I Know…I Was There

Bathing Wasn't Always an Everyday Event

Civilization advanced when hot water became easy to get.

WHEN I WAS a kid, Saturday night was bath night. Mom wanted us to be all nice and squeaky clean Sunday morning when we donned our best duds and set off for church.

But the ritual was not without its problems. Like lots of other people, we didn't have a hot water heater. What we did have was a cast-iron cookstove with a well at one end. It was kept filled with water that stayed nice and warm because the stove was running more or less constantly.

So Dad would ladle hot water into a pail and carry it upstairs, where he dumped it into the tub. Add a little cold water from the tap, and you had more or less enough water for your bath.

After a few years, Dad bought a water heater that sat in the basement next to the furnace. It looked something like a deformed fireplug. When we needed hot water, Dad built a fire in it with corncobs.

He called it his "Little Inferno No. 2," a term that comedian Fred Allen had come up with and Dad thought was enormously funny. Water circulated through the outer jacket of the heater and made its way up to the bathtub. Hot water by merely turning on the faucet! What luxury!

Cleaning Up an Empire

Bathing wasn't universally popular for many eons. Then, 2,000 years ago, the Romans got really enthusiastic about it. They built grand aqueducts that brought clean water from springs and lakes to the urban areas, both for drinking and bathing.

They also were ahead of their time when they figured out how to

use solar heating to warm the water. Eventually, they conquered most of Europe, building baths wherever they went. (Okay, so how do you think Bath, England got its name?)

But the idea of public baths didn't catch on with other cultures. Personal cleanliness just wasn't wildly popular. Do you suspect that may be why perfume was invented?

I remember a man on a neighboring farm who boasted that he bathed only twice a year—once in the fall, when his wife sewed him into his long johns, and again in the spring, when he took them off. It seems likely that his spouse slept in another part of the house through the winter.

A while back, Reminisce received a story from a reader who grew up in a family with five kids. The challenge was to be first in the tub on Saturday night, because the wa-ter was neither very warm nor very clean by the time it was the last child's turn.

The choice of bath soap usually was left to mothers. Some favored Cashmere Bouquet. Others swore by Wonder Pine Tar, a brand plugged as "not for the faint of heart." That's also how I felt about Lifebuoy, with its strong, somewhat medicinal aroma.

Then there was Ivory soap. It was advertised as "99-44/100% pure," which must have been a comfort if you had worried about impure soap. But the neatest feature of all was "It floats." And it did, which made it easy to find in the tub.

Sales also were helped along with the discovery that Ivory was ideal for carving, too. School art teachers had their students carving little bears, horses, fish and you name it. And if it didn't turn out too well, you could take it back home and have it join you in your bath-tub. (According to one legend, bank robber John Dillinger carved a gun out of a bar of soap, painted it with shoe polish and used it to escape from the Crown Point, Indiana jail. Others say he carved the

fake gun out of the top of a washboard, while others say a real gun was smuggled in.)

Bathing en Masse

Maybe the rich folks had shower baths when I was young, but no one I knew had ever heard of them, except at the local high school. I wasn't much into showering with a bunch of other naked guys, so I spent as little time as possible washing up.

Besides, the seniors delighted in snapping your behind with a wet towel, so I wanted to be dressed and gone before they finished showering.

Most likely the worst showers I ever had were the ones aboard a troopship that had been an elderly Dutch freighter in an earlier life. Seawater was pumped into the shower room, unblessed by heating.

Since regular soap doesn't work in salt water, the military provided a special variety that supposedly made you nice and clean. It did, unless you count the greasy film that somehow didn't rinse away. But at least everyone smelled a lot better in those crowded holds with bunks stacked four high.

Later, in the Philippines and after V-J Day, three of us constructed an outdoor shower. It consisted of a wooden framework about 8 feet high and topped off with a 55-gallon steel drum.

We filled the drum with water each night. After a day of sitting in the tropical sun, the water was nicely warmed by the time we returned from our daily duties.

I know a couple that lives in the deep woods without any electricity. They use the same barrel-on-the-roof idea for their summer bathing. In the winter, they heat hot water on their wood-burning stove and take sponge baths…pretty much what we did between Saturday nights 75 years ago.

The Price of Progress

Today's new upscale homes have enormous bathrooms with both a shower enclosure and a huge, oval tub complete with whirlpool action to soothe aching muscles. Some friends remodeled their bath a couple of years ago and thoroughly enjoyed it…until they got their first water bill.

Women relish soaking in water perfumed with bubble bath solutions. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to shower, probably because it takes less time.

Living alone, as I do, it's also the prudent route, because I doubt that I could get out of a tub these days. So why take chances?

Morning showers wake me up and put me in a good mood for whatever the day has to offer. They're a big improvement over those Saturday night baths.

I know…I was there. —Clancy Strock, Contributing Editor

Clancy's columns on "life back when" appear in each issue of Reminisce and Reminisce EXTRA.