
Short Stories

Encounters Caused by Nature

By Lillian Smith Sherrer

No doubt about it, we are the last generation of an ex-stink society, who are blessed (?) with memories of the old fashioned out-house or back-house as we referred to one of nature's necessary facilities.

These came in all sizes and were found attached, semi-attached and non-attached, to your home. Some two holers, often three holers, and also a lonely one holer. In case you don't know what I am describing, I will attempt to enlighten you young ones.

An out-house consisted of seats (boards with appropriate size holes cut in them) which were equivalent to our toilet seats. These seats were placed at a comfortable sitting height atop supporting sides, similar to a box. This was completed with extended walls and roof to become a little house. There was no plumbing, therefore, no leaks or blockage problems. They were manually cleaned once or twice a year.

My first encounter with one of these majestic thrones was at a tender age, on my grandmother's farm where I grew up. Father worked the farm to the halves. Gramma had half of the income from the farm and Dad the other half to provide for the family. We shared the farm house. Petitioning off two rooms downstairs for Gramma and the largest bedroom up stairs to store her prized possessions.

To get to the dual purpose two haler at Gramma's was a challenging experience to a fearful youngster like me, especially when

dusk approached. So out the back kitchen door we go, glance up the shed chamber stairs to the right to ascertain our safety. All is well. To the left we see through the summer kitchen door, only a huge old wooden cupboard. Advance on to the door opening to the outside via the cupola. Whew!! Directly at the right is the sunken section which stores the wood supply. It is down a good three feet lower and depending upon the time of year it either is bursting with piles of wood or crying out for lack of it.



The alley to the outhouse is petitioned off this space with boarded walls and walk. One wall sporting the cherished buffalo robe (used to cover us on cold winter sleigh rides). It hangs ready for use. The other wall holds the mop wringer and rag mop. Nothing unusual. At last we make it to the outie.

Not yet knowing how lucky we were to have ours in the woodshed, therefore attached, but still mighty cold trudging out there on wintery

days. However, it was always well painted and papered. Gramma saw to that. She definitely took pride in her out-house.

For wipe paper we all used the Sears Roebuck catalogue. If lucky you enjoyed the softer pages, which were chosen ahead of the more glossy scratchy pages. Of course, as you chose your page, you also admired the pictures (except in winter).

Most often Gramma had a grey painted wooden box which sat in one corner of the wee back-house. She cut the catalogue pages in half and stored them in the box conveniently ready for all size jobs; Gramma was a real gem.

For lighting purposes, each out-house wore a tiny window. Some at the side, but often a moon shape in the door. Gramma's was situated directly over the seat. Thus by closing the lids on the assorted holes one could stand upon the seat to get an excellent child's eye view.

These views changed according to the seasons. In the fall, the red apples dangled upon the winter apple tree. This old tree draped over the chicken house straight across the driveway from our vantage point. Sometimes you saw hen pecking at the fallen apples. Again the same liens would be enjoying a dusting under my Mom's white bridal rose bush, which prospered perhaps because of the loosening of the under soil. Close behind the rose bush was the ever neat vegetable garden. In the evening after a long hard day's work on the farm, Dad very regularly could be seen on his knees weeding and coaxing the already healthy plants. We admired the straight rows with narv a weed. In order to see this, one had to crane their necks a bit to the right, but learning this came easy to a curious viewer.

Then often in the morning after accomplishing the necessary errand (at the out-house), we quickly mounted the seat to check how many cows stood in the barnyard. That way knowing how much longer before the chores would be done. After milking each cow was put out of the barn. They then drank water from the trough (made by hallowing out a log) in the barnyard and browsed till all were milked. We anxiously awaited the rime to drive them to pasture. We had to make sure the neighbours were not coming down the road with their Ayrshires, as they pastured a bit further down from us. Always fun to see who made it down the road first the Ayrshires or our Jersey cows.

The milk from the cows was kept cold in a cement water trough inside the barn. Before the truck came to haul the cans of milk away and leave empty cans, Dad would carry out the filled eight gallon cans. He lifted them onto the milk stand built truck height. This stand was close to our window, so we counted either the empty cans or the full cans depending upon when nature called us to our view point.

Needless to say, at this age, very rarely did we admire the mountains surrounding us with beauty. (The Sugar Loaf Mountain, shaped to fascinate the imagination. Was it really sugar? Why was Owl's Head Mountain called Owl's Head? That was a mystery.)

Except in winter, when our view finder was too frosted, our days were dabbled with country scenes. To this day we have memories of this much used hole for watering at Gramma's house.

The next encounter with these wooden wonders was when I started school. Though and behold. They had two, two holers. One for the boys and one for the girls. They were naturally well separated in the wood shed.

But when in high school, I spent sometime at a girl friend's house, and became aware of the unattached outhouse. Her's, much to my dismay on a snowy day, was across the yard near the garage. It proved to be an encounter of a draftier kind.

A few years later I was highly exhilarated, while visiting my boy friend's parents, to encounter twin dual purpose out-houses. One upstairs off the shed chamber, jetting out its full size at the back of the house. It boasted two holes, one large and one small, for smaller back laps. Used as a twosome, it was real cozy. Directly below was another two-holer. This was approached via the wood shed. It had a neat window at one side, as did the one above. What a wonderful thought, a duplex double seater in one household. The only one of its kind to my knowledge.

Six children and close to twenty years down the road of life, we bought the property (after the passing of the parents, my in-laws). It still had the twin back-houses intact. These proved to be very useful down through the years even though we also had modern inside facilities. As of now, the six have dwindled and the rest rooms (out-houses) are truly at rest.

It still seems unbelievable to have acquired so much in life -- two, two holers under one roof. Attached even!!

