

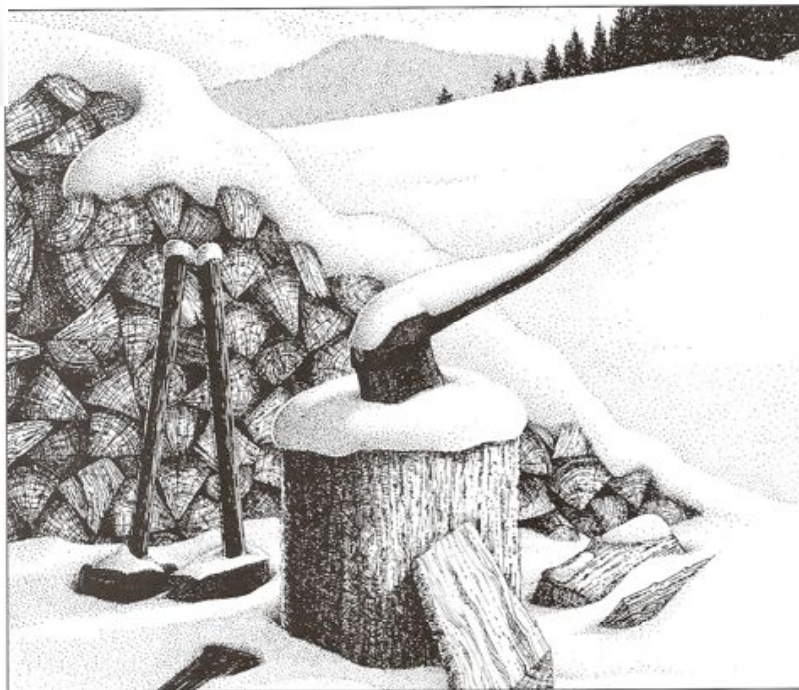
The brothers at Weston Friday • Lanes-country skiing at Blueberry Lake  
Henry graduates to Washington • "Wasteo" Green • Classified winter events

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Illustration by Don Martin

# Stacking Wood

*A Young Vermonter Earns His Keep*



**A**UTUMN IN VERMONT means stacking wood and I, according to my dad, am a great stacker. I groan when he announces that he will be requiring my services on the weekend and for the next few days after school.

"Talent like yours," he says. "You can't afford to waste."

So here I am, laying a smooth hunk of beech in the middle of the new pile. Two rectangular pieces of heavy oak make nice end pieces. Placing the right

stick of wood in the right place, constructing solid and sturdy towers on either end for stability—it's like playing with blocks. Minus, of course, the best part of blocks: the immediate and complete destruction of your creation

*"The pile constantly grows, no matter how many trips I make."*

at the end. Oh, no. With a woodpile, the dismantling is excruciatingly long and slow, like the winter, piece by piece—and usually when I have something more important going on. "The woodbox is empty," my dad will interrupt. This is definitely not blocks.

Moving wood, for me, is the worst part. The woodpile is behind the house, but our wood supply comes from the woods next to the front yard where five huge trees fell two summers ago in a storm—two beeches, an oak, a maple, and a twisted, knobby elm. My dad sets up his operation there: He hacks a swath into the woods with the chain saw, cuts the trees into rounds, splits the rounds with an ax, and tosses them into a pile for me. The pile constantly grows, no matter how many trips I make. The hard part is loading myself up, my seven-year-

old hands unable to grip any but the smallest pieces and my arms only long and strong enough to carry a few pieces at a time. Once in a while, my dad will pause his chopping to help load me up—six or seven pieces maybe—and I'll stagger off under the load, inevitably dropping it halfway across the yard. When I return from one of these six-piece trips—thinking I've made a dent—he has split twenty-five more pieces. I can't keep up.

"It's the golden age of parenting," my dad explains to my uncle, the two men swinging their cutting tools. "There's a small window of time between the ages when they're too small to be useful and when they're teens. Now is when I get a return on my investment." They chuckle.

I don't know what he's talking about, but later he brings me a wheelbarrow to make my job easier. "Try this," he says. It's promising, I think. We fill it all the way, and I grip the handles. I can barely budge it, and it tips to the left. I twist to save it, but I overcompensate. The wheel lodges on a chunk of wood

and I fall into the barrow. It topples, and I lose the load. "It's okay," my dad says cheerfully. "We just can't fill it so full."

My dad goes on about how we won't run the thermostats at all this year, while I load the wheelbarrow with about five or six pieces per trip. He talks about my grandfather and great-grandfather; they were Vermonters too, and they burned wood. I don't realize that in less than two decades, I'll be doing the splitting and stacking at my own house, and I'll be just as proud of thwarting the oil company as my dad.

At present, however, the needs-to-be-moved pile grows upwardly and outwardly like a giant blob, absorbing everything around it. I know I'll be moving wood for days, maybe weeks. I wish I could do the splitting and they the stacking. My dad says it's too dangerous. Besides, he says, I can't ignore my God-given talent. ▽

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## Just the facts: how to stack wood

No matter who you ask, everyone has a method for stacking wood. One common technique involves building a stable "tower" of firewood on each end; I've also seen towers up and down a woodpile. My neighbor here in Richmond has constructed elaborate circular piles, while another neighbor has a 14-foot-high pile suspended by ropes and 2x4's in his garage. As a kid, I never placed a piece that my Uncle John didn't correct. For him, there was only one way to stack wood: his way.

The most important thing when you stack wood, according to Larry Westall, 64, a retired builder who now sells firewood in Underhill, is to space your rows apart. "You want to make sure," says Westall, "that air can get in there so you don't wind up with damp, moldy wood."

A cord of stacked firewood is four feet high by four feet wide by eight feet deep—128 cubic feet in all. A "thrown" cord is 189 cubic feet. Generally, Westall and his partner Clem Noel estimate their cordage by tossing wood into a measured area, like a wood truck or a box. The best way to learn about stacking wood is to do it, so Westall should know. He and Noel do all their cutting and stacking themselves.

If you are cutting, splitting and stacking your wood the old-fashioned way (unlike 21st century wood-cutters Westall and Noel, who season their wood overnight in a high-tech, computer-operated kiln that heats up to eight cords at a time to precise temperatures and removes the moisture from the wood), your wood needs to be seasoned for a year or two before burning. Stacking it in an airy place, off the ground, and with enough separation between rows, will speed this process.

Westall and Noel have been selling wood for 30 years, but they're always looking for new ideas. Last season, the partners introduced a small, round woodpile-on-a-pallet, perfect for a garage or a weekend burn. "To tell the truth," says Richmond native Westall with a chuckle, "I first saw that in Florida. Would you believe it? They burn more wood in Florida than you would ever think." —M.A.