FIREWOOD

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

Tell me about how you get your firewood.[1]

Whenever I'm getting wood, I choose trees that are dead, or very nearly so. I'd rather not cut a thriving green tree, regardless of what type it is.

I think Nature has sort of been wise in that prime trees that are good for building, and other things like that, usually aren't as available and prevalent as other trees that are less suitable for building.

When we were threatened by a forest fire, they sent out a building protection crew. They came and asked me what I thought they should do as far as protecting my place. I told them "That's your business. You're more qualified to say. Do what you think is best."

They proceeded to cut all the trees that were real close to my buildings. Then they put a pump in the edge of the lake, strung a whole bunch of hose, and put tripods up with sprinklers on them around the buildings. They had another hose with a nozzle that they could use to squirt water around onto anything.

They were very businesslike about it, but I was somewhat uncomfortable. I didn't like to have all those trees cut, exposing my place much more to wind and so on, but that's the way life goes. I knew that what they were doing what was necessary because if they put it off until the fire actually got there, it would be too late. There wouldn't be time.

As a result, I had quite a few piles of wood lying around. They did roughly limb it, but they were in a hurry. I stood those piles of wood on end and sorted them out. I more or less divided them into definitely firewood, definitely building material, and then some that was marginal. I figured that I'd probably make that into firewood, because I didn't have any major building planned right away.

By the next year, those stacks of wood were well dried. The marginal wood was very good firewood. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have that kind of an opportunity.

Duane and Rena made it a point to cut their firewood in the summertime and stack it up. Dennis did the same sort of thing. But it seemed like I always had plenty to do in the summertime, and I preferred to cut my wood as I needed it, in the wintertime.

I worked my way into that big burn back there, little by little. The trees had been standing long enough since the fire that the small roots were starting to rot off. Quite

often I could tip the trees right out of the ground and bust the bigger roots off with my axe, giving me an "Alley Oop" club.

The cartoon character Alley Oop was created in 1932 by American cartoonist V. T. Hamlin. Image source: http://firegeezer.com/files/2013/01/alley-oop-a.jpg

That was my first cut of those trees. Those roots were very good. They would fit into the stove, and would hold a fire well. Farther up the tree the pieces got smaller, and the wood would burn up quicker.

I enjoyed going out to get wood in the wintertime. I'd take a dog and a sled, get a load or two of wood, and have enough firewood for several days. For me, that worked out better than trying to cut firewood and have it stacked in a pile, but that's up to people that are doing it, and how they organize their lives around what they have to do.

What are the special properties of your various fuel woods?

The main wood I had available was spruce. It makes a hot, quick fire that burns down to ashes.

One of my goals that I haven't accomplished has been to try to live in a lavvu[2]. I did make one, but I've never been really free to try living in it for any length of time.

Sámi lavvu tent, late 1800s. Image source: http://www.environmentalgraffiti.com/featured/before-fall-reindeer-people/18225

Those temporary shelters have been used by so many people through so much of history that it's one of the experiences that I wanted to have, and I still do, but right now I'm not counting on much of anything.[3]

Spruce tends to throw a lot of sparks, so I saved my birch and poplar, thinking that if I ever did live in a lavvu for any extended time, I would like to have enough dry poplar to burn. It works better for an open fire, like in the middle of a tipi or a lavvu, because it doesn't throw sparks as bad, and the smoke is not as toxic as the spruce. Willow doesn't have a very toxic smoke either.

I don't have too much birch. Whenever a birch tree goes down or I have occasion to cut one, I save it. Birch has to be split, or else it will decay in that waterproof envelope made by the bark.

When the firefighters cleared the place, I told them to leave the birch standing because there were only a few of them around. If it had come to where we did have to cut them, it wouldn't have taken long to take care of that.

I have some split birch drying and seasoning inside a Quonset-like hut. I save that for when I want to do some blacksmithing. That's what I burn when I'm using the stove as a forge.

Hardwoods burn down to coals. Softwoods burn down to ashes, and more quickly, but are much easier to find than the harder woods. Poplar is a hardwood, but not in the sense that birch is.

Most of the tamarack around my place is so twisted that it's not much use for anything except where you use the whole tree, for posts or something like that. When you fall one, sap will run out of a ring shaped area and make a mess. But it's an oily wood, and burns real well. It ignites quickly and makes a quick, hot fire.

A bunch of bugs went through our area a few years ago and killed almost all the tamarack trees. Now the needles are off of them and they're dry, and I sometimes cut some. I keep it mainly for kindling and for getting a fire going.

By the way, tamarack is the slipperiest wood we have. If I come to a piece of a tree that doesn't have too much twisted grain in it, I invariably save it and quite often end up making runners for sleds out of it. It's hard, and it slides easier than any other wood we have, especially when the weather is really cold and the ice crystals are like sand.

Alder is very good firewood. It's next to birch, I guess. It makes pretty good coals, but they don't last as long as birch does. When you try to use them, they burn up quite a bit faster.

Alder soon starts to rot when it dies, and usually there's a lot of that in a clump. I usually used that kind of conky[4] wood for smoking fish or meat—that and willow.

