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*Outhouse painting and frame by Ann Warren
photo by Leah Ratliff*



was erroneously given credit for inventing the flush toilet.

Outdoor toilet facilities were common in our small towns and rural areas well into the 1940s. Frisco's sewer system was built in 1935, making indoor toilets more feasible.

When homes had only one outhouse, it wore the crescent, the ladies' symbol. After all, men & boys could always go to the barn or the plum thicket.

Let's take a look at a typical American outhouse, usually a little, unpainted, wooden structure with four walls, a roof and a door. Many had a small crescent shaped hole cut in the door. Some say it was to provide ventilation and light for the windowless building, but why the crescent shape? That dates back to early European days when inns had two outhouses, one each for ladies and men. Since many people of that day were illiterate, the toilets were labeled with symbols to indicate which was "his" and which was "hers." From ancient times the sun has been the symbol for men, and the crescent moon for women. That custom stuck as European immigrants moved to America, so when homes had only one outhouse, it wore the crescent, the ladies' symbol. After all, men and boys could always go to the barn or the plum thicket if the restroom was occupied.

The Little House Out Back

By Bob Warren

THE NEXT TIME you reach for the flush handle on your toilet, pause just a moment and think about this: it hasn't been many years since "going to the bathroom" meant taking a trip into the heat, cold or even rain, down a path to the little house out back--the outhouse. Early real estate ads could have read, "Four rooms and a path" rather than "Four rooms and a bath," because very few early-day houses had a bathroom.

Now, I realize an outhouse is not a pleasant subject, but it is one with which you old timers are painfully familiar, and one I hope you "young' uns" will find

interesting.

Outhouses are said to have originated in Europe some 500 years ago. The name originally meant any outbuilding or small structure located away from the main building, but in North America, the name "outhouse" became associated with a small building housing a toilet. Throughout the world the little buildings have many names. In Australia, outdoor toilets are referred to as "dunnys" or "thunderboxes," while in Canada they are commonly called "kybos." We call them "johns," "toilets," "privies" and "crappers," named for the English plumber, Thomas Crapper, who

Looking inside the little house, we find on the back wall a bench-like seat with at least one oval shaped hole. Large, deluxe models could have several holes. For example, one family said they had a “three holer,” a small hole for the children, a medium sized hole for “dad and grandpa” and a still larger one for “mamma and grandma.” You probably wouldn’t find a roll of toilet paper in the old outhouse. Few people around here could afford it, so newspaper, corn cobs or Sears-Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogues became our toilet paper.

People were always losing things “down the hole” - everything from eyeglasses, wallets and grandma’s false teeth to my new Shafer Lifetime fountain pen. Such miscues caused some unpleasant “fishing expeditions” followed by a thorough disinfecting.

Our family toilet was located in the “chicken yard” and, as a small child, that gave me some grief. One experience with a chicken that had found its way under the seat and gave me an unexpected peck prompted me to look in the hole before I sat down. It was also a good idea to check for wasp nests and spiders. Just the thought of such things lurking there usually hastened my “rest” in the restroom.

Like our homes, early Frisco schools had no indoor plumbing. Toilet facilities consisted of two fairly large, wooden outhouses, one for girls and one for boys. They were located well away from the school building in opposite corners of the playground. Before leaving the classroom

for a restroom break, students had to get permission to “be excused” by holding up either one or two fingers, signaling the teacher - and the whole class – their intent. Older boys used the outhouse for their smoking break while keeping an eye out for the principal.

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Outhouses were the object of many jokes and pranks. Boys felt it their Halloween duty to topple as many as they could. Some were pushed over while occupied. Almost every Halloween someone stole a toilet and hoisted it up a pole or onto the roof of the old city jail, leaving the owner the task of getting his outhouse back home.

But, my favorite story is one about an old fellow who ran a “filling station” out in the dessert. Most everyone who stopped to fill up needed to use the toilet facilities behind the station. So, while the attendant was servicing the car, the

owner watched as women hurried to the outhouse. He would give them time to get seated, then, in a loud voice, would speak into a microphone connected to a speaker hidden under the seat. His words were, “Lady, would you move over to the other hole? I’m working under this one!” The old man delighted in watching the women almost bust the door down as they came running out, pulling their skirts down.

Now that you’ve heard all this, go ahead and flush, thanking your lucky stars that you have indoor plumbing. We didn’t have it in Frisco’s early days!

Frisco native Bob Warren is a humorist, historian, and former Frisco Mayor.

