

## *A Burning Question*

*Term Paper*

*Written By: Jayson Fox May 2000*

*(A Chimney Doctors Employee)*

Many people have fireplaces in their homes, and these fireplaces come in all manner of distinct shapes and sizes from the lowliest wood stove to the greatest Rumford (a old style fireplace that was used mostly to provide heat for the home). Although these fireplaces are all distinct in some fashion they all follow the same basic tenets: to provide light and warmth. For many centuries almost all fireplaces have been strictly wood burning but since the advent of the industrial age a new manner of fireplace has come around: the gas-burning fireplace. These two types both have their advantages and disadvantages as well as their own dangers. You may already have a wood burning or natural gas fireplace in your home, but have you ever thought of why you have that particular kind? How about changing to another type? Do you prefer the convenience of gas or the naturalness of wood? Or are you building a home and trying to decide which type to have built with it? Whatever your particular reasons for interest in the debate between wood-burning and gas fireplaces I know that this article will help to make your choice of a natural fireplace an easy one.

One of the main issues in the debate between the two camps is the convenience of being able to turn a knob and flick a switch for an instant fire. The traditional picture given of a man and his fireplace is that of the hunter and axe, searching around the frozen wilderness for the proper wood with which to heat his home. This is a slight exaggeration. It is true that this is the way it once was for many people, nowadays though many people neither have the time nor energy to go off wood hunting. As it says in an article from last years Home magazine: "Homeowners dreaming of adding the romantic glow of a fire to their homes now have it a little easier. They can purchase factory built fireplaces...[with] gas fireplaces rapidly gaining in popularity, largely because of their ease and range of use." (Petrowski, 56).

But neither is it necessary to go off in the woods scavenging for

wood. There are many places that sell wood cut, stacked and delivered right to your door. Yes, that added expense is there as it is for any service of convenience, but the time and effort excuse is eliminated. There are also many places that sell firewood where all you have to do is go and get it. Another thought to consider is this; is it really all that discomfoting to go outside, cut down a tree and chop, stack and dry your wood? I know that many of us do not have the convenience of a forest for our back yard but in an age of fast paced office jobs and less free time for anybody it can be a very relaxing experience. Besides, I know you can use the exercise.

Have you ever thought about the fact that natural gas, as is the case with all fossil fuels, is not a renewable resource? For every fire you burn with gas as with every time you drive your car more of that precious resource is gone forever. Although some of you may question the loss of our hardwood forests, wood can be replanted and regrown, ready for use again within a few years. It's something to think about isn't it?

The thought of fossil fuels now brings me to my next point: fireplace dangers. The wood burning process of the traditional fireplace is quite dirty. During the fire the wood is reduced to ash with the smaller particles of that ash pulled up the chimney with the rising heat and draft. This soot does not always make it out of the chimney. As the air rising up the chimney flue is cooled by the lower temperatures above and from the distance from the fire itself the soot will then collect on the inner wall of the flue lining creating a byproduct known as creosote. Creosote is made from the compilation of soot on the flue (which is in itself the unburnt remnants of the wood). When a sufficient buildup of creosote accrues on the lining, the possibility of a chimney fire increases. A chimney fire can be a fiery, smoky affair or a quiet one. Regardless of the type though, temperatures within your chimney can reach in excess of 2000 degrees, cracking and destroying flue tiles, each time making the possibility of a house fire greater and greater. The best maintenance you can provide for your wood fireplace is that of an annual inspection and good cleaning. The loss of a home is enough to make most people think twice about a wood-burning fireplace, but with proper inspection and cleaning this danger can be all but eliminated.

With natural gas fireplaces the danger is no less severe. Rather, it is worse as the danger is silent and deadly.

*Carbon monoxide is the country's leading cause of accidental poisoning death, and because it is an odorless, colorless, and tasteless gas, it can go*

*unnoticed and spread quickly in homes...Homes of all types are susceptible to carbon monoxide, including those with furnaces, water heaters and fireplaces... (PRNewswire, 1).*

**According to the Chimney Safety Institute of America: "... burning one cubic foot of natural gas requires 10 cubic feet of air to provide enough oxygen for complete combustion ("Gas" 1)." If the correct amount of air is not provided the danger of carbon monoxide production is increased; and if the chimney is not receiving the correct amount of air carbon monoxide is less likely to be safely exhausted from the chimney allowing this silent and deadly killer into your home. "Better [to] know nothing than half-know many things" ( Nietzsche, 518)**

**There are other problems associated with natural gas fireplaces, as opposed to wood burning fireplaces, which may cause costly repairs. The other most obvious problem gained from cool chimney temperatures, which are much more likely with gas burning fires, is that of condensation.**

*As odd as it may seem, the combustion of any hydrocarbon, and gas is a hydrocarbon, results in mainly carbon dioxide and water vapor. In fact, the average furnace puts about 1 ½ gallons of water into your chimney every hour! ("Gas" 2)*

**This condensation is also highly acidic which results in the deterioration of the bricks and mortar joints that make up a masonry chimney. Situations like this can cause very costly chimney repairs and sometimes create problems that can only be solved with the insertion of a stainless steel liner to take the place of the regular flue tiles. None of these problems are associated with a wood-burning fireplace.**

**Now we come to my last, and least important, point: aesthetics. When people think of a fireplace, or they show a romantic scene on television or in movies, it is always the crackling fire with the reddish-yellow flames curling around the logs. And although you can't smell it while watching TV, there is always that slightly smoky yet pleasant and relaxing scent given off by the burning wood. Where are those things with a gas fireplace? How many people do you know who are willing to watch the exact same show (and by that I mean the exact same episode) every time they sit down to watch the TV? Because that's**

**exactly what you are doing when you sit down in front of your gas fire; the logs inside aren't really log; they never burn, and they always look the same! Most strictly gas fireplaces built or sold today cannot be used for the burning of wood without extensive remodeling, but every wood burning fireplace can be setup for gas burning within a few hours. Also, if it is the convenience of lighting a fire that you are after, a gas starter can be installed with little trouble or hazard providing an easy start for a real fire.**

**If all you want out of your fireplace is convenience and concern, then please, go ahead and get yourself a gas fireplace. But if you want a fireplace that is going to be reliable, safe and much more enjoyable, go with the better choice, wood-burning is the way to go.**

#### **Works Cited**

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