

FESSENDEN



FIREWOOD

Since 1973

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SPRING 2017 NEWSLETTER • 44th ANNIVERSARY

As I wrote last year, FF may soon be ending. However, I thought I had a plan in place for the business to continue, even if Chris and I retire. I have two drivers (who drive our firewood delivery trucks), and Gerardo, the younger one, was poised to run the business. I was comforted by that. I figured that with me in the background, assisting when necessary for a few years, Gerardo could manage the business. Small businesses are an endangered species in today's world, but with the customer list, the trucks, our firewood sources, and the good will FF has accrued over decades of service, I thought he had a good shot at success.

Our firewood yard is for sale, and we have a buyer, a developer who wants to build townhouses. The plan was that Gerardo would have the business, and we would sell the property the yard is located on. Thus he would have to find his own woodyard. He looked in Richmond, where our yard is situated, and was staggered by how much it would cost to lease a yard. Most landowners want insurance, plus he'd need a resale license and a business license. Many landowners won't lease to a Mexican-American. So he backed out, and now I'm confused about what I want to do. After 43 years it's hard for me to just have FF disappear.

But papers haven't been signed yet. Chris and I have talked in general terms with the developer. We are in agreement on a price, and also a timetable for FF to vacate the yard. But we haven't signed any papers yet, and the buyer has not made us a formal offer. But I'm quite sure that the buyer is ready and eager to move forward with the transaction. I'm the one who's not ready.



I wanted the firewood business to continue for the sake of my employees, my suppliers, and especially my customers, many of whom have been buying their wood from us for 20, or even 30 years. It's hugely ironic to me that an oak fire can foster continuity in a household, and yet with the business there will be no continuity. It will just disappear. I'll probably sell the business, but then it won't be us, it will be someone else, with their own way of doing things.



I have an employee named Moi, from Oaxaca, who has been with us for at least 20 years. Moi (short for Moises) is a great worker. He doesn't work fast, but he never gets tired. He is a gentle soul who executes each and every task I give him with equanimity, no matter how crazy or riled I get. He never loses himself.

And I worry about what will happen with Moi, when FF is no more. He speaks not a word of English. He's Indian; for him Spanish is a second language. It's hard to tell how old he is, probably mid-fifties, but he could be over 60. I've heard he's been sending money back to Oaxaca, building a nest egg. But he's been in California most of his adult life, and it will be a major adjustment for him returning to Mexico. Even though he's about the most soulful person I know, he's also very vulnerable. The loss of the business will be wrenching for me, and Chris. But possibly even more so for Moi, or Gerardo, who has young children.



I put the yard up for sale three years ago, when almost every winter's day was a "spare the air" day. Chris and I were using the equity in our house to prop the business up. Even 3 years ago we were in our mid 60's, and I couldn't think of any way to pay off the equity-line except by selling off an asset. The wood yard was the only asset we had except for our house. So that is what we did, we put the yard up for sale.

However the bank has given Chris and I a monthly payment schedule that is easy for us to make. So we could stay in business for a few more years, if we choose to do so.

But our trucks are old. I drive a pick-up, which would be relatively easy to replace, but the dump trucks that Eleuterio and Gerardo drive are another matter. If those trucks last another two years it will be a miracle. And replacing them will be a major expenditure, which I really don't want to make now.

A bigger problem has been labor. Moi, Eleuterio, Gerardo and myself make a good core, but when the orders pile up we need more help. And I just can't seem to find anyone. Young people, even Hispanics, just don't want to do manual labor anymore. When I go to the yard in the morning, I don't know which of my employees will show up. If it's cold and rainy, which is when demand for firewood is high, the answer probably is ...NOBODY! Excuse me if I'm sounding old and whiny, but as I approach my 70s I should be doing less of the actual physical work. Instead, I'm doing more. This seems like a problem that should have a solution, but so far I haven't found it.



There are several good reasons for the firewood user to purchase their wood in the summer:

- It's cheaper! This years prices are practically identical to last years prices — same cord price, also the same multiple cord discounts for customers who heat with wood. And, with a few exemptions, we are waiving the delivery charge until July 4th.
- Wood quality is better early in the season. By the time the holidays arrive, most of the good wood has already been sold.
- Customers who are concerned about rain wet wood should be pro-active and purchase their wood before the rainy season. We tarp our wood in the woodyard, but when it rains like it did last season, it gets very difficult to keep the wood dry.
- Customers who request our stacking or resplitting service should order early. In the hectic holiday period, often we are unable to provide these services.



It upsets me that the Air Quality Board criminalized the burning of firewood. In the 50s, 60s and 70s the use of firewood was widespread, but today such a small percentage of households burn wood that I find it difficult to believe that wood smoke is a significant source of air pollution. In certain situations their claims may have some validity — like the valleys of Orinda, for instance, where wood smoke may accumulate on cool mid-winter nights. But there was never much community discussion or fact checking — the Air Quality Board just imposed their will on the public.

Wood heat gained traction in Europe, but never here in California. I find this surprising, as there are less trees and a much denser population in Europe. And Europeans are just as concerned with safeguarding the environment as we are here in California. But, somehow, wood heat has a place there, whereas here it is discouraged. The stoves and inserts sold today are clean burning, yet were never promoted by the Air Quality Board. And having enforcers prowling neighborhoods and citing those who are burning wood seems harsh, and excessive. A more balanced and humane approach surely could have been found — grounded more in reason than fear.



As I write these words, I honestly don't know what will happen with FF. I would like to go two or three years more, but that might not be possible. I hope this isn't my last newsletter, but if it is, Chris and I would like to express our gratitude to our customers, who have supported us, even though we can be testy at times, and even though our wood may not have been fully seasoned, or the pieces just a little on the chunky side. It is our customers who gave us a place in the community, and we will never forget that. We honor the faith you placed in our little business; the faith you have in us. *Thank you again.*

■ ■ ■ **RANDOM NOTES** ■ ■ ■

We are asked a thousand times a year: which is better, almond or oak? And I reply that everyone has their own opinion: some people like oak the best and some are crazy about almond. Both are classic hardwoods, great for heating up a home. 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 oak 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 split — 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 subject!

Much more information regarding the summer sales can be found by visiting our website, and reading the 2014, 2015 and 2016 newsletter.

Visit our website: fessendenfirewood.com

2-TIERED 2017

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	\$ 367.00	\$ 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