Some species of alder are trees that grow up like a birch. Where I grew up there were lots of them. The lumber company had land that was covered like that. When they cut it, the land would come back to fir and other woods that they preferred, so we got firewood permits.

When I was a youngster, my dad bought me a boy's axe. I guess it had a 2-1/4 pound head and a 27" handle. I used it to fall those trees, and used a buck saw to cut them into 4' lengths. There for quite a while I'd stop and cut a couple of trees on the way home from school. I was about eight years old.

At the time, my dad and my uncle used to work together. They didn't have as much time as I did. They'd borrow a truck from a neighbor, load that wood up, and haul it home—both the wood that I cut, and some that they cut.

That alder is nice stuff to cut with an axe. It's soft when it's green, and the chips split out well.

Our red alder here in northern California is my favorite wood for starting a fire. It's a large tree, and the wood splits easily.

It's fun to split that kind of alder into kindling.

Our alder is quite a hard wood. If I'm looking for an *ichuun* handle or something that I want a particular shape or crotch for, I'll go out where there is an alder bush and usually find what I want.

An *ichuun* is modern Eskimo skin-scraping tool made of a tube of metal fitted onto a shaped wooden handle. Image: Molly Rettig, Cold Climate Housing Research Center, University of Alaska Fairbanks

I've also used alder to make salad forks, wooden spoons, and things like that. Quite often you can cut a piece of wood that's big enough for making the bowl of the spoon, with a branch sticking out at a good angle for the handle. When I have the piece carved out and smoothed up, I put some salad or cooking oil on it, let it soak in, and wipe it off.

One time I made a sourdough pot out of alder. It worked all right. It had a little taste to it, but nothing like what it would have had if it had been spruce.

I've read that if you crush green alder leaves or chew them a little and then rub it around on your skin, it will protect you from mosquitoes. I tried it several times, and maybe it helps a little bit, but it takes more than that.

You can also scrape the outside bark off of the younger alder trees, shave the inner bark off, and use it as a red dye for hides. You soak it or boil it, and then spray the shavings thickly on the hide. For some reason, you don't really need a mordant with it.

Up north, alder doesn't grow like a birch tree. It's spread out, more like a bush, and it takes a lot of it to make a load. It's a lot of monkey business to get firewood that way.

Around Kotzebue, alder grows thick on the slopes facing Kobuk Lake. That was what Pete and Lena Satterlee used almost entirely for firewood. I helped them a time or two. You have to cut those pieces so that they don't have a bunch of crotches, and will stack easily on a sled. At home he'd cut them up with a buck saw.

Toward the end of his life, Pete had a serious heart problem. He'd been cutting wood for years, just with a hand saw. I think that was good exercise for him.

One of his friends thought that he should have a chain saw so it would be easier for him, but a chainsaw is sometimes a damned fussy thing. I've seen Pete pull on that chain saw until he was really puffing and red in the face and angry and ready to throw it away.

So I went to that fellow and told him, "Don't get Pete any more chain saws. When it stops running, don't fix it."

Pete didn't live too much longer. They found him sitting in a blind, waiting for geese to come over. His back was against a tree, and he had his shotgun across his knees. At least he died doing something he liked to do.

We called him Pete Satterlee, but that was not the way his name was supposed to be said. Lena, his wife, explained that she had been in Norway, and had visited Pete's relatives over there. They all pronounced it "Saterleed", rather than Satterlee. I think Pete had trouble in this country and just said, "Call me Satterlee".

He lived at Pipe Spit. Neither of them hung around town very much, although Lena had a log house in town. She'd inherited it from her grandfather, I think. John Nelson was Lena's brother, I think. Maybe she inherited it from her father. That was before my time around there.

How do you kindle a fire? Do you use fuzz sticks?

I have poles on the roof of my house, supported by purlins. In the crack between the poles and the purlins, there's several fuzz sticks already made up. But when I'm away in the spring time, the house gets kind of damp, even though the vent is open all the time. The reason they're still up there, unused, is because when I need them most, I come back to the house, and they're not nearly as flammable as they were when I made them.

But anyway, I enjoy making a fuzz stick. It's fun.

How do you make one?

I use a drawing motion. I know I shouldn't be encouraging anybody to whittle towards themselves, but you have more control and power to pull that knife than you have to push it away from you.

When I make the shavings, I hold the end of the stick against my bent knee. It's solid, so I can hold the knife with the blade facing me and start making shavings. But that's not for everybody. People who don't grow up doing dumb things like that don't have the muscle control to stop when you want to, and that can be dangerous.

One time I was traveling with Shield Downey. We stopped to make tea, and I started to make shave sticks that way. I noticed that he was looking at me kind of odd. Afterward, he said "I can't do that."

He told me that once, when he was young, he was making a fuzz stick with his mother's butcher knife, with a long blade on it. He said he had never practiced pulling his knife toward him, and stabbed himself in the belly. He didn't say much about what happened, except that it was a very serious wound and they were afraid he was going to die. It impressed him so much that he never did it again.

