

The inside of the outhouse was designed to fit the users. The size of the holes ranged from large to small. A smaller hole and lower bench were often created for small children who feared falling in. The holes could be round, oval, or square, rough, or smooth depending on the skill of the craftsman. Lids were optional but might embody the cut out shape attached by leather hinges. The door was more likely to have an outside latch than an inside one, and many an old-timer remembers outhouse pranks including locking someone in, and moving or tipping the structure. On cold nights a lantern or fire bucket was used for heat, and one resourceful old miner used the top of an iron cook stove for seats: deadly on cold mornings.



Outhouse in corner of horse shed on Razor Creek.

## Gunnison County Register of Historic Landmarks

The members of the Historic Preservation Commission, along with the Gunnison County Commissioners, are very excited about the Register of Historic Landmarks. The Gunnison County is rich in history, and with the register we can recognize those important properties within our county. The register serves as a means to educate the public about our interesting past and to preserve that history for future generations.

If you own an old house, ranch, or other property with historic interest in the Gunnison Country, and are interested in discovering more about your local history, you may be interested in listing your property on the County Register.

Individuals may nominate a property to be listed on the Gunnison County Register of Historic Properties in one of the following two categories:

**Landmark:** A landmark is an individual structure, object, feature, site or area.

**District:** A district is a related group of historic structures, objects, features, sites or areas.

We are interested in hearing from you. The HPC can provide assistance and help with research.

### *Benefits to being a local Historic Landmark*

- Protecting a physical link with our past.
- Serving as a source of area pride and identity.
- Distinction signified by a bronze plaque at the property.
- Possible financial or technical assistance to property owners through state or federal agencies.
- Adaptive re-use of properties.

## About the Gunnison County Historic Preservation Commission

Charged with the identification and nomination of historic landmarks to be placed on Gunnison County's Register of Historic Landmarks, the Gunnison County Historic Preservation Commission, consisting of a five member volunteer board, was founded in 1994.

For more information, please contact the Gunnison County Historic Preservation Commission by phone: 970-641-0495, e-mail: [kashwood@rmi.net](mailto:kashwood@rmi.net), website: [www.ci.gunnison.co.us/hpc.htm](http://www.ci.gunnison.co.us/hpc.htm), or mail: 200 E. Virginia, Gunnison, CO 81230.

# Preserving our past...

## ...outhouses of Gunnison County



Gunnison County Historic Preservation Commission



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*Typical family backhouse in Tincup.*

Outhouses are endangered buildings. When indoor plumbing became established, around the turn of the century, the backhouse was no longer a necessity. In fact, it became a source of embarrassment to those who did not have the luxury of running water. Yet the privy has a long and remarkable history. The word itself comes from early Middle English and is derived from the Latin word *privatus*, meaning apart, retired, or secret. As far back as Roman times, latrines used a diverted water source to flush wastes away, and some frontier privies were built over water. Outhouses were built, at times, in stages as families settled and accumulated enough money for their construction. No known privy designs existed; the pioneers built them from memory, using their ingenuity and the materials available to them. Backhouses were made of logs before milled lumber was available, and some early johnnies displayed gun ports.

American privies are the only ones worldwide to display the moon or star on the door. Legend has it that the moon meant ladies and the star signified gents. This code was available to everyone, even those who could not read, so there would be no embarrassing encounters. These decorative cuts actually had a use: to provide light and ventilation to a room that otherwise might not include windows or ductwork. Among the many colorful names for the privy were backhouse, parlor, dry closet, library, johnnie, or biffie.



Gunnison County hosts some unique privy designs, including two story outhouses. Several examples of this design existed in Crested Butte in its boom days when the Old Town Hall, the Masonic Hall and Kochevars Bar and Dance Hall all sported this arrangement. While the two story outhouse still resides behind the Masonic Hall (walk around back in the alley to see it), the shaft on the rear of the Old Town Hall has been built



*Two story outhouse on back of the Crested Butte Masonic Hall. A sign noted, "Anything over eight pounds must be lowered by rope."*

into an entryway. Privies attached to a building were unusual for obvious reasons. The customary placement was close enough to the house to be handy and far enough away to keep down the odor, although lime and wood ashes were thrown down the hole to help eliminate smells. In Crested Butte many miners built covered walkways to the backhouse to do away with shoveling during the long winters.



*Shaft of former second story outhouse on back of the Old Town Hall in Crested Butte.*

Many question the concept and operation of the two story outhouse. In climates like Crested Butte's the upper story of a privy was reserved for winter use when snow built up. When attached to a building, the second story outhouse was a convenience, eliminating a trip downstairs and then outside. Generally, but not always, the wastes fell to the ground floor and were periodically collected and removed by workers called scavengers.



*Attached Union Park facility shows port for waste removal.*

Another unusual outhouse design in Gunnison County is the three door privy featured behind the Fairview School on Ohio Creek. Although speculation on the reasons for the three doors runs high, it appears the middle door was a storage room while the ends were for boys and girls.



*Fairview School privy on Ohio Creek.*

