

Dispatches from Magnolia

Alberta before Electricity

In pre-electricity rural Alberta, houses were primarily heated with wood and coal. Many were little more than log cabins, with cellar holes below and unfinished attics above the main (usually only) floor. Insulation, if any, was sawdust or shavings, which settled over time. The spaces between wall logs were sometimes chinked with moss. By modern thinking, houses were cold, especially in winter and particularly in the early morning when the fires were down. Lots of blankets were required to keep warm overnight, and an early morning chore was always the stoking of fire. Outdoor privies were the norm.

Keeping clean was always a problem, especially in winter. Winter wash water was often obtained by collecting snow to be melted in wash boilers or tubs (photo 1) on the kitchen stove. As the warmest place in the house was the kitchen, people bathed in the kitchen.



Photo 1: Two galvanized wash tubs with a wash boiler in the back. The latter had many uses, including water bath canning

This arrangement was completely fine for little children and their parents. With the children supposedly safely in bed, the parents took turns assuring that the kids stayed in bed, while the other washed. However, as the children grew older, the indelicacies became apparent.

The houses were not designed for the incorporation of bathrooms. Some homeowners solved the problem by building an annex, but they were difficult to heat. A more practical and sophisticated approach was to build a detached wash house.

There were several in the greater Magnolia area, one of which lingered on long enough for me to see. From this single example and what I have been told, they were simple structures about twelve feet square, just big enough to accommodate a wood burning kitchen stove (photo 2), some wood storage, and a bit of shelving or cabinet for towels and a wash tub.



Photo 2: Well-kept wood burning cook stove. Photo compliments of Ena Rudovics

The buildings were set on floor joists raised off the ground, with the walls sheeted with lumber or shiplap. The roof was shingled and the walls covered with tar paper. Rolled roofing embossed to make it look like siding (figure 3) was also used on the walls. A door and window completed the structure.



Photo 3: Example of embossed rolled roofing, used as siding

The wash houses did away with the problem of disposing of dirty water, as it was simply dumped out the door. As it was hot, there was no appreciable ice buildup.

With electrification and gentrification on-going in Edmonton, there was a lively renovation business, especially in heating and bathrooms. The fittings taken out were disposed of, or if there were country relatives that could, for example, use tubs as cattle water troughs, all the better. Some of this re-use included footed tubs (photos 4 and 5), which were placed in the wash shacks. Real bathing, in private, had arrived. The drain was routed through a hole in the floor, so the water drained away just like real plumbing.



Photo 4: Footed metal bath tub



Photo 5: Repurposed footed bath tub

With heat, water and a means to get rid of dirty water, by natural progression, the wash houses became home to gasoline engine driven wringer washers. Even in the limited space, there was room to hang some wet clothes to dry.

Note: the wash boiler in photo one is still available from Great West Metal, Winnipeg

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