

Shirley

By Sam Seabright

Ray, my father-in-law the contractor, had a weekend job to replace a boiler at the Jackson, Michigan State Prison— yes, The Joint. Shirley and I were to be his helpers. When Ray told me he had to pick up Shirley on the way to the job that morning, I naturally tried to picture what Shirley might look like (blonde or brunette?), what were her qualifications, and how competent she might be at installing boilers.

We went into Detroit to pick up Shirley, who turned out to be a very large, very black, very muscular *man*. I was relieved that this person looked like he could do some meaningful grunt work, and realized that you should never prejudge anyone.

We drove to the prison and signed in, then drove to the building that housed the boiler. It crossed my mind that this might not have been Shirley's first visit to the prison.

It was a rusty old boiler, about the size of a Volkswagen Beetle, and solid cast iron. There was no way to remove it whole, so we proceeded to take it apart segment by segment. Each of the eleven six-inch segments, lined up like a set of books, weighed about 200 pounds; two of us could either roll each segment, or wheel them on a dolly, one each trip. It was easier to dolly them out so that is what we did.

After cleaning up the area, we started to bring in the new boiler. It was a similar design, made in segments, and we of course brought it in piece by piece. Shirley and I did most of the assembly while Ray brought in the piping, insulation and tools. We uprighted each segment and loosely mated it to the adjacent segment. When the last segment was in place, we inserted four long draw bolts and squeezed all the segments together, forming a complete boiler. Now we needed to raise the boiler about six inches to get it off the floor.

Ray had already brought in the wood foot blocks, but did not bring in a jack. I told Shirley I will go get the jack. Shirley said, "No, don't get the jack." I was puzzled. He said, "Get the blocks ready." I had no idea what he had in mind.

Shirley said to me, "O.K., grab a block and get ready." Huh? Well, I got ready to shove a block under the still sitting boiler. And one end of the boiler started to rise! Shirley was tilting the boiler; he had just lifted over 1000 pounds by himself! He said, "O.K. put in a block" and I quickly shoved a block under that end, dashed around to the other side, and shoved a block under the other side. Shirley let down the boiler. I was astounded.

He repeated this feat at the other end of the boiler. Then we proceeded to assemble the piping. Shirley was a master at knowing how to put together a boiler: piping, insulation, valves, controls, everything. I got to know him better on subsequent weekend jobs. He could also weld, do plumbing and electrical work .

At that time, I needed just such an excellent boiler and general maintenance man at my regular job; our boiler guy had quit the week before I invited Shirley to apply for the job.

Early Monday, Shirley showed up ready to work. However, he would first need to make out the paperwork: employment application, tax forms, etc. He asked to take the paperwork home so he could complete it there.

Well, that was a sticking point. Shirley could not read, and that was a job requirement. I argued that reading was not part of the job, that I felt he was perfectly capable of doing the job. The counterargument was, he could not even make out his time tickets or boiler reports. I said I would help him. But that was not allowed. I lost the arguments and had to send Shirley home.

I still think Shirley was well qualified, honest and hard working. He wanted and needed a steady job with benefits, and I needed him. But it was not to be. ▼