

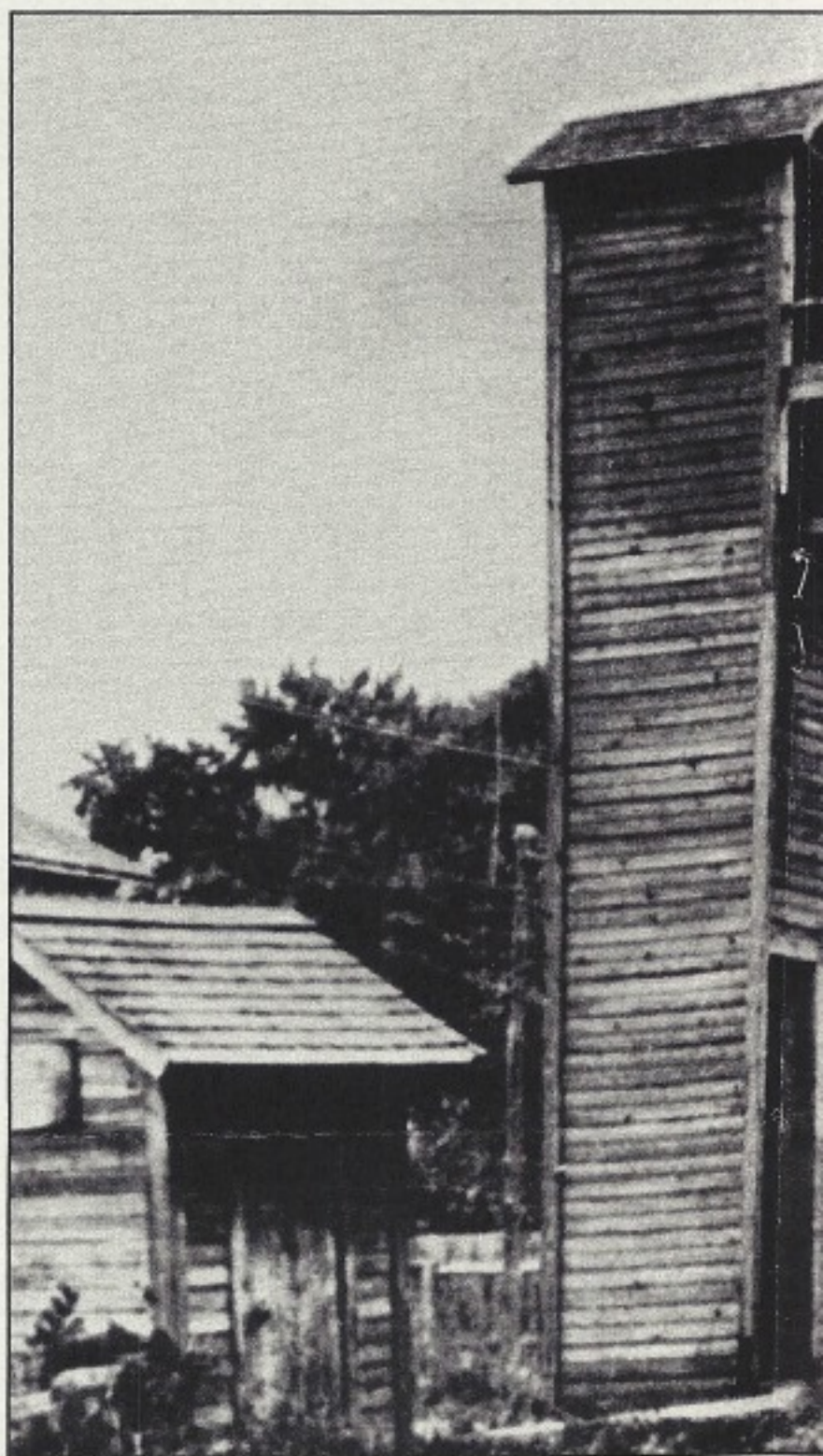
As the cold winter months approach, and we start to batten down the hatches, we should be very thankful for our indoor plumbing. As my age increases, and subsequently my needs, I cannot imagine trudging outside to use the facilities two or three times on a night with the wind howling, the thermometer reading 10 degrees, and six inches of snow on the ground. I truly know now why everyone in old pictures seemed to lack any sense of humor. Although indoor plumbing is not a totally new invention, we have certainly brought it to heights of pleasure with heat, light, hot and cold running water, and all just steps from the warmth of our beds.

