

Chimney Fire

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Wow! Things got a little scary here! Just recovered from a chimney fire. Thankfully, the cabin (and the two of us) survived!

We clean the chimney fairly regularly, so we weren't expecting this! But I guess we've been using a different composition of firewood this fall, more cedar and fir, less alder, and it makes a difference. That, and I finally managed (at least temporarily) to stop the chronic leak in our chimney that always kept the stove pipes a bit damp.

In any case, we were revving the stove up for supper, around 4 p.m., and suddenly swoosh!! Ken ran outside to see a huge plume of smoke and ash come out of the chimney. Meanwhile, I was watching inside, seeing the lower part of our chimney start to glow red-hot.

We were both lucky and unlucky. Most of the black stovepipe that you can buy in stores these days comes from offshore, likely China or some other place where cheap manufacturing is part of the deal. Unfortunately, this means that the alloys used in manufacture can be highly variable ... some components last for years, others rust out at the slightest hint of dampness. You can't tell by looking at the stuff in the store ... you just have to install it and hope. Our chronic chimney leak was caused by an inferior grade of metal on the chimney flashing, which resulted in one specific piece rusting at a much faster rate than all the other components. Another inferior component was located at the junction between our stainless pipes coming out of the stove and the black iron chimney pipe, a short coupler. I had noticed that this piece was showing signs of rusting (in spite of the fact that it was located inside the cabin), and had just recently bought a replacement for it. So ... when the chimney fire began, this rusted piece essentially burned out. We had a bit of a fright watching it shed sparks and iron oxide flakes. This was the unlucky part ... a few nerve racking moments until the fire in the chimney cooled down. Luckily, the piece held together long enough ...

We got the stove closed off as tightly as possible, which slowed the fire to a dull roar, and waited. Eventually everything cooled down and stopped glowing and smoking, although the house remained filled with blue smoke and the smell of burning paint off the pipes for the remainder of the night. And a cold night it was. We didn't dare relight the stove until we could examine the damage in daylight (it was, by this time, night). And of course, we had a clear December night with temperatures below freezing. A pile of glowing cinders had been ejected from the chimney pipes and had accumulated in the bottom of the stove, where they crackled and popped most of the night, but provided little heat. Ken and I slept poorly, listening to the stove and fearing that a spark might have gotten into the roof somewhere, the potential of a fire resting heavily on our minds.

We woke to a cold and foggy morning, but again, we were lucky. The only damage was the joiner, which had burned out to a handful of rusty shards. We started our day by pulling down the entire interior components of our chimney stack ... what a way to make sure your chimney is squeaky clean. Getting things back together, with the new joiner now in place, was something of a challenge ... pieces that were supposed to slide were fused together with creosote, clearances were tight. We eventually timed out for some pondering, brought the kerosene heater into the cabin for a bit of warmth, and had a late breakfast.

Amazingly, warm and fed, things proceeded much better. We had the chimney back together and a fire in the stove by lunchtime. I wonder what folks in the rest of Canada were doing with their morning?