Open Fire, a Symbol of Safety and Sustenance.

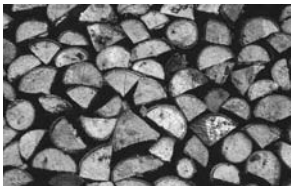
a plain or through the woods, they remain today a symbol of safety and sustenance. In some parts of the world, they are essential for life, for warmth, and for cooking. In other places, they are not necessary for life but continue to be used for ritual gatherings. Outside, the open fire is usually easy to control simply by adding more or less fuel. On the other hand, moving the fire inside creates a whole new set of control problems, although it opens new possibilities for a rich social life inside the house.

In the Carpathian Mountains of Moravia, in the Czech Republic, traditional country kitchens all contain huge masonry stoves overhung by a hood that channels smoke safely to a chimney. Here, meals are prepared daily and heavy breads baked weekly for the family; on holy days, hot fruit pastries fill the room with tantalizing aromas. Moreover, the stove centers family life, especially in winter. Children play and grandparents gather to settle their backs against the comforting, warm mass. Some stoves even project through the kitchen wall into an adjoining room where wide

Czech Kitchen Stove: The Miller's House Museum, Carpathian Mountains, Moravia. Viewed from front and back. (Photos by Mary Knowles.)

shelves afford a place for sitting or perhaps for sleeping on the coldest nights.

Whether inside the house or out, individual fires require an easily accessible and dependable source of fuel. This can have environmental consequences for a nearby forest. Farmers in the Austrian Alps stockpile wood for both cooking and heating. They draw on nearby forests to supply their local needs. But of course history is replete with stories of people who outgrew their own forest.



Piled Firewood in Austrian Alps.

Where there is no wood, people have sometimes burned the earth itself. Even in modern times, farmers cut peat from the boggy lands of Scotland, digging through layers from sepia to coal-black. It is removed in square "turves," stacked and dried for both heating and cooking. There is, of course, a limit to how often the cutting can be repeated. Each 1-inch layer of peat can take perhaps a century to build up. In that sense it is not a renewable resource.

The chimney long ago became a mark of hearth and home. Sometimes, as in the medieval French town of Loches, chimneys extend inconspicuously, each in its own way, from dissimilar

Turf-Cutting in a Scottish Bog. (Photo by Mary Knowles.)