

The Passing of the Backhouse

This poem has been attributed both to James Whitcomb Riley and to Charles T. Rankin.
Absolute authorship is not known.

When memory keeps me company and moves to smile or tears,
A weather-beaten object looms through the mist of years,
Behind the house and barn it stood, a half a mile or more,
And hurrying feet a path had made, straight to its swinging door.
Its architecture was a type of simple classic art,
But in the tragedy of life it played a leading part.
And oft the passing traveler drove slow and heaved a sigh,
To see the modest hired girl slip out with glances shy.

We had our posey garden that the women loved so well;
I loved it too, but better still I loved the stronger smell
That filled the evening breezes so full of homely cheer,
And told the night-o'ertaken tramp that human life was near.
On lazy August afternoons it made a little bower
Delightful, where my grandsirer sat and whiled away an hour.
For there the summer mornings, its very cares entwined,
And berry bushes reddened in the streaming soil behind.

All day fat spiders spun their webs to catch the buzzing flies
That flitted to and from the house, where Ma was baking pies;
And once a swarm of hornets bold had built their palace there,
And stung my unsuspecting Aunt -- I must not tell you where.
My father took a flaming pole -- that was a happy day --
He nearly burned the building up, but the hornets left to stay.
When summer bloom began to fade and winter to carouse,
We banked the little building with a heap of hemlock boughs.



Apparently His and Hers backhouses sitting on Martin Springs Drive, just west of Rolla. Photos by Terry Primas, except as noted.



This outhouse sat for years in Six Crossings Hollow near Duke until the Big Piney flushed it downstream in the flood of 2008.

But when the crust is on the snow and sullen skies were gray,
Inside the building was no place where one could wish to stay.
We did our duties promptly, there one purpose swayed the mind;
We tarried not, nor lingered long, on what we left behind.
The torture of the icy seat would make a Spartan sob,
For needs must scrape the flesh with a lacerating cob,
That from a frost-encrusted nail suspended from a string --
My father was a frugal man and wasted not a thing.

When Grandpa had to "go out back" and make his morning call,
We'd bundle up the dear old man with a muffler and a shawl.
I knew the hole on which he sat -- 'twas padded all around,
And once I tried to sit there -- 'twas all too wide I found,
My loins were all too little, and I jack-knifed there to stay,
They had to come and get me out, or I'd have passed away,
My father said ambition was a thing that boys should shun,
And I just used the children's hole 'til childhood days were done.

And still I marvel at the craft that cut those holes so true,
The baby's hole, and the slender hole that fitted Sister Sue,
That dear old country landmark; I tramped around a bit,
And in the lap of luxury my lot has been to sit,
But ere I die I'll eat the fruits of trees I robbed of yore,
Then seek the shanty where my name is carved upon the door.
I ween that old familiar smell will soothe my jaded soul,
I'm now a man, but none the less I'll try the children's hole.



This outhouse near Spring Creek in Phelps County has seen years of use. Its tongue and groove siding and recycled interior door give it a rather distinctive look.

For the earliest settlers, intent on slash and burn improvement, backhouse construction wasn't a priority. It was understood that women would use the brush on one side of the path behind the house and men would use the other side.

Later settlers constructed the backhouse 50 feet or so from the house. The digging effort was lessened if a



And then there is the old saying "Built like a block --house" or something like that. This house was built during WW II for use by the occupants of four one-room plywood cabins in back of the Old Stagecoach Stop.

small sinkhole was in the vicinity.

Sanitary facilities came slowly to the hills. The primitive outhouse contaminated wells and provided a breeding ground for hookworms. The New Deal's WPA built thousands of improved outhouses across the country (see above, right.) They had cast concrete floors to prevent hookworm penetration and ventilation stacks. A

three man crew would spend twenty hours constructing the "Eleanor" (or "Roosevelt" was another nickname.) If the farm family could afford it, they paid \$17 for the materials. The WPA labor was free.

For some of us, the modern plastic version of the backhouse (right), with its disinfectant smell, slick floor, and lack of individual style just doesn't



The area's most noteworthy outhouse was built for the Lynch family in 1941 by the WPA. They were living in a tent along the roadside of Route 66 during the construction boom of Fort Leonard and the shortage of living accommodations. The family quip is that many people have a picture of their first house but how many have a picture of their first bathroom? Courtesy of the Lynch family.

have the same, well, ambiance of the original.

The backhouse is just about extinct now. Should you see one in the wild, give it a nod or, better yet, sit awhile.



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