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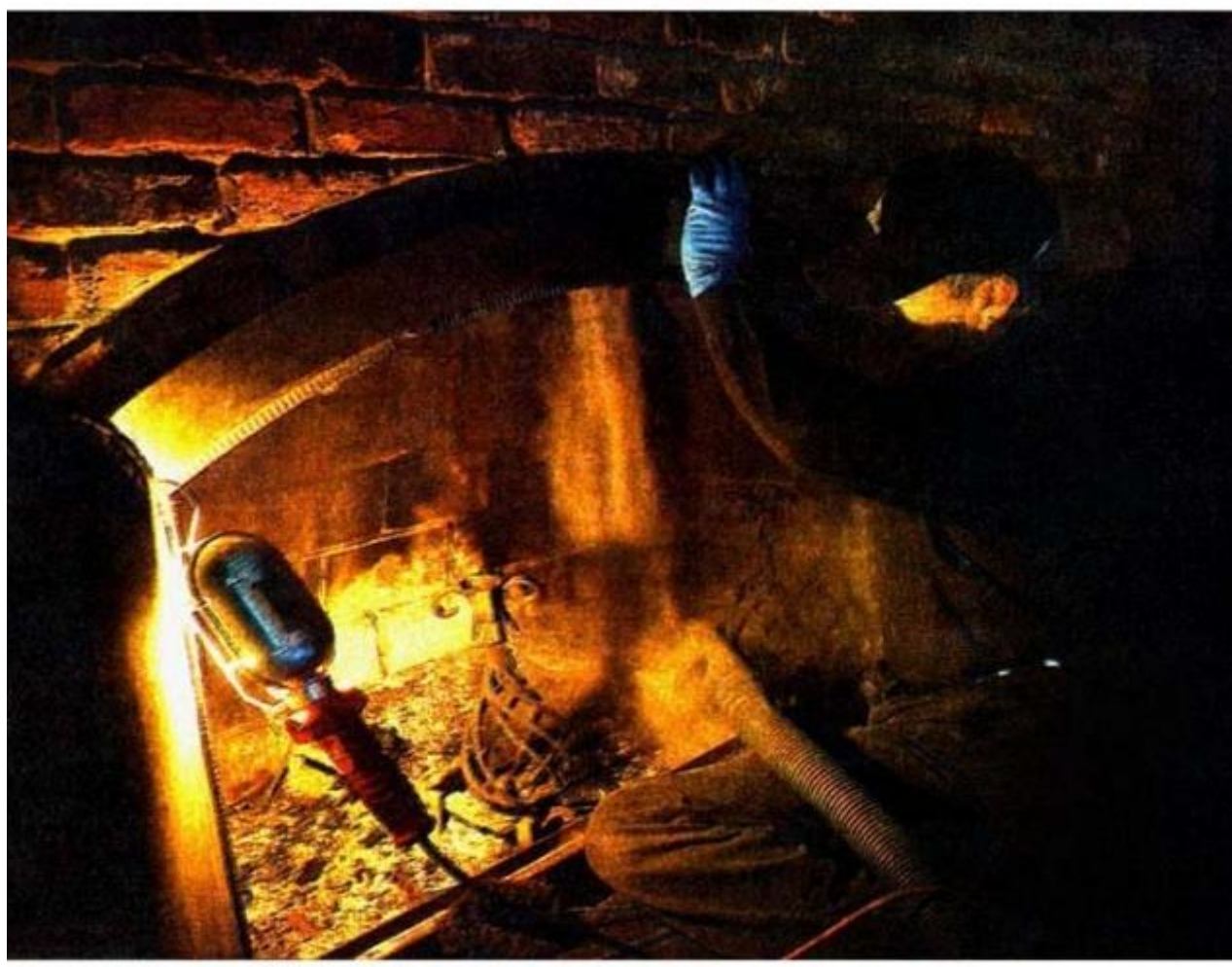
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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2007

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LIFE/Home



Photographs by Michael Conner/The Washington Times

Good clean sweep



Giving chimneys regular care helps keep house safe

By Jen Waters
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Ludith and Charles Perso use their family room fireplace almost every night during the winter, enjoying the relaxing atmosphere it gives their Purcellville, Va., home.

Because they use the fireplace regularly, Mr. Perso says he is careful to have the chimney swept and inspected by

a professional every summer before the burning season. "One of the first years we lived here, we noticed we had a bird in the chimney," Mr. Perso says. "After that, we put a wire cap on it and have not had that problem since." With cold weather approaching, homeowners should make sure their chimneys are prepared for wintertime. Keeping the chimney in good working order could prevent a fire. The National Fire Protection Association in Quincy, Mass., recommends that masonry chimneys be inspected annually, says Sheila Laszlo, owner of Ace & Ashless Chimneys Inc. in Arlington. Her company cares for the Persos' chimney. It costs \$165 for a service call, inspection and sweep. It costs \$85 for

Kenwyn Ward of Johnson Power Vac (above) sweeps a chimney at a home in Potomac. Walter Kerr (right), also of Johnson Power Vac, cleans the chimney of the home's wood-burning fireplace of carbon and soot. Mr. Kerr then lets the broken soot fall out of the chimney (top photo).



just a service call and inspection. Even if the fireplace isn't used, yearly inspections are recommended, primarily for structural integrity, Mrs. Laszlo says.

"Don't burn a fire in the fireplace until the interior and exterior of the chimney have passed a safety inspection," she advises.

If a fireplace is used three or more times a week, it likely will require a sweep when the burning season is finished, she says.

Wood choice is important when trying to prevent a buildup of soot and creosote in the chimney, she adds. Unseasoned, rotten, wet wood creates more problems, even if the fireplace is used less frequently. Burning the evergreen branches from a Christmas tree in the fireplace can be extremely problematic, she says, because of the mess it will leave in the chimney.

Though loose soot can be brushed out of the chimney, third-degree creosote can be removed only with spray-on chemical treatment, she says. Third-degree creosote is a flammable, thick buildup that can cause chimney fires. It is caused by poor wood choices and burning habits.

Rotary treatment with chains can be used in severe situations to get rid of third-degree creosote, Mrs. Laszlo says. The cost to remove it begins at \$225 per flue.

"The key is to burn small, hot fires using hardwood," Mrs. Laszlo says. "That minimizes the accumulation of creosote and maximizes heat output."

People with wood stoves connected to a chimney should get them inspected at least every month, especially if they burn them many hours a day, says David Myers, owner of American Professional Chimney and Masonry Service in Hyattsville.

Until homeowners know how much creosote and soot the wood stove creates, many stove manufacturers suggest checking the chimney every two weeks, he says.

"It's more problematic with an older wood stove," Mr. Myers says. "Manufacturers are now making stoves that burn much cleaner."



Walter Kerr replaces the handle of a fireplace flue. Homeowners should have their chimneys inspected annually.

If nothing seems to be wrong with the chimney, video scans are a good way to get a closer look, especially with older homes, he says. If someone doesn't want to pay to fix a fireplace chimney, it is best not to use the fireplace.

"You are burning a fire inside your house," Mr. Myers says. "You want everything to be as safe as possible."

When the fireplace chimney is inspected, the furnace or gas chimney also should be inspected, he says. Sometimes, it can be in worse condition than the fireplace chimney.

If the heat in the home has shut off and won't turn back on, there might be something wrong with the furnace chimney, Mr. Myers says. To prevent carbon monoxide poisoning, the furnace and the furnace chimney need to be cleaned and inspected annually. Mr. Myers says he has sent clients to the emergency room before for possible carbon monoxide poisoning.

One time, a technician arrived at a home where the woman's furnace was on fire and she didn't realize it, says Joni Fontana, vice president of Johnson Power Vac Inc. in Northwest. The company has offices in Alexandria and Bethesda.

"She kept smelling smoke, but she didn't know where it was coming from," Ms. Fontana says. "She was sitting in the house with her cat drinking tea. By the time the firetrucks got there, the whole first floor was on fire."

As part of properly maintaining a chimney, caps should be placed over the furnace and fireplace chimneys, she says. Otherwise, sparks from the chimney could fly onto the roof, or the chimney could become the perfect place for animals to nest.

"If an animal gets stuck in the chimney, it causes a back draft, and carbon monoxide or smoke would come back down the chimney, or the animal dies there and you have maggots," Ms. Fontana says. "You just need a chimney cap. It's so important."