



The Bath

Ma took down the wash-boiler from the back-porch wall about three o'clock on Saturday afternoon and summoned her chief water-hauler, a boy about 10 years old. He must fetch four pails of water for the boiler. Though washday was past or coming, whichever way you looked at it, this was Saturday—the night of the bath.

Ma and the girls would start things off with a head-wash every second week. Since their hair was long, it was nice to do that in the afternoon, as it would be completely dry by bedtime.

After supper, the boiler steamed away on the stove. In winter, the steam that collected on the windowpane quickly froze to thick, white frost, but near the stove it was cozy.

Some families had tin bath tubs you could soak in. Some used the round rinse-tub from washday in which you stood and scrubbed; some used a wash basin. It was sort of a matter of tradition and using what you had.

The kitchen was hot with the stove really fired up. Ma brought out a big hooked rug and put it right in front of the open oven door. The turns usually went from the youngest to the oldest, ending with Pa. Sometimes a boy or girl of courting age might have Saturday night plans and they could be worked in the early part of the schedule. During summer, when the whole family went to town on Saturday night, the bath hour was moved up, so the baths came before town.

In winter, Ma laid out neat piles of clean underwear and night clothes for each member of the family. With a pail of cold water at hand to blend with the hot water, it was bath time.

Ma presided over scrubbing the small children until they were considered old enough to manage themselves and then they could bathe alone and be checked afterwards.



A pioneer family with their prized well.

PHOTO CREDIT: © Courtesy USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Privacy was honored. No one interfered as one by one the family members took their turn enjoying the nice hot water. It usually wasn't emptied between bathers, but more water could be added to keep it nice and warm. Homemade soap was used for scrubbing, but sometimes there was a bar of town-soap with its good smell.

There would be at least three bath towels for family use. These would be nice, soft, terry cloth, not the hard huck toweling used for everyday. As one towel got wet it could be draped over the oven door to dry and later used again. Ma had likely cut and hemmed the wash rag from a bath towel gone thin in the middle.

There might be a bottle of lotion set on the table to smooth on elbows and rough heels.

Pa, the last one in the bath, took care of emptying the water into slop pails. He would wipe out the tub and hang it on the back-porch wall by the boiler.

Ma would come in quietly wearing her night clothes with her hair braided into one big braid down her back. She picked up the piles of discarded clothes for her wash box and tidied up the kitchen, for tomorrow was Sunday.

Sunday could come. Her family was all clean for another week.

—Marian Cramer, *Lantern Glow*