

Status Report - December First 2018



By Anna Von Reitz

I recall asking certain of my neighbors to join our Food Storage Club some years back. Alaska is inordinately dependent on food shipped in from the Lower 48. Except for salmon and a few moose, berries and home gardens and barley, there isn't much here in terms of food, unless you are a really careful and knowledgeable forager (like my husband).

And even he prefers not to eat lichen boiled in saltwater.

How they laughed at me! How they derided the whole idea of a Food Storage Club! What was I? A "Prepper"??? A "Sovereign Citizen"??? Oh, ha-ha-ha! Even here in Alaska, they were all too good for me. Too modern. Too sophisticated. They dog-trotted away with horrible fixed grins on their faces and didn't look back.

I and a few Northern Mormons and a Sergeant Major's widow did it anyway.

Today, after an actual disaster, it's a different story.

Two of these neighbors (who never read this blog) are huddled in front of my old stove keeping warm and eating bowlfuls of corn chowder as if it was the most exquisite thing ever. Two more have been keeping warm via electrical heat exchange units I provided and at least a dozen more who snubbed the whole idea are eating today because of our lowly little Tin Hat Food Storage Club.

As I write, I have three elders, seven small children, and three people recovering from injuries/surgeries under my care. I am at the Anchorage office pinch-hitting and tending woodpiles and woodstoves around the clock. More than 600 homes and businesses remain without gas for heat, and many additional businesses including food stores and gas stations, are closed for repairs.

This is exactly the scenario I described in my 2007 book, "Alaska's Gas" where I explained how dependency on natural gas for heat in a cold climate can turn into a disaster --- and it has.

Once a portion of the gas grid goes down or the "drop out valves" related to specific homes go out, an actual technician has to check the system, re-pressurize the whole thing, and turn the gas back on.

This is a time and tech expensive process. It can take a long time to turn the gas back on --- days, even weeks, given limited numbers of trained technicians. And in the meantime, people have to stay warm and their houses need to stay above freezing or the water pipes blow and a whole different kind of frozen flood disaster begins.

Thank God the electrical grid in Anchorage didn't go down at the same time as the gas grid. Many people would be living in their cars watching the fuel gauge run out--- and freezing to death after that.

Do you know what happens when the lights go out? If you don't have a generator and fuel for it, the lights stay out. And the gas stations have gas, but 99% of them can't pump it, because guess what? Their pumps need electricity and the gas stations don't have generators....

Many years ago, I noted this formula for disaster to the local gas station owner in Big Lake. He looked thunder-struck. He'd never really thought about it, but.... soon thereafter he installed generators and reserve tanks at his gas station, and lo, and behold, yesterday when people were desperate, I heard the radio announcer saying, "Hey, folks, if you are on the Parks Highway and looking for gas, the station at Big Lake is still pumping...."

Yep. Us Tin Hats at work again.

When I installed an old-fashioned iron water pump with a handle people laughed, too. Some asked if it was a decoration. No, I had to explain, it was fully functional and fitted with a special gizmo that allows me to pump water directly into my house system and keep it pressurized.

Ah, so, my toilets flush, my water runs, and all I have to do is go outside and pump the handle. It's a lot easier than I had it as a kid, doing the same thing back on the farm and having to carry two five-gallon buckets sloshing all the way back to Grandma's house.

So the Uppity Neighbors who laughed and thought I was odd are now grateful to have drinking water and a five gallon water container to carry it home, too.

The State Troopers who used to cruise past my house verry slowly, called me up and asked if my pump was in service and would I be making water available to people in need, if electrical service couldn't be promptly restored?

All it takes is a 7.0 Earthquake to jolt things back into view.

This is the moment when the Grasshopper Politicians confront the fact that: (1) they have no way of restoring gas service to over 600 locations at once, and (2) they have no way to pump fuel during electrical outages, and (3) there are "no" safe supplies of drinking water when the grid goes down because almost nobody has private wells and hand pumps anymore.

