



The Coal Pile

If you told a child today to go out and bring in a bucket of coal they would not know what you're talking about. However, not so long ago, that was a routine chore that almost every child particularly boys, had to help with. Up until the end of the 1950s, coal was a very important part of everyday life. In the 1940s and early 1950s almost every Pacolet family heated their house with coal or wood. The [company houses](#) in [Pacolet Mills](#) had an open coal fireplace in every room but the kitchen. The cook stove in the kitchen kept that room warm but it usually was fired with coal or sometimes wood.

Many families installed a small coal burning heater that vented out through a pipe in the fireplace. No matter whether it was in a heater or directly in the fireplace, coal was essential to helping the family make it through the winter. Every house had a coal pile in the yard. There was a special bucket called a coal scuttle that many families used for bringing in coal. Lots of families just used a regular metal bucket. The regular coal scuttle bucket held a lot of coal and it was difficult for a child to carry. The same bucket used in bringing in coal was also usually used to carry out the ashes.

The family coal pile was a valuable thing, particularly during [World War II](#). Coal, like many things, was rationed and the family could only get a limited amount. My wife has childhood memories of a neighbor stealing their coal at night when her Dad was away working on a defense plant.

In the wintertime, all the houses burning coal gave a distinctive smell and sometimes resulted in a haze that could be seen. To some of us of a certain age the smell was certainly not unpleasant and evokes memories of a time long gone.

Starting probably in the late 1940s, the use of kerosene heaters began to slowly replace the use of coal in home heating. Kerosene, or fuel oil, had several advantages. It burned cleaner with less smoke and did not have to be physically be carried into the house. A large kerosene tank was constructed outside the house and located high enough so that the kerosene ran to the heater under gravity. However, small kerosene heaters also became more common and they usually had to be taken outside so they their tanks could be filled with kerosene.

In the 1970s and 1980s, it became more common for houses to be refitted with a central system that both heated and cooled the house. The cooling is done with electricity but the heating still requires the use of kerosene, natural gas or bottled gas. Probably, almost all new houses are now constructed with a central heating and cooling system.

I am not sure now where you would go to buy coal for home use. At one time, many places sold coal by the ton, delivered to your house, or in smaller bags or “tow sacks” that you could carry home.

The coal industry has fallen on bad times. Coal sales have declined steadily over the last several years because of international concern. The burning of coal produces carbon dioxide which is attributed to be the main factor in global warming.

The virtual disappearance of such a common item as coal makes you wonder what will be next. How many of the ordinary things we take for granted today will still be here and used in 50 years?



Mr. and Mrs. Latt Howell standing outside their home in [Pacolet Mills](#) on Limestone St. in the early 1950s. Note the coal pile next to the front steps. It was seeing this picture that made me realize that coal piles had disappeared from our lives and led to this article. Thanks to Mrs. Dorothy Paige Howell for this picture.