

FESSENDEN



FIREWOOD

Since 1973

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SPRING 2016 NEWSLETTER • 43rd ANNIVERSARY

Fessenden Firewood is coming to an end. We will stay in business one more year, or possibly two. The plan now is to close Feb. 2017. If we continue past this date, it will be for a full year, because once the sale starts we have to keep going, until the end of the firewood season, which would be after the holidays of 2017-18. We were both born in 1948, and we began selling wood in 1973. It's been a long ride, and the writing of this letter is triggering some strong feelings.

But as of now, we will not disappear entirely. Our plan is to turn the business over to our employees. They will have problems, but then small businesses are mostly an exercise in problem solving. It appears to me that the Air Quality Board has cut back on the number of "spare the air" days, which will help them in the transition period. After 2017 (or 2018, if we go that far) the main difference is that our firewood company will have a different name. The wood will be the same, and I'm confident the quality of service will remain high as well.

All things must pass, and at age 70, it is time to pass on the firewood business. It may have never happened, though, without a push from the Air Quality Board. During the last (and worst) drought winter of 2014–15, there were "spare the air" days throughout the holiday season after about Dec. 22nd. Then, except for a few days, firewood burning was illegal the entire month of January. Chris and I were using money from our home equity line to prop up the business. The business didn't seem to have much of a future, so I put the yard up for sale. A buyer surfaced almost immediately.

But then last year was a pretty good year for FF, because we had a few months of real winter weather, and also because there was only one "spare the air" day. And of course I began to second-guess my decision — I like my customers, I like my crew, I enjoy the firewood routine, and I believe in wood heat. I don't even mind the hard work. But papers were signed, agreements made, and it would be hard to back out now. The buyer is a developer who will build condos on our wood yard site. Negotiations between the developer and the city are dragging, but it will probably happen, next year or the year following. My drivers Eleuterio and Gerardo might be running the business after that. They are resourceful, and much younger, and I think they will do OK.

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For many of our customers, firewood is more than just a cost effective way to heat a home. It can be that, of course. Many of our customers are older, and I think of them, as I write this letter. Some of them are living on a fixed income, and a \$400 outlay for a cord of wood puts a pretty big hole in the monthly budget. But they spend the money, because a fire in the fireplace or stove is a necessity that cannot be skipped. They are passionate about their fires. The activity of burning firewood carries with it a host of intangibles that the bureaucrats at the Air Quality Board may never have considered.

Wood heat relaxes the body and mind in a way that forced air heat never will. Wood heat soothes the bones. If there is such a thing as a restorative heat, it would be from an oak fire — a heat that is luxurious and supportive.

Sometimes I think of FF as interior decorators, as a fire in the fireplace can change the feel of a room more than a coat of paint or a piece of furniture. Fires have the capacity to center a room, as well as the people that are in it. It is easy to be still with a fire, and renewal can be found within the stillness. Fires have the feeling of abundance. Fires are cheery and hopeful, and can foster the best kinds of connection.

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When Chris and I first began to sell firewood, we didn't have a comprehensive vision of what we were trying to do. We didn't see ourselves as part of the "back to the land" movement, which was part of the 70s. Selling wood was just a way to pay the rent and buy food. I had a Plymouth Valiant then, and I filled the trunk and back seat with cedar firewood. I went door to door, selling 1/8th cords for \$12.50, and ¼ cords for \$20, free stacking. I borrowed money for gas from my housemates in the morning; paid them back after I made my deliveries.

But our timing was good. In the mid-70s, there was an energy crisis. Natural gas prices tripled in that period, and suddenly there was interest in wood heat. Our business grew quickly — perhaps too quickly, as we got deeply in debt, and had to sell wood at a breakneck pace. Each day was a crisis; it was like being in a raging river, struggling to stay upright, lucky to catch another breath.

Gradually, over a couple of decades, our business stabilized. It was never a goldmine, but Chris and I were able to buy a house, and develop outside interests. Chris was a dancer, and currently teaches dance. I have my climbing and skiing, and am also a writer. I recently published "Crimson Coat", a book of poetry, available on Amazon.

