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Twice Warmed with Firewood

Sun rose above frosted mountain ridges in cold winter sky when we took care of the ranch in northeastern Oregon. The thermometer hanging on a nail on the porch post said ten degrees below zero. New snow squeaked under my feet. Earliest sunlight shone on the south face of the barn, built fifty years before, of western larch, locally called tamarack, harvested from nearby ridges, and milled into timbers for the main supports of the barn, into studs, joists and boards at the mill down the valley a mile, untended for fifty years now, and beginning to fall down.

Lodgepole pine, cut to firewood length, stacked tall, filled bays both sides of the barn.

Summer and fall, along with ranch work and cutting firewood and selling firewood, I brought pickup loads of firewood or loads on the trailer behind the tractor, parked in the center of the barn, hay loft ten feet above me, threw the wood off and drove out the north doors. I came back and stacked wood when I had time.

Snow covers our part of the world two feet deep. Sun shines in the big south doors of the barn and makes enough heat to matter against ten below. I throw rounds, each about eighteen inches long, cut from dead lodgepole pine trees, from deep shade in the barn, where frost clings to some surfaces, out into sunshine. On the hard dirt floor, I stand the rounds on end, in two lines. I swing the splitting maul down on each of them, swing, crash. Wood flies apart. I step over, hit the next one, all down the line, turn and come up the other line crash, crash. Wood flies, thuds and rattles against other wood.

Last swing, I leave the maul down a long moment, stand still and soak up winter silence and sunshine.

I set the maul aside. I stand the split halves in lines in the sunshine and swing the maul crashing down the line again. Sun shines on me. Peaceful odors of summer's cuts through wood and new odors of freshly-opened wood rise in cold air. I think of

summer, when my chain saw roared outside my ear protectors. I cut this round onto dusty ground, across the ranch, over in the timber. Sweat dripped from my face in hot summer sun. Grasses grew green in the meadow just below the ridge where I worked, and flowers blossomed in sunshine.

But this winter moment in sunshine, I wear insulated gloves and insulated coveralls. I keep working to stay warm enough for comfort. I leave the heavy maul leaning in sunshine, and I bring split pieces of wood to my splitting block, twenty inches tall, and hold them there with one hand and swing my single-bit short-handled axe, lighter and more controllable than my maul. I split kindling from split wood, move my left hand clear just before I strike the wood with the axe.

Until I have enough. The sun has warmed the barn's dark wood on the south face, so I sit on a round against the barn a while, soaking up quiet, soaking up sunshine.

I bring the pickup over and load split wood for our kitchen stove and kindling for all our stoves and take the wood to the house where it cooks food and adds warmth to the warmth of our family proceedings this bright winter day. Juniper, Amanda, and Laura school at the kitchen table and begin to taper away from the structured schooling to other creative projects, an active household, outside to sunshine if it warms enough.

I feed the fires and join the family flow. Laura and I fix lunch and bring food to our table that soaks in sunshine just inside our big south window. Our wood-fired kitchen stove radiates heat to us as we eat and heats water for tea and water to wash our lunch dishes and water for baths.

I measured the wood again while I was in the barn. We have more than we'll need. Early spring, I'll sell a few cords of wood, deliver it when we go to town for groceries. Selling some wood will give us some winter money. We'll still have wood left when I start cutting firewood in hot sunshine again, trees and grasses and flowers growing all around me in summer sun.