

IMAGES

. . . then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

Outhouses and Privies of Yesteryear



Before the advent of indoor plumbing, outhouses were a regular part of the landscape in Indian Hill. Modern bathrooms are a relatively new convenience; most privies in America have been demolished, with only a few remaining as relics of a bygone era. An improvement on the chamber pots which preceded them, the outhouse had numerous nicknames: backhouse, necessary, one- or two- (or more) holer, pokey, loo, throne, Chic Sales, and Roosevelt.

Ancient Romans used public privies with underground drainage, and medieval European castles had private rooms (garderobes), which emptied into the moat below. Chamberpots were common, and people threw their waste into the street. The scourge of typhoid and cholera brought about sanitary reform in the mid-1800s. Queen Victoria supported the development of a sewer system in Great Britain, and New Yorker Julius Adams designed a sewer system copied throughout urban America.

Still, most rural 19th century dwellings did not have indoor plumbing, and used a homemade privy.

Climate, soil conditions, proximity to the house, and exposure to public view were important considerations. The average size was 3 to 4 feet square by 7 to 10 feet high, with a pit about 5 feet deep as the foundation for the building. Many were single occupancy, but some families and schools used double occupancy. One hotel outhouse in Montana had a dozen seats, and Indian Hill's Jefferson School had two large round outhouses with multiple holes until the late 1920s. The most common construction material was wood, though outhouses have been made of brick, bark, stone, adobe, clay, packing crates, and oil drums. Vents (to reduce the foul smell) came in a variety of shapes; but as many early Americans were illiterate, symbols were used. The crescent moon, "luna" denoted an outhouse for women, and the men used one marked with stars or sunbursts, "sol". Over the years many gentlemen's privies fell into disrepair and were abandoned, whereas the ladies' were maintained. Thus the moon symbol was more commonly seen.

Other decorative features were added to the outhouse, like notches or hearts carved on doors. Some had flowers; thus the saying, "I'm going out to smell the lilacs." Interior accoutrements included lids over the holes, seats, flyswatters, disinfectant (often lime or lye), and reading materials. In the past many people were too frugal for newfangled toilet paper, so such reading materials as catalogues, or sometimes corncobs, were used in the privy.

Most outhouses were 50 to 150 feet from the main house, but some had ramps to larger facilities such as rooming houses, boarding schools, or mining camps. Some of these were two-story backhouses. An alternate site for privies included placing over a waterway—until this was outlawed due to groundwater pollution. When a family outhouse got full, a hole was dug a few feet away, the outhouse moved, and the old hole filled with dirt. After 1900, tubs (barrels or pails) were used, and these were rotated and cleaned, allowing "an extra long time for germs to be killed."

Now outhouses are rare. But, as recently as the 1990 census, over 400,000 backhouses were in use in the U.S. During the Depression of the 1930's the government set aside funds for the construction of 2,309,239 privies across the country. The comforts of indoor plumbing are taken for granted today, but memories of the outhouse – cold winter treks, fear of snakes and hornets, the awful stench – endure in the minds of many Americans. Yet the trips to the backhouse did provide a "communion with nature."

Post World War II prosperity caused many outhouses to be demolished, but some remain—converted to sheds, saunas, playhouses, or storage areas—rustic reminders of days gone by.

If you know of a local outhouse, please telephone 891-1873 for historic photo preservation.