



## Life in the Dark Ages

With a few exceptions, like the first time I saw a transistor radio at a high school graduation party, change creeps up on you.

“Umm...let’s see, Gary told me that there was a new search engine that was better than Altavista, called Google.” That was then.

Now if I “google” my address, 1146 Lullwater Rd. 30307, and select the map link, I can see the location of the house in Atlanta’s Druid Hills. And if I click the “Hybrid” button on the map and increase the magnification a bit, I can see our house down among the trees. To those who live here we prize our trees in much the same way that others on cliffs above the Pacific love their sea view. What can’t be seen, even at the highest magnification on a Google hybrid map, is that in Druid Hills the electrical wires are above the ground and below the trees. This leads to some unpleasantness.

If you saw the movie “Driving Miss Daisy,” which was filmed down the street, you may remember that one of the scenes took place during an ice storm. The depiction was quite accurate. You are frozen in your home unable to move about because the streets are coated with a thick glaze of ice. In addition, the weight of the ice on the trees brings down limbs and whole trees, plunging the city into darkness. It’s like a slow, nearly silent tornado descending on you.

A few years after we arrived in Atlanta we lived a mile from our present house and we were subjected to one of these ice storms. Perhaps time has softened the memory, but my recollection was that we survived for five days fairly well with our young children. My strongest memory was shivering in the line that formed itself, for some reason, into a spiral in a parking lot. In my arms was a cardboard box. Like something out of Dante’s Inferno, we were waiting for a truck to arrive with a shipment of dry ice so we could maintain the temperature of our freezers and cold lockers.

This past August we returned home from the SPIE Annual Meeting, where we celebrated the Society’s 50th anniversary. After going through our e-mail and real mail,

we settled down to watch the Atlanta Braves with their terrific rookies beat up on Cincinnati. At the end of the game we caught the local weather that showed a series of small tightly formed storm cells marching west (west?) toward the center of Atlanta. We were in the path. Upstairs we listened as the storm approached. But it didn’t fade away. It seemed to stop and grow more intense. It whipped at our trees, its winds reminiscent of Tropical Storm Opal ten years earlier. Then the lights went out.

This has been the summer of our discontent. While the Midwest has been suffering from drought, we have had nearly 24 inches of rain during July. Our great tile roof couldn’t take all that water and it leaked so badly that our roofer, who had repaired one slope of the roof, had to be called. They threw a blue tarp over it and anchored it with ropes tied to bundles of shingles. Now the wind was threatening to rip the tarp off. We went to bed, hoping that everything would return to normal.

But we found the morning no better. In fact, worse. A massive branch broke off an old oak behind the house. So we would have to pay what we call the “tree tax,” the cost of cutting down and hauling off wayward trees. The greatest discomfort was the loss of electricity. But why? After all, apart from the loss of refrigeration during the ice storm, we had survived five days with moderate discomfort. This time it was real hardship.

The times have changed. Each morning after breakfast Helen and I head for our Macs, which sit side-by-side in the study. We open our e-mails and read the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* before going out to work in the garden. We have projects to be done and all require connections to the Web to search, organize, and send. This journal is edited and administered through a Web browser.

The day after the windstorm, it became clear that Georgia Power had its hands full. In the evening the light failed, night descended, and I occupied my time by reading Samuel Pepys’ diary. The flickering candle by which I read added atmosphere to his account of the Great Fire of London in 1666. We prepared for an early bed. Then the lights came on and our first movement was to the study to turn on our computers.

Had this electrical outage happened even 5 years ago, I doubt that our responses would have been much different from when the ice storm hit. But since the introduction of high-speed Internet service and the development of the Web we have entered a different way of living. We depend on it for communication and information, for amusement and employment in ways that were never available before.

So it all depends on keeping our power lines connected, our DSL service up, and hoping the Web is still functioning. Never have I felt so vulnerable, as when I was sitting in the dark using the same illumination technology as Samuel Pepys.

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