

HERITAGE CORNER

In praise of the noble but much maligned outhouse

It's been called a latrine, a backhouse, a dunny, a jakes, a comfort station and a necessary house, but there is noble lore behind the genesis of the outhouse that few are privy to. Local historian Laurel Pattenden has done some scholarly research and written an enlightening story to elevate our opinion of this lowly, but necessary, facility.

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When Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote the song *Anthem*, he observed how cracks let in the light. He was absolutely right, and he could even have been referring to how cracks were important to outhouses. Yes, outhouses!

We don't take much note about the history of outhouses, or to use a more polite way of referring to it - the *privy*, which is obviously the short form of the word *privacy*.

Have you ever noticed that outhouse doors always have a hole cut out of the upper portion of the door?

That hole lets in the daylight, but also allows for privacy...and bugs! It can also let out the light, when someone is using the privy at night and has carried in a lantern.

Outhouses located near homesteads and farm houses had doors with holes cut in many shapes or designs. However, when it came to public outhouses, a standard cutout shape was developed for their doors. The cutout shape was used instead of



a printed sign because the literacy rate was very low in the 1800's. We still use standard symbols in our multilingual world so everyone can understand.

According to commonly held theories, the women's privy door always had a cutout of a crescent moon which, throughout history, has been known to represent Luna or the Goddess Diana. It was later used as a symbol indicating feminine.

Cutouts made in the door of a men's privy were either a sun or a star. It is difficult to find information on these two symbols, but it has been suggested they also relate to gender mythology, and they have become masculine signs.

The crescent moon shape on an outhouse door tends to be seen more often today than a star or sun door. One theory for this is preference is that men's outhouses were not as well maintained; they deteriorated more quickly, so fewer of them survived. Outhouses are hard to find these days but fortunately, a perfect example of a joint public outhouse can be found behind the schoolhouse at the Moore Museum. One door bears a cutout of the crescent moon, while the other door bears a different shaped cutout. Is it a sun or a star?

The answer to this intriguing question is yours to discover the next time you visit the Moore Museum. We look forward to seeing you this spring.

-Laurel Pattenden

Moore Museum seeks volunteers for the Advisory Committee and the Tuesday Group

The museum is also looking for anyone who would be interested in joining the **Advisory Committee**. We meet at the museum once a month (with a few exceptions), at 7 p.m. on the first Wednesday. We discuss all matters concerning the museum, including upcoming events, maintenance needs, the accepting of large donations/artifacts, etc.. Anyone with an interest in the Museum or local history would be welcome to join!

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The Moore Museum is currently looking for volunteers who may enjoy being part of the **Tuesday Group** on Tuesday mornings. The group comes to do general maintenance around the grounds, such as painting or building shelving or display mounts, etc. and they enjoy the camaraderie of working together. They usually stay until early afternoon.



Above: Moore Museum volunteers work to restore a vintage piece of farm machinery that sits in an open air display area at the Shaw Building. Just one of the interesting tasks our volunteers enjoy with the Tuesday Group.

Moore Museum photo