An Indelicate Subject

by Joy Lewis

Tracking down the original meaning of a word can lead to some interesting discoveries. Take, for instance, the word "diaper." Who first thought of wrapping up an infant's nether parts? And why call it a diaper?

Away back in the Middle Ages the word "diapering" referred to the lavish decorations on a shield or a Coat of Arms, specifically a field of jewels arranged in a diamond-shaped pattern. So for more than two centuries was its sole meaning. When the clever linen weavers of sixteenth century France devised a new weave, creating a raised diamond motif, they called it "diapered-cloth." Fast forward a couple hundred years. At about the time of the American Revolution the diamond-weave cloth was manufactured using cotton rather than linen. This produced an exceptionally soft, absorbent fabric and came readily to be used as swaddling material for infants.

As swaddling fell out of favor during the early years of the nineteenth century, the practice evolved which today is called diapering: a square of cotton diapered-cloth was folded into a triangle, then fitted over a baby's bottom, one point drawn between the legs, and the two ends tied over the belly. After 1849, a diaper pin – the newly-invented safety pin – was used as a fastener.

Along the same line, the origin of the word "toilet" can be traced back in time to another type of French cloth. *Toile* ("twaal") was a heavy linen fabric. In sixteenth century France a length of *toile* was placed over a person's shoulders to protect his or her clothing during the application of powder to the hair. When not in use, the cloth was draped over the dressing table; before too long the word, in the form "toilet," was adopted into English as a noun to designate the dressing table, and as a verb to describe the early morning grooming ritual.

One of the items kept on the bottom shelf of the toilet table was the "pot." Made of shiny brass or thick ceramic, with a lid to match, this necessary but unsightly item was known by New Englanders – forebears of those hardy pioneers settling the lands of western New York in the early nineteenth century – by a couple of different euphemisms. A ceramic chamber pot was called a "jordan" and a brass one a "thunder mug" – on account of the noise it made when in use. The term jordan harks back to the days of the Crusaders when Christian pilgrims brought back from the Holy Land a vial of water from that most sacred of rivers. The round-sided jug they carried their consecrated water in was called a Jordan-bottle. Because the shape was similar, the name in later years was transferred to the pots and bottles used by alchemists in their experiments. Eventually the word came to be applied to the lowly chamber pot.

With the passing of time toilet tables came to be fitted with doors, inside which the pot was shut up when not in use. The erstwhile dressing table, now a small cabinet, was denominated at various times a "toilet" or a "commode" – this word being derived from the same Latin root as the word "accommodate": for the toilet cabinet was made to accommodate the pot. By the year 1800 the word toilet was in everyday use in America to name what today is commonly called the outhouse. With the advent of indoor plumbing, the same word was utilized for the sanitary porcelain vessel with a convenient flushing tank.

Many words and phrases have been applied to describe that "little house behind the house": Aunt Nellie's, the reading room, biffy, rest room, shiver shanty, two-holer, outdoor plumbing, Mrs. Murphy, earth closet, privy, lavatory, comfort station, Aunt Susan, the office building (it's where you "do your business"), necessary house, bathroom, the john. (This designation dates back to the fourteenth century when a common euphemism to indicate a call of nature was to excuse one's self by expressing a need to "visit my cousin John." John was the most ubiquitous name in England: so common that it served as a code word for the most common of natural functions.)

In Honeoye, and in other rural areas of the northeast, the outhouse of the 1920s and 30s was routinely called a "chick sale" in honor of Charles "Chic" Sale (1885-1936), an American humorist. His stock in trade was a monologue heavily dependant on outhouse jokes. His 1929 book *The Specialist* – a parody of outhouse salesmanship – was wildly popular, with the result that his name was appropriated to the little house.

Burton Deuel (1902-1996) grew up in Honeoye, attending school on East Hill. For fifteen years he served as Richmond's Town Clerk. In his delightful memoir "Reminiscences," he writes of "The First Bathroom in Honeoye." The year was 1913; the home was that of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Gilbert, of West Lake Road. It seems Mr. Gilbert was about fed up with the local hooligans tipping over his outhouse each Halloween and this year he was bound to put a stop to the nonsense. As Mr. Deuel tells it: "Well, come Halloween night Albert got himself ready. About nine PM he donned a pair of boots, heavy overcoat and gloves; went out to the toilet, closed the door, and set down to read his newspaper…About ten o'clock, without any noise or warning, over went the three-holer onto the door and Albert, lantern, and newspaper all in a heap on top of the door."

Mrs. Gilbert, who was deaf, never heard her husband's cries for help. As Albert considered his predicament, he decided his only recourse was to exit the space by crawling through the largest hole in the seat. "Being a small man," Mr. Deuel writes, "he made it through, but when he got to the house, he did not look so good or smell so good either…The next morning Albert went downtown and hired a man to dig a hole where he built a concrete septic tank. He ordered a hand pump, put a water tank in his attic, bought a bathroom outfit and had it installed."

And so, indoor plumbing made its debut in the township; it was an innovation much imitated. So much so that one hundred years later, the humble back house is hardly to be seen in these parts.