Humidity

Way down yonder in New Orleans…in the 1950s when air conditioning was uncommon, and windows were open. What was it like grandpa?

Well, in the daytime the windows were open to let in any breeze that might come along, but if it started to rain, you needed to close some and it got steamy. It was common to take two showers a day as you wanted to get out of the sweaty daytime clothes and into fresh, dry togs. No point in putting that sweaty body into clean clothes, so the second shower was part of getting ready for the evening. The house had a central attic fan, but you didn't turn that on during the day as it would just pull the outside hot air in. Come nightfall, the outside temperature moderated and the ceiling fan as it was known would be turned on and that generated a cool breeze from those open windows.

If you were at the table, there would be a sugar bowl and a salt and pepper shaker in the center. There was always a teaspoon in the sugar bowl and the most common use was to add sweetness to iced tea. It also was commonly added to breakfast cereal. This was before the cereal companies sugar-coated everything. You would find clumps in that sugar bowl and this was due to the humidity. Sugar attracts moisture when the humidity is above 65-70% and that was commonplace. Back then saccharine was the only artificial sweetener you might find in stores, and it was used for coffee and little else.

The saltshaker might contain rice mixed with the salt. Salt was prone to clumping and clogging the shaker head, so rice was added to a salt shaker as rice is more hygroscopic than salt and that means the rice sucks up the humidity before the salt can. So, when it rains, the salt still pours. The Morton salt company made a point that its product came out of the container without humidity-induced clumping. I'm not sure how that worked. That same salt when put in a shaker would pick up moisture and stop up the holes in a shaker's head.

In the bathroom, by the basin, you would find a bar of glycerin soap. Usually, it was Neutrogena Bar. It could be Pear's if you bought the English import. Any brand of glycerin soap would sweat. That's what we called it. Beads of moisture would form on the surface of the product before anyone had even used it. Glycerin draws moisture out of humid air and that moisture beads up on the surface of the bar. So, we said that it was "sweat".

Speaking of sweat, that was something our bodies did plenty of. If you sat on a wooden chair for even a short period of time, that would lead to a buildup of moisture between your skin and the chair. Of course, there usually was an article of clothing between those surfaces and when you tried to arise from that chair, you peeled yourself off the chair. What that means is you moved off the surface of that chair, but your clothes remained attached by moisture to the chair and would peel loose as you arose. Sometimes you could hear the cloth peeling loose. If the chair had a shellac coating, there might be an imprint of your body left behind. A ghost-like whitish imprint on a darker wooden surface that represented moisture picked up by the shellac much like glycerin soap would do. That moisture would evaporate, and the chair would return to its normal hue in just a few minutes.

A common place to experience being semi-glued to a wooden surface was on the streetcar. The streetcar was not air-conditioned and when it stopped to board passengers, the humidity would soar. The natural outside air moisture was one component of that and the other was the hot, sweaty passengers getting on and off. It was miserable. Then the car would start moving and the air immediately cooled as moving air aids in evaporation and evaporation of sweat is how you kept from

overheating. The effect was dramatic. And then you stopped at the next corner. The stillness was only tolerable as you knew relief would come when the car started moving once again.

The seats on the streetcars were slats. There were spaces between the slats so that your skin could breathe a little. A solid surface would have no way for your sweat to evaporate, but slats provided a margin of relief. Those wooden seats were reversible. By that I mean, the seat remained stationary, but the back could be flipped from one side of the seat to the opposite side. It was mounted on a fulcrum that was centered over the stationary seat. This let the passengers face forward when going to town or returning home. The streetcar reversed directions; it didn't turn around. So, by flipping the seatback, you could face forward no matter which direction the car was headed. The slats minimized the peeling problem upon standing to exit the streetcar.

That's what grandpa remembers about visiting family in New Orleans.

Submitted by Bob Rietschel, March 31, 2023
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