

Comfort and joy by a high-def hearth

Traditional fireplaces are going digital

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In Decembers of auld, Norsemen would wassail wine and venture forth to fell the largest oak, which would be lit as the year's "hjóll log." Today, wired on ginger-nog lattés, we trudge to the local Best Buy and haul home a massive HDTV plasma screen with which to spark a DVD digi-fire.

Needless to say, the Yule log has undergone a few transformations of late. But no matter how much it must morph to suit our increasingly chimney-free lifestyles, we humans can't seem to let go of this crackling tradition.

In 1966, the general manager of New York's WPIX television broadcast a simple burning fire on TV at Christmas. It brought a few hours of commercial-free cheer to all the "cave dwellers" of the city -- all those New Yorkers who lived in dark, cramped apartments lacking fireplaces -- and it was the start of a holiday movement.

A number of local analog channels across Canada will be showing four-hour segments of the burning log in this 40th season, starting at 6 a.m. on Christmas. And to keep pace with technology, the Yule log has also gone high-definition -- two HD Canadian channels, WGNDT and CITYDT, will be showing high-def logs at 11:30 p.m. Christmas Eve and at 3 a.m. on Christmas morning, respectively (don't forget to set your TiVo).

"HD has caught on now," Jim Barr, a product specialist at A&B Sound in Vancouver, says. "It is something people can talk about because they've seen it advertised on TV, or heard about it on the radio."

There are also options for those looking to escape the tyranny of the network schedule. Asya Melville, who works at A&B Sound, finds that it's mostly 25- to 35-year-olds who are inquiring about fireplace DVDs.

"Last year, people wanted it for a background for parties or clubs," she says. "This year it's more to do with their new home [theatre] systems."

Her co-worker, Lindsey Michie, says the popular Canadian title *Faux Fire* is out of stock (at HMV down the road, 94 were reportedly on order). "I had a guy pester me for a half hour, asking me if it had DTS 5.1 surround sound. His girlfriend was pretty embarrassed."

In fact, there is at least one 1080i high-definition fireplace DVD with 5.1 surround sound, released this year by VAT19.com under the title *Ambient Fireplace*. Justin Schmidt, marketing director for VAT19 in St. Louis, said he sees a spike in demand for fireplace videos around Christmas, and offers a little insight into our desire for ambient TV.

"I think a lot of TVs now -- especially the thin plasmas and LCDs -- are such awesome pieces of equipment and are usually the focal point of a living room. When the TV is on, it's beautiful and really draws everyone into the room. However, when it's turned off it's just this giant black hole hung on the wall," he says.

Though he won't divulge the year's sales figures, Mr. Schmidt says they're good enough that his company plans to continue producing and selling digital-TV fire "screensavers." "There's definitely an upswing of popularity for these things -- no doubt."

And there's always the downloadable-fireplace option. Firms such as Vancouver's Ion Design (<http://www.iondesign.ca>) offer basic, free fireplace Flash videos for those stuck at airports with their notebook over the holidays, or for whom the computer has become the entertainment focal point. "Psychologically, it feels warmer in the room," laughs Ion's Shawn Bouchard.

And while ersatz fire and crackle hardly seem comforting to some, perhaps it is for the best that some traditions are adaptable. Gerry Bowler, professor of history at the University of Manitoba and author of *The World Encyclopedia of Christmas and Santa Claus: A Biography*, is suspicious of the Yule log's cozy reputation.

"Some people have speculated it's a hangover from human sacrifices. There are some places in England where a figure is chalked onto the log," he explains.

When it comes to Christmas traditions, nothing -- and everything -- is sacred.