

The Outhouse: When Nature Calls

— Howard L. Cohen

out-house *n.* **1.** A small, enclosed structure having one or two holes in a seat built over a pit and serving as an outdoor toilet. **2.** An outbuilding, as on a farm.

~*American Heritage Dictionary*

Outhouse you say? What does this have to do with astronomy? Nothing and everything. First, definition number 2 (above) refers to an “outbuilding” or any small structure placed away from a main building and often used for activities not wanted in the primary house. Therefore, backyard astronomical observatories fall into this category (Fig. 1). Yes, your favorite telescopes may very well be stored and used in an “outhouse.”

However, outhouses can also be an outdoor “toilet” or “privy” as they are sometimes known (Fig. 2). Many other terms are also used. In fact, other countries besides the USA have their own terminology as the “dunny” in Australia or the “long drop” in New Zealand!



Figure 1. Did you know a backyard observatory is an “outhouse”?

But then again, how do outdoor toilets relate to

astronomy? Aside from their possible convenience when observing in a rural area, have you not seen many outhouses with crescent moons carved on their sides or doors? And have you not wondered why?



Figure 2. An outdoor toilet is also an example of an “outhouse.” Did you know some but not all have a crescent moon cutout?

Digression. Many articles discussing outhouses erroneously refer to these lunar cutouts as “half-moons.” However, a half-moon is a popular word for the astronomically correct *quarter moon*, a moon appearing half illuminated and not a crescent.

But back to crescent moon symbols carved into the sides of outhouses. First, it is a popular myth that outhouses have or must have these lunar signatures. Many, if not most, do not. They may, however, have other symbols decorating their walls. For example, the Swedish road sign for an outhouse uses a heart (Fig. 3). Possibly the association of outhouses and crescent moon was made popular by cartoonists, for reasons only known by their sometimes “perverted” sense of humor.

Still, other stories abound. Some say carving these symbols helped illiterate peoples distinguish between the men and ladies facilities. This may be an urban legend. But why use a crescent moon?

Historically, at least in Europe, the Moon was associated with the goddess of the hunt, wild animals and also the Moon (Fig. 4). Examples include (Artemis in Greek mythology and Diana in Roman mythology). Associating the Moon with hunting is not surprising since bright moonlight aides the hunter. In fact, the first full moon after the Harvest Moon is often called the “Hunter’s Moon,” which fell on 2 November 2009 and will occur 22 October this year (2010).



Figure 3. Swedish road sign for an “outhouse.”

However, solar deities, although sometime associated with goddesses (as Amaterasu in Japanese beliefs), have frequently been related to male gods. This common belief may be due to popular Greek and Roman mythologies that use male deities.

Stories abound about why the crescent carving survives on outhouses but not a Sun symbol. One variant tells it this way. Women took better care of their “facilities” than the men. Men, ultimately sought them out leaving the male counterparts unneeded so they disappeared from history. Another variant claims ladies’ outhouses outlasted men’s because porcupines chewed their seats due to their liking for salt found in urine!

Others will simply state, which would you rather carve or draw (cartoonists take note) a crescent moon or a radiating sun symbol on the side of an outhouse?

But why a crescent rather than, say a quarter or full moon? Ah, you may want a view out but you probably don’t want much of a view in!

Regardless, holes were certainly placed in the sides of outhouses both for ventilation and light (at least during the day). People have also used many shapes over the years including diamonds, triangles, hearts, V-shapes cutouts and even circles (full moons?) for those wanting a view.

Whether or not one adopts the outhouse as an observatory outbuilding or an outdoor toilet, both meanings definitely carry the connotation, “nature calls.”

Naturally, crescent moons should continue to adorn the “astronomer’s outhouse,” especially for lunar observers. However, I would think a star design, which, in fact, has sometimes been used, might better fit the deep sky observer.

You decide.

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Figure 4. The Moon has traditionally been associated with female goddesses.