Oven-Roasted Farm Girls

Temperature control meant abandoning the blast furnace upstairs.

By Barbara Anders Maggart, Wabash, Indiana

DURING the hot summer, I've heard many people ask, "What did we do before air-conditioning?" I can tell you in two words: We suffered.

Thinking back to the 1940s, to our Marion, Indiana farmhouse and the upstairs room where my sister, Kathleen, and I slept, I can still feel the oppressive heat enveloping us as we tossed and turned in our beds.

The heat built up all afternoon in our bedroom, which faced west. All the door needed was a large temperature dial, and the room could have passed as the world's largest oven.

We'd complain and grumble, turning this way and that like two large roasts on spits. Finally, in exasperation, we'd grab our pillows and head downstairs.

Usually, there was a slight breeze drifting through the dining room windows. We'd throw our pillows down, not bothering over the fact that we were lying on a hardwood floor. This would last until 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, when the upstairs cooled down enough for our return.

You never knew where you were going to find someone. Dad might be draped over the recliner, and Mother could be lying on the living room couch. Dad was doing well sleeping on the porch couch one hot night until the dog licked the bottom of his foot. After seeing Dad's reaction, I have never doubted the miracle of levitation.

Occasionally, the kitchen was just too hot, so we'd eat in the

basement. My sister and I loved this and thought we were very clever, despite having to carry dishes and food up and down the stairs.

Naps were generally taken in the early afternoon—even Dad would lie down for a bit after lunch.

Sometimes, if she had time, my mother would fill two laundry tubs with cool water and let “Sis” and me play. Being the smaller and younger, I had no problem doubling up and covering my small, plump body up to my chin. Kathleen, who was tall with long, thin legs, must have looked like a skinny chicken stewing in a pan of broth as she tried, in vain, to get most of herself in the water.

Often, at the end of a hot day, we’d all pile into the family car and take a drive, the idea being to catch a few cool breezes through the open windows. However, my farmer father would often forget the purpose of the drive as he slowed down to view a neighbor’s crops. Kathleen and I would complain in dismay and urge Dad to drive faster, but he had two gears on his car—slow and slower.

On Sunday mornings, we’d put on our going-to-church clothes and hope to arrive early enough to get a window seat. Waving madly with our paper fans provided by the local funeral parlors did little good. Our clothes were stuck to us, and perspiration ran down our backs.

Upon our leaving church, we all looked as though we had participated in a mass baptism.

Most of the time, I idealize the past, as many seniors do. I, too, feel that most of it was a much happier, peaceful, enjoyable time. But when it comes to the heat and pondering what in the world we ever did before “AC,” I can answer, very confidently, “We suffered!”