

Bill Rea ? Power failures are tiring

There are some things in life we have to learn the hard way, and the lessons some times come with little warning, even if we always knew they would come eventually.

My wife and I had to deal with a power outage last week.

Now it is a fact that I'm a big boy who has had to deal with such issues lots of times, but this one had certain implications.

Having been born in the late '50s, I have vivid memories of the massive Northeast blackout in 1965. I was a little kid at the time, and was appropriately frightened.

The lights went out shortly before dinner time. My brother and I had been down in the rec room of the house. The lights and TV went out simultaneously, and since we were in the basement, everything suddenly went pitch dark. I think I had every right to scream like the bratty little kid I was.

It was a complicated evening for my family. My father's job at the time required reasonably frequent trips to Europe, and he was due to start another trip to France that night. My late dad was a man with a temper, and I clearly recall how packing in candlelight did little to improve his mood. He had probably arranged to get to the airport either by limousine or taxi. I forget exactly which mode of travel he used, but by the next evening, we knew he had made it across the Atlantic, where the lights were working.

It was never planned to have the family accompany him to the airport. It was the second Tuesday of the month, meaning my mother's bridge club was to meet that night. The ladies all got on their respective phones (which were all still working, despite the blackout), and in light of circumstances, called the whole thing off. Mom also called the babysitter and told her to stay home. She stayed home with her offspring. The three of us spent the evening sitting in the living room, since there was nothing else to do.

Remember, this was the '60s, so little boys had their transistor radios. That's what we listened to that night.

The whole thing was a God-send for teachers the following day. Getting their little charges to write about what they did the night before spared them the bother of coming up with some other assignment. That's how Mrs. Shortt kept me occupied that afternoon.

I've had to deal with lots of other outages over the years, and as I got older, they ceased being frightening, but became increasingly annoying.

We have all become too used to having electricity available when we want it, not to mention when we need it.

There was the massive outage in August 2003, when I abruptly learned that my ability to do my job had been seriously hampered.

There was a real lesson to be learned that day, as many of us came to realize how much we depend on our electricity. The computers in the office went down, as did the phones. Cellphone technology was such that a charge would last maybe 24 hours if you didn't use the phone too much.

Problems with my cellphone was not the only thing I had to address. I found stores were having trouble doing transactions because the cash registers needed electricity to work. It was a good thing I had put gas in my car the day before, because gas pumps weren't working.

But the lights did come on, at varying times in various places.

And then we had to deal with the power going out at our Sandhill-area home at about 2 last Thursday morning.

I'm a fairly light sleeper, so I noticed the problem almost immediately. My clock radio going dark is usually a very reliable indicator of such things.

I woke Beth up because I couldn't think of anything else to do. Then I realized we have a sump pump in our basement that wouldn't be working with the power out. And with all the rain we'd had recently, it seemed a cinch we weren't too far away from having a flooded basement.

We have lived in this house for almost two years. We never had to worry about such things in our last home.

Thus, I spent about 20 minutes in the middle of the night bailing out the pump and lugging buckets of water upstairs to pitch them out from the front porch. I was also having a hard time determining if I was doing much about the water level.

After about 20 minutes of this fun, I decided I needed some sleep. I retired, resolving to get up at 4 to do more bailing.

Fortunately, our cuckoo clock is not electrically powered, so I was able to hear when it was 4; time to get up and start bailing.

I spent the next 40 minutes trying to make a dent in the water level in the pump.

Beth was fussing about with her cellphone. She was able to access the web and found a news story that Premier Kathleen Wynne was planning some announcement about hydro rates. She mentioned it, and I think I can be forgiven for suspecting my spouse was trying to be a wise guy.

She also found a phone number to call about the outage. She did, and was told the authorities were hopeful the lights would be on by about 5:15 a.m.

I bailed as much as my tired body would allow, then went back to bed.

I stirred at about 5:45, and Beth mentioned something about the 5:15 prediction being missed. The lights came on about a minute later.

So a power outage of almost four hours meant I got a lousy night sleep and was not terribly productive at work the following day.

I hope we don't get billed for the hydro we didn't get.

