

Cottage Memories

Chronicles of A City Boy's Life In The Country

LITTLE BROWN SHACK

How does that old song go – “Little brown shack out back so dear to me”? Billy Ed Wheeler knew whereof he sang. Outhouses help us take indoor conveniences less for granted. And when modern facilities aren't up to the task, it's either that outback shack or a swift visit to the bush for me. I'm still picking out the thorns.

Don't confuse outdoor privies with those ubiquitous porta-potties. The ones with cutesy monikers like “Johnny On The Spot”, “Jerry On The Job”, “Perry On The Pit” or “Dewey On The Dumper”. So named to mask a purpose that's anything but cute. And who wants an outhouse that someone can move just when I need it most? Or while I'm in it!

In cottage country, new outhouses are rare. Like the sun, they've always been there - sad, dilapidated, neglected relics obsoleted by technology. I bet any new ones would rapidly acquire these disreputable attributes once confronted with their mission in life.

Mine is an old, shabby, claptrap throne hidden in plain sight. The rickety door hangs by broken hinges and doesn't fit when closed. Its misaligned hook doesn't latch against interruptions. The structure leans far left as if in search of fresh air from the prevailing wind. Or maybe it's an NDP Privy. Or perhaps just slowly sinking into the pit below.

I approach my latrine with trepidation. Mostly because it's my system of last resort.

All others are occupied. Or have failed, except my own which is about to. Perhaps I'm reluctant because I have to dress to go. Maybe I'm nervous because nothing human has visited there since my last loo crisis. Or because it's inevitably the dead of night and I can't find flashlight or toilet paper.

Before entering, I strike a match to check for cobwebs. Eye reflections. Nests. Gas fumes. Or gnawed things like the toilet paper or the seat. Also, for what needs moving for access. Like old gas cans, deck chairs, lawn mower, garden tools and a tangle of hoses that the wife's to-do list says I should already have taken to that other dump. My flickering flame also provides assurance that nothing new has fallen into, or is about to emerge out of, the pit. Over which I'm about to lower my exposed nether self.

In winter, I do so on a Styrofoam seat if it wasn't left on our floating raft as a life preserver last summer. Or on my hands, a particularly vulnerable position. As the wife discovered while failing to fend off an inquisitive horse in mid squat. Her, not the horse. I prefer hands free for swatting.

Privy ventilation is unique and essential. In mine, no joint joins. A fact used to excruciating advantage by invasive insect hordes and Arctic winds, albeit in different seasons. If I catch a sniff of a whiff, I know it's got to be a quickie. Getting my business done in one lung-bursting breath, with no noxious intake. And to keep my

constitutional solo, I'm always straining on seat edge for sound of urgent intruders. Or peering through cracks for a rushing glimpse of a would-be occupant. The wife says nobody wants my company that badly.

Except by desperados like myself, outhouses are under-rated. They keep us out of the bush, preventing embarrassing poison ivy rashes and inexplicable frostbite. They are sanctuary during marital spats. Safe havens for the flatulent. A getaway for sneaking a smoke or catching up on old magazines. For avoiding line-ups and to-do lists. And no one cares I've left the seat up.

Yes, my little brown shack is my oasis. Except when I'm swatting, squirming, straining, or searching – which happens when I run out of toilet paper again. Then the magazines really earn their keep. Although their glossy paper just isn't the same as my Cottonelle. I try to use pages I've already read. Which definitely aren't the same after.

The wife has little privy appreciation. She stoically avoids its use with unsurpassed bladder control. So far, she's refused my offer of a chamber pot. Even when our indoor facilities break down and I'm supposed to call the plumber. Maybe I'll get around to it next week.

Craig Nicholson is a long-time Kawartha cottager who also provides tips and tour info for snowmobilers at intrepidcottage.com and for PWC riders at www.intrepidcottager.com.