

Sanitation and Outhouses

An Odd History

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Why Study Outhouses?

- Outhouses contribute to a better understanding of the past
- They offer insights into how people lived and played an important role in their lives
- They serve as reminders of a rustic America



Image from Library of Congress

Memorialization of the Outhouse

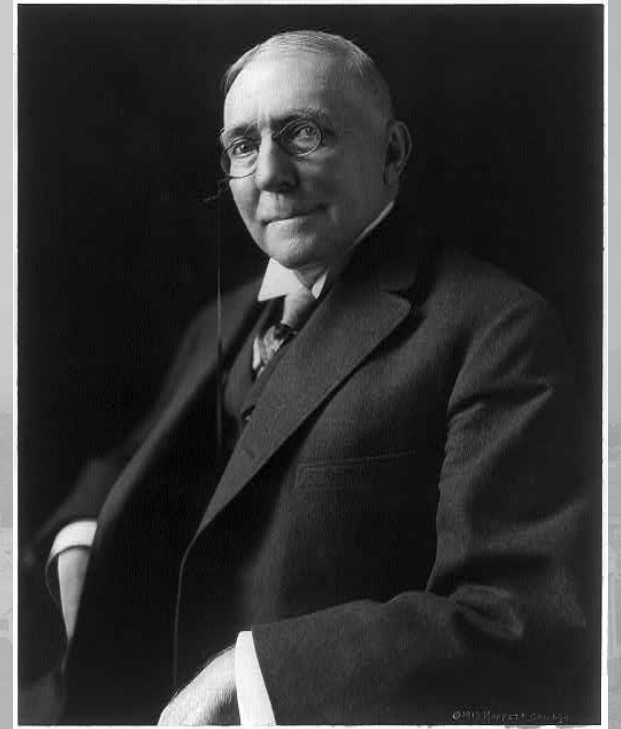
- Outhouses are remembered as humorous objects, and many such stories reflect that humor
- James Riley, Charles Sale, and Sherman Hines contributed to the public perception of outhouses through poems, stories, and photography
- Such efforts preserve the memory of the outhouse



Image from Library of Congress

Outhouses as Representative of Simple Times

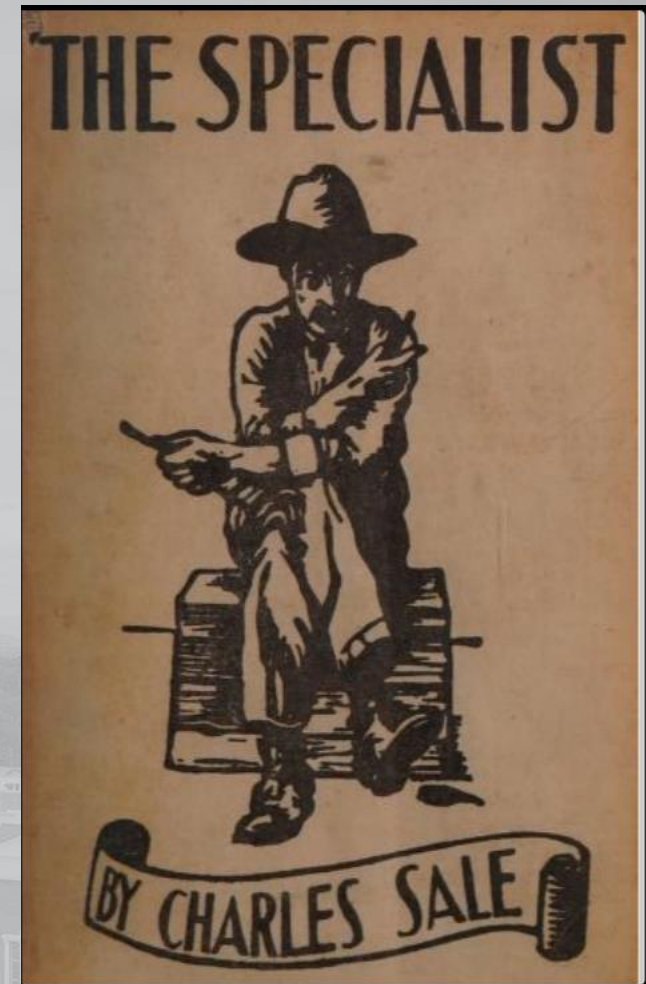
- Many rural families used outhouses for a variety of reasons that are a reminder of a time when Americans lived in simpler times
 - Outhouses reminded Larry Farrar of simpler times
- James Riley's poem "The Passing of the Outhouse" represents the nostalgia of the widespread use of outhouses and rustic America
 - "When memory keeps me company and moves to smiles or tears a weather-beaten object looms through the mist of years."



