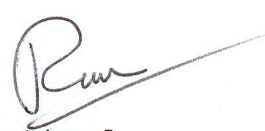


## BURNOUT (?) TOILETS



by Edward G. Heilman, FS R-5,3,9, and 1 - Retired

Before they fade entirely into a well-deserved and unlamented past, let us document a feature of 1940s-1960s (and later?) R-5 public campgrounds - the so-called burnout toilet.

Your author had the misfortune to encounter these up close and personal, beginning in 1945 on the Big Bend District of the Tahoe, and continuing intermittently until my 1961 transfer from the Descanso District of the Cleveland into the more sanitary fire staff job on the Shasta-Trinity. For those not already acquainted with burnout toilets, they were built probably during the CCC era in bigger campgrounds, at least on the Tahoe and Cleveland, and perhaps on other R-5 forests as well.

These burnout toilets consisted of an underground concrete vault whose top surface was approximately at ground level. This top surface had four through holes into the vault below, two each for men and women, into which a removable Angeles metal stool fit. A nice looking wooden building was built on top of this surface concrete slab, providing a good-looking unit. A large masonry chimney was on one side, and a sort of access pit outside the main vault provided a combustion air inlet into the below-ground vault and access into the vault through hinged metal doors.

The intent here was that before use, a loosely stacked pile of wood would be placed within the vault, below each of the Angeles stool holes. After use, whenever required, the Angeles stools would be temporarily removed, the holes covered with a sheet of metal, and the wood in the vault below would be burned, reducing all the waste to ashes which then could be easily removed. Combustion gases would vent nicely through the large chimney. After restocking with more wood, this use/disposal cycle could go on indefinitely. This must have sounded like a good idea to the designer and to approving officials, probably in the Regional Office.

In real life, the problem here was the great difficulty in getting the wood to ignite and then to keep burning long enough to reduce the waste. Solution: dump some more diesel oil down through the stool holes, right? Sometimes yes, but all too often there was abundant moisture, sometimes a foot or more deep, already down there in the vault. This moisture apparently mostly seeped into the pit from adjacent ground water - there was way much more than users may have contributed. It just wouldn't burn. And one can imagine what this meant to those who had to remove the mess and restock it for the next cycle. At times this was yours truly.

After one or two seasons of this at Big Bend, probably in 1946 or 1947 we thought we had the final solution to our burning

problem. Someone at the forest or regional level had acquired numerous 55-gal. drums of a heavy grey puttylike substance that had been used to make incendiary bombs during WW II. This stuff really did burn, and we thought that surely this would solve our toilet burning problems. So, we tried it, very cautiously at first, and then with enthusiasm. And yes, it did burn the wood down there inside the pit - and also the wooden siding of the building, and the flames shot way out of the chimney, much to our dismay. So, after a few trials and several errors we became extremely judicious with this "goop". We also tried putting old tires underneath the wood burn pile, but this made so much smoke we eventually abandoned this practice. Only rarely did we achieve successful and complete burning, in spite of all our efforts.

During the time I was at Descanso on the Cleveland 1956-61 there was a prolonged drought, and surface water mostly disappeared. With all this dryness I could never understand how ground water would still fill these miserable burnout vaults when wells and springs all around had long since gone dry, but it did.

One can only hope these misguided recreational conveniences have disappeared into a well-deserved and unlamented past. Let us not become too sentimental about the good old days.