Our Home Comfort Range

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by

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I have often wondered how far around Appalachia the renown of the Home Comfort Range extended during the quarter century between 1905 and 1930. These kitchen stoves were manufactured by Wrought Iron Range Co., St. Louis, Missouri. I would guess that the famous, reliable stove cooked food for a great number of the rural youth who grew up

in that generation in most sections of the Appalachian Mountains.

Many of those favored stoves can still be found in farm house kitchens, shining with their original beauty and all ready to be fired up; even though a modern electric range sits beside them. No farm housewife would sell her Home Comfort Range for love nor money.

On my way home from our one-room school one September evening in 1909, (my second year in school) as I was getting the mail from our box along the country road, a pleasant, middle-aged man driving a slick team of brown mules hitched to a bolster wagon stopped and asked me, "Who lives up that lane?"

"We do," I answered timidly, remembering that my father and mother had warned me against getting friendly with strangers along the roads. There were many tramps on the roads in those days.

"Hop in, I'll give you a ride up," the friendly man said, and he reached down to help me up on the spring wagon seat beside him.

He clucked to the mules and slapped them on the backs with the check lines and turned the team into our lane. After the drive of half a mile, all up hill, we arrived in our farm yard.

"Could I interest you in a new kitchen range?" he asked Mother, who was taking the wash off the clothes line. He began untying ropes, and then lifted a canvas cover off the most beautiful stove I had ever seen.

Though I was only seven years old, I still remember how mother's eyes lighted up with anticipation of having such a thing of beauty in our dingy basement kitchen. Our old stove was flat, and the lids were warped and cracked.

"Pure wrought iron. You can use this stove for fifty years and never have a cracked nor warped lid," the salesman told mother. Father was not at home, and mother would not decide to buy a range that was priced at $79.00 cash, or $2.75 a month for thirty months, even though her admiration of it was almost shouting, "I'd love to have it."

The salesman, whose name we later learned was Henry Ward, asked if he could arrange to make our home his headquarters for a week while he canvassed our neighborhood. Mother agreed to that. We had room for him in the house, and stalls and feed in the barn for the mules.

Mr. Ward proved to be an interesting and agreeable boarder in our home. That night after supper, he and my father became very companionable, as he talked of the level lands of his native Missouri. Father had lived all his life in the hill country. It was Mr. Ward's first experience of driving such mountainous roads as we had in the eastern Appalachians.

He told us that his team and wagon that had Wrought Iron Range Co. painted in large red letters on both sides of the green wagon bed, had been shipped by train from St. Louis, Missouri, along with many others to central cities of the eastern Appalachians. The mule teams were shipped in stock or cattle cars.

At that time a salesman covered about a fifty mile radius of the farming and rural communities of West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania. Mr. Ward said it would take him about six months to cover his territory. "We never try to sell our ranges in towns or cities," he told us.

Mr. Ward got up the next morning long before daylight, when my father did, and went out to the barn to curry and feed his mules and harness them. As soon as breakfast was over, he hitched the mules to the wagon and drove around in front of our kitchen door to give mother and father a demonstration of the durable qualities of the Home Comfort Range. He took the canvas cover from it, and with the eight-pound sledge hammer he had in the wagon he swung in a wide arc as if he were driving a fence post, his blow falling on the top of the range and the lids clattered and bounced off in every direction. Such a blow on a cast iron range would have broken everything on top of it.

"Wrought iron. You can't break it. You won't have a warped or cracked lid after fifty years of service," Mr. Ward said as he climbed down off the wagon to gather up the stove lids and banged each of them against the wide steel tires of the wagon wheels.

Two skillets and a teakettle were accessories that were given with the range. He took a skillet in each hand and hammered them together while their ringing sound echoed and re-echoed from the hills behind our house. Then he hammered the skillets against the wagon tires. Not a dent or mar could be seen on either of them.

He unlatched the broad oven door and dropped it to its flat position. "I weigh 190 pounds," he said as he stepped up on the door and jumped up and down on it to show that its hinges could not be broken by any kind of reasonable use. Then he put the disarrayed range back in order, covered it with the canvas, and went on his way over the hills and up and down the rocky lanes in search of buyers for Home Comfort Ranges.

When Mr. Ward left our home the following Monday morning to work in another territory, my father signed an order for our Home Comfort Range. There was an allowance of $21.00 for the seven days board and room for Mr. Ward, and for the feed and stalls for the mules. That left $58.00, which was paid at the rate of $3.75 a month for the next eighteen months.

Two weeks later Mr. Ward returned with our new range, which had come to Keyser, West Virginia, in a boxcar load of ranges he had sold. He helped us assemble it that night after our old stove had cooled off from cooking supper so it could be moved. He stayed in our home that night, and along with us ate the first breakfast ever cooked on the new range.

The new range was a thing of beauty in our dingy, thick-walled basement kitchen which had but two windows. A door that was installed later, with the upper half glass, helped but the kitchen was dark because it lacked exposure to daylight. These days, an electric light would have been kept burning, at least on cloudy days. But kerosene lamps didn't have much effect on daytime darkness.