James W. Riley. Image from Library of Congress

The Specialist

- *The Specialist*, written by Charles Sale, is a short story based on Lem Putt, a carpenter in Illinois
- Provides tips and tricks for the proper construction of outhouses
- In Sangamon County, he constructed an outhouse for Luke Harkins



Cover of *The Specialist*

Outhouse Photography

- Some trekked throughout America to photograph outhouses
- Sherman Hines was the foremost of these
- With the assistance of Ray Guy, Hines published a collection of his photos along with a brief explanation of outhouses
 - They reflected that indoor plumbing made the outhouse obsolete and made it “indecorously comic”



Image from Library of Congress

Sanitation on Indian Reservations

- Tulalip Agency, Washington
 - Lacked proper sanitation practices
 - Unclean homes, crowded, and disordered
 - “abomination of desolation”
 - Government believed that educating the Native Americans would solve the problem
- Los Coyotes, Mesa Grande, and Rincon Reservations, CA
 - Privies and sewage disposal inefficient
 - Led to poor sanitation
 - Privies dilapidated unsanitary
 - School privies in good condition
 - Water Springs
- The Fort Apache Agency, Whiteriver, AZ
 - Each privy in the area disinfected
 - Completed efficiently and consistently



Image from Library of Congress

State and Local Regulations

- Michigan
 - Concerns about diseases
 - Typhus and dysentery
 - Understood that people carried germs associated with typhus
 - Stressed the dangers of flies
 - Recommended that people close off areas with waste to flies
- Marietta, OH
 - 1875, established regulations for depositing waste
 - The Board of Health had the power to remove goods that could spread a contagion in the city (privies, hog-sties, or watercraft).
- Illinois, 1912
 - Believed water was a leader in the cause and spread of diseases
 - Also stressed the dangers of flies
 - “KEEP THE FLIES OUT! KILL THOSE THAT GET IN! KILL THE FLY!”

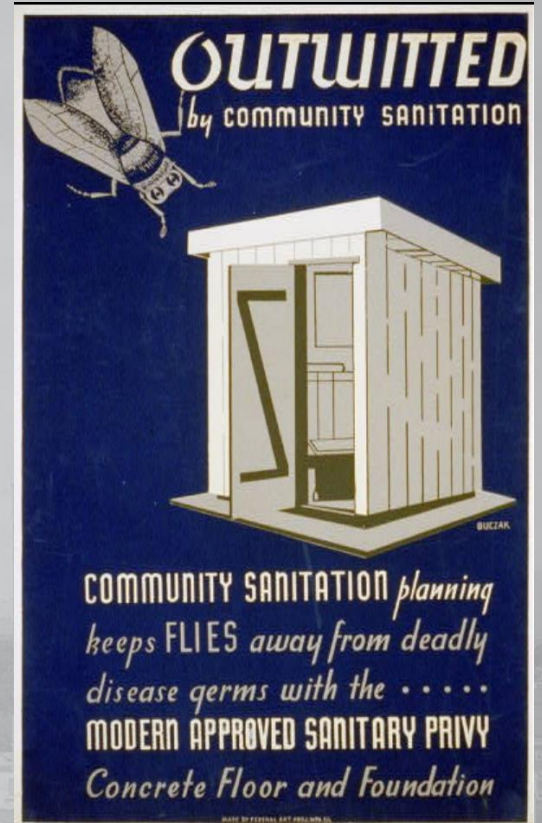


Image from Library of Congress

Obsolete and Irrelevant

- Even though outhouses served as a tool of remembrance of a rural America, they have become far less relevant
- Some still use outhouses, but due to indoor plumbing outhouse are obsolete
 - Federal, state, and local regulations also played a role in the growing irrelevance of outhouses
- They still serve as a memento of the past meant to evince a nostalgia for a different time
- Some campgrounds burned outhouses, while others turned outhouses into decorations



Image from Library of Congress

Conclusion

- Studying outhouses is necessary because it allows historians to see how people lived in the 19th and 20th centuries
- American outhouses have served as a reminder of rustic America
- The introduction of indoor plumbing relegated outhouses to the past

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