

Saturday Night Bath on Youngtown Road

Three Cousins Remember the 1930s

Bathing in the 1930s was a different affair than what we experience today. First off, it was quite a production, and it was done generally on Saturday nights. Saturday nights only, that is. There was no such thing as waking up in the shower every morning, or calming the kids down in a warm bath before bed every night. Second, it didn't happen in the bathroom. People had to heat water and fill a tub in the kitchen. The water was shared by everyone in the family.

Joann Masalin Ratliff:

Saturday night everybody had a bath, whether they wanted it or not. Often they went to her Finnish grandfather's for a sauna. But it was difficult to get there in the winter because of the snow.

At home, they used a round galvanized tub, about 3 feet across. The hot water had to be heated on the wood stove. Some stoves had a tank on one end, but theirs didn't. They had to do it the hard way, by heating it in kettles on top of the stove. It took awhile just to get the water ready.

The tub was put on the floor in the kitchen as close to the stove as it could get, where it was warm. The youngest child, or maybe two if they were both little, was the first to have a bath. The little kids used to shampoo in the tub but this was usually done in the kitchen sink for bigger kids. They added more hot water for each new bather to warm it up a bit. The next older one then followed, right up through to the adults. Sometimes they'd put a blanket over a chair for some privacy, or just declare the kitchen off limits for awhile. Everybody else would be sitting and listening to the radio anyway.

Joann remembers sitting in an enamel wash basin in the cast iron kitchen sink when she was really little. Later on, larger tubs were available. Their new tub was an oval, maybe 5-6 feet long. That was a big improvement because you could stretch your legs out. These tubs took more hot water of course, but by then more

people had hot water tanks. Water could be heated by running it through a coil in an oil stove.

One time Joann's other grandfather was sitting in the tub, when one of the neighbor ladies came in the kitchen door, heading for the living room to listen to the radio. Her grandfather yelled "What are you doing!," and she made a fast retreat out the back door. Someone had to go find her and tell her to come in the front door.

There was a time when some of the neighbor kids didn't believe someone was having a bath, and they'd peek in the window. One night it was grandma in the tub. Oops.

Joann also remembers living in her Aunt Ina's house for the winter while she was in Florida. Ina had a real bathroom. Wow, it was something, with a sink and tub and toilet (remember outhouses). And more than that, it had a French door with crinkly glass.

Doris Carver Delano:

Doris' family bathed in front of the stove, too. Saturday night was the standard time. The kitchen got kind of cold. As each kid took their bath their mother added more hot water from the stove, until there wasn't any left. There was a tank on the end of the stove, which held maybe ten gallons. If somebody dawdled then the last few people got a lukewarm bath.

Jimmy was the last to bathe in the family. He'd stand in the tub screaming that it was too cold, until his mother added more hot water to help him out.

If the children needed to clean up at other times they'd head for the brook or the lake with a cake of soaplike after a day of haying, gardening, or strawberry picking. (They used to throw the rotten berries at each other.) Doris liked having a mud bath first. The children would throw mud at each other until they were a real mess, then dive in the lake. Between Saturdays they'd wash up in a pan at the sink.

The last day of school the kids were all ready for a special picnic at the park in Belfast. Jimmy was all dressed in white and ready to leave. He had on white duck pants and a white shirt and

he looked so cute. First he went to the 3-holer (two big ones and a little kid one) outhouse, but he fell down through. When Doris was sent to investigate why he hadn't returned, all she could see was his head above the muck below the three holes. It was awful. It smelled terrible. Reaching down, she pulled him out by the arm pits. Boy did he stink! His mother scrubbed and scrubbed him. She even put perfume in the water. He went to the picnic in dungarees instead.

Katherine Karl, Doris' sister-in-law, grew up in Rockland. When she got married her brother, Buster, who worked at Cries Hardware bought her a round galvanized bath tub for a wedding present. Her new husband had never used a galvanized tub, since his family had a real tub with hot water. But there was no modern tub in their house. Come Saturday night he thought he'd take a bath. He brought the tub into kitchen, and put it in the middle of the floor, and got in it. It was so small he was all cramped up inside it. Once in he got a cramp in his leg and couldn't get out for quite awhile. He ended up splashing water all over the floor. After that he went up to his mother's house to have a bath.

Dorothy Hardy Santi

Dorothy's family heated water on the stove and put it in the tub. Then they ate supper while the water cooled enough to bathe. She remembered once that a kitten jumped into the hot water in the tub. It was pretty frantic, and they had to grab it in a hurry because it couldn't get out.

It was a big day when they got a new modern tub in the 30's. It was like today's tubs. It was quite the luxury, but it was easy for some people to find other uses. For instance, her farming father used it when he killed an animal, laying boards across the tub and the animal on the boards. She said she'd look at that awful carcass and didn't feel like she could take a bath in that tub if she had to.

Another neighbor had a houseguest who followed the tradition of the Saturday night bath. So, as the weather was warm, the tub

was set up in the buttery off the kitchen. Now the buttery had two doors, one to the cellar and one to the kitchen. Over the years the lower corners of both doors had been chewed off by the mice and rats which came up from the cellar.

The guest was bathing when an eel escaped from a bucket full of eels that sat behind the kitchen stove. Probably trying to escape from that bucket, it crawled through the hole in the corner of the door. Needless to say, the guest was more than frightened, not wanting to share his bath with an eel.