

VILLAGE VIEW ANDREA LEONARD

Shortly after the end of the Second World War, I found myself living in a small apartment on the south side of the city of Chicago in the great and glorious state of Illinois. Included in the monthly rent of \$52.50 (!) were heat and hot water; a kitchenette with under-counter refrigerator and a miniature gas stove, dinette, studio-living-room, tiny hall with tinier closet, and a full bath completed the arrangement.

Also included was a Murphy bed, a contraption consisting of a bedspring and mattress that disappeared behind double doors into a large aperture in the living room wall when lifted at the foot, for it was counter-balanced by a heavy weight at the head of the bed.

Since the hall closet was totally inadequate, the Murphy bed was disassembled and removed, supplying ample storage space for a multiplicity of belongings. A couch that converted to a comfortable bed was the first furniture purchase.

Not included in the rent were the utilities; gas for the stove ran approximately \$5 a month and electric bills were seldom over \$10. Food was the second biggest item in the budget; I allowed \$12.50 a week for grocery shopping for two people. Less than \$3 a week was enough to keep the ten-year-old LaSalle coupe, parked at the curb, supplied with gas, oil and enough maintenance to pass inspection.

Since combined income, after withholdings, was in the neighborhood of \$75 a week, there weren't many months a deposit wasn't made to the savings account. It paid 3% interest on deposits. Because most capital had been invested in the couch, the rest of the furniture was sparse, mismatched and decidedly secondhand. The drop-leaf table where we ate most meals was aptly named; it often dropped unexpectedly.

This feature caused consternation one evening when it dropped on a plate of spaghetti, a glass of red wine, a dish of tossed salad into the lap of a guest. Shortly thereafter that table was consigned to an open area of the building's basement (where I'd found it in the first place) and replaced with one from a mail-order catalogue.

Most of the money in the savings account eventually

found its way into the coffers of the catalog stores, that year. As soon as there was enough to pay for it, a corner cabinet to match the table arrived, then a couple of foot-square three-drawer chests to use as end tables, and eventually, other miscellanies to make the apartment more attractive and comfortable.

There came a day when the gas stove's oven declined to light. The top burners operated as usual, but the oven had quit. Back to the catalog, for cooking without an oven was beyond me. And there, among the thousands of other items offered in the "wish book," was a small (12"x12"x12") portable metal oven.

It had a coiled-wire handle, three solid sides, a door with a see-through panel in which was mounted a temperature indicator, and an open bottom. Inside were two wire racks supported by brackets on either side. Overnight delivery put me back in business.

Today my kitchen is equipped with four countertop electric burners and a wall oven. They work perfectly. And they cost an arm-and-a-leg to run. Today my dining room is equipped with a wood burning stove to take the curse off the bill that arrives after every delivery of home heating oil. It does a magnificent job as long as I keep the chimney free of creosote and the fire-box stuffed with oak. It has given warmth, comfort, good cheer and fine service for several years, and I'm looking forward to the night after this month when a decided nip of frost in the evening air will signal the season's first fire in the woodstove.

What I'm not looking forward to is another winter without a 12" cube of sheet metal oven, equipped with a couple of racks inside, to set atop my woodburner so I won't have to use the electric stove so often. For months now I've been looking at mail order catalogs and "down home" magazines, hoping some enterprising soul would recognize there's a big market for these money-stretcher energy-savers.

Hundreds of thousands of woodstoves have helped Americans cut oil-usage the past few years; coal stoves and stoves that burn either coal or wood grow ever more popular. Contractors are even building new houses with chimney-holes to accommodate stove-installation.

Magazines, newspapers and mail-order catalogs advertise stoves of every description, chain saws and log splitters, wood bins and racks, coal hods, chimney cleaning tools, special grates, blowers and fans, ash removers and other related equipment. But no ovens. Why not?

They are simple and uncomplicated; any competent sheet-metal worker could make one. Any company now making and selling metal tool boxes could easily add a line of ovens. But, nothing.

If I could purchase a small portable oven, I would. Certainly thousands upon thousands of other people would, as well. Then I'd make Indian pudding from the recipe handed down from my grandmother's day. It needs to bake three or four hours. I could bake bread. I'd bake potatoes four or five nights a week. When I didn't use the oven, the woodstove would cook spaghetti sauces, savory stews with dumplings, or hearty soups loaded with vitamins and rich flavors of vegetable waters I didn't drain down the sink, as it has for the last five years.

I'd put a pot of beans in the oven Friday night and they'd be baked to perfection by suppertime, Saturday. Macaroni and cheese would be on the menu once a week, not to mention tuna casseroles, the ham, onions and potato favorite, Texas hash, and that old standby, meatloaf.

A little oven such as the one I remember would fit perfectly atop my stove. One any larger would not. A little oven like that would heat up fast, cool quickly and store easily. I wish I had had the foresight to hang onto the one I bought nearly 35 years ago.

Whatever happened to it? I haven't the foggiest notion. After eleven moves, initially to other, somewhat larger and better-equipped apartments, and then to four houses in three different states, I probably concluded, somewhere along the line, it wasn't worth packing and shipping. I probably thought it could always be replaced if I needed another. The original cost was only \$3.49 plus shipping.

I'd willingly spend ten times as much to duplicate it. And I'd probably need to, too. Rent, \$52.50? A month's electricity, under \$10? Grocery bills, \$12.50 a week? So much for inflation.

But won't somebody please give me, make me, sell me an oven? Or tell me where I can buy one?