

Outhouses and Chemical Toilets

Outhouses were common place during these years, especially in country homes. Many of these necessary buildings were built as a single-hole affair but some were equipped with a two-seater to accommodate a large family. During the depression years, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) built many outhouses in Steele. These early pre-fab units were transported to individual homes in town and on farms throughout the county. The nice thing about these manufactured outhouses was that they had cement bottoms, a neat seat with a cover, and air flow from two directions through a series of wooden pipes along the back wall. The seat box was often built in the corner which provided much more floor space.

It was in one of these typical outhouses that my dad improvised a unique system for taking a shower in the summer. He used an old gas tank, empty of course, and put it on top of the roof. A long rubber tube was attached to the drain hole with a shower head fastened to the other end. All we had to do was carry pails of water from the cistern behind the house or water from the city well, fill the tank, allow the sun to heat the water to a comfortable temperature, disrobe, and let the water flow freely. Since the floor was cement, the water drained to the lowest point which was usually toward the back of the building and into the pit. There wasn't a means to regulate the water temperature so warm wasn't an option. It was either hot or cold. It was also hard to gauge how much water was left so you had to hurry before the water ran out.

Most of these outhouses didn't survive with the invention of modern plumbing. There really wasn't any reason to keep them around. People were so glad to be rid of the inconvenience that they simply burned them and quickly forgot about the cold seat, long trips in the cold night air to a far corner of the yard, or the scary hoots of an owl late at night.

Using the facilities wasn't convenient or even very safe at times. Occasionally on Halloween night, young strong boys in the community took a chance to prove their prowess by toppling over an outhouse. Many unlucky souls were caught in an overturned building just as they were answering nature's call.

During the winters in the '40s and early '50s, we usually had huge snow drifts behind our house. Often times the outhouse door was blocked with many feet of snow making it inaccessible and unusable. To make it more convenient, my parents purchased what was known as a chemical toilet for inside use. Ours was approximately a five-gallon capacity, complete with a seat and cover. A package of enzymes was dropped into the inner bucket to breakdown the excrement and waste products. If you were the unlucky adult who let it fill up to the five-gallon mark, you were expected to dispose of the contents also. The inner bucket was removable and had to be lifted out of the main container, then carried to the outhouse and dumped down the hole. Imagine slipping and sliding on snow drifts carrying a pail of sh**. It wasn't a pretty sight but one of necessity.

When I got married in 1953 and started a family, we also purchased a chemical toilet. With four little girls in the house, it was very convenient to have. It wasn't until 1965 when we built the new house on the farm that we finally had indoor plumbing. Even though we had to run from the old house to the new house to use the indoor facilities until the house was completed, the new bathroom was the first room completely enclosed and boy, did the girls love it! They took a hot bath, dressed in their pajamas, threw on their overshoes and coats and ran back to the old house. Amazingly, no one caught a cold or got the flu from running between the houses that winter. Maybe we were doing a Bulgarian version of a Finnish bath.