*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**A holiday disaster averted**

One might be tempted to quip something like “Oh, how the mighty have fallen,” but trust me, I have never been on that pedestal.

Recently I crowed in this column about my tendency to procrastinate but still manage to avoid disaster – for the most part. As you might guess, I come with a bowed head and bent knee after a near miss.

Just before the recent cold snap, I checked the propane level in our fuel tank. It was at 40% a few weeks ago and had fallen quickly to 20%. In a 500-gallon tank that can be filled to 80% capacity, that’s about 100 gallons left.

I thought I was on a keep-fill program (note the use of the word “thought” in that phrase) after having to pay for an emergency fuel delivery last year, but I knew cold weather was on the way, so I notified the fuel company just to be safe.

Then came the cold and more snow and then more cold, with double-digit below-zero temperatures overnight and bitterly cold wind chills. Winter had arrived with a vengeance and I was busy with work and other tasks.

I awoke Christmas Eve day with a nagging thought – how is that fuel tank doing? Not that it’s important or anything – we only have two furnaces, a water heater and a kitchen stove that run on it.

I bundled up and trudged through the drifts to find the tank had fallen to below 5%. We had family coming Christmas Day for dinner and to stay. And the forecast was for continued cold, which would have been warm compared to the icy reception I would have received from my wife

Sherry had she been unable to cook for the family because we ran out of fuel.

I rushed into the house, turned the thermostats down and was able to track down the emergency fuel driver who said he was out shopping at that moment but would be able to come that afternoon.

I started our wood burner to keep the house warm and removed snow for what seemed like the 10th time in the past few days. I even shoveled a path to the fuel tank to make it easier for the fuel truck driver, who profusely apologized, saying yes, we were on a keep-fill program but they were far behind on their deliveries.

We chatted for a few minutes as he pumped propane into our tank. He stopped at 399 gallons. For those doing math at home, the maximum capacity on a 500-gallon tank at 80% would be 400 gallons. We had exactly one gallon of fuel left.

“It was a good thing you called,” the driver said, stating the obvious. I gave him a tip, wished him Merry Christmas and went back to enjoy the gift not all enjoyed this holiday season – a warm house.

Christmas mittens recalled

My recent column recalling the mittens that my grandmother knitted every year as a Christmas gift drew a similar memory from one of my snowbird readers.

Jim and Brenda Uren from Chetek who winter in Okeechobee, FL offered this story:

“I was a 14-year-old youngster who had lost one of my leather ‘choppers’ at my elderly great-aunt’s house. She, of course, kidded me about needing an ‘idiot string’ on my gloves and I kidded back about how the gloves could have red thumbs to make them easier to spot.

Sure enough, on Christmas day, in front of all the family, I opened my package from her to find a pair of knitted white mittens with bright red thumbs and naturally a five-foot ‘idiot string’ attached.

It is now 60 years later, almost to the day, and I still have those very mittens in a drawer in our spare bedroom.  I can only hope that Aunt Bunny knew for the remainder of her days how much I have enjoyed the memory of those mittens.”

Thanks for the feedback Jim, who wrote back to say that even though it was cold by Florida standards, it was still better than being under the 20 inches of snow and ice that coated his RV in Chetek.

*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*](mailto:chardie1963@gmail.com)*.*

Cutlines:

Fire: Chris Hardie started his wood-burning stove after nearly running out of LP to keep the house warm over Christmas.

Frozen: Chris Hardie bundled up to work outside.

Path after: Yes, there was a path under the snow.

Path: Strong winds kept blowing snow over paths and walkways.

Tank: Only one gallon of propane was left in Chris Hardie's tank when more fuel was delivered.