



CHAPTER 1

THE COLD







In need of fire he is, he who steps inside,
numb with cold knees.

—*Hávamál* (*Sayings of the High One*), from the *Poetic Edda*, orally transmitted Old Norse mythological poems recorded in the thirteenth century

It was the difference between being frozen and being warm. The difference between ore and iron, between raw meat and steak. In winter it was the difference between life and death. That is what wood meant to the first Norwegians. Gathering fuel was one of the most crucial of all tasks, and the calculation was simplicity itself: a little, and you would freeze. Too little, and you would die.



Perhaps in the course of a few thousand years of frost and suffering a uniquely Nordic woodburning gene has evolved, one that is lacking in people living in more clement parts of the world. Because wood is the reason the northern peoples are *here at all*—without it these cold regions would simply have been uninhabitable. A mere century or so of fan heaters has not been enough to wipe out that debt of gratitude—and the joy that harvesting firewood brings may well reflect the awakening and activation of that gene, something that connects us through the ages to the gatherers we are all descended from.

For thousands of years wood was *serious business* in Norway. From the earliest times, people in the north have chopped green wood and dried it in preparation for the coming winter. Wood has left its mark on the Scandinavian languages. In Swedish and Norwegian, the word for “firewood” is *ved*, and the

Old Norse word for “forest” is the almost identical *viðr*. Trees meant heat, and since time immemorial people have gathered around open fires in their camps, and later around fire pits, with the smoke escaping through a vent in the roof or tent.

Of course, in former times wood was crucial to the survival of people all over the world, for heating and preparing food. It is our most ancient source of energy, its uses and traditions subject in the main to two conditions: what kind of forests there were, and how cold the winters were. In the years around 1850, for example, the one million inhabitants of Paris consumed annually some three hundred thousand cords of wood. If in our times Scandinavia has become an especially interesting region in which to study the history and culture of heating with wood—bearing in mind that the use of firewood here has *increased* hugely over the last thirty years—the principal reasons are these: We have a wealth of forestland; our tradition of woodburning has never been broken by the adoption of coal burning or any other means of obtaining heat; Scandinavian countries have been in the forefront of the development of clean-burning stoves with minimal pollution; and, perhaps the single most important factor of all, we cannot modernize our weather. Up here in the north it is still cold.

The Pleasures of Chopping Wood

Wood is chopped, dried, and stacked in fairly similar ways across the Scandinavian Peninsula. Consumption in Norway, Sweden, and Finland is on average 660, 750, and 860 pounds (300, 340, and 390 kilograms) per capita, respectively. Populous Sweden alone goes through three million metric tons of wood a year. Even in oil-rich Norway, an astonishing 25 percent of the energy used to heat private homes comes from wood, and half of that is wood chopped by private individuals.

So the consumption of wood in present-day Scandinavia is not great.

It is *enormous*.

How big? Well, if we take as an example the annual consumption in

PREVIOUS LEFT Birch has always been regarded as the queen of firewood in Norway. It grows tall with few branches, and splits easily. This is a meticulously cared-for forest of birch near Fåvang in Gudbrandsdalen. Most of the trees were planted twenty years ago, and undergrowth has been cut away at regular intervals.

PREVIOUS RIGHT A drying bin made of iron mesh is a good supplement to woodpiles—it is perfect for twisted wood that is difficult to stack.

OPPOSITE Mountain birch in a fine, robust square woodpile stacked by Eimund Åsvang of Drevsjø.

