

The Outhouse

FROM THE WOODEN PRIVY WITH A CRESCENT-SHAPED MOON TO DOUBLE-DECKER MODELS AND 12-HOLE SUPERSIZE LOOS, THE OUTHOUSE IS AN ICON OF THE AMERICAN WEST.

They say it was the outhouse that held the key to Billy the Kid's great escape. Hidden inside one, legend says, was a revolver waiting for The Kid to retrieve it on an early evening visit to the loo outside New Mexico's Lincoln County Courthouse, where he was jailed. In truth, Billy knew that if he could get loose from the floor, where he was shackled and chained, he could slip his remarkably small hands through his handcuffs. After asking the guard if he could use the outhouse, he slipped his cuffs and hit the guard over the head when he returned to the courthouse. In the ensuing scuffle, Billy got the guard's gun and shot him. "Today, The Kid's famous jailbreak—and the role the outhouse played—is memorialized in New Mexico's historic Lincoln County, in a play at the Lincoln State Memorial," says B. Byron Price, director of the Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West at the University of Oklahoma. And that's no small role: It's been reprised

annually (except for two years during World War II) since 1939, making it the longest-running folk play in the United States.

Once abundant throughout the country, the iconic structure typically depicted with a crescent-shaped moon on the door was truly privy to the intimate details of life in the American West. For some, it provided a rendezvous point for late-night clandestine encounters. For others, it was a constant magnet for pranks, especially at Halloween, when many outhouses were moved (so the user stepped in the hole), tipped over, or even torched. Maybe you remember digging the holes, or filling them in when the outhouse had to be moved. The outhouse was, after all, a mainstay of life in the country until not that long ago. "You'd find outhouses far into the 20th century. There are still some out there," Price says. Indeed, about 50 million American families still had outhouses as late as 1950, down to 0.6 percent of the population in a recent reckoning.

It was Thomas Jefferson who got rid of the wooden privy on the White House lawn and then opted for two indoor water closets, which pumped waste into a septic field beyond the White House. But Jefferson was no stranger to innovation: The privies at his Monticello home were air-cooled by underground tunnels. And even pop stars are part of the outhouse culture. Singer-songwriter Jim Croce found his outhouse in Lyndell, Pennsylvania, a relaxing place to meditate. The arched window from the architecturally unique structure can be seen on the cover of his first album, *Don't Mess Around with Jim*.

With such a colorful and ubiquitous history, outhouses have often figured into Hollywood Westerns. Price, who previously served as executive director of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, points out that in *The Missouri Breaks* (1976), starring Marlon Brando and Jack Nicholson, an outhouse set the scene for the shooting of a man at his most vulnerable—with his pants down. Another



outhouse shooting took place in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992). And in 2008's *Appaloosa*, Jeremy Irons' ruthless Randall Bragg character was taken by surprise and arrested while coming out the door from his early morning outhouse visit.

Traditionally, the average outhouse (for single use) was 3 to 4 feet square, 7 feet high, and had no heat, window, or electric light. Many outhouses had two holes of different sizes—one for adults and a smaller one for children. Large families sometimes had multiple holes for concurrent use. A supersize privy at one Montana hotel offered a dozen holes to patrons. There were even deluxe two-story models. Although most outhouses had lids to cover the holes, some included actual toilet seats. Other practical matters: Many outhouses were painted white so they could be seen in the dark of night, and before toilet paper, mail-order catalogs were favored because the pages were soft; corn cobs (usually kept in a box) also served a similar function.

Curiously, the crescent moon equated today with outhouse doors wasn't always a universal symbol. Nor was the actual intent simply for ventilation and light. In colonial times, an era when few people could read, the crescent moon associated with Luna was a gender identification symbol for women. Likewise, the men's outhouse was then designated with a sun or star cutout on the door. However, by the mid-1800s, the original meanings were lost on the general population. Some Northern areas had no cutouts at all on the doors because of severe weather.

Doug Harman, chairman of the Lakes Trail Region for the Texas Historical Commission, which includes most of North Texas, shares a historical insight: "At the time of the Civil War, there were
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Thunderbox Road

Painted privies go on auction May 9 at The Museum of Western Art in Kerrville, Texas.

With a name that sounds more like a song or a film, Thunderbox Road is a traveling exhibit of 12 full-size outhouses that has been showcasing the talents of 12 top Texas Hill Country artists during a seven-month tour dubbed The Trail of the Painted Privies. Following a final exhibition that began in April at the Museum of Western Art in Kerrville, Texas, the "thunderboxes" are being auctioned May 9, 2009, with proceeds benefiting the National PKU Alliance and The Museum of Western Arts Teachers' Workshops.

Created and underwritten by Sand Creek Post & Beam of Texas and Cedar Eaters of Texas, Thunderbox Road was inspired by the book *Nature Calls: The History, Lore, and Charm of Outhouses* by Dottie Booth (Ten Speed Press, 1998). "Because many of our barn kits are based on historic turn-of-the-century designs, we love iconic farm and ranch structures," says Sonja Howle, who runs business development for Sand Creek. So naturally, when the idea was hatched, Sand Creek built the artists their own thunderboxes (an Australian term for outhouses), assuring all a fresh start. "We looked at all different styles of outhouses and felt this particular style with the little angled shed roof was most indicative of the Texas Hill Country," says Howle, creator and project manager for the tour. From pickup to completion, artists got two months to transform blank pine thunderboxes into works of art.

From Thom Evans' winged angel to Dotti Brundrett's aquarium theme to David Querbach's fortress fit for a queen, the outhouses reflect creativity and humor. The stunning exterior of third-generation artist and Texas-native Gwendolyn Listerman's outhouse is painted with horses galloping through the Hill Country. The front features a wood-carved horse head modeled on her mare, Diamond; open the door and there's a real saddle inside.

Besides the May Thunderbox Road grand finale auction, one of the 12 artists will be selected for the Judge's Choice \$5,000 cash award (decided by a panel of judges representing most Texas Hill Country arts organizations) and a \$5,000 People's Choice award (determined by votes cast online and ballots cast at tour hosting venues).

What's next on the trail of the painted privies? Perhaps thunderbox options to be added to Sand Creek's famous post-and-beam kits for traditional barns, garages, workshops, horse barns, and hunters' cabins? "As a matter of fact, we've had a few requests for outhouses," Howle says. "I'm sure we'll figure out something." But there are the semantics to sort out. "All the kids under 10 are calling them port-a-potties!"
—E.K.M.

To see more painted privies, visit www.thunderboxroad.com.