



DÉJÀ VU

by Cynthia Crossen

Before Home Spigots, Water Was Never Taken For Granted

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AFTER TRYING OUT her new shower in 1799, a Philadelphia woman named Elizabeth Drinker noted in her diary that she had tolerated the new experience “better than expected, not having been wet all over at once for 28 years.”

Getting wet all over was once a luxury few people could afford. Until the early 20th century, using water, for most people, meant first locating and then hauling it. There were no taps, let alone water heaters, and, since there were also no drains, what was brought into the house had to be taken out. Along with heat and food, water was a commodity most early Americans never took for granted.



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On the Western plains, where the author Wallace Stegner grew up, “You boiled sweet corn, say. Instead of throwing the water out, you washed the dishes in it. Then you strained it through a cloth into the radiator of your car, and, if your car should break down, you didn’t leave

the water to evaporate in its gullet, but drained it out to water peas,” he wrote in his book “Wolf Willow.”

Some Americans are becoming reacquainted with the idea that their faucets may not produce an infinite stream of clean water. Throughout this past summer, low rainfall forced water restrictions in several states.

The average American uses between 50 and 100 gallons a day, depending on region and season. In 1900, the average person used five. Only 15% of households then had flushing toilets—now the biggest users of indoor water. Even fewer homes had bathtubs; for most people, bathing was a dreaded Saturday-night ritual involving a small tin tub and shared water that was either too hot or too cold.

Indeed, bathing was once considered by many to be unhealthy; in 1845, the city of Boston outlawed it unless it was done under a doctor’s orders. Not until 1919 did plumbers and soap makers start a Bath a Day marketing campaign that became wildly successful. One plumber, writing in Illinois Master Plumber magazine, even claimed bathtubs were useful in the fight against Bolshevism; being clean, he opined, would make the lower classes feel better about themselves and less likely to rise up against authority. Even so, by 1950, only 64% of American homes had full bathrooms.

People always needed water for their gardens, but, as Mr. Stegner noted, they often used “gray water,” which they had saved from rinsed dishes, clothes or hands. Nor would people living in 1900 have lawns of Kentucky bluegrass, now one of Americans’ favorite turfs, which demands a steady diet of water in summer. They also wouldn’t have had swimming pools, water beds, washing machines, hot tubs, underground sprinklers, aquariums, misting fans, dishwashers or garbage disposals. They didn’t have cars to hose down, and no one was advising them to drink eight glasses of water a day.

For the urban poor a century ago, water was scarce, costly and dangerous. It could be bought by the bucket or barrel from water peddlers, but so-called tea water (pure enough to drink without boiling) was prohibitively expensive. Water might be available at irregular times when street pumps and hydrants were operating. Because a tenement of 2,000 people might not have a single bathtub, many cities built public baths, the one place people could immerse their entire bodies.

It was only in the 20th century that people realized water not only quenched thirst and nourished crops, but also killed. Water-borne diseases like cholera, dysentery and typhoid were thought to be generated spontaneously from filth and spread by invisible gas or miasma. The real culprit was usually the proximity of wells to outhouses or the common practice of dumping sewage and trash into rivers, lakes and streams.

The first public water systems were built primarily for fighting fires or manufacturing; households were considered secondary users. The water, usually untreated, was often unpalatable. Even so, with water both easy to get and cheap, consumption quickly started rising.

On farms, wells were dug by hand, excavated through rock until the water flowing in overtook the digger’s bailing rate. The well might be several hundred feet from the house. In the 19th century, it was calculated that a typical North Carolina housewife walked 148 miles a year carrying more than 36 tons of water. Doing laundry was, as a Nevada housewife put it, “the Herculean task which women all dread.”

Washing and rinsing one load of laundry used about 50 gallons of water; a bucket held less than three gallons.

“Do you see how round-shouldered I am?” a rural Texas woman asked Robert Caro when he was reporting “The Path To Power, “ a biography of Lyndon Johnson. He explains on his Website: “She said, ‘I’m

round-shouldered from hauling the water.’ Another woman said, ‘You know, I swore I would never be bent like my mother, and then I got married, and the first time I had to do the wash I knew I was going to look exactly like her by the time I was middle-aged.’”

Americans now have some of the cleanest, cheapest and most reliable reservoirs in the world. Unlike their forebears, however, they will never truly appreciate the weight of water.

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