

- A. Charcoal today brings to mind charcoal broiled steaks.
 - B. Or, perhaps, you've seen a demonstration of a blacksmith heating his iron red hot in a charcoal fire fanned to a glowing brightness by huge bellows.
 - C. If you're like my young neighbor, who only knew charcoal briquets, you might exclaim as you looked at the real thing, "That looks just like wood!"
 - D. How could logs and branches of wood turn black through and through in two weeks; and then when used for fuel, produce one of the hottest and most smoke-free fires known to man?
 - E. We will answer that question for you during today's program, "Charcoal Burning on Taborton Mountain." These pictures were taken at various seasons at George Dobert's charcoal pits.
 - F. His family has made them available to us along with the knowledge of this art gained from growing up in the last charcoal-burning family in Taborton.
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- 1. Are you a collier, George? "No, I'm a Dobert, " he would probably quip. George was both because a collier was the name given to the master charcoal burner. Cords of hard wood, birch, beech, maple and cherry would be cut and hauled out of the deep woods during the winter when the ground was hard and covered with snow. During the months of May to October, charcoal pits would be burned and the wood hauled to the pit site. In the woods, birds, singing songs, are constant companions.
 - 2. A level plot of land was selected and cleared for the coal bottom. Each time a pit was started, the charcoal dust and dirt was shoveled back to the bare ground and arranged in a circle at the edge of the pit which could be 24 feet to 30 feet in diameter. Most of the time we think of a pit as a hole in the ground.

3. A charcoal pit is built above the ground and if you were standing on top of it, you could say for a fact that the wood is buried inside that pit. The small building you see isn't important now, but when the pit is burning, it is headquarters for the collier and his helper who need to be close by to keep the fire controlled.
4. In preparation for setting the pit, attention is paid to placing wood in the right order. Smaller branches, 1 1/2 to 4 " around, called limb wood are laid lengthwise over the mound of dirt at the edge of the coal bottom to a height of about two feet.
5. The limb wood then supports the larger logs which have been cut into 4 foot lengths and stood on end.
6. Load after load of wood is place on either side until the bottom is full except for the narrow roadway for the horse and wood shod sled to drive through. Nine to ten cords of wood are needed for a pit with a 24 foot bottom.
7. The time has come to set the pit. Four stakes are sharpened and driven into the ground leaving an eight inch opening at the center of the coal bottom.
8. They form the pit's chimney. Wood is now taken from the sides and placed around the chimney. Care is taken to place each piece at the proper angle. Around and around the wood is placed until a five foot circle is reached.
9. Then the second tier is started by an extension of the chimney, which is a bundle of limb wood, four feet long.
10. Again, piece after piece is stacked from
11. the chimney outward, maintaining a solid packed firmness so there would be no twisting of the pit.
12. The first and second tiers are completed together to the edge of the coal bottom.
13. Next, these tiers are covered with limb wood. Then, the cap or head of the pit is rounded off with shorter pieces of limb wood, taking care to leave the hole in the middle for the chimney. Here's the collier's masterpiece before it is covered up.

14. A layer of hay or leaves, 6-8" thick, is added
15. and then the circle
16. of dirt is shoveled on as the final covering.
17. It takes about two days to set a pit.
18. Now the pit is ready to be fired.
19. Wood chips, dry leaves and fine charcoal are dropped down the chimney and lit.
20. As it gets started, more small wood or pieces of incompletely charred wood, called
beans, are added. When the fire is well started, heavier wood is added.
21. The chimney is covered and
22. foot holes are poked in the bottom against the ground to draw the fire down. During
the first couple of days, the pit is examined every 2-3 hours to be sure it is tight,
which means the only air that is allowed in the beginning is through the footholes.
You can see the wisp of smoke coming out of the foothole. Careful control of the
draft insures a slow burn which causes the wood to char instead of igniting into a
flaming fire. After two to three days, the footholes are closed and new vent holes
are made 2-3 feet from the top and thereafter down the sides as the pit is settled.
This draws the fire to the outside so all the wood chars.
23. Throughout the two week period, the pit must be fed by putting pieces of wood into
the chimney two or three times a day. Depending on the weather, the pit must be
checked every 5 or 6 hours.
24. Any soft spots, where the wood has shrunk or settled, must be stomped from the
firm area inward. Then the spot is carefully dug out, new wood added and covered
again to maintain an airtight pit. This was called, "settling the pit."

25. The vents must be opened or closed as necessary to maintain a "dead fire" in which the wood would be changed to a charred state. A "live fire" spelled disaster with only a pile of ashes to show for all the previous hard work. Other enemies of a good burn would be the wind or rain.
26. At the end of a successful burn, a small section at a time is uncovered and there's the charcoal, wood from which the moisture and coal tar has been removed ready to be raked out. This is known as keeling the pit.
27. It is necessary to have water or dirt nearby for fire lasts a long time in charcoal and must be put out immediately when the air hits it. As well, the exposed area must be covered up again with dirt to keep the rest of the pit air-tight. A good rain at this point can be a definite help.
28. Hauling or raking out of the charcoal is continued for the whole pit.
29. Brans, the uncharred pieces, are laid aside for ^{feeding} the next pit.
30. Bagging the charcoal can be done right at
31. the pit site.
32. With all the charcoal bagged, all that's left of the pit are the spots where the four center posts were staked.
33. The bags are now ready to be loaded and stored until they are needed for delivery. At the turn of the century, a bushel of charcoal was 10¢; now it is \$4.00.
34. In the mid 1800's, charcoal was in demand for the glass factories, steel mills, stove foundaries and in making guns for the Civil War. Hotels, laundry, tinning and plumbing shops used it. Families bought charcoal to start wood fires and some used it as their total fuel. A consistent use for charcoal has been as a purifier. Now, technology and new forms of fuel have made this so-called Black Arte an almost extinct art.
35. We hope that for you, charcoal will always look like wood.