*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic) Inter-County Leader*

**Water shortage can change your perspective**

Living by the lake, there’s no problem with water shortage. Being a city boy, I always wondered how the country folks survived without running water, gas, electricity and sewage facilities. Somehow, the pioneers managed and survived; some actually lived quite a comfortable lifestyle; fresh-caught fish or wild game for dinner, a cozy campfire by the tent with lasting wood for burning and plenty of moonshine … just how romantic would it be?

Honestly, I wouldn’t last a day in the woods. First, without any sense of direction, I’d assume that east is where the sun rises and west is where the sun sets. But what if I am left in the middle of the open fields or forest one afternoon, when the sun is right above me, I’m dead meat. Oh, the joy of living in Northwoods!

A few years ago, California was facing a water shortage, there hadn’t been any rain for weeks and months. Folks were warned not to waste any drinkable water for their lawns, or they would be fined big time. It is amazing how folks who had beautiful lawns would spray-paint their dying grass with green paint so they still looked greenish. Ah, what folks will do to impress others.

The water shortage theme came to mind when I was watching a movie one evening. It was in Chinese, which was good for me, as I could practice my language I grew up with. For a while, I lost it, as I did not have anyone to practice with. Colleen would only smile at me lovingly every time I spoke Chinese to her, not understanding a single word I said.

The movie is called “The 72 Renters.” I don’t think anyone here in the Northwoods would have experienced what the title means, not to mention relating to actually living in small quarters with many others.

Well, as the title implies, there were 72 renters that resided in this living quarters. Seventy-two, so count them, 72 renters crammed into a crowded area. Just how many people are living in your quarters right now? Six or maybe 10? Impossible, you’ll say.

Yes, it was a three-story complex that had separate apartments. Consider that if you have a door, four walls (actually cardboard partitions) a bed and access to kitchen/toilet, you were “making it.” Now, think of living with nine or 10 families living on each floor in a three-story building and then extend that with two or three other buildings that connect to each other, like a cul-de-sac. You get it?

All these families living closely right next to each other! If you snore or have a bad dream, everyone could hear you. Oh, let’s not talk about getting intimate here.

Anyways, all these families (renters) shared this complex, a temporary residence that they could call home until they had established themselves before they could move on. The residents of each floor (may it be nine or 10 families) would share a kitchen (which doubled up as the bathroom).

It is an amazing thought these days to have a tub “to do business with” next to the cooking stoves. I was always awakened at midnight when the cleaning ladies would come and unload “the business,” carrying all the “soil buckets” gingerly down three stories of stairs with dim lights. The thought of one lady slipping and rolling down the steps of a three-story building with the “soil buckets” did come to mind many times, yet I prayed very hard that it would not ever happen. Thank goodness, my prayers worked.

This movie, “The 72 Renters,” was about how these families hang together during tough times. They were from all walks of life, with different professions, and escaped from Communist China to find a new beginning in this tiny Hong Kong.

They were from all over different parts of China, speaking the different dialects from their mother provinces. Even though they shared the same appearance, they were total strangers. There would be a landlord (or landlady) who either owned the complex or would just manage the property.

If you enjoy watching “The Odd Couple,” you would love “The 72 Renters.” Think of all the stories that entangled 72 family members. Yes, 72 family members, different ages, from infants to 80s.

As the landlord/landlady was the one who had to handle the monthly bills, he/she was always depicted as mean and nasty as they had to collect monthly rent and utility fees from the renters. What if the individual renter had financial problems and couldn’t pay rent? A true dilemma indeed, and what could the landlord/lady do? Put up with the nonpayment or expel the helpless tenant? Oh, I guess the world is just full of dilemmas.

Anyway, back in 1960s, there was no rain in Hong Kong for a few years. And talk about panic! There were a few manmade reservoirs which could hold enough water for a few months, but not a few years! So, what’s the solution?

The negotiations with China hadn’t even begun, so Hong Kong was on her own. What to do, what to do? Some officials suggested rationing the water supplies, something that Hong Kong had never done before.

Supplying water enough for 20,000 people, then the population growing to 2 million people, this was a totally different story. So, the process of rationing began — water was supplied to areas on a certain day and at a certain time only. Otherwise, you’re out of luck.

We used to live on the third floor, and of course, the water would reach the first and second floor of our complex first. By the time the third floor got its share, trouble began.

While the first and second floors were still hogging the supply, there would be screams from the third-floor residents, “Hey, downstairs, turn off your water faucets.” Now, can you imagine 72 renters fighting for the one and only faucet they got the water supply from?

It was then that I learned how to clean myself with less than a gallon of water, and to brush my teeth and wash my face with less than a cup of water.

Now that water is plentiful, shall I change my cleaning habits? Nah. It still puzzles me how folks can take a half-hour shower, wasting gallons of water.

But it is comforting knowing that I will never have to hear the scream, “Hey, downstairs, turn off your water faucet.” Hopefully, never, ever again.