

VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

Lots of mail comes to my post office box (#353, Osterville) and some of it is from readers of this column. A recent letter has given me a few chuckles and perhaps it will help dispel the post-holiday blues for you, as well. With that hope, I'm sharing it with you.

"My dear Ms. Leonard:

For many years I've been a reader of your column and it has given me much pleasure and food for thought. I've especially enjoyed your articles about energy saving, solar heating, insulation, "woolies," wood stoves and fireplaces.

Fireplaces, and my experiences with them, are my reason for writing. I've never been comfortable with fireplaces. Some "things" and I seem incompatible; for me, fireplaces manifest an inexplicable perversity, often found in inanimate objects by people like myself who possess only marginal mechanical endowments.

Fireplaces obstinately prove difficult for me to light. Somehow there's always a dearth of flame and an excess of smoke; (I concede I sometimes forget to open the damper.) But even when the fire starts to burn briskly, as soon as I retire to my chair, it invariably loses vitality and subsides into sullen smolderings.

If anyone else is in the room, that individual spontaneously feels he or she has been singularly blessed with the ability to make the fire burn better or hotter. It is that person, alone, who recognizes the particular arrangement of logs, kindling, andirons and draft to insure a cheerful welcoming blaze.

The net result: for at least forty per cent of the time, whatever insipid radiant heat might be forthcoming is obscured by someone "fixing it". And when, by some fluke, the fire does flare up and demonstrate its capacity for warming the room, this faculty is characterized by blistering the varnish on valuable furniture inadvertently situated too near the hearth.

A nicely burning fire in a fireplace is pleasant and comforting, with but minor exceptions. If you sit near enough to feel the heat, the side of you towards the chimney is soon roasting while the opposite side of you is freezing, a result of the draft caused by the "draw" of burning wood. Old-time New Englanders solved the problem with wing chairs to shield them from the draft. In modern homes, unfortunately, such chairs are rare, and if present, are seldom placed to take advantage of their functional design.

Further, the air to support the blaze is pulled from all other parts of the house, cooling down those rooms; this causes the fire to burn merrily and the house heater to switch on. Obviously, this isn't an energy-efficient or financially-profitable arrangement.

Another consideration is that a fireplace possesses an astonishingly voracious appetite for wood. What appears at the close of the dinner hour to be an ample supply in the woodbox becomes woefully inadequate by mid-evening. Rather than permit the fire to die peacefully to a bed of glowing coals, some bright-eyed guest is certain to say, "We need more wood for the fire." This means a trip to the woodpile by Guess Who? Chances are six to ten it's (a) pouring outside or (b) the dry wood is home to many large hairy spiders that, in

the-dark and their panic, run all over you.

But these problems pale when I consider my neighbor's experience. Two years or so ago his family moved into the house next door, a house without a fireplace. He and his wife, disoriented by preconceived visions of the blessings of rural tranquility, clearly felt unfulfilled without a fireplace (especially his wife). I kept my own counsel. Inevitably one day the mason contractor's truck arrived and work began.

Adding a fireplace (or making any other apparently simple change to a home) involves unexpected and unbelievable delays and problems. In this instance, exhuming large boulders (four feet in diameter) before the footing could be poured, removing a number of overhanging tree boughs, and re-installing the television antenna.

My neighbor explained to me they had decided to build the fireplace to offset rising energy costs. I nodded while mentally calculating the cost of wood at \$130 per cord, delivered. I also thought about the \$4,000 non-tax-deductible investment, and the increase in his tax assessment with which he would be soon assaulted.

Finally, after some months of work, the project was completed and the wood delivered. He was pleased. His wife was delighted. And vicariously I shared their pleasure. But the event was an emotional Indian Summer.

The fireplace was finished quite late in the year. In mid-December, 1979, my good neighbors left for six weeks in Florida. As I sit here, it's 5° outside and the wind is brisk. I can see their house without moving from my chair; a shimmering over its main chimney tells me the oil burner is running almost constantly. I strongly suspect the damper in the new fireplace is open. In fact, I can see shimmering over that chimney, as well. Yes, that damper is open. An unfortunate oversight, but an understandable one, considering the circumstances.

Before leaving for Florida, the neighbors threw a going-away christen-the-fireplace party. Since we had a previous engagement, we declined their kind invitation, but we heard about it later.

It seems my neighbors, in preparation for the party, had laid all the requirements for a good fire in the fireplace. It had plenty of crumpled newspapers, dry shingles, and logs properly spaced. When their first guests arrived five minutes early, my neighbor (slightly off schedule) asked his wife to light the fire while he greeted the early birds. This she did and then joined him. More guests arrived. Finally all proceeded to the living room which was now full of smoke.

Taking command of this emergency, my neighbor tried to open the damper, managing to sustain second-degree burns on both hands and badly singeing his full beard (of which he had been justly proud). His wife was now hysterical. A guest called the fire department. Neighbors, hearing the commotion, called the police. It was a clear-thinking female guest who managed to open the damper with a poker. She said she had had similar experiences.

Just as she got the damper open, an overly-helpful male guest extinguished the blaze with a handy tank of rare tropical fish.

Well, sic transit gloria munci. Or, in the vernacular, you just can't win them all.

Although this story is nearly complete, there's a sequel. That lady who wielded the poker is an attractive blonde with, I guess I should say, a widely-observed predilection for plunging necklines. On this evening, as I understand it, she was particularly spectacular. In any event, it subsequently became unfortunately apparent that at least one of the logs used for the fire had been, in its natural state, entwined with poison ivy vines. Some remained. The smoke, carrying volatile residual oils, did its work. A ghastly experience.

Maybe I've already gone too far, so I will stop. Before I do, though, I want you to know that in my fireplace are plants; and they will remain there. Hasn't it been said, "Keep a green bough in your heart and a singing bird will come"? I keep green boughs in my heart(h). Thanks again for all the pleasure your column has given."

The writer has requested his name be withheld. I'm amused and hope you're equally so. And may singing birds reside in his chimney!