

Outdoor Privies: Necessaries from the Past



Old privy in the Beech Grove area

My introduction to outdoor privies came as a young girl visiting my Uncle Bob and Aunt Katie Wiltrout's rustic cottage on the shores of Lake Erie. The cottage had no indoor plumbing at the time so we had to use the wooden facility located up a well-worn path to the rear of the property. I found it strangely freeing to sit quietly while the birds and crickets chirped around me. My older brother always ruined my last excursion before bedtime by whispering, "Don't let the bears get you!"

Many years later, when we started coming to the mountains for the weekends, I introduced my own young daughter to the quiet solitude of a "two-holer" at the hunting camp where we stayed. I remember the morning we were sitting side by side in the privy and I gave instructions to "remember to flush" as I exited the wooden structure. Standing outside trying not to laugh, she emerged in a few minutes sheepishly announcing, "I couldn't find the flusher."

We ended up renting the same camp when we finally moved here permanently in 1980 but by then the water had been turned on and we had the convenience of an inside bathroom. We continued to make use of the old privy, however, when the electric went off, which was frequently in the Blue Ridge Mountains where we lived. Gracing one wall of the camp's indoor bathroom was a painting I purchased by Waynesboro artist, Joan Hinerman. The little watercolor shows an outhouse with a light in the window and a television antenna on the roof. The title? "Affluence." It hung in every bathroom of the homes I've lived in, until, alas, I lost it in a 1986 house fire.

Since the early years of the camp, I've upgraded to indoor plumbing but I am still on the lookout for those distinctive wooden buildings located to the rear of older homes. It's surprising how many are still in existence and probably still being used for their intended purpose, especially at weekend camps in the mountains where people come to rough it.

Some privies, outhouses, Johnny houses, or outdoor toilets as they are sometimes called, are basic in structure, having one opening on which to sit. Others can accommodate two, three and even four bottoms at a time, especially those belonging to families with many children. I remember Burgess Coffey telling me that her father had built a privy with different sized holes for the various ages of his children; small openings for the little ones, medium holes for the older children and several larger ones for the adults.



Allen family privy on Durham's Run



Privy with a window; Weaver camp



R. T. Toler's privy with a humorous Buick hood entrance covering

Every household was equipped with a chamber pot or two, also known as a “thunder mug” or “slop jar.” These portable potties were made of enamel or stoneware and were usually kept under the bed in times of emergencies, sickness, and inclement weather or at night when a trek down the well-worn path was not desired. But it was understood that whoever used the chamber pot, emptied it and cleaned it as well.

By far, the grandest privy I’ve ever frequented is located in Coffeytown, on the Macedonia Methodist Church property. The outside of the building is well maintained but it is the *inside* that captures your attention. With electric lights, a ceramic tile floor, beadboard walls, pictures gracing the walls and a small basket of toiletries such as hand sanitizer and lotions to choose from, the double outhouse (his and hers) is a marvel to behold. And best of all, there are no spiders or creepy-crawlies to be seen anywhere!



His and Hers privy at Macedonia Church



Tasteful interior of Macedonia privy

The dictionary defines a privy or outhouse as a type of toilet in a small structure separate from the main building, which does not have a flush and is not attached to a sewer or septic tank. The building itself was usually constructed of wooden boards but some built more permanent ones of brick or natural stone to compliment a home made from the same materials. Privies were situated over an excavation hole from three to six feet in depth and a bucket filled with lime was often placed on the floor within reach so a scoop could be thrown down the hole as needed to reduce odors. Ventilator pipes that resembled a smokestack rose from seat level and extended out the roof to help get rid of methane gas buildup.



Outhouse at Mountain Top



Well-used privy at Zandy Coffey's cabin

We associate a “moon” cut into a privy door as kind of a standard ornamentation on these buildings. I always assumed it was simply to let in sunlight or air but in doing research, found out that these vents often doubled as symbols for gender identification. The crescent shape was the universal symbol of womankind. Thus, a moon, sawed into a privy door, served to let folks know this was the “Ladies Room.” In earlier times, a sunburst pattern was cut into the door of the men’s privy, which indicated “old Sol,” the sun. These symbols were necessary since during the Colonial times only a small part of the population could read or write. But I have seen stars and diamond shapes cut into doors as well.

Before the advent of paper products, folks relied on the standard Sears and Roebuck catalogs for taking care of personal hygiene inside the privy. These catalogs were thick and ripped out pages could be used for a long time. Before that, country folks who had access to large gardens used the cobs from shelled corn for the task. For those not well acquainted with the texture of fresh shelled corn cobs and wince at the thought of scraping delicate flesh with husks associated with the term “rough as a cob,” the old timers say that fresh ones are quite soft to the touch. And since red cobs outnumbered white ones two to one, the trick was to use a red cob first, a white one next, and another red one if it was needed.

Most photos used for this article on privies were all taken within a short distance from our cabin here in Love and continue to be used or just allowed to stand as a nostalgic remembrance of yesteryear.



Above: A pristine privy amongst a garden setting *Below: the “two-holer” interior*



Over the years that the Backroads newspaper was in circulation, I published a little story entitled, "A Matter of Communication" several times because folks found it humorous and asked for it again and again. I am including it in the outdoor privy article for those who may never had the chance to read it.



A Christmas decorated privy

A Matter of Communication

There was a nice lady who was a little old fashioned. She was considering a week's vacation in sunny Florida at a particular campground, but she wanted to make sure of the accommodations first.

Uppermost in her mind were the toilet facilities, but she couldn't bring herself to write the word "toilet" in a letter. After careful deliberation she settled on "bathroom commode." But when she wrote that down it still sounded a little too forward so she rewrote the entire letter to the campground owner and referred to it as the "bathroom commode" as the B. C. "Does the campground have its own B.C.," is what she actually wrote.

The owner was baffled by the euphemism, so he showed the letter around to several people staying at the campground but they could not decipher it either. Finally, the owner concluded that she must have been referring to the local Baptist Church so he sat down to respond.

Dear Madam,

I regret very much the delay in answering your letter, but now I take pleasure in informing you that a "B.C." is located nine miles north of the campground, and is capable of seating 250 people at one time. I admit that it is quite a distance away if you are in the habit of going regularly, but no doubt you will be pleased to know that a great number of people take their lunches along and make a day of it. They arrive early and stay late

The last time my wife and I went was six years ago, and it was so crowded that we had to stand up the entire time we were there. It may interest you to know that right now there is a benefit supper planned to help raise money to buy more seats. The supper is going to be held in the basement of the B.C.

I would like to say that it pains me vey much not to be able to go more regularly but it is surely from no lack of desire on my part. As we grow older, it seems to be more of an effort, particularly in cold weather.

If you do decide to come down and stay at our campground, perhaps I could go with you to the B.C. for the first time; sit with you, and introduce you to all the other folks who go there. Remember... we are widely known as a friendly community, so come on down and we'll all enjoy the B. C. together!

Modern Day “Affluence”

