

VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

If ever I get my hands on the people who design refrigerators, woe betide them. Bad enough that the interior is equipped with drawers that slide in and out on channels impossible to clean and a combination of posts and clips to hold everything together which, to assemble after a scrub-out, requires a balancing act of a tight-rope walker.

Worse, by far, are the acrobatics necessary for keeping the working mechanisms dust-free, as recommended by energy-conservationists who blithely advise cleaning condenser coils regularly to keep the fridge operating at optimum efficiency, limit service calls to a minimum, and extend the life-expectancy of the single most expensive kitchen appliance the average homeowner acquires.

Because I'm energy-conscious, disinclined to spend money needlessly, and resentful of the lack of consideration to householders exhibited by repairmen who, at times, must be called but seldom come when they promise, I schedule my refrigerator homecare on a quarterly basis.

With practice, I've become familiar with the intricacies of taking apart and reassembling the food-storage compartment components; I might even say I'm proficient in that area. No amount of practice, however, will ever make me proficient in attending to the "guts" of the machine.

At least once a year the time comes to do the job while the temperature is 93° and the humidity even higher. I don't attempt it in such weather; instead, I write a note to remind me. Finally, when dog days are over for another year and a day dawns clear and cool, I assemble my tools.

Pliers and screwdriver to remove the screw-nuts holding the cardboard cover in place at the bottom and back of the box; the vacuum cleaner, hose and crevice tool; flashlight, dustpan and broom, and pokers for reaching in, over, around, under and behind the fan, brackets, motor, baffles, wires, braces and gizmos, the names of which remain a mystery to me.

Once I'm so equipped, the refrigerator must be persuaded to leave its accustomed niche and assume a position where access to its bowels is possible. My kitchen is long and narrow. When the refrigerator moves out from the wall, I must go through living room, dining room and den to reach its rear; experience has taught me to place all assembled tools and equipment where they can be used without making repeated trips through the house.

First I pull the plug, then clean the floor with broom and dustpan, sponge it with soapy water, finally with clear. Next I remove the cardboard cover and place screw-nuts in a safe place. With flashlight in one hand and crevice tool of vacuum cleaner in the other, I begin the attempt to dust the machinery. Consider, please, that at the left front of the exposed compartment is the electric motor. It is hot. Behind it is a grillwork, a mesh of wire-like metal diabolically designed to attract and retain every speck of dust that floated near over the past three months, and to defeat the best efforts of anyone desiring to eliminate the mess.

These are, I presume, what engineers call condenser coils. Why anyone would hide them behind a motor that heats up is beyond my comprehension. With the help of the crevice tool, various brushes, picks and pokers, and by lying flat on the floor on my stomach, I can, in time, get out most of the crud. I must be careful, though, not to damage the coils. I must also be careful not to suck the insulation from the sides of the compartment into the vacuum cleaner bag. When first installed, of course, the insulation was a nice bright yellow color and easily distinguished from dust and dirt. Over the years, not unexpectedly, accumulations of dust and grime have been deposited on the surface of the insulation. It's difficult to distinguish between the two.

The chore is made no easier by my dependence on the trifocal spectacles, never intended for close work on anything I couldn't hold on my lap. Seeing what I'm doing a foot away from the end of my nose, looking up through the distant-vision section of my lenses, poses a problem, especially when I need one hand to wield my tools and the other to hold the flashlight; if I had a third hand, I might be able to adjust my glasses.

At the right front of the compartment, conveniently located behind a brace, and itself held in place with a couple of U-shaped brackets, is the fan. The fan blades, no matter how often wiped clean, oil themselves efficiently. Dust and grease coat the blades forming a gluey mass that defies strong soap; what's needed is a dunk in a can of gasoline but that's impractical and dangerous. I do the best job I can with a

soapy sponge and dry cloths.

A maze of electrical wiring, held together with masking tape and placed strategically to prevent reaching into the dark recesses behind the fan, is another hazard. Break one of those connections? Buy a new refrigerator.

By the time everything appears clear of dust and dirt, the electric motor has cooled enough to permit skin-contact with it, but even the slimmest fingers are too thick to slip between the motor and the floor. With a cloth-wrapped spatula, however, it's possible to sweep beneath and clear out the final pocket of muck.

While the rear of the box is exposed is a good opportunity to swab off the accumulated dust, tobacco smoke residue and nameless deposits that inevitably result in the room where I cook and prepare food. Both sides as well as the top of the box get a thorough washing, too. Nor do I overlook emptying and cleaning the drip pan.

Now I'm ready to roll the fridge back where it belongs. Even on rollers, it's a job two people accomplish more easily than one. Unwieldy is a refrigerator. A quick sponge-off of the doors and visible areas of the sides removes fingerprints from the enamelled surfaces. It's ready to go again.

Hold everything! I forgot to plug it in. Once more it must come out from the wall, the cord be fished from the floor, the plug placed in the proper receptacle. Electricians always install those where they can't be reached without a major move.

Why? Why are refrigerators built to defeat me? Why can't the "innards" be arranged in these essential appliances to make cleaning them relatively easy?

It's beyond belief that it's beyond the capacity of the engineering genius of kitchen appliance manufacturers to design refrigerators so that cleaning condenser coils might be accomplished simply.

I'm not the only householder taking energy conservation seriously. From what I read, refrigerators are one of the heaviest users of electricity in the average New England home, third in line after hot-water heaters and heating systems. Cutting down on electricity use not only reduces my utility expenses, it also saves a few drops of precious imported oil.

Perhaps, in time, and if we all complain loudly, design engineers will pay heed. We can try. We can hope someone is listening.