

Buck Stove: The Buck Stops Here

By Donna Orozco

Visalia Times-Delta, Tuesday, February 22, 2017

Wood stoves used to be the enemy of cleaning up the environment. Now they're the good guys.

Talk to Bob Hawn, owner of Buck Stove Pool & Spa in Visalia, and he'll tell you all about it.

"We were the dirty stove people, putting out four cups an hour of particulates," he explained. "The new stoves are regulated to put out no more than 4.5 grams an hour."

Even better, natural gas stoves put out zero grams, and they have a smart thermostat that automatically turns the flame up and down. Plus, no wood to haul.

Federal emission standards on wood stoves came out in 1990, and Hawn figures he has been working with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District for 15 years. In fact, he and a dealer in Fresno and Modesto are now called the Three Amigos because of their input and involvement.

"To the air district, we were the heavy polluters. They didn't realize how much cleaner our stoves burned," he said. "We showed them we are part of the solution."

Because the San Joaquin Valley has the dirtiest air in the nation (tied with the Los Angeles area), the air district proposed grants for residents with open-hearth fireplaces or wood burning stoves to install the cleaner wood burning inserts or gas inserts. But the rebate amount was so low, it drew little interest.

Now—only in the San Joaquin Valley—residents can get a grant of \$1,000 to \$3,000 for EPA-approved stoves.

45 years in business

Hawn got into the buck stove business in 1980 as an installer's helper. Pretty soon, he started coming in after doing installations and helped with sales.

"I came in all dirty and started selling more than the salespeople," he said. "I was always number one or two in sales."

He says knowing all about installations and having the gift of gab helped.

A few years later, the owners went out of business, and in 1984 Hawn and two others reopened the store. Nine years later, Hawn bought out his two partners.

"When I took over as sole owner, we went into the spa side," he said. "We needed to add something for summer sales. We had ceiling fans, but the big box companies came in with them, and so we needed something else."

Today his business is about half stoves and half spas. And the company is still called Buck Stove even though Hawn hasn't sold a Buck Stove brand in 20 years.

"When people buy a wood stove, they say they bought a Buck. It's like saying Kleenex instead of tissue."

When the stove business began upgrading and going to gas, Buck Stoves didn't modernize, so Hawn now sells other brands. He has been one of the top dealers in the nation for Country Stoves (now Innovative Hearth Products).

"People wanted prettier stoves, and the old companies didn't change. Buck Stoves had three styles—small, medium and large—all black."

Today, Hawn will cut custom panels and fireplace faces and even paint the face a different color. He has designed a few faces himself, having learned after 45 years what customers want. Those faces have just been manufactured and were first available at Hawn's store.

Buck Stoves is the only stove business in Visalia, and Hawn—a mechanic at heart—has built all the fireplace displays himself.

Gas stoves were introduced in the early 90s, and by 1996 they were Hawn's top seller.

About 20 percent of his stove business is still wood, mostly up in the hills where wood is plentiful and gas might not be available. He sells a few pellet stoves, but gas is the majority.

If you have to buy the wood, the cost to run a wood stove is about the same as a gas stove.

"I have a customer from Lake Isabella. He has a lot of dead trees around and has a chain saw, so it will be cheaper for him to burn wood."

Cleaner Valley air

Of course, wood burning is only a small part of the pollution problem, and Hawn says that because the San Joaquin Valley is sitting in a bowl between two mountain ranges, the air would never meet regulations, even if all vehicles and industry were removed.

Dirty air from the Bay Area and even China would still come in. Because of that, the Valley has the toughest rules in the whole United States.

Cars, trucks, diesel and other "mobile sources" are 85 per cent of the pollution problem, said Heather Heinks, outreach and community manager at the San Joaquin Valley Air District in Fresno. The air district only regulates stationary sources, such as wood burning, agriculture burning and manufacturing emissions. In the winter, wood burning is the largest of the stationary pollutants.

However, she adds, the Valley air is 80 percent cleaner today than it was 20 years ago. Modern wood stoves have helped.

Regulations are measured in particulate matter (PM). PM 10 is dust and pollen, larger particles that the body's immune system can often filter out. The dangerous level is PM 2.5. Particles smaller than 2.5 micrograms per cubic meter (less than the diameter of the human hair) burrow deep in the lungs where they can enter the bloodstream and harm the heart and other organs. Today's stoves burn wood so efficiently, they no longer produce PM 2.5.

One reason, they are more efficient is because they reburn the smoke. If you have smoke going up the chimney, you are wasting fuel, Hawn said.

Hawn's humor and gregariousness is an asset to the serious discussions at the air district.

"He always has that look on his face," said Heinks. "He'll throw out a one-liner and we all laugh."

And he has the right personality to communicate the complex issues while helping the customers get the product they want, she said.

While talking to you, he'll throw out a zinger or two. A favorite?

"The Buck stops here."