

## **Potato Chips and Love from Our Wood Cookstove**

I used my French chef's knife as if it were hinged to the wooden cutting board at its point and cut away the thinnest slices I could manage, almost thin enough to see through. One potato, two potato, three potato, four.

I wiped the hot top of our wood-fired cook stove clean. I put thin slices of potato down on the stove, then picked up a spatula and turned potato slices. As soon as I'd turned all the slices, I started at the beginning again and removed the cooked, crisp, browned circles to a plate and informed my family, "Hot potato chips, right now."

Four of us gathered by the stove. We emptied the plate almost as rapidly as it filled a moment before. Juniper said, "Make more," and everyone seconded the motion, so the French chef's knife flashed again in winter sun shining over deep snow on the meadow and into the big south kitchen window. I'm sure this is how potato chips began, and one of our rewards for having a wood-fired cookstove was our salt-free, oil-free, delicious, hot potato chips whenever we wanted them.

We reaped many rewards from a wood-fired cook stove. We moved into the house in Whitney Valley that had no electricity, and my mother gave us the stove. She had switched from cooking with wood to cooking with electricity, and she welcomed the opportunity to clear the blue, white, and black stove from her kitchen.

One layer of the double layer of sheet metal between the firebox and the oven had long ago burned through, so the oven had a hot spot there, and Laura, official mother in our family, main teacher and main cook, became adept at knowing when to open the oven and turn whatever she had baking to keep one side from getting done too soon. It was worth the extra effort, because anything baked in our wood-fired oven achieved unmatched, beautiful golden-brownness that prepared us for delicious tastes.

All winter, whatever else the kitchen stove was doing, it kept the kitchen of the old, heat-leaking house warm in our mountain valley where 40 degrees below zero was not uncommon.

All winter, two canners of water sat on the stove, so we had hot water for washing dishes, taking baths, and cleaning up. We dipped hot water out, filled the dipping pan with cold water from the hand operated pitcher pump at the sink, and poured it into the canner.

The kitchen stove burned wood split smaller than the wood we used for our heaters. Splitting lodgepole rounds into kitchen wood, one cut of a tree into 2 pieces, then 4, 8, 16, then splitting the easiest to split pieces into kindling with my smaller axe was a graceful, orderly, rhythmic piece of work that fed our living well, and I enjoyed doing it.

I read the part of the book that talked about an energy-efficient approach to wood burning stoves. The author said put a small door into the wall and put the wood directly into the woodbox from outside, but I enjoyed tromping through the house, walking into and through whatever activity my family was engaged in, reading, school at the kitchen table, their own writing, art projects, acting out plays. I carried wood that would cook for all of us and warm family projects. Sometimes Amanda and Juniper carried in some of the wood, and we had a noisy, energetic family project.

Whitney Valley dropped to forty degrees below zero, winters we lived there. One January night dropped to 56 below zero. Those cold nights, I stayed up all night, kept the cookstove and both heaters burning hot, wrote, played my guitar, and periodically prowled the house and checked every stove pipe and the chimney, making sure smoke exited like it should and no hot spots developed in the wood structure of the house.

I gave up whatever I was writing or singing and my patrol of the house at 4 or 5 am and went to bed. Laura got up about five, fed all three stoves, and started her day. Juniper and Amanda woke later and went on with their daily projects. I got up about noon and, along with whatever else I did that day, I made sure we had enough wood split and ready to use for several days.

As long as we had plenty of dry lodgepole pine firewood, and we always did, I liked the deep cold of Whitney Valley Winters. Our family education progressed even through coldest winter. We grew together in knowledge, in warmth, in love.