

KEEPING WARM!

By L.E. Buchholz

The writer lives on a farm near Lehr, N.D. In this article, he recalls the variety of fuels used by the old-timers of the Dakotas.

The most desired fuel for the cook stove was "cow chips." The product still has songs written about it, like "Cow Pattie." Cow chips were a common sight at fairs when used in tossing contests. Some were put up in see-through frames and used as wall decorations. Some were also sent to elected politicians!

The demand here for chips was so hot that people would wait in line to scan the pastures! About six people were preferred. One would drive, and one would hand-receive the chips picked up by the walkers. They were loaded into a dry place for kitchen range use, and with chips as fuel the best homemade bread and noodle soup was prepared.

But for the living room's pot-bellied stove, Dakota Lignite (as it was often called) was used. This was made out of cattle manure in side sheds, where the barn would not be cleaned all winter long.

The manure was compact and very well cured. A man armed with a razor-sharp spade would cut strings the full length of the barn. Then he square-spaded and set up the square blocks to dry.

Sheep manure was the best of all the manure fuels, since it produced a fierce heat and only a minimum amount of ashes.

The kind of material used for cooking and heating could be told when one saw the ash pile. Those piles quickly built up to the point where they would become a real problem, and had to be hauled away. Every household also had to allow for a place to lay the fuel in store, at least for overnight use. Usually, the carrying out of the ashes was a greater chore than fuel-



Picking up chips was sometimes a cold and unpleasant task!

ing the stoves

In the pioneer days, the milk cows were kept in a small pasture throughout the summer, to build up a manure supply. Later in the fall, six or even eight horses were tied side by side and then trotted in a tight circle to mulch and compact the manure. Then one horse was hitched to a manure packer and pulled in a circle until a firm enough bed was made to allow for spading, and stacking for drying. That was supposed to be for the bigger supply.

By now someone may ask why the families did not use wood, like they did in Minnesota or Wisconsin.

The reason was because we lived here on the open plains. There were few trees. Some people even had to use twisted hay. Anything that would burn was fed into the stove, not the least of which could be shelled corn cobs.

We had people follow us on our railroad right-of-ways, as gleaners, to pick up every little speck of wood. Same was true when we fixed fence. Every rotted post or splinter from the post would be salvaged for stove fuel.

But do I mean to tell you that nothing more modern was used?

Yes, there was coal. And surely that was the best. But some households could not afford coal, and it was possible for the supply to run out at awkward, even dangerous, times. And then it could happen that a train might not pull in for two or three days because of snowbound tracks. Some people might not have been able to haul coal way back out to their farms.

The first of the modern cooking methods was the installing of the kerosene stove, and some of the most fashionable folks had hard coal stoves. Those had the little windows through which you could see the hard coal burn.

Such stoves cost more and had to be soot-free. There was also very little ash to carry out. But the hard coal stoves were big and very heavy to set away.

Our main fuel item was sawed railroad ties. We could use the stub

“Good ol’ North Dakota coal was a superb source of heat, but a friend of mine who hauled it said there were certain professional liabilities.”

blocks whole, for the space heater. The blocks were chopped into four slices for the cook stove. That made wonderful burning material. I think we sawed several hundred ties each fall, and then stockpiled them.

Houses built with basements and then heated with furnaces were the best invention up to then. For one thing, it allowed coal to be shoveled down, along with the wood—and maybe even manure squares. The furnaces made warm floors, and there was more space in the living rooms without the stoves.

A dray line friend of mine once told me that in a good day he would load and haul many tons of coal to basements, at a \$1, and later a \$1.50, per ton.

Now that was hard work, especially in cold weather. My friend claimed he did not get rich doing it.

Fact is he said it is now 35 and even 40 years ago, and at least half the people have never paid him yet!

Since they, for the most part, are now dead, he may have to chase them all over heaven to collect his dues. He claims he may have a real problem since he does not expect to be in both places.

And he certainly does not want to chance having to haul coal again!□