Plumbing has seen many changes and improvements over the years. In biblical times the word paddle (or shovel) was used for the purpose of covering what came from thee. Chamber pots, or slop jars were names given to portable pots. The wealthy might have a pot made of onyx, brass, silver or gold, while the common folk would have pots made of stoneware, pewter, enameled iron, or tin. Inns and wealthy families had

chamber maids whose job it was to empty, wash, and return these vessels to their place under the bed. In the 1600's people of Great Britain sometimes concealed their pots in chairs, trunks, chests and bedside stands. Wealthy Greeks favored indoor plumbing, including tubs. Roman conquerors took these ideas and improved upon them, adding hot and cold running water, lead pipes, and early flushing devices.

Until 1760 Madrid, the capital of Spain, had no backyard conveniences so that after dark, all chamber pots and slop jars were thrown out of windows into the streets below. It was several years before the King's idea of underground sewers, at public expense, actually took wing. In England, the idea of flushing it all away came back into vogue, and by 1815 a pan-valve type hopper was installed in many London bathrooms. These water closets were connected to private cesspools, sometimes on the homeowner's land, which most often contaminated public wells. They were also unvented, leading to lethal time bombs, with the accumulation of methane gas. With cholera reaching epidemic proportions in England - claiming 20,000 lives between 1845 and 1855 - strong support was given to the construction of a modern sewer system completed about 1853.

The American Colonists brought with them some ideas and the name "privy" (after the Latin word Privus, or private place). They also coined Outhouse and the more proper, "House of



