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Once upon a time, scales were displayed in parlors, not hidden in bathrooms

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Stepping onto a scale after a calorie-filled holiday season isn't an activity many 21st-century Americans relish.

But in the late 19th century, scales were all the rage at festive gatherings — the 1800s' answer to Guitar Hero.

"A family would think it fun to weigh themselves before and after a big holiday dinner to see how much they had gained," said Deborah I. Levine, Ph.D., an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Modeling Interdisciplinary Inquiry Fellowship Program in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis.

"Knowing your weight was a novelty, a kind of parlor trick, before scales became widely available through mass production," said Levine.

Instead of being hidden away in a bathroom, home scales in the late 19th century often resided in prominent places in parlors, where family and guests would gather to socialize, likely alongside other popular 19th-century devices for body measurement. They were garbed to fit in their elaborately decorated environments.

"Parlor scales, which use the same technology that many doctors' office scales use today, often were made with highly polished wood, with inlay designs and semi-precious stones," Levine said.

However, in the early 20th century, attitudes about weight evolved. Medical and life insurance industries set weight "norms" for healthy individuals, and Americans began to see being over- or underweight as hazardous.

A person's weight became more than just a number, Levine said. It was health information, and having too big or too small a figure could mean serious consequences. A fun fact to be shared and compared among family and friends was transformed into a statement about a person's health and even moral character.

As the public's perception of weight changed, so did scales' places in fine society, Levine said. They were banished from their lofty spots in parlors to kitchens and finally, to bathrooms. Sequestered scales no longer needed to impress, and their ornate decorations gave way to the plain white or gray often seen today.

Source: Washington University in St. Louis