

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

How did you cope with the electric outage of May 10th? Was it an interesting day, one that kept you busy with activities seldom called for anymore? There were many things we were unable to do that we normally take for granted.

Shortly after 9 o'clock in the morning most of us discovered the electricity was off. The light switch produced no illumination and the electric stove wouldn't heat water for your second cup of coffee.

A quick check of the electric clock confirmed there was no "juice". You couldn't run the dishwasher, machine wash or dry clothes, or vacuum rugs; my electric typewriter sat silently, almost sullenly, at my desk.

If your house is heated with gas, you were warm; those with oil-fired furnaces began to feel chilly before noon. The food and ice cubes in the freezer started to melt, and the refrigerator became decidedly warm by mid-afternoon.

If you had a fireplace and a supply of dry wood, you could heat one room. If you had a woodburning stove and a supply of dry wood, you could be comfortable in most parts of the house, even though the outside temperature was 40°.

Just feeding the fire kept you busy a good part of the day. Between fetching more wood and checking the fire, you could read or darn socks, dust, clean closets if you felt so inclined, rearrange furniture, scrub kitchen cabinets if your hot water supply held out, and do anything else that didn't require electricity.

We've become so dependent on electric power, however,

that we forget how vulnerable the delivery system actually is. When meal times came, a lot of people ate at restaurants. Without a battery-operated radio in the house, we sat in our cars and listened to news reports. If we needed gasoline in our cars, we sat in lines, waiting to fill our tanks, for only a few stations have generators or hand-crank pumps.

Even people with woodstoves may have found preparing their evening meal somewhat of an undertaking. You could, of course, eat a cold dinner, but a good hot meal to counter the chill and dampness was what most people wanted.

Off the pantry shelves came sterno stoves, cans of soup, and packages of hearty crackers. Heating soup isn't difficult on a stove, but even that simple feat, if a fireplace is the only source, can pose problems unless it's equipped with a crane and a kettle to hang on it.

Dark fell earlier than it would have if the day had been sunny. Some people's electric service was restored by late afternoon, but thousands were sitting in darkness until after 9:00 p.m. Then candles came out of hiding, oil lamps were brought from storage, and menfolk shaved with the help of flashlights -- with non-electric razors.

Emergency situations carry with them a quality of reaching out -- even to strangers. Like holiday seasons, threats to national security, and severe storms, black-outs of electric power elicit a need to seek out and share the experience with others of our kind.

To some, the challenges create defiance against such inconvenience, arouse a spirit of competition, and stimulate imagination to find ways to cope with the situation and assert independence.

These people accept the emergency, even welcome it, for they are presented with the opportunity to prove their inherent ability to survive.

We've seen evidence of this spirit in times of war among both military and civilian populations, in men who've been prisoners of war, in populations of entire nations who've made tremendous and concerted sacrifices in creature comforts without complaint for the good and ultimate security of their countries.

In times of financial disaster, people display a capacity to deal with reverses that might be expected to overwhelm them. Instead, they handle them with dignity and courage.

While a day without electricity can't be likened to such catastrophies, still it evokes feelings of rising to the occasion, and meeting needs for which we are unprepared that have come without warning.

To these people, finding ways to fill the hours productively results in fine feelings of virtue. Spending a day in a cold house is a hardship we're unwilling to accept, huddled miserably under blankets awaiting the restoration of power. Instead, we build fires in fireplaces, light woodstoves or join friends with heat sources independent of electric service.

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In so doing, we feel stronger, better able to meet adversities, and realize the Pioneer Spirit is still alive and well. This discovery is reassuring, to say the least.

It's reassuring because, in all probability, we're going to need to call upon that spirit, and tax it to its limits in the next decade or two.

The incident of the freak storm of May 10th illustrated clearly our dependence upon electricity.

Ten per cent of our electric power today is generated by nuclear plants; the rest comes from water power and coal- or oil-burning plants similar to that located on the Cape Cod Canal. As oil supplies diminish, this country may be forced to convert most of its oil-burning plants to coal; before we can do that, however, economical ways must be found to deliver coal to the plants.

Since our rail system has been allowed to fall into disrepair, and since coal, unlike oil, isn't capable of flowing through a pipeline, and since coal is not usually mined in close proximity to ports, transporting it will require a tremendous re-building program. That old song, "I've been working on the railroad," may once again be timely.

Because burning coal presents a serious threat of air pollution, alternate energy sources are being sought; substituting coal for oil and gas would be, at best, a stop-gap solution to our energy shortages.

The unhappy reality we face is that oil and gas reserves are being exhausted and demands on our remaining dwindling supply are increasing daily; there's urgent reason to cooperate with those who press for conservation of what we have.

Should this nation find itself under attack, as we did unexpectedly in 1941, where then would we turn for energy? The huge tankers plying the seas, bringing Black Gold from Arab countries, would be easy targets for air and submarine attacks. Blockades of U.S. ports have harrassed Americans in the past and may again.

A large part of our security as a nation lies in our geographical position, far removed from the squabbles of Europe and Asia; on the other hand, our remoteness from our sources of supply of oil could, if we are not self-sufficient in energy resources and independent of foreign supplies, change our entire future in the event of war.

Pioneers we would then become, in every sense of the word.