

Winter Warmth

Nowadays as I awake to a warm bedroom and enter a warm bathroom, I sometimes think about the way our houses were heated in Dallas when I was a youngster.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand the differences between then and now might be to compare our house then with those we have today, both in Virginia and most places I'm familiar with. To begin with, no house that I knew about had a basement – an unreliable shale bedrock was too near the surface under the shifting black earth. When I was a child, most of the houses were built on piers sunk several feet into the ground and supporting the exterior and interior load-bearing walls. There was a crawl space of two or three feet between the ground and the floor of the house. The houses in our neighborhood had the crawl space protected by brick walls that reached the ground, but I've seen many a house in the country with open space, sometimes as much as four feet off the ground. That crawl space, whether protected or not by a wall, made for potentially drafty, cold floors in the winter. Insulation, both for the floors and for the walls, was inadequate by today's standards. Moreover, at least one window in each bedroom was opened at least six inches every night unless there was a raging rainstorm outside. I'm sure that there may have been some centrally heated houses in Dallas, but they were not part of my experience.

The most common source of heat was natural gas, of which there was an ample supply. No house that I was familiar with had central heating. Each room in our house had a gas pipe projecting from a wall near the floor. The pipe was capped with a cut-off lever with a tapered nozzle by which a flexible rubber hose could be attached to a space heater. The hoses were approximately three-eighths of an inch inner diameter and fitted tightly on the wall and heater nozzles. Some hoses were encased in a flexible woven cloth cover; some were bare rubber. The flow of gas could be controlled with a cut-off lever both at the wall nozzle and at the heater. When the heater was not in use, both nozzles were firmly closed to prevent gas leaks, easily detectable because of a distinctive, unpleasant odorant added to the city gas lines.

We had three kinds of heaters in our home. The one in the bathroom was a small, rectangular, white enameled metal box with legs. It was lighted by a match thrust into a small round opening near the gas burner openings on one narrow side (no pilot light). It heated quickly and must have been a burn hazard, for there was no protective barrier and the enameled outside became quite hot. It was seldom left burning unless someone was actually occupying the room. I don't remember anyone in our house ever being burned.

The second kind of heater was located in the bedrooms. These heaters were made of black metal, approximately three and a half feet high by two and a half feet wide by ten inches deep. The gas jets were in a row across the back, about six inches off the floor. The gas was lighted in the same way as the bathroom heater, by a match inserted in a round hole at the side of the heater and next to the nozzle which controlled the amount of gas fed to the flames. The flames rose against an asbestos backing which reflected heat into the room. The front of the opening was protected by a wire fence. Heat was

instantaneous. On the top of the heater, when temperatures hovered around freezing for several days, we generally had a container of water to replace the moisture in the heated room. Each heater was centered on a four-foot square asbestos-backed metal sheet. Our bedroom heaters were always turned off at night. When we were small, a parent would close our window and light the stove in the morning so that we could enter a warm room when we left our beds. When we were older, my sister and I would take turns lighting the heater. The turns were often hotly disputed. I remember that the shock of the cold floor on my feet was only momentary as I lighted the burner and popped back into bed. The bathroom heater was always lighted in the morning by the first unfortunate person who entered the bathroom. That room was cold enough to wake the soundest sleeper.



The third kind of heater was more ornamental than the utilitarian bedroom heaters but was just as efficient, or perhaps more so. It consisted of a clay back into which radiant, replaceable clay pieces were inserted. Lighting the heater was accomplished by turning on the gas at the side of the heater and holding a lighted match low in front of the clays. If the gas was turned up high enough, the clays would begin to glow, but that was an inefficient use of gas and we resorted to it only when trying to heat a room in a hurry. In the living room the radiant heater was placed in the false fireplace and was quite attractive. The clays were moderately fragile, as was the body. I remember clays being broken but never the body of the heater.

The kitchen was heated by the range surface burners or oven in very cold weather. Usually, the routine cooking of meals combined with the heat radiating from the gas water heater was enough to make the kitchen comfortable.

In spite of the preliminary shock before the heaters took over on exceptionally cold mornings, I mostly think of our house as a cozy, warm place. All heaters were turned off if we were away from home an hour or more, when we went to church, to a movie, or to visit friends. Even when the temperature was very low and the room was slow to warm, we found great comfort in backing up to the nearest heater and toasting ourselves. When we came in from outdoors, we could warm our hands quickly before the rosy flames.

Such warming was much more comforting than approaching the outlet vent of a heat pump, with its mysteriously cool air that heats many of our homes today.

There was inherent danger in those open heaters in every room, but I don't remember any member of our family having a burn from coming into too close contact. After my twin brother and sister became mobile during their first and second winters, we used a floorless playpen as a protective fence around one bedroom heater. Otherwise, they were closely watched and soon learned to stay a safe distance from the heaters.

The only time I remember having problems with a warm house occurred on New Year's Day the year I was eight or nine, and I was primarily responsible for the trouble. The temperature was below zero, a memorable phenomenon in Dallas. The extremely low temperature coupled with most people being home for the holiday placed an unusually high demand on the gas supply. Consumers were urged by radio to conserve gas as much as possible; therefore, all of us kids stayed mostly in one room. Even so, the heater was having a difficult time keeping the room as toasty as we would have liked. As was our habit on holidays, we three kids were romping on Brother's bed in the big bedroom that doubled as a playroom. We must have been getting dressed, for part of the "fun" seemed to involve the tossing of various garments about, usually at each other. Because of a weak ankle, I was the not-very-proud owner of a pair of heavy brown leather, high-topped orthopedic shoes. Among the clothes that I tossed, with the impeccable judgment of an eight-year-old, was one of my shoes. Brother dodged. My shoe went through the window where he *should* have been. It was a large, single-paned window which broke with dismaying noise into many pieces. The blast of sub-zero air quickly subdued our high spirits, and I was persona non grata for most of the rest of the day. Daddy scrambled out to the garage to find some sort of material to close that gaping hole. I remember it as a patchwork of corrugated cardboard, pieces of wood, and a quilt. Needless to say, on New Year's Day there was no hardware store open to supply the needed glass to reglaze the window. For some reason, shoes were banned as weapons from that day forward, even after I discarded the orthopedic shoes.

Fortunately, the memory of that unhappy day has merged into family legend and I remember primarily the warm, dry comfort of those space heaters.