

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

October 2, 2003

...When the Lights Went Out

I was working a column about emergency preparedness last weekend, a column based on my experiences during two recent power outages at my home. As I was writing, the power went out one more time, adding a new advisory to my list: save your computer documents often!

Seriously, the loss of electricity requires changes to our routine beyond the search for flashlights or lanterns. Last month's hurricane Isabel spared Longmeadow, and we lucked out in the summer's massive Northeast blackout as well. The blackouts in my neighborhood have come from summer wind, an automobile accident and autumn rain. Here are some of the lessons from my own experiences – coupled with valuable advice from Longmeadow Fire Chief Eric Madison.

Lesson 1. Know where the candles and matches are. A scented candle or a decorative taper can light the room very well when it is not overpowered by incandescent lights (Chief Madison has a different point of view. See below).

Lesson 2. Keep a simple telephone in the house. Modern telephones don't operate when the lights go out, so you can't even call the electric company. With a non-electric receiver it is easy to report the outage and get an estimate of its duration from the WMECO automated phone system.

Lesson 3. Keep a manual can-opener on hand. A cupboard stocked with canned food does not do much good if the opener needs electricity to operate. I improvised with the triangular tip of an old bottle opener to open can of tuna, but next time I will be ready.

Lesson 4. Learn how to open your garage door manually. The battery-operated remote cannot do the trick without the electric motor, and you must have access to the inside of a detached garage in order to release the mechanism.

Here are some tips from Chief Madison on how to prepare for an extended power outage.

Batteries are important. Keep extras on hand for a portable radio and working flashlights, but *don't* use candles as a light source because they have been shown to start fires.

Keep a good supply of canned food in stock along with several gallons of bottled water for drinking.

Know how to shut off the main breaker to your power supply to avoid damage to your home's electric system when power returns. Know how to shut off all of your natural gas and water supplies if needed.

Do not use an emergency generator unless it has been installed by a qualified electrician. Several deaths in the recent hurricane were caused by carbon monoxide poisoning from improper use of generators. Portable, un-vented kerosene or propane heaters are other carbon monoxide dangers.

Stay in touch with neighbors, especially if they are elderly. Neighborhood interaction will help each family through the crisis.

As it turned out, the recent blackouts were not massive or long, but the experiences of millions of our neighbors from hurricane Isabel and the Northeast blackout should serve as an incentive for all of us to prepare for an unexpected natural or man-made disaster. We all rely on light from the light switches on the wall and toast that

pops out of the toaster. But, please, take a little time to get ready for the possibility that we may have to make do for a time without those conveniences of daily life. And don't forget to save your computer documents often.