

# Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

## Farvour shares memories, stories of toilets of the past

*Editor's note: This is the second of a series of articles about Ripon's forgotten buildings.*

Part of a bygone era, most younger people will never experience using an outhouse.

"Outhouses I Have known" is the title of a story written in 1986 by Ripon's Franklin Burwell Farvour (1919-2006). Farvour wrote several self-published books which he called "Potpourri, Things, Feelings, and Thoughts."

Copies of these books may be found in the Ripon Historical Society research library at 508 Watson St.. The outhouse story appears in book No. 4, which was compiled in 2004.

"Ask any child of today of 10 years or younger 'What is an outhouse?' And chances are he (or she) will not have the slightest idea," Farvour wrote. "What a change from things as they were when I was that age."

The Oxford Languages dictionary defines an outhouse as "an outbuilding containing a toilet, typically with no plumbing."

This small building, normally built well away from a home in the backyard, has a hole or pit dug under it. People sat on a wooden bench with a hole cut out of it and waste fell into the pit.

Farvour noted that the house that he was born in was "not serviced by public sewer until the summer of 1947." He continued by writing that "even so, our house was different. We had an indoor 'John' and a 'cesspool' into which its products were run. Everyone else in the block, south of Howard Street, had an outhouse of some form or another."

Early telephone directories show that the Farvour family lived at 932 Woodside Ave.

"Most of the homes in Ripon had a free-standing structure built solely as a sanitary facility, however the one next door had a walled off part of the barn and the one across the street a separate little room in the corner of the henhouse (where chickens were kept)," Farvour wrote.

Farvour added even though these facilities were different, "they all had two things in common: (1) a bag of hydrated lime



**A RIPON COLLEGE** Scrapbook contained this picture of students sitting atop an outhouse in the 1930s. *submitted photo*

with its tin can measuring cup, and (2) a mail order catalogue nailed to the wall within easy reach of the seat."

The lime was used to sprinkle onto the top of the waste to control odor, ward away flies and help assist waste decomposition. The catalog was used as toilet paper.

Although he did not have to go outdoors to the outhouse at his own home, Farvour said, "I learned about them firsthand when I would spend the night with Grandma and Grandpa Klingbail."

Farvour's grandparents, August Klingbail (1872-1957) and Hulda Goldschmidt Klingbail (1874-1961) lived at 334 Washington St.

"Although Washington Street was provided with a sewer pipe under a U.S. Government WPA (Work Progress Administration) project in the late 1930s, Grandpa never did connect to it and so [we] used the faithful outhouse facility in the backyard as long as they lived," Farvour wrote.

Farvour went onto remember that "the nature of all this required that the structure be relocated from time to time. The owner would choose a new location [if their

outhouse was full], dig a new hole and surround its perimeter with a rectangle of planks."

The original outhouse building was then moved to this location.

"The whole neighborhood would gather to affect the move itself," Farvour penned. "It was a great social occasion, celebrated with at least coffee and kuchen, and perhaps with a bit of homemade wine or bootleg schnapps."

Farvour wrote that "most of the folks laid a plank walk from their back door to the privy, the 'highfalutin' ones built an arbor or trellis upon which morning glories or other flowers climbed and bloomed. What greater joy could there be than a walk through this leafy and colorful bower in route to the little outhouse at the end of the line!"

Farvour remembered that it was popular to tip over outhouses as a prank.

"Periodically a structure was tipped with the occupant inside," he wrote. "There were hazards to the pranksters too. Many of these householders made it plain that they had a shotgun loaded with rock salt just waiting for anyone to mess around with their privy

(outhouse)."

A 1941 graduate of Ripon College, Farvour wrote that "there would always be a privy at the top of the college's homecoming bonfire. Freshmen were charged with the duty of providing the structure. ... The out-of-town students naturally turned to their 'townie' compatriots to provide transportation to haul it."

He went onto say that the year he was a freshman "things got sort of out of hand, not one but three privies were lined up."

"Jake Leitz (1919-1991), one of my classmates who lived on a farm east of town, got the family truck. An outhouse at an abandoned place on a lonely road was chosen and in the dark early hours, with considerable stress and strain, we loaded it aboard the truck, just barely loaded that is. Jake was driving as fast as he dared toward the bonfire site when he hit an enormous chuck hole in the street. The privy went up and the truck continued on. The privy came down and stood there in the middle of the intersection."

Farvour and Leitz did not go back to get the outhouse as two others already were available for the bonfire. But he did write that the owner of one of the outhouses found out that his ended up on top of the bonfire and each student involved had to pay 35 cents (approximately \$5 today) to reimburse the owner for his privy.

Farvour also remembered the outhouse in the carpenter shop his grandfather rented, which was located on Blackburn Street.

"Although the building [w]as less than a hundred yards from City Hall it still had no indoor plumbing," he wrote. "At the southwest corner of the building was an attached privy that extended all the way to the second floor of the building. That was the only two-story outhouse I ever saw or heard of!"

The stories of Ripon's outhouses continued with Farvour writing that in 1947, following World War II, his friends helped to establish and co-own an airport located east of Ripon. They purchased a used outhouse and placed it on the property.

Farvour volunteered to give the

outhouse a fresh coat of paint and he forgot to place a "wet paint" sign on the door.

"One of the steel-rigger construction men building the airplane hangar went in and perched on the newly painted seat," Farvour wrote. "The next thing we knew we heard a bellow like a buffalo in quagmire. The poor guy actually couldn't get loose! On top of that, he was an extremely hairy individual. After much roaring and cussing, kicking and straining, he finally freed himself. A rag soaked in aviation gasoline removed the circle of paint from his backside, but we left the seat as he did. Our airport became known as the only one with a fur-lined outhouse seat."

When Farvour wrote his outhouse story in 1986, he noted that he was still a proud owner of an outhouse.

"It was here when I arrived, and I didn't have the heart to tear it down," Farvour penned. "It is an unusual one too, a two-and-a-half-holer. There is a regular seat for two adults, and then there is a small one halfway down with a smaller hole just right for a child to use. It is truly a monument to a bygone day!"

The unusual twist in the story, which Farvour did not record, is that he assisted Ripon resident and archeologist John "Jack" Steinbring (1929-2019) with archeological digs at many of Ripon's old and no longer in use outhouses. The reason being, in the past, outhouses also were for disposal of refuse such as old bottles, broken dishes and unwanted household items.

Outhouses were sort of a family's personal landfill. Many of the artifacts found in these digs shed light on living in the Ripon community during the 19th and early 20th centuries as families tossed everyday items into the outhouse.

*The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is located at 508 Watson St. and is open Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.*

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