

# Chimney sweeps increase homeowners' safety

By Mary Kiernio  
staff writer

"Chimney sweeps" may bring to mind characters from a Mary Poppins or Charles Dickens story, but cleaning your chimney is really a serious, practical idea for the modern homeowner.

So say Redford Township residents Ray and Marie Gilreath, who, with Larry Lapeer, form High Hat Chimney

Sweep, Inc., a new chimney-cleaning business. They recommend that homeowners have their chimneys cleaned at least once a year before the "burning season" starts in September and have them inspected after that.

"Tars and chemicals will collect in the flue lining itself," Ray Gilreath said. "The more time, they can condense and build up on the walls.

"If a person doesn't have a chimney

fire, that doesn't mean it shouldn't be cleaned."

Since Dec. 1, three fires in Redford Township were caused by chimney fires, said Fire Inspector James Sigler. Sigler confirmed how dangerous such blazes can be.

"It's a real serious fire," he said. "You can end up with a structure fire. If they aren't caught in time, you can lose a whole building because of that."

Temperatures in a chimney fire can go as high as 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Fires this hot, even if brief, can heat masonry chimneys enough to ignite combustibles. Small cracks in masonry

can allow fire through.

Chimney fires are caused by accumulations of soot and creosote, which are formed during the incomplete combustion of wood. The soot and creosote build up into a highly flammable coating.

Creosote may be deposited as a shiny, hard coating or a thick, flaky crust. As the chimney warms — from subsequent fires, for example — the creosote may be altered chemically and finally ignite, easily spreading up the entire chimney. The more it burns, the hotter it gets.

Besides being dangerous, an accumu-

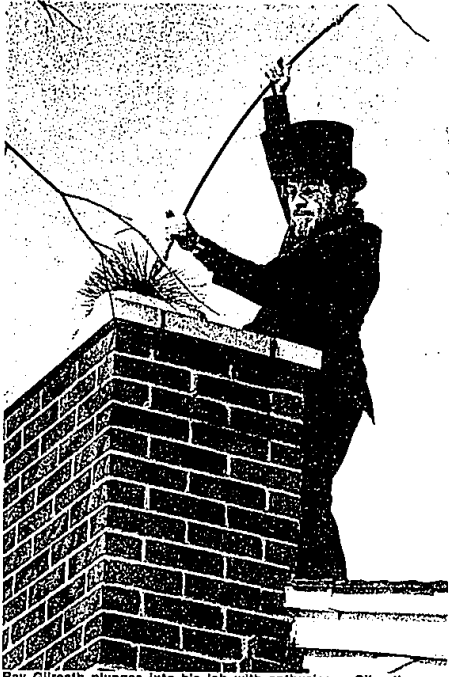
lation of creosote can affect the efficiency of the fireplace or stove, Gilreath said. He said that one-fourth as much fuel will reduce efficiency by 10 to 15 percent.

The chimney cleaning process can take between 30 and 90 minutes. In the first step, the sweeps spread tarps to protect the furniture and floor, and shine a flashlight up into the flue to examine it and see if a cleaning is necessary. A large vacuum is turned on during the actual cleaning to prevent dust and soot from flying into the air.

The one-horsepower motor on the High Hat vacuum moves 700 cubic feet

of air a minute, Gilreath said. "We guarantee we won't leave a mess in their home," he said.

Everybody's surprised there isn't one bit of a mess," Marie Gilreath said. Most of the cleaning work is done from the inside. The sweeps use different-size brushes with flexible, adjustable handles to reach into the chimney. Gilreath said High Hat sweeps will rarely climb on the roof, both for safety reasons and because "people don't really appreciate your climbing on their roof." If the flue goes off on an



Ray Gilreath plunges into his job with enthusiasm. Gilreath recommends that homeowners have their chimneys cleaned at least once a year.

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