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## **From European royalty to African villages, indoor plumbing rarer than you think**

*By Diether Haenicke*  
*October 15, 2008*

I talked the other day with a student from Africa about living conditions of common people in the Third World, hygienic standards in those countries, the lack of clean water in many regions of the earth and the consequence of poor sanitary conditions on the health of poor people.

I had earlier expressed concern over his own very basic living quarters in Kalamazoo, when he advised me that he actually considered the very minimal room he inhabits here more than adequate and much superior to what he has available at home. He pointed out that it is particularly the plumbing that makes a difference.

It turns out that he lives in a small, remote village where his family does not have running water. He considers it a luxury that he can take a shower each morning and has a flush toilet and access to a washing machine -- unheard of comforts at home. We laughingly drew comparisons.

When I grew up, we also had no washing machine, and I did not wear fresh clothes from top to toe each day. Neither could I take a shower every morning. We did have a flush toilet, but only one for the entire family.

A big boiler in the bathroom was fired up twice a week to produce hot water for the family bath. Since several siblings needed to be cleaned, the boiler content had to be used carefully to last for several subsequent bathers. The last one's bath was usually rather cold, and we sometimes threw dice to determine who would go first. In summer, after playing soccer for hours, my mother gave us boys a bar of soap and we plunged into the river behind the house. We smelled best during the summer. My African guest laughed. His memories of bathing in the river were similar to my own. And he was right:

Comparatively speaking, we have it very good here when it comes to high standards of hygiene.

My guest and I stayed on the topic. I mentioned that when I visit castles and royal palaces in Europe, it always strikes me how luxurious our sanitary installations are compared to those of princes and kings of a few centuries ago. None of them had indoor plumbing; few of them ever bathed during the winter; and hardly any of them changed their under garments frequently. Many castles have curious protrusions in their outside walls. A closer look from the inside reveals that they have seats with a large hole from which the user's excrement fell into a river or moat. Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled England from 1553 to 1603, is said to be the first monarch to have had a primitive forerunner of a water closet, for which she was much ridiculed but which she used nevertheless.

Even our early American presidents, all of whom with the exception of George Washington lived in the White House, did not know indoor plumbing in the stately residence. When John Adams, our second president, became the first resident of the house, it had no running water and chamber pots functioned as toilets. The Potomac was the president's bathtub. Weather permitting, the American president strolled to the river to clean himself.

It is debatable when the first bathtub actually was installed in the White House. Many historians agree that it was Lucy Hayes, known as Lemonade Lucy to contemporaries because she had banned liquor from the premises, who insisted on a proper bathtub for herself and husband Rutherford, who was president from 1877 to 1881. It is well established, though, that President William Howard Taft was so fat that he once got stuck in the White House bathtub. It was replaced with one more appropriate for his girth -- he weighed more than 330 pounds -- and a later photo shows the enormous size of the tub. According to the photo, four regular-sized men fit comfortably into it.

When my African guest left after an hour of much laughter and many stories, he said -- tongue in cheek, I hope -- that when he goes back to his home country he can tell his friends and family that he once had the honor of meeting the former president of his university and had a long talk with him about bathtubs, outhouses and water closets. I hope he was kidding.

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