Anyway, you set your knife against the wood and cut a shaving maybe 1/16" thick. When you come to the depth you want, you tip the blade a bit, and then go back and cut another one in the same place. The shavings don't have to be very long to be effective.

You learn after a while that you have to have the right wood. Some woods are brittle that when you tip the blade, the chip breaks off. You need wood that is flexible, so that the shavings will bend a little. A straight-grained piece of spruce is good. If I have that kind of a stick of kindling in my hand, it's easy enough to make those shavings.

What you end up with is a stick of wood that's divided into a bunch of fine pieces, from your hand out toward the end, ending probably within 3" or so of the end. Each shaving is curled up a little bit. It's like a bunch of little kindling sticks all fastened together.

When you get done with it, it might look like you've got a whole handful of kindling in your hand. I think that would be a good project for somebody with a camera.

A few of Oliver's fuzz sticks. Image: Curt Madison

Do you turn the stick over and make more shavings on the other side?

You could do that, but usually I don't. A stick of kindling isn't that big, and when I'm starting a fire with one of those, it's easier to lay the fire if all of the shavings are on one side.

How do you lay a fire?

I make a coil of birch bark, and lay it just inside the draft. I stack some kindling on it, and above that, some easily burning wood like tamarack or spruce. I pull the stovepipe damper out, light the birch bark, put the cover back on the door, and pull the draft can out.

Pretty quick the stove's a-jumping up and down or starting to roar. If you have a hole alongside your damper, you'll soon see the flames going up beside it. Then it's time to start shutting things down a little bit.

By the way, my house is not very cold in the morning. It stays warm all night, and I don't worry about trying to keep a fire at night.

One April, Sasha and I stayed overnight with Shield Downey and his family in their log cabin. We had a plastic tumbler of water on the floor near our sleeping place. In the morning it was frozen. We could tip it right over and nothing would pour out. It wasn't unusually cold outside, although there was a pretty good north wind.

By contrast, we once banked snow against the door and Visqueen[5] shutters of our sod house and went to Ambler for the Christmas festivities. We had to delay our return because of -40 weather, so were gone for a couple of weeks.

When we got home, dug out the door, and went inside, I knelt down by the stove to lay a fire. I noticed a can of fruit cocktail sitting on the sand floor under the kitchen counter. I shook it, and could hear the liquid sloshing around in there.

Granted, it takes a colder temperature to freeze a heavy sugar solution than plain water, but even so, that was a testament to the difference between a log cabin and a sod house.

Do you gather enough birch bark to last all winter?

No. A forest fire went through the area long ago, leaving a lot of birch staubs[6] that are just being held up by the bark, with the insides all rotten. I can go out any time and break off one of those staubs, cut it down the edge, leave the dead pulp, and bring back the bark.

I usually have several pieces of bark. They curl up, one inside the other. When I run low, I go get more.

I used to go and peel some of the loose curls of paper from live trees. Here, I sometimes find cracks in some of my Douglas fir that are filled with pitch. I cut those parts of the tree into kindling-sized pieces, and save them for starting my fires.

When a tree bends enough, due to windstorms or heavy snow loads, something's got to give. It will stretch on one side and cause it to crack a little. There will sometimes be little strips of pitch up and down inside the trunk where it has been split apart. That's called "wind shake" in a tree.

When I find that kind of wood, I also cut it up into small sticks and use it to get the kindling burning. After birch bark, it's the second best thing to start a fire.

I once found a Douglas fir that had streaks of wood that smelled like turpentine. I cut it into very short pieces, maybe two inches long, and use it to get my kindling going. You can touch a match to it, and it will burn like a candle.

I've used a lot of that tree wood. When I was 10 or 12 years old and was helping my father dig out stumps, we'd sometimes find areas that were just black with pitch. We always saved them and used them for starting fire in a cook stove. You'd light them with a match, and pretty soon they would be dripping.

The loggers used to call that "trading wood". It's a vulgar term. If a logger wanted the favors of the cook, he would collect that kind of wood and bring it to her to start her fires with.

I learned that in the southeastern United States, they called it "lighard". They'd use it for fenceposts.

It has a lot of that impregnation, and won't rot easily.

Prime kindling—wind shake (left) and lighard (right)
Photo: Ole Wik

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1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) A *lavvu* is a temporary dwelling used by the Sami people of northern Scandinavia. It has a design similar to a Native American tipi but is less vertical and more stable in high winds. It enables the indigenous cultures of the treeless plains of northern Scandinavia and the high arctic of Eurasia to follow their reindeer herds. It is still used as a temporary shelter by the Sami, and increasingly by other people for camping. (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lavvu)

3) Oliver was pretty much bedridden at the time of these interviews.

4) Conk: The shelf-like fruiting body of certain wood-decaying fungi; bracket. (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/conky)

5) "Visqueen" is a brand of polyethylene plastic sheeting, and has become a generic description for any plastic sheeting. It is commonly between 4 and 10 mils thick and is available in clear, opaque, and black. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visqueen)

6) Staub: A small protrusion of a tree root or stump. (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=staub)