*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Early winter calls for larger woodpile**

I think it’s time to call in a professional negotiator to settle a serious dispute between Mother Nature and Old Man Winter.

By my calendar, this should still be fall — light jackets, sweaters and crisp mornings. Apparently, Mother Nature needs a better calendar manager, or she has taken a serious bribe from Old Man Winter. Because early November skipped forward a month or two; we went straight to winter coats, gloves and subzero mornings.

Yes, I mean subzero. I am not exaggerating. The area where I live in Jackson County dipped to negative-8 degrees on Nov. 8 as recorded at the Black River Falls airport. In central Wisconsin, the town of Rome also measured negative-8, giving those two locations the notorious distinction of the coldest temperature that day in the entire lower-48 states.

The average low temperature in La Crosse for Nov. 8 is 32 degrees. The temperature dipped to 9 in La Crosse that day, coming close to the record low of 5. Even that would have been a warm welcome instead of negative-8. The previous morning on our farm I recorded negative-1, which gave us back-to-back days of colder than zero.

All of this early and extended appearance by winter is putting even more pressure to build the woodpile for what’s shaping up to be a very long and extended heating season. A few weeks ago, I featured a photo of my first woodpile stack of the season. It was a feeble attempt duly noted by Michael Clements, who lives near Middle Ridge between La Crosse and Cashton.

Clements brazenly flaunted the size of his woodpile by emailing me a photo of “what a real woodpile for the winter looks like.”

Sure enough, there was a large mound of wood that immediately made me jealous. Clearly, Clements was showing no regard for my problem with woodpile envy, a malady I wrote about this past year. I’ll be driving down the road watching the scenery and bam! I am instantly overcome with jealousy and covetousness, and almost a feeling of resentment.

I’m particularly attracted to very large woodpiles — no doubt because I’m ashamed at the size of my own. It seems no matter what I do, my cordwood simply doesn’t cut it.

I know wood piles as big as Clements’ don’t simply materialize overnight. Michael and his wife, Ann Marie, have lived on the farm for 41 years. It’s been in Ann Marie’s family for more than 140 years.

Clements heats an “old, cold farmhouse” and a 36-foot by 45-foot shop with an outdoor boiler. He marks dead or storm-damaged trees, cuts them and drags them to a pile. There they are cut and split with a tractor-driven wood processor and piled high with an elevator.

“So it’s not really fair to compare my woodpile to yours,” Clements graciously replied.

My less-than-professional wood processing is accomplished with my old pickup truck, whichever chainsaw will start and an 8-pound splitting maul. All of that is to feed an outdoor boiler that holds 1,000 gallons of water and has a firebox 4 feet long, 28 inches high and 32 inches wide.

The boiler heats two houses and the milkhouse in the old dairy barn. It’s a hungry beast that devours more than 40 full cords each winter. It’s a task my dad and I once shared but now falls upon my broad but aging shoulders.

I shouldn’t complain. Clements, 74, has 19 years on me and said he still cuts most of the wood himself.

“If I have bigger trees, I get some help from my sons,” he said.

He admitted the big saws are becoming harder to handle, but the benefit of all the work is a truly warm house.

“The only time we have really been warm in this house is since we put the outdoor stove in,” he said. “We set the thermostat at 68 degrees in the fall and leave it there all winter.”

One of the advantages of having a large firebox is I usually cut and split the pieces only the size that is necessary for me to lift them. Sometimes I overestimate my strength. That results in those pieces smoldering away in the front of the firebox because that’s as far as I can toss them.

Clements has a better idea to help lighten the load … in more ways than one.

“Never split wood bigger than your wife can handle,” he said.

Hmm…

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at**chardie1963@gmail.com**.*