



Full of Hot Air? By MARY CASHIOLA

When Conway Services Heating and Cooling began its "oldest furnace" contest earlier this month, organizers thought they'd get about 70 entrants. "We met with over 30 homeowners in just the first 10 days of the contest," says company owner John Conway. "We have been surprised. We didn't realize how many old heaters there were out there."

As part of the company's 15th anniversary, Conway is awarding a new \$2,500 furnace to the person who can show he or she has the oldest working heating system in the area. The winner will be announced March 5th at the Vesta Home Show. To enter, call 384-3511.

So, how old is an old furnace? Conway estimates that the average lifespan is somewhere between 12 and 15 years.

"Some systems out there last 20 years," says Conway. "Some die at eight. Then there are some variables, such as how the homeowner maintains the system."

Conway expected to see some real "dinosaurs," and he hasn't been disappointed. Just the other day, he went on a service call where the heater was 26 years old, and the homeowner didn't even know about the contest.

"We're seeing a lot of 20- and 30-year-old systems," he says of the contest's entrants. "If it's still running, they don't replace it. They just buy lots of duct tape. What they don't realize is how much the energy is costing them."

Or maybe, especially in recent months, they do. At the beginning of winter, Memphis Light, Gas and Water promised, er, estimated that heating bills would increase by 70 percent this year.

Linda Clements and her husband have lived in their Annesdale-Snowden home since 1984 and say they haven't replaced the furnace because they simply cannot afford to do so.

"It's been a very faithful furnace," Clements says. "It doesn't have youthful qualities like higher efficiency, but it was intended to last. I think whoever designed it wasn't into planned obsolescence."

When the couple bought the house -- their first and only -- they paid a structural engineer to inspect all its nooks and crannies.

"He looked like Pig Pen when he got through," says Clements. "He said this furnace is not particularly efficient, but it only has one moving part, so it's not likely to wear out in your lifetime."

The engineer recommended that they keep the furnace, because they wouldn't recoup enough savings on their utility bills to justify buying a more efficient one.

Clements thought that was good advice, until last month when her MLGW bill came in at more than \$700.

"I can pay that bill one time, but any more bills like that, we just can't do. The month before, it had more than doubled. I think that one was \$318, and I thought, okay, we can handle this for a few months. Then it more than doubled again," she says.

Her husband recently retired, and even so, \$700 is \$700. After all the other bills and expenses, how many people have a \$700 cushion in their monthly budget?

"We have the smallest house on the block. We keep the thermostat set on 55," says Clements. "It makes no sense."

George Graflund also entered Conway's contest, and when his entry wasn't old enough to win him a new furnace, he replaced it anyway. His house originally belonged to his parents; he moved in about seven years ago.

And his main reason for upgrading?

"Because of what gas is costing from MLGW," he says. "This is an older unit, and furnaces have higher efficiency ratings now. I plan on being in this house for a while, and I thought I'd save some money."

Graflund has always done minor upkeep on the furnace himself, cleaning it and oiling the motor. "It's not dead by any means, but I'm looking at cost efficiency and it seems like it might be worth it."

Graflund probably isn't the only Memphian weighing the costs and benefits of new heating equipment.

I haven't done any scientific polling, but I don't know anyone who isn't wearing a sweater (or two) while at home. I've turned my thermostat down to 60; I hung curtains. I was gone a week last month, and my bill still doubled. Frankly, I don't know what else I can do. And don't get me started on those "MLGW is doing everything it can" commercials.

Conway points out that older-furnace owners could save about \$200 a month on their utility bills with a new system. But, I've got to say, his best sales pitch is probably this: "If you've got a 20-year-old system, you know it's probably on its last legs," he says. "If it's running and you keep it for five more years, you're going to have to pay that extra \$10,000 to the utility company ... and you know they'll spend it wisely."

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