1890's roaming hou



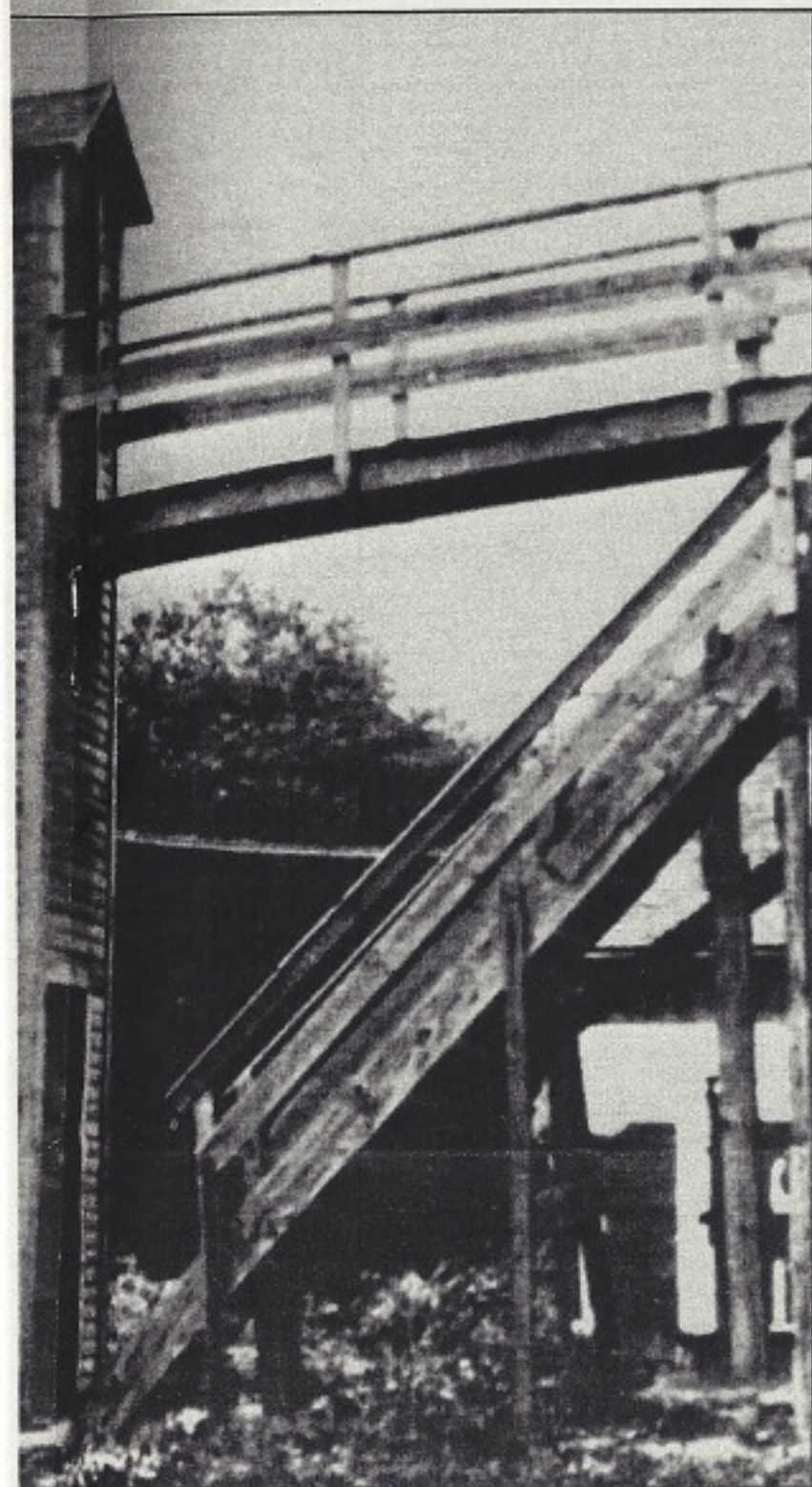
Birdhouses were privy status symbols often set on rooftop poles.



These Texas roadside Teepee privies for "Braves"

# HING OUTHOUSE

by Karin Giannitti



Office." Many, many synonyms have grown over the years -- one holer, backhouse, pokey, loo, throne, and so on.

Choosing a location for the outhouse was determined by climate, soil conditions, and domestic water. However, the most important determination was exactly how far a child or old family member could safely maneuver during an emergency. Wood was the preferred medium for construction, but many privies were built of brick, bark, stone, mortar and adobe clay, bamboo, sheet metal, oil drums and corrugated cardboard packing crates. In colder climates no provision was made for windows, as any opening would allow in the cold chills. Windows were used for admitting light not air. Portholes and rifle slots were sometimes used. Vents sometimes designated gender identification. Luna, a crescent shape, was the universal symbol for womanhood, thus the sign for "Ladies Room." Sol, or the sunburst pattern, was cut into the door for the men.

These backyard houses, however, were foul smelling and dangerous, as methane gas (produced by organic decomposition) could accumulate with no obvious odor, and a careless smoker could blow up the entire privy, if not careful. Sometimes the dung was used by the farmer himself and sometimes a professional "gog fermor" came in the dark of night and carried it away. More often than not, the owner would cover the dung with gravel, pick up the entire outhouse, and place it in a new spot, downwind, of course.

Privy doors could take on many forms from bedsheets to louvers, wire woven cornstalks, and recycled Coca-Cola signs. Here creativity reigned. There was discussion, however, on whether the door should swing to the inside or the outside. A very heavy outward-opening door might sag on its hinges and entrap the occupant for days. A stuck push-to-enter door, on the other hand could have disastrous results for the user who waited too long. Some outhouses were of the two-story variety, especially in areas where heavy snow and drifts covered the ground level door.

Most private residences had two-hole conveniences, but some homes with many residents, or servants, would often have as many as six, in assorted sizes. Accessories included a bucket of lime, a corn cob, a fly swatter, and a long willow pole for knocking down wasps' nests. In some wealthy homes, calendars, and magazine pictures, as well as an occasional mirror adorned the walls inside. Outhouses actually enjoyed a boom during the period of the WPA between 1933 and 1945.

