When the coal company came

By Nat Shapira
SPECIAL TO THE ENTERPRISE

"The ash left over from burning anthracite coal is excellent for aerating soil and as an anti-skid material for icy driveways and walkways," – The Waschak Coal Corp.

"Salt price hike will make battling snowstorms more costly" – Enterprise-news.com

Considering the "Old Farmer's Almanac's" forecast of cold and snow for the 2008-2009 winter season in both coastal and interior New England, there may be more than one occasion when a bucket of ashes would be nice to have on hand.

That, of course, would mean having a coal or wood stove on the premises.

During the 1940s, when many residents of Brockton and vicinity had coal-burning furnaces, ashes were easy to come by and, if not utilized on walkways or driveways, were invariably present at curbside when the rubbish men came.



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I remember from Miss Comstock's fourth-grade class at Whitman Elementary an impressive full-color graphic illustrating how coal was formed eons and eons before, in a Pennsylvania swamp, with towering ferns and other strange plants from long ago gradually rotting and being compressed into coal as the ages rolled by.

Coal, to our young eyes, was truly a wonder, and even today, many years on, it still is a marvel. Not only that, but there's a lot of it.

Then, as Gerry recalled, "The only brand of coal I remember from those days was 'Reading Anthracite,' which I believe had its source in Reading, Pa. I lived in one house, later the victim of a fire and now gone, at 514 Warren Ave. The house had a coal furnace, but the place was always cold."

All three of us remembered the Brockton Ice & Coal Co.'s delivery of coal in the neighborhood, when a large portable metal chute carried on the big coal delivery truck would be deployed. The deliveryman would send a ton of coal roaring and rumbling its way into the proper storage area in somebody's basement, thus providing heat for the house and a ready supply of ash for winter contingencies.

The noise of the coal delivery was loud enough to alert every little kid seeking some kind of relief from the prevailing boredom of play. Thus, it was a common sight to see boys and girls following the activity as the delivery truck brought its cargo to the houses that still depended on coal.

Thanks to a bit of Googling, I discovered that Rocky Marciano (alongside whom I would later work one summer in a city ditch-digging project across from the old Brockton Hospital), among his other non-boxing activities and occupations, once worked as a "chute man" for the Brockton Ice & Coal Co.

Presumably, Rocky's evident musculature was due in no small measure to shoveling coal and moving the coal chute about.

Recently I heard a radio replay of a 1940s mystery series "The Shadow," complete with a commercial for "Blue Coal." The announcer, in addition to telling listeners to buy war bonds, also reminded those folks tuned in that, although the war was making extra demands everywhere, our local Blue Coal dealer would be Johnny-on-the-spot with home deliveries. Further, that we could depend on Blue Coal to give us dependable heat throughout the winter.

Well, one thing leads to another, and so began another email correspondence between us three ex-Brocktonians – David Keith, in semi-tropical Florida; Gerry Slaney, a resident of c-c-c-old Vermont; and yours truly, moss-covered in the rain forest of British Columbia – on the subject of coal.

Dave Keith was first off the mark. "I got curious, and here's what I found," he told Gerry and me.

"In the heyday of anthracite mining in Pennsylvania, many of the coal companies branded their coal. This was done as a sales gimmick. One of the most famous branded coals was the Glen Alden Coal Co.'s 'Blue Coal.' Often the coal was dyed a color other than black. This dye served as a lubricant to allow the coal to travel down chutes and bins more easily. When the coal traveled more smoothly, it was less likely to break into smaller pieces".

Catchy slogans came with the brand names.

Blue Coal was "Clean, Safe, Low-cost heat."

Sterling Brand Coal, from the Hudson Coal Co., which was dyed a silver color, was "Triple-Tested" and "Chemi-coated."

Having a supply of coal was one thing. Igniting it was another, often-frustrating problem, as Dave found out.

"When I lived in North Easton," D recalled, "we rented the large, center-e trance colonial at the former Langwate Farm at 250 Main St., owned by the Ames family. I found a small, space-heater-type coal stove, and after putting into place, I drove down to my old Keit Oil haunts at 74 Plain St. and bought a 50-pound bag of walnut-sized anthracit from Campello-Keith. I schlepped it ba to North Easton, built a fire in the stov with newspaper and kindling, then add the coal.

"Despite fooling around with that thing for hours on several occasions, I could never get a decent coal fire burning, and after experimenting with the dampers and such-like, I gave up and p the dratted thing on the porch."

Gerry, on the other hand, is an expe with his coal stove. He told Dave:

"As one who prides himself at lighting a one-match fire that can burn all winter long nowadays in my living roon I'll bet I could have helped you get that little stove cooking pretty quickly. Of course, we may very well have burned t house down, too."

Come spring, when the birds return from the South and when ice breaks in the Vermont rivers, no doubt you'll find that, once more, Gerry has done it again – with one match and a pile of coal, he stayed warm and toasty all winter long.

Nat Shapira was born in Brockton 1933 and was a city resident until 1955. H is retired and lives in Vancouver, Britis Columbia. This article originally appeare in The Enterprise on Feb. 9, 2009.