We are the very definition of a small business. A couple of old trucks, a pile of wood, and a strong back — our workplace environment is closer to the 12th century than the 21st. Chris and I have four employees now: Eleuterio and Gerardo are our drivers, Moises and Felipe are the loaders. Gerardo's English is good and Eleuterio's is serviceable; Felipe and Moises speak no English at all.

But the work is straight-forward — we load the trucks, then make the deliveries. Not much communication is necessary. If the wood is to be resplit into smaller pieces, then we swing away with the axes. If the wood is to be stacked, then we bring a wheelbarrow, and usually either Felipe or Moises to help. We make a serious effort to show up on time, and we sell full cords. If we have a business plan at all, it is no more than that.

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The use of firewood harkens back to an earlier time — pre-WWII perhaps — when California's economy was more grounded in agriculture. Back then more people lived in rural areas, and firewood was commonly used for heat, and also light. Californians live much differently now than they did 75 years ago, and today there are far fewer people burning wood. It is not the actions of the Air Quality Board that have curtailed the use of firewood. Not entirely, anyway. Winters are warmer now, and firewood can be messy. Young people are so busy now; stacking wood and kindling a fire no longer a priority. The use of firewood may belong to another era, and that era has slipped away.

It is certainly true that far fewer households use firewood now, when compared to a generation ago. I often think that a single commercial jetliner, taking off from SFO, deposits more particulate matter into the skies above San Francisco and Oakland, than an entire week of Bay Area wood burning does. I have no way of knowing if this is true or not. And I am not saying that wood smoke concerns are not legitimate. But, as a person selling firewood in the Bay Area for the last 40 years, I know what is happening in the firewood universe. And it is this — restaurants are more likely to burn wood now, for cooking. But far fewer households use wood. If the burning of fires in fireplaces were to be banned outright, the changes in Bay Area air quality would be negligible in most places. Claims that the Air Quality Board have made regarding wood smoke pollution may have been true 30 years ago. But not now.

The Air Quality Board is well intentioned in their response to wood smoke pollution, but I feel they went too far. A more common sense approach might have been to encourage the use of clean burning, and efficient burning, wood stoves and fireplace inserts. In addition to all the intangibles that a fire brings, burning hardwoods in a stove or insert can be a cost effective way to heat a house. Clean burning stoves and inserts have been available for a couple of decades now. Orchards growing in the Central Valley could provide virtually unlimited quantities of almond and walnut firewood, at a relatively cheap price. This could have been the message of the Air Quality Board, backed up with something like a tax credit for the purchase and installation of a stove or insert.

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For FF, four decades have flown by, like an instant in the wind. In spite of all the struggles and obstacles, we have survived into old age. It is so odd — I feel like all Chris and I did was to answer the phone and fill orders. It is you our customers that gave us a place in the community. From all of us — Chris, Bruce, Eleuterio, Gerardo, Felipe and Moises — to all of you — James, Richard, Phil, Mohammed, Lila, Delina, Dave, and hundreds more — *we are all deeply grateful to you. Thank you, Thank you!*

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Our spring newsletter usually announces the upcoming summer sale. However this year's letter is a little different — a more important announcement perhaps. Yet the summer sale is just around the corner, and summertime is still the best time to buy firewood. Our prices are at their low point in June and July. Also, once again we will waive the delivery charge for orders placed before July 4th. Savings are significant for customers who buy early, especially those who take advantage of our multiple cord discounts.

There are other reasons to buy firewood early. Get your delivery before it rains! It's really hard for us to keep the wood dry after the big storms hit, no matter what precautions we take. And the wholesalers we get our wood from raise their prices when the rainy season comes.

Customers that request our stacking or resplitting services should realize that there are only 5 of us now at FF, and I'm 68! There is only so much we can do, and during the busy holiday period we may not have time for stacking. Customers that need stacking or resplitting should place their orders early!

The definition of "well seasoned" wood can be a little ambiguous. The wholesalers tend to think that if their big rigs can carry 12 cords of oak or almond, and still be under the legal weight limit, then the wood is dry. And while this is true in a general sense, the smart firewood user will purchase wood in the summer, to give it a few extra months drying time. Then, when the cold weather comes, their firewood will light easily and burn hot.

