



CHAMBER POTS

What in the world did people do when they had to go to the bathroom and there was no bathroom? In rural areas, people dug pits for their waste and placed shacks over the pits for privacy. These were known as “outhouses” because they were quite literally outside the house. They were also called “privies” because they provided “privacy.” But, what about inside? What did people do if they lived on the sixth floor of an apartment building or tenement? What was available “in the house”?

For most of recorded history, people who have had limited or no access to running water or flush toilets have used chamber pots. They first appeared as civilizations emerged and people began living closer together in villages, town and cities. In general, chamber pots were shaped like a large bowl. They had a handle, and usually, a lid. Most chamber pots were made of fired clay. Cheap pots were not finished, but, as the manufacture of ceramics improved, most were glazed and decorated. Aristocrats and wealthy families often possessed elaborately decorated chamber pots, while poorer families could only afford simple devices, usually with only one handle and no lid.

In the middle of the night, or when it was very cold, a person would pull the chamber pot out of its storage place, either under the bed or in a special closet, and use it for a toilet. In the morning, a member of the family would gather the chamber pots and empty them into special barrels in the street. Sometimes, people merely emptied the contents of their chamber pots out their windows and onto the street. Wealthy people hired “chamber maids” whose first responsibility was to gather, empty and clean the family’s chamber pots each morning. In some cases, “night soil collectors,” people who emptied the barrels filled with human waste, came with wagons or wheel barrows and removed it to rural areas where the “night soil” was used to fertilize gardens and fields. These activities lasted over centuries until modern sewer systems were built in cities, indoor plumbing became standard in homes, and contemporary chemical fertilizers were produced.

The lack of effective sewer systems and running water caused problems for cities. The refuse of thousands of people rotting in the streets caused cities to be very unhealthy places. Cholera and typhoid regularly plagued the urban population as water supplies were contaminated. These conditions continued until the early 20th century when most large American cities constructed sewage disposal systems to prevent the pollution of drinking water and the spread of bacterial plagues like the yellow fever epidemic that killed 5,000 people in Memphis, Tennessee in 1910. Modern sewage systems put the chamber pot out of business, and, after several centuries of loyal and faithful service to humanity it was unceremoniously dumped.