

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



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