

## On Social Ecology: A Report from Alderville

A message from Woody Andrew

Alderville winters are cold. We have to spend a lot of time gathering firewood. I like to start early in September, putting in about four nights a week cutting, splitting and stacking my wood. I work steadily like that until about halfway through October. Some folks start even earlier. That way they don't have to spend so much time working outdoors after dark when days are short.

My neighbor Jerry doesn't lay in any wood at all anymore. I guess he never really was interested in that type of work, though there was a time when he put up enough to almost get by. I remember how he used to start coming over about the end of March when his woodpile was down to scraps.

"Hey, Woody, my wife's havin' her folks over tonight. Mind if I borrow a little wood?"

"Go right ahead, Jerry," I'd say. "Help yourself."

Actually it wasn't just generosity. You see, Jerry often gave me a hand with things. He's a great mechanic; he can tell you what's wrong with an engine just by listening to it. I don't know how many times he helped me fix my car. Once he overhauled the lawnmower, and it's been running like a top ever since. Took him an evening. It would have taken me a month.

As I said, when it comes to cutting wood Jerry never got very far ahead. He used to spend his time after work doing anything and everything else. He'd watch TV, play with the kids—his and

mine too—going off fishing with them and things like that. I have to confess I sometimes resented it when I was swinging the ax night after night and I could see him sitting in his living room watching TV. But all considered he used to be a pretty good neighbor.

Mr. Herbert, Jerry's neighbor on the other side, is what you call well-to-do. He's got enough wood piled up for two winters. Herbert owns the store where Jerry works. I guess Jerry knows better than to ask *him* for wood; he didn't get ahead by giving it to neighbors. On the other hand, he's not exactly a miser—or at least he didn't used to be. I know he gave a lot of wood to the hospital. But that was before we had the firewood bank.

Three and a half years ago we elected a new mayor. He's done some great things for this town. One of the things he did right after he got into office was he started the firewood bank. He wanted to make sure nobody had to go through a winter without enough wood to keep warm. That was right after Mrs. Ivan died. One of her neighbors found her frozen in bed. Seems her wood got used up and nobody noticed it. Maybe she wanted to wait as long as she could before telling somebody. Or maybe she was sick. I guess we'll never know.

The whole town felt awful for neglecting Mrs. Ivan. It was the first time as far as anyone could remember that someone died in Alderville for not having enough firewood. We always looked out for one another. It didn't really matter who you were: if word got out that you had no way of getting wood for yourself, your neighbors pitched in and built up your woodpile.

Since we all felt so bad about what happened to Mrs. Ivan we wanted to do something to make sure it could never happen again. So the mayor came up with this plan where everybody donates to the wood bank. Then if you run out during the winter you know there's a place you can get more. You don't have to borrow from a neighbor, and you don't have to pay it back.

The mayor set up a storage yard with an office. Then he got Ralph Morgan, one of the other fellows who was working at the store, to be the firewood agent. (Mr. Herbert never got anybody to replace Ralph. He just let Jerry and his other two employees, Janet and Steve, work longer days.) Every year during the month of October Ralph goes around and measures everybody's wood-piles. Then he takes his measurements back to the office, and he does some calculations. He figures in things like the size of your house and how many kids you've got. Finally he comes up with the amount of wood you get to contribute to the firewood bank.

That first year with the bank Jerry never came over to "borrow" wood like he always used to. But then I was pretty low myself after my contributions to the bank, and I might not have been so eager to share it with him. That next fall I put in an extra night each week and several additional Saturdays in order to be sure I'd have plenty of wood left after the bank took its donation. As it turned out it made little difference because Morgan took even more than he did the year before; so my pile ended up about the same.

As you can imagine, Ralph isn't as popular as he used to be when he worked at the store. And I think that bothers him quite a bit. He tries to hide it by putting on a stern official face. He's a dif-

ferent man from the cheerful guy we knew; but I think he's doing a good job under the circumstances. One of the toughest parts of Morgan's job is trying to keep folks honest. That wasn't much of a problem the first fall when the bank was new. But by the next fall stories were going around about people hiding wood. Some of the places they hid it were pretty funny, and the stories were told like jokes. None of us took it seriously at first. But then the mayor called a town meeting and reminded us that it isn't fair to keep back some wood when other people are giving out of their whole pile. In fact he said there would be a penalty if you were caught; namely, any wood found in hiding goes automatically to the bank. I know a lot of folks went home after that and made sure all their wood was in just one pile.