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ing house privy.



wes" and "Squaws" are traffic stoppers.



Portable privy for field workers on a Morrisville, PA farm.



## THE VANISHING OUTHOUSE

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Federally trained and funded "Specialists" built 2,309,239 "Sanitary Privies." Old structures were replaced by new ones made with concrete bases, airtight seat lids and screened ventilators. This not only helped create more sanitary conditions, but put many men to work during the depression years.

As indoor plumbing became more and more common, our modern-day life does not include the wonderful stories of the trip to the backhouse being such an adventure. On Halloween, many a farmer would sit on his front porch with a loaded rifle, as it was the custom to upend the outhouse, or move it completely. Snakes and lizards were often confronted on the path to the privy, or found inside curled up in the most inconvenient places. Other guests you might find were wasps, hornets, bees, bats, rats, scorpions and skunks, plus an occasional porcupine.

Toilet paper took the form of corn cobs, newspapers, dress patterns and other "uncoated" paper, including mail order catalogs. There is a wonderful series of letters from a gentlemen who found an old Sears, Ward & Company catalog. He ordered 10 rolls of toilet paper for \$1.00. Sears returned his letter stating that he must have an outdated version of the catalog, as the price of the toilet paper was now \$1.50. The gentleman wrote back and said "If I had one of your old catalogs, I would not have needed any toilet paper. Please send me your latest catalog, and return my money."

We can now look back at these rather archaic bathrooms and snicker about all the stories. As modern day plumbing brought the "privy" inside, many of the outdoor structures were torn down because they were thought to be objectionable. The 1950 census showed that there were nearly fifty million "unplumbed households" and it is thought that there are as many as 4 million outhouses still in use across the country. Thank goodness there is not one in my backyard.

(The text and pictures for this article were taken from *The Vanishing American Outhouse* written by Ronald S. Barlow. Special thank yous to Windmill Publishing Company, El Cajon, California, for giving us permission to use their words and pictures so that we can share this with you. Also, thanks to Jane Atkinson for bringing it to my attention in the first place.)



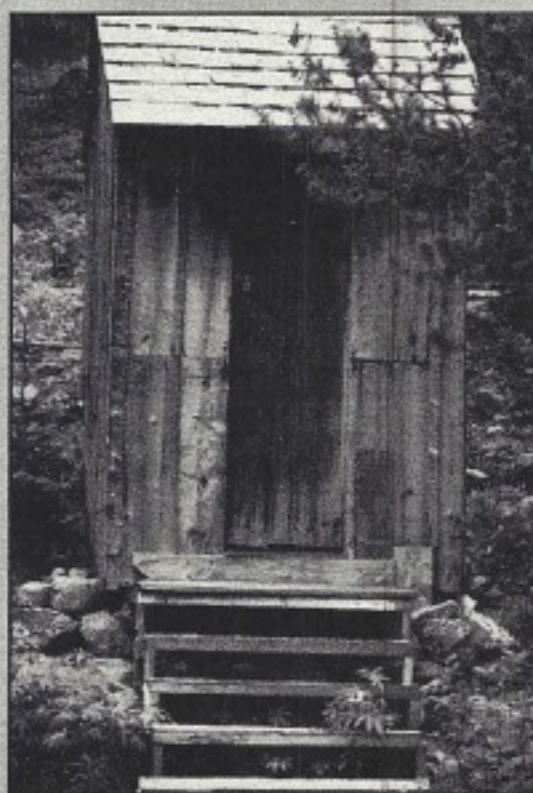
Victorian public park privy, (panelled door has been covered.)



Alaska has more outhouses than any other state in the Union



Photographer found 1930's catalog still in place on the seat of this old outhouse.



Transplanted Colorado privy now serves as an attractive tool shed.



This outhouse was the recent victim of an aluminum siding salesman

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