

Functions of the Newfoundland Outhouse - Gerald Thomas

The outhouse still stands in the Newfoundland cultural landscape, as it does in many rural areas of North America. It is a reminder of harsh conditions for many Newfoundlanders. A memory of what it was like before indoor plumbing. A few of us may only know about “outdoor facilities” at national or provincial parks and the like. Others may know of outhouses from listening to their grandparent’s stories, or from visiting a cottage, or a cabin in the woods. If you do remember outhouses then you probably have some memories or tales of your own. Stories about a cousin, who fell in the hole, or getting locked in the outhouse, or maybe stories about the many ways in which the house was decorated or the many functions of an outhouse.

Construction and maintenance of the Outhouse

Outhouses fifteen to twenty years ago were small and painted in any color on the outside, just the front or sometimes not painted at all. They came in many different sizes and shapes. Some were narrow and made to only accommodate one user. In larger outhouses the second seat was made for a child, woman would come in with their young daughters and men with their sons. Outhouses generally were twenty feet away from the household placed over a hole in the ground and if the house was near the water it would stand on a beach so the waves could take waste away. The floor was sometimes plane wood or an old piece of oil cloth. The walls were covered with catalogue pages. This had a dual purpose, you had something nice to look at and when you ran short of paper you could always take a piece from the wall. Many people dressed up the windows with curtains. Double outhouses were built so that one side was the men’s and on the other side was for women (Similar to what you would see at a park).

The Licit, Illicit and Inspirational Functions of the Outhouse

Licit Functions - The main purpose of the outhouse was to provide a place with some degree of privacy to rid yourself of bodily waste. Also, as many of the stories talk about to get rid of any messy “slops” from the home (dirty dishwater, leftovers, or a bowel movement during the night). Because of all these “extras”, the smell of the outhouse was sickening. Ashes were used to help control the smell, one had to be sure there weren’t any hot embers from the ashes, or you have the added problem of getting a “lacing” from your “old man”. With the arrival of two-seater outhouse, came the function of sociability. The final licit use of the outhouse was it was used for more than just an outhouse; some were kept so clean that some kids were able to play in them.

Illicit Functions - These functions were much more interesting, these were activities that the informants knew or believed their parents would disapprove of. Along with the invention of the double outhouse came the holes bored into the wall hoping to catch a glimpse of a fellow and his girl looking for a few private moments together. So, the outhouse became a hiding place to many people for less-than-innocent activities. Some activities included smoking, sneaking a peek at a penis, hanging out with your friends, exchanging stories about what girl did this or that, or who had a crush on who, what girl you wanted to go out with or have sex with, etc. These were all things that were said in whispers amongst your friends, things you didn’t want your parent’s to know you were talking about. The outhouse was used for sex, not with your girlfriend, but with some of the town’s ‘used girls’. You would meet up with her take her to the outhouse to have sex, then she may have sex with 2 or 3 other boys if she wanted to or possibly not. Because of the size and shape of the outhouse, having sex was uncomfortable, but satisfying! Finally, depending on the time of the year, outhouses were used as bonfires or pushed over hills.

Inspirational Functions – The outhouse inspires many short and long narratives. Maybe about the lovely smells with all the flies in the summer, the cold winter and freezing your ass off sitting or squatting above the toilet seat, or the affair between Old Man Richards and Mrs. Talbot.

In Conclusion, the idea of having to use an outhouse is not as prevalent anymore in today’s society. Most often, outhouses can be found in cabins or the old family cottage. Outhouses will always be a past memory of the culture of Newfoundland and landscape for times past. People will always have funny stories to help them remember the hard times that they dealt with.