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Imagine Life Without Air Conditioning

WE used to sweat through Oklahoma's summers because we couldn't escape the heat. Now we perspire to pay for the electricity it takes to run our air conditioners, but we don't turn them off.

Sports fans and physical fitness buffs still exert themselves in the great outdoors, either as participants or spectators. Quite a few people work outdoors in the broiling sun, too, but most ply their trades in air conditioned offices, factories or vehicles.

As we rush from our air conditioned homes to air conditioned cars to air conditioned work places, stores or entertainment centers, it is hard to realize that this marvelous comfort was not converted from a luxury to a necessity until after World War II.

Widespread air conditioning came into our lives along with television. People could stay in their houses in summer and TV relieved their boredom while they were encased behind closed doors and windows that shut out songs of birds and other sounds of summer.

Air conditioning also made it possible for Congress to stay in session during Washington's hot, humid summers, resulting in more laws and regulations than the country really needs or wants.

This has not been one of Oklahoma's record summers for heat. It has been dry but we have not had long periods when the thermometer rose about 100 degrees daily and sometimes hit 110 or more, like it did in 1936 and 1950, for example. But it might be a record year for money spent on air conditioning.

American Heritage magazine (Aug.-Sept.) contains a comprehensive history of air conditioning, a term which may include cooling of air, humidity control, ventilation and cleansing of air.

The first ice-making machine was patented in 1851. In 1881 ice was melted in a device to cool the room where President Garfield lay after he was shot by an assassin. This proved to be quite expensive, as it consumed half a million pounds of ice in 58 days.

It was not until 1902 that Willis

Carrier, 25, figured out a way to remove excess moisture from cooled air, leading to development of today's efficient air conditioners.

Before air conditioning movie houses and concert halls were closed down when weather became too hot. In the 1920s they started using mechanical water coolers that made them "20 degrees cooler inside." Folks went to the movies just to escape the heat, which may be a better reason than for going nowadays.

As late as 1938 less than one percent of wired homes had even one air conditioned room. Then the industry discovered the home market and sales of room air conditioners jumped from 74,000 in 1948 to more than a million in 1953. Next came central air conditioning for homes and most people now have some kind of unit.

Because air conditioning has become essential for many purposes, American Heritage comments that it would be difficult "to conjure up a world without air conditioning."

Not many of us would want to.