

Smiles best reward for roof top job

A bit o' luck part of smudged sweep's life

By STEWART WRIGHT
Of the Emerald

A Chimney sweep, legend says, is kind, loved by children, wears a smudged coat and top hat and has a certain comic charm.

David Stuart Bull, Esq., fits that image right down to his twinkling blue eyes and smudged nose. His top hat, however, seems to have degenerated into an elongated derby. He attracts smiles and children wherever he goes; he is invited to weddings just to kiss the bride for luck, and old ladies wish him well on the street.

"One of the things I like about this business is that it brings out the best in people," he says. "It seems to make them smile."

Bull, who calls himself the Jolly Good Chimney Sweep, has himself enjoyed a bit of the luck which sweeps are supposed to bring. Since 1973, and the oil crisis, business has been booming, he says. During that time the number of full-time sweeps in this country has gone from several hundred to five or six thousand.

In Eugene, a dozen or so sweeps have gone in and out of business in the past several years, and now there are only two or three full-time sweeps in the area, he says. They are kept busy because of renewed interest in burning wood — something Bull says people don't know much about.

"We're a thermostat generation," he says. "We're not knowledgeable about burning



Photo by Jimmi Harris

Business is booming for the Jolly Good Chimney Sweep. The 1973 oil crisis created a renewed interest in burning wood and a plenty of sooty chimneys for David Bull to swab. The sweep also

wood anymore."

So the Jolly Good Chimney Sweep distributes advice while he works. He cautions against flu fires, caused by the buildup of excessive soot and creosote (oily stuff used in preserving wood). There's a special danger of fire when people vent their slow-burning wood stoves into the fireplace, he says. If such a setup is used, a roaring log fire should be built in the fireplace now and then to burn up the excess creosote.

Proper wood is also important, Bull says — dry, seasoned hardwood burns the best. Care of the chimney is a maintenance item all too often overlooked, but "for most chimneys, sweeping them once a year is plenty, if they aren't being misused."

Bull has other irons in the fire. He's working on a collection of children's stories about chimney sweeps. In the springtime, he turns into a rototilling Robin Hood. Dressed all in green, he calls himself the "Jolly Good

distributes advice about the art of wood burning to his customers while he works. "We're a thermostat generation," he says.

Rototiller." He carries a quiver of arrows, with seed packets stuck to each.

He has written and marketed a Chimney Sweep Calendar, full of chimney sweep lore and helpful hints about fireplaces. He's also working on a plan to market silver belt buckles with the likeness of Saint Florian, the patron saint of chimney sweeps. Florian was a Roman-officer-turned-Christian who was dumped into a lake with weights around his neck. He was known for his ability to extinguish fires.

Romantic though his trade may be, Bull says, it has its disadvantages.

"I don't think I would want to stay in it much longer than a year or two," he said. "Too many safety hazards. It's too easy to fall and break your neck."

He also complains of the intake of soot and the often contorted positions in which he must work. The work itself is not very glamorous, consisting mainly of swabbing the chimney from the top with a square steel brush, and from the bottom with a giant vacuum cleaner. But, he says, "when you're standing up there on a roof in the older part

of town, taking a break, there's nothing quite like it."

Bull got his start in England, where he grew up. "I was never an apprentice," he said, "but all of us kids used to follow the sweeps around and wait for a chance to hand them tools for a farthing."

His parents moved to America, and Bull went on to drop out of college in Utah, where he was studying English. Since then he's held a variety of jobs, but self-employment has always been his dream, he says. He started sweeping chimneys part time, and only in the last three years has been able to go at it full time during the busy fall season.

Now he looks forward to winter, when he'll have time to work on his stories and other schemes. Also in his future is the purchase of a new business vehicle — a moped — which he plans to hook a trailer to carry his tools on. "It's economical, and besides, it would be fun," he says.

Bull charges an average of \$35 for sweeping a chimney — a deceptive amount considering expenses and the short, busy season. That's about the going rate, says Bull, and a fair price for a dirty job which people are reluctant to do themselves.

But there are other rewards for chimney sweeps, like what they can pull out of a chimney — in Bull's case, some tennis balls, a pheasant, and a live, formerly white, pet duck.

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