



## 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. They placed shacks over the pits for privacy. These were known as “outhouses” because they were actually 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? What was available “in the house”?

For most of recorded history, people who have had no access to running water or flush toilets have used chamber pots. They first appeared as people began living closer together in villages, towns and cities. Chamber pots were usually shaped like large bowls. They had a handle, and sometimes a lid. Most chamber pots were made of fired clay. Aristocrats and wealthy families often had decorated chamber pots, while poorer families could only afford simple pots, usually with 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 take the chamber pots and empty them into special barrels in the street. Sometimes, people just dumped the contents of their chamber pots out their windows and onto the street. Wealthy people hired “chamber maids” whose first job each morning was to gather, empty and clean the family’s chamber pots. In some cases, “night soil collectors,” people who emptied the barrels filled with human waste, came with wagons or wheelbarrows and removed it to rural areas where the “night soil” was used to fertilize gardens and fields. These activities lasted for centuries until modern sewer systems were built in cities, indoor plumbing became common in homes, and modern chemical fertilizers were produced.

The absence of effective sewer systems and running water caused problems for cities. The waste 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 or polluted. These conditions continued until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when most large American cities built 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.