

Gas

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by James Collins

Gas was the key utility used in the Bronx. Furnaces burned coal but everything including the refrigerators burned gas. Now, the small nozzle that metered the gas into the base of the refrigerator influenced the efficiency of the unit. For safety, and to keep the cost low, you had to have it cleaned on a regular basis. A licensed plumber normally did this. However, our family did not have the funds to hire a plumber, so my father had learned to do all of these tasks himself.

Our building in the Bronx was a five-story apartment house around a central courtyard, which came in from the street as a setback. Therefore, the apartments surrounded the courtyard on three sides. The main entrance was at the end of the courtyard and there were several broad steps rising in the courtyard to make an impressive entrance. We lived on the fourth floor in apartment 4C overlooking the courtyard on one side. Directly below, on the third floor was the Riordan family in apartment 3B.

Initially, my father would obtain about 40 feet of plastic tubing one half inch diameter on the outside and about a quarter inch or less on the inside. He then removed the aperture from the gas refrigerator and immediately hooked on the hose and threw the open hose end out the kitchen window. This diverted any gas and exhausted it harmlessly to the outside. However, this was a summer day and every window was open. My father took the aperture over to the kitchen sink and, using carbon tetrachloride, cleaned it vigorously using an old toothbrush and dry cloths to absorb the carbon tetrachloride.

While busy at his task, fire engine sirens could be heard and they pulled up in front of the house. Several firemen rushed into the courtyard with all of the paraphernalia needed to encounter any kind of fire emergency. As he looked out the window he heard the firemen yell "it's 3B". He looked to the window below for smoke and he noticed that the hose that he was using to exhaust the gas had blown into the open window of the Riordan kitchen. Immediately, my father pulled the hose up, wrapped it around his hand and put the refrigerator back together with the clean aperture in its place. There was an awful lot of commotion downstairs as the fire department searched everywhere. Apparently Mrs. Reardon was found passed out in the kitchen and all the evidence indicated it might be a gas leak, but no matter what test equipment they used, the firemen could not find the source of the gas. This went on for about an hour and a half. Then the firemen left. My family never informed the neighbors of the cause of Mrs. Riorden passing out. It would've been an embarrassment and probably end up with my father in court, but that was the way things were done in the Bronx.