Much more information regarding the summer sale can be found by visiting our website at fessendenfirewood.com, and reading the 2014 and 2015 newsletters.

■ ■ ■ **RANDOM NOTES** ■ ■ ■

We are asked a thousand times a year: which is better, almond or oak? And I reply that everyone has their own opinions: some people like oak the best and some are crazy about almond. Both are classic hardwoods, great for heating up a house. Almond trees are small and branchy, so the pieces tend to be smaller than oak pieces. Almond burns hotter and with less ash than oak, but the chunky oak pieces produce coals that can radiate heat all night.

For customers who are unsure about what they want, I recommend the oak-almond mix, because there is a nice mix of sizes — smaller pieces of almond mixed with chunky, long burning oak. Those who prefer oak often will have part of the cord resplit; also resulting in a nice mix of sizes, with smaller pieces that can work as kindling.

Almond is really dense — walnut is a better choice as a starter wood. Some of our customers are under the impression that in the oak-almond mix, almond is the starter wood. This isn't really the case, because almond is just as hard as oak.

We began resplitting almond and oak for the restaurants, because pizza ovens work best with small pieces of wood. For the last twenty years we have been offering our resplitting service to customers who prefer really small split pieces. Customers who request our resplitting service typically have a portion of their cord resplit — a ¼ cord, or a ½ cord, for instance. The price is \$15 per quarter cord.

Customers who are heavy users of firewood should understand cord measurement, for their own protection. Once the basic subject is grasped, cord measurement is not so arcane. Visit our website for a detailed explanation on this exciting topic!

Visit our website: fessendenfirewood.com

2-TIERED 2016

WE WILL WAIVE THE DELIVERY CHARGE FOR ALL ORDERS PLACED BEFORE July 4th, except for West Marin and the Peninsula.

Delivery charge for orders in Antioch, Clayton, and San Ramon: \$10.00.

Delivery charge for orders in San Francisco: \$15.00.

	PRICES THROUGH JULY 15				PRICES JULY 15 - AUGUST 15			
	1/2 cord	1 cord	1.5 cord	2 cords	1/2 cord	1 cord	1.5 cord	2 cords
16" Oak or Almond or Oak/Almond mix	\$ 230.00	\$ 385.00	\$ 565.00	\$ 745.00	\$ 235.00	\$ 395.00	\$ 580.00	\$ 770.00
16" Oak/Walnut or Almond/Walnut	\$ 220.00	\$ 3670.00	\$ 542.50	\$ 720.00	\$ 222.50	\$ 375.00	\$ 550.00	\$ 730.00

Kindling is \$6 per bag, through Sept. 15th

■ ■ ■ **SPECIAL SERVICES** ■ ■ ■

STACKING: Our normal procedure is to pull up a truck as close as safely possible and DUMP the wood. This is our procedure *UNLESS STACKING ARRANGEMENTS ARE MADE WHEN THE ORDER IS PLACED*. The stacking fee is based on how close we can safely drive a truck to the stacking area and whether or not stairs are involved. If you need to have your wood stacked, please remember to give us an accurate description of what is involved at the time you place your order so we can send the necessary personnel and equipment.

RESPLITTING: Although our normal 4" to 8" split is perfect for most customers, some people require very small pieces. Our "Postrio split" (named for the famous S.F. restaurant that first requested it) produces a 2" to 4" diameter piece of wood at an additional \$60 per cord. Resplit wood has become very popular because it makes igniting the fire so much easier. Some customers choose to have only a portion of their order resplit and the fee is prorated accordingly.

Please be aware that in the busy winter months, these services are not always available. For those who require stacking or resplitting, it's best to purchase early.

Those looking for the best firewood value will find it during our summer sale. The sale is over August 15th while supplies last!

Please place your order by phone — we are not equipped to take orders by email.

We're easy to reach: Call the yard at (510) 236-4789 during daytime hours or, if there is no answer, call the office at (510) 525-4080 day or night, 7 days a week. Hope to hear from you soon! Your Firewood Dealers, Chris and Bruce Fessenden

Chris & Bruce Fessenden

