

PARTING SHOT

A weekly snapshot from The Daily Astorian and Chinook Observer photographers



Cheryl Johnson, owner of Clatsop Paddle Co., left, paddleboards along the John Day River with her son, Drew Tapio, center, and niece, Margo Niemela, right, in late September.

Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

ODDITY

The Good, The Bad, The Potty

Professor thinks historic outhouses underappreciated in Southwest

By RUSSELL CONTRERAS
Associated Press

CORRALES, N.M. — At a time when life could be harsh in the American Southwest, outhouses served more than one important role. They provided structure, protected water resources and created important social norms, a New Mexico professor says.

Many of the aging wooden structures still dot the landscape in the region and across the Great Plains. Richard Melzer, a University of New Mexico-Valencia history professor, wants to see the iconic buildings preserved before they're gone from the memory and legacy of the Old West.

Melzer has been researching the historic lavatories and hopes his work will encourage outhouse conservation efforts since they helped modernize areas like present-day New Mexico amid drought and limited plumbing.

"They had a tremendous cultural impact on the region," said Melzer, who has collected hundreds of photos of old outhouses in New Mexico.

Two seats meant higher economic status

The outhouses assisted in creating social norms on sanitation and personal hygiene, he said.

In New Mexico, they served residents such as ranch hands tending to cattle and rural teachers educating the children of chile pickers. And they did so while protecting the environment and important water resources.

Inside, one might find a Bible, old



AP Photo/Russell Contreras

A a 19th century-era outhouse stands at Casa San Ysidro in Corrales, N.M. At a time when life could be harsh in the American Southwest, outhouses served more than one important role. They provided structure, protected water resources and created important social norms, a New Mexico professor says.

tools, or catalogs from Montgomery Ward or Sears, Roebuck and Co. Two seats meant a higher economic status for owners, and the walls might be plastered with wallpaper to keep away insects or unwanted audiences.

Such items can still be found in some abandoned outhouses.

"They tell the story of the past," Melzer said.

The exact number of historic outhouses throughout the Southwest and Great Plains is unknown.

The New Mexico Historic Preservation Division, for example, says around 40 outhouses occupy historic

ranches and homesteads in the state.

But Melzer says there likely are hundreds more in the Southwest, and people are beginning to collect them. One Roswell aficionado has amassed around a dozen or so, he said.

Listed on historic registry

Outhouses also are part of a number of properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places across the country. That's the case with the Anderson Lodge, an 1890 two-story multi-room log cabin in the Washakie near Meeteetse, Wyoming, listed on the registry along with its outhouse.

A late 19th century outhouse is a feature of the Casa San Ysidro: The Gutierrez-Minge House, a Corrales home owned by the Albuquerque Museum. The home's origins go back to the 1870s.

Collector Ward Allan Minge bought the outhouse from another location and preserved it, Casa San Ysidro site manager Carol Lopez said.

"Outhouses remained common, especially in rural areas, until after World War II because of the lack of indoor plumbing and electricity," Lopez said. "Here in Corrales, they were

common up until the 1970s."

Indoor plumbing was 'just gross'

In fact, when indoor plumbing finally came to parts of New Mexico, some residents shunned the idea of bringing what went on in the outhouse into the home where they ate and slept.

"People thought it was just gross," said Melter, who is scheduled to release the details of his outhouse study Saturday at Casa San Ysidro. "That's what the outhouse was for, they thought. For out there."

our coast

MAGAZINE

3 WAYS TO GET YOUR COPY TODAY!

ORDER ONLINE

www.DiscoverOurCoast.com/order

STOP BY ONE OF OUR 3 LOCATIONS

Astoria • 949 Exchange St.
Seaside • 1555 N. Roosevelt Dr.
Long Beach • 205 Bolstad Ave. E. #2

or CALL HOLLY LARKINS
at 503-325-3211, x227
Email: hlarkins@dailyastorian.com