Last fall there were more stories about wood-hiding, only this time the humor was missing. People were getting to be suspicious of each other. The mayor called another meeting and said that anyone actually knowing about illegal wood was supposed to report it to Ralph Morgan. So now it's part of Morgan's job to follow up on these reports and confiscate any wood he finds in hiding.

Certain folks get pretty steamed up when they hear about someone cheating on the system (especially when it turns out to be themselves). When a report of wood-hiding is sent in, the sender is usually anonymous of course. But that doesn't keep people from speculating with accusations and counter-accusations. When Morgan catches somebody with hidden wood the story gets written up in the paper. John Murphy was caught last fall, and I don't think he's gotten over it yet. His wife says she

didn't know anything about the space under the basement stairs where they found the wood. John's been spending most of his evenings at the bar lately. I don't think he and his wife are doing well.

Some folks have been getting mean, saying that nobody has any right to take their wood. Some are even mentioning that they have guns which they know how use to protect their property.

Jerry never comes over anymore when I'm working on the car. Maybe it's because he doesn't need my wood. He always goes to the bank when he runs out, which he does frequently because Ralph only doles out a trunk load at a time. Another reason might be that he's got less free time now. He's always going in early and working late at the store. To make it worse, Mr. Herbert's having Steve leave the store most afternoons and going over to his place to cut wood. That leaves only Jerry and Janet to run the store. I never see Jerry playing with the kids these days.

I've decided that this fall I'm not going to spend as much extra time on the wood pile. Other folks must be feeling the same way because it's nearly July and I don't see anyone starting to cut wood yet. I'll hold back on heating the house if I need to. It's not that I mind giving wood to the bank since it's surely necessary, but for some reason it was hard to put in the extra time last year. I can't seem to get as motivated as I used to. Though I support the bank, I must admit I don't get a lot of pleasure out of laying up extra wood for someone who doesn't even know who cut it. I'll still make enough to get by on, though. I'd never go to the bank myself—wouldn't feel right doing that. Borrowing from a neighbor wouldn't be so bad because I'd pay it back or at least return a

favor of some sort. But I'm not about to go in and ask for wood like a charity case.

I wonder if Jerry has feelings like that too. He probably hates going to the bank so often. But he probably figures it wouldn't be fair to ask me for wood when I've already given so much. Maybe that's why he's been avoiding me. I thought it was because of the trouble Jerry Jr. got into with Mr. Herbert's car last summer.

Jerry's son, along with the Murphy kid and Janet's son, Tom Johnson, found the car parked with the keys in it. They got in, started it up, and took off. Tom was at the wheel, and when they got out on the highway, he took a curve too fast and rolled the car. Jerry's son only got some bruises, but the other two wound up in the hospital. Tom didn't make it.

And for some reason, kids all over town have been getting into trouble lately. A couple of them were caught with their parent's guns. They hang out in little groups after school, mostly just standing around. Maybe it's because so many of their parents are working more hours and spending less time at home. Or maybe the kids are upset just because their parents seem to be upset and they don't know what to do about it. One youngster actually got hurt with a gun, though it was in his own hands and it went off by accident.

To meet this crisis, the mayor has figured out a way to build a recreation center for the kids. His idea is to get the carpenters to donate the time they would usually spend cutting their own firewood and build the rec. center instead. In return they'll be allowed to get all the wood they need from the bank for one

winter. To make up the difference in the bank's supply, people who have plenty of wood like Mr. Herbert will give more (but just for the one winter). Sounds fair to me, but knowing Herbert I suspect Steve is going to be spending all day cutting wood for Herbert, which means Jerry will end up doing most of Steve's job and probably will never see his kids.

Of course most of us are for the mayor's plan. But a few are going around saying it will just make things worse. That upsets a lot of parents because they realize that anyone against it is either rich, like Mr. Herbert, or doesn't care about kids. There have been some pretty strong letters in the paper back and forth. It seems like neighbors who got along pretty well three years ago are hardly civil anymore.

Last night somebody drove by the wood bank and fired three shots at the office. It broke a window but didn't do any other damage. The mayor called a town meeting today at noon. He wants everybody to turn in their guns. I think it's about time. We'll all be safer—especially the kids. But there were arguments. Some said they were not about to give up their guns, period. They were mean enough to say they'd use them if necessary to prevent it. As somebody said, that amounts to sacrificing children for guns, which is about the same thing as murder. The meeting finally broke up after several people walked out angry.

I know it's hard to believe what's happened here. I wish it were just a bad dream, but I'm afraid it's real. We must remember the positive thing, which, as the mayor keeps reminding us, is that nobody's frozen to death in Alderville for nearly three years.