The range, with its nickle-steel trim and nickle-plated copper water heating reservoir gleamed with a friendly brightness any time it wasn't pitch dark. My mother took great pride in her new range.

From the first, she declared it seemed to cut her work almost in half. She could keep a fire going in it without the constant use of the poker, as she had had to do with the old stove. She had worked almost daily on the old stove to keep it looking clean, and it had the habit of filling the kitchen with smoke every time a fire was lit in it. The new range seemed to keep itself clean and bright and tidy all the time without any extra attention, and it never smoked up the kitchen.

Farm housewives of the hill country in those days didn't get many new appliances for their kitchens. If the stove could be used at all, it was usually kept in service—in some cases until it set the house afire.

But, if a house could be likened to a human body, then I will say that our Home Comfort Range was the heart of our home for the next thirty years. All of my growing up days it was my chore to keep the reservoir filled with water from our yard pump before and after school. It was also my chore to keep the woodbox at the right side of the range filled with the cut wood in our woodyard. After a few years, it became my chore to cut the wood as well as to carry it in.

The sturdy oven door which opened downward could be sat on to warm the back when one came in out of the cold, and all of us used it on such occasions.

Fond memories of youthful days come flooding back when I recall the fragrances of the kitchen when meals for threshermen were prepared. In canning season the aroma of bubbling catsup and other vegetables and fruits was wafted out in the yard, and canning season for mother was from the first ripening of wild strawberries to the jelly she made from wild grapes in the fall. Mother never stopped canning until all her cellar shelves were filled.

In autumn of those days, wild chestnuts and hickory nuts and walnuts could be gathered by the bushels, and it was the kids' job to gather them after school and on Saturdays. In that season we often emptied a quart of chestnuts on the stove lids to let them roast for a few moments until they began bursting as they would pop off the stove like jumping beans. The Chinese chestnuts we roast today are but a poor substitute for those wild nuts, which have been gone from our forests for over half a century.

Around Christmastime we would crack and pick the kernels from hickory nuts that mother used in the fruitcakes she baked.

As we studied our lessons and did our homework around the kitchen table under the flickering yellow light of the coal oil lamp, our Home Comfort Range kept the room snug and warm, with a cozy warmth it seems I have never felt from our central heating—or maybe that is only my imagination.

I believe it would be safe to say that mother fried tons of young chickens on our range. She always hatched around three hundred

chicks under broody hens every spring. Around the Fourth of July some of the cockrels were getting plump and ready for the skillet. Mother was renowned for her fried chicken, which was the favorite meat of the big crowds of friends and relatives who rarely missed a Sunday dinner in our home. I have seen my mother dress a dozen Plymouth Rock roosters on Saturday night, then fry them to take to the basket dinners that families shared at the all day Sunday Camp Meetings. She always took a bushel basket of fried chicken to those dinners.

As I grew into young manhood I took over the chore of getting up first in the morning and letting my father rest a little longer while I started the fire in the range. In winter, we got up in the icy coldness of the unheated house because both of my parents were afraid to leave fire in the stoves and go to bed, unless there was sickness in the family; then one of the grown ups stayed up to tend the sick and watch the fire.

To crawl out of a warm bed with covers heavy enough to keep warm in a bedroom that was cold enough to put a quarter inch of frost on the window panes is an experience few young or middle-aged people could imagine today when temperatures of bedrooms are controlled to within a few degrees of perfect comfort.

But we didn't know about such comforts then, and never thought of it as a hardship, and once I came out from under the feather tick covers, I lost no time getting my lantern lit and my clothes on and went down to the kitchen where I soon had a fire going in our Home Comfort Range.

I often sat on that strong oven door to warm my chilled back as I laced my boots. And sometimes the welcome heat made me drowsy enough to fall asleep again because I had not yet had my sleep out when the alarm clock woke me at five o'clock.

The kitchen would be warm and cozy when my father came down, perhaps half an hour later, and the range would be ready for mother to begin getting our breakfast.

Our Home Comfort Range cooked the food for our family and all our relatives and company that visited us at the farm down through the years. It was still doing its faithful duty in our kitchen many years after mother, who had been so fond of it, passed on to her reward. My young wife, whom I brought to the farm in 1924, began her career of housekeeping with that range, and cooked for our family until the children were half grown.

When the rural electric service became available to the farms of our community, we bought an electric stove, and the old Home Comfort Range was moved to a small outbuilding where we left it and later gave it to a young couple who moved into our community.

It might be sentiment or only my imagination, but it seems that no matter what foods are cooked on modern ranges, it has never had the flavor or tasted as good as the food that we used to cook on that range. But, perhaps, I never get as hungry as I used to after a hard day's work on the farm. Or maybe I'm just getting old.

The Drawing

Feet barely touching the weathered porch,
I swing. Smell night.
A bare light bulb our censer,
Heavy bugs crash against the screen,
Whirl toward us.
Moths circle, blinded.
The tree frog believes in harmony.
On the hill, passing cars;
We hear them a mile away—
Listen, spellbound.

—Victoria Barker