Almost. Unless you happen to me, or one of my Knothead buddies.

"Oh," chuffed one local Blowhard, "no need to store any food. The stores will stay open."

The food store isn't open today in Big Lake, Alaska. It might not be open tomorrow or even next week.

As for our Team here, we are all still standing, battered, but not down.

Several of us lost all or nearly all of our china and glassware; some (including me) lost major and minor appliances that "fried" when the electrical grid went bonkers.

There were a lot of minor injuries--scratched arms, twisted legs, bruised shoulders, cuts from broken glass. Nearly everyone is stiff and sore and limping around.

One of our Team was hit by a heavy ceiling lamp fixture that nearly cold-conked her and took a gash out of her scalp. She also lost about 200 years-worth of family glassware. She's hurt and disoriented and sorting through the rubble today, and though she is a tough lady, there's some sniffing and extra nose-blowing going on. And of course, there's the splendid designer bandage on her head.

Another Team Member very narrowly avoided being run off the road by a crazed driver who barreled through a broken stoplight intersection at 80 mph. Apparently, some people don't know that when stoplights go out, every intersection becomes a four-way stop and everyone has to take turns. [They don't remember hand directional signals, either: hand up, elbow at right angle means "right turn", while arm straight out means "left turn".]

Another Team Member had a gas leak and was lucky enough to avoid inhalation or explosion. Another one of our guys was just recovering from surgery when this hit and should be resting, but isn't.

And now we are having a sleet storm with gale-force winds. Oh, joy. That makes hauling wood and splitting it a real treat.... picture me in my flannel shirt, Helly Hansen rain gear, Irish fisherman's sweater, pack boots with ice grips and a woolie helmet hat with the flaps down over my ears....

I have no hot water where I am and no central heat. We are keeping the home fires burning--- literally, in a cast iron woodstove, and I am washing dishes the old way:

First, you find water. Then, you find a way to heat water. Then, you find a pan or a water-tight sink. Then you pour hot water into the dishpan or sink, and if you have it, dish soap and/or vinegar into the hot water.... then you dump all the dirty eating utensils except sharp knives to soak in the bottom of the pan while you do the glassware first, the scraped plates second, and the dirty eating utensils next. The heavily soiled pots and pans come last.

There is a logic to washing dishes by hand. There are tricks to every trade.

Some people add bleach to dish water, but I don't care to eat bleach, so I use vinegar or salt to kill bacteria on contact. You might have to use bleach if you are fighting a disease like cholera, but for normal cleaning, vinegar, salt, and baking soda will do.

You use hot water to wash dishes, as hot as you can stand, with enough soap to make bubbles but not enough to form a slimy film on dishes. To save fuel, you will want to rinse your dishes in cold water--which only works well if you learn to use the right amount of soap.

I spent enough years washing dishes by hand to know the tricks: how to conserve energy, how to sterilize things, how to kill bacteria, the right amount of soap, the proper order of things to wash....and as I did this, today, I wondered how many young people know?

And if the world keeps being tilted off its axis by criminals, how many other people will need to know? Almost certainly the neighbors who have been snickering all these years will need to know.

Final note--- we are facing hard times here and its ten times worse because of this earthquake. Team members are pretty plucky or they wouldn't be team members, but even some of them are dragging around like Eeyore, the Donkey, in Winnie-the-Pooh: "I guess we'll make it. Don't have any choice..."

Well, right.

We need cash donations to replace necessary things and pay for fuel. It's frankly too cold and too late in the year to send foodstuff that can be spoiled by being frozen in transit. That includes canned goods.

As a group we have lost two kitchen stoves, a Toyostove, a freezer, and a computer to electrical surges, and at least five replacement sets of every day dishes, sustained three visits to Urgent Care facilities for bangs and cuts and gashes, and several of us are now accruing large electric bills because the gas is off to so many homes.

If you can help, I am still Grandma-in-Charge. I am still here, doing my best to take care of everybody. Even the Pooh-Pooher neighbors.

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