit in the stovewood box and listen to Mom grumble about how the meal was not going well. Maybe the stove was not hot enough, or she had stayed in the garden gathering the vegetables longer that she should have, or whatever, she shared it with me because I was there. All who were working in the fields would leave the fields about 11:30 –11:45AM and would be “washing-up” and “setting down” at the table about 12:00 noon. Mom knew her part was to have dinner ready.

After a heavy meal, then a nap of about 30 minutes – it was back to the fields until about sundown. At least once in the afternoon I would be required to carry a gallon of cool wellwater to those working in the fields. If Mom were canning vegetables or fruits, the fire would be kept going in the cookstove all afternoon. I might be in and out of the stovewood box several times during such and afternoon. When she began to run low on stovewood I would be tasked to refill the stovewood box with the call “Harvis, bring me another armload of stovewood”. An armload was the quickest way to move a limited amount of stovewood from the woodpile to the stovewood box. You arrived at the woodpile and usually squatted down, then stacked all the wood you could get into the crook of your left arm, rounded up, then placed your right arm over the wood and squeezed just tight enough to keep the wood from falling out of your arms. You then proceeded to the kitchen door and yelled for someone to open the screen door, then you went over to the stovewood box and dumped the armload into the box. Sometimes you would then assume your perch thereon to rest a little bit. Mom would usually “warm up” the “dinner leftovers” for supper if she was canning, if not, it was cold leftovers with cornbread and milk, either sweetmilk (whole milk) or buttermilk.

In the fall and winter, dinner may be a pot of dried beans, or a hash, or Irish Stew – a one-item meal with cornbread and milk. Coffee was usually made only at breakfast, except for Sunday dinners when company was there. Occasionally on fall and winter evenings we had a real treat, homemade oyster stew with saltines. Those sissy oyster crackers didn't come along until later. I was usually in and out of the house several times a day from either chores or other

exploits – always to the stovewood box if Mom or the sisters were in the kitchen. Aprons for women was a required item of dress I thought, all wore them, especially in the kitchen. Apron strings were inviting and were often untied as one would pass close enough to the stovewood box for me to reach – it always got their attention. If Mom was in a good mood, she would fuss at me and laugh, but if she was not – she might respond with “if you do that again, I’ll pop your jaws”, and sometimes she did before you could “bat an eye”. When that happened, it was time to take myself elsewhere – like the barn loft for some solitude.

The sisters, and later sister-in-law, would either pick at me, or fuss with or about me, and I would give them as good as I got. The stovewood box was my territory, I had laid claim to it, I thought it was mine to defend. I felt safe there – the girls be danged.

Many cakes and pies were baked on the wood cookstove, and if I was in the stovewood box, I might get to lick the batter and frosting bowls (actually I had to wash my hands, wipe the bowl with my finger, and then lick my finger – but a treat to a country boy). I might even get to sample the first batch of teacakes, a southern sort of cookie. But never did we get to sample a cake or pie – they must remain whole until sliced and served at the intended meal.

Oh the smells that came from that kitchen – they kinda soaked in and you carried them with you all day. There were also some offensive odors as well, collard greens cooking, also on rare occasion – hog chitterlings (pronounced chittlins), especially right after “hog killing” time. At those times I would not be found in the stovewood box, or anywhere near the kitchen, or the house.

It is strange the things that come to mind about our youth. I have fond memories of my little niche - a simple stovewood box in the kitchen of our farm home. I am sure it was not at all comfortable to sit on or in, but as a youngster I never noticed. Sometimes I was sitting high, and as the wood was used I was sitting lower and lower, always with my feet dangling over the side. I just may be the only person ever to have such fond memories of “sittin on a stovewood box”.

By Thomas H. (Pap) Ewing
(My own story)
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