

Hi, Fred Nelson for Community Comment

My recent commentary covered the existence of many lumber mills in the days gone by and the smoke emanated by the burning of wood waste. Mills were not the only contributors of excessive smoke back then. John Q. Citizen added his fair share and more. Today, you see the garbage trucks busily engaged within the city picking up recyclables, garbage and yard waste. All these collections are shipped out of the area to land fills elsewhere. For you younger folk, that was not always the case. In the 30s and 40s papers were usually burned in the back yard along with grass and yard clippings and, in some cases, residents would also attempt to burn their garbage. Most everyone had a 'burn pile' located in their back yard. Some folks used 55 gallon drums as burn barrels. Part of my chores as a kid was to gather and burn grass clippings and papers. As most of you know, matted papers and grass don't burn well unless the pile is constantly stirred allowing the oxygen to reach the coals. If you stirred too much, the fire got hotter and embers would start to fly. If you did not stir enough, you would have a pillar of smoke. In later years, we procured a burn barrel. The only advantage was better fire containment but it was a real chore to try and stir the contents within the barrel. Back then, the city had no designated 'burn days' so you burned when you thought the time and temperature was right. If you were a decent neighbor, you burned when the lady of the house next door was not hanging out her laundry. Can't think of a better way to sour neighborhood relations than to smoke up freshly hung clothes. There were many rainy days when burning was not possible so there were times when your pile of debris got pretty darned large so you had to be very careful to keep it under control when it did dry out enough. Back then, many homes used wood stoves for both heating and cooking. Chimney fires were common what with using wood that was not completely dry. Some tried to burn newspapers in the stove to add heat to the wet wood which only added to the numbers of chimney fires. As a teenager, I split many chords of stove wood. People would buy Redwood remnants that were still very wet and I could quickly go through a chord of Redwood as it split so easily. But people would not buy it early enough to cure and dry for burning. So, more smoke and chimney fires. Even dried Redwood burns poorly because of the softness of the wood. The family next door always had a good time when burning the trash pile in their back yard. The whole family participated, finding a nice bed of coals to bake potatoes in the evening.

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