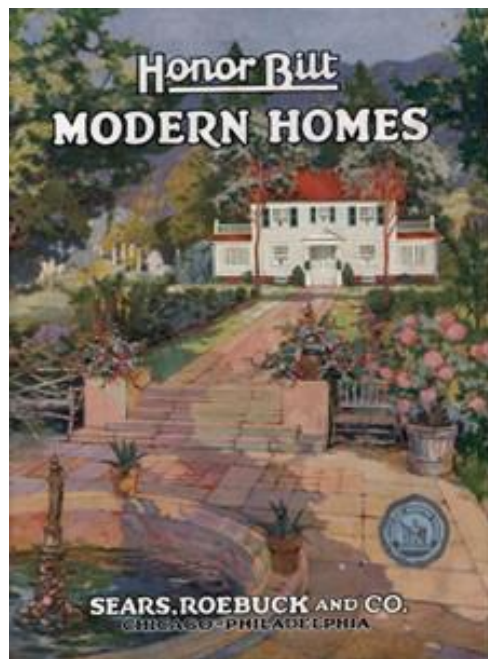


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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Kit Houses: Sears Roebuck & More

By David Frew
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The Sears Home Catalog

My grandmother lived in a prefabricated home. On the surface her place seemed like most other houses, except that it was made from steel. It lacked the typical

exterior details of older homes in the bayfront neighborhood, like wooden siding that had to be painted or complex trim pieces that required maintenance.

From her perspective, however, the kit house was filled with advantages. For one thing, the baked enamel, steel exterior never had to be painted or maintained, except for an annual wash with a garden hose. She also boasted of the cost efficiency of her place, which was assembled in a few days on a lot that she and her husband purchased just after World War II. With the return of the men from the war and the population boom that was well underway during the late 1940s and early 1950s, housing was in short supply and kit homes helped fill the gap in growing demand.

Her place was an “off brand” marketed by a local firm and, as she explained, she had the choice of either having it assembled on a concrete slab or preparing a traditional concrete block basement and having it placed on top. The basement-added construction strategy was more expensive but well worth the cost, according to her, since the cavernous basement provided storage space for “everything.” And it was a great play area for us kids.

In the world of prefabricated homes, Sears Roebuck was clearly the industry leader at the time. Sears houses were marketed from 1908 to 1942 and could be previewed in a progression of catalogs that included dozens of attractive designs. Modern Sears home scholars list 370 different designs. While many American kit homes had the appearance of plain, box-style buildings, most Sears homes seemed like the traditional and modern house designs common in America’s suburbs.

They ranged from simple but attractive cottages to multistory mansions; buildings that could be ordered in a variety of popular designs. The primary advantage of the Sears home was that it was delivered in one railroad car, ready to be sent to a construction site. They could and were often ordered complete with interior features, including kitchen cupboards, bedroom chests with drawers, and complete sets of electrical and plumbing parts. Theoretically, less-than-highly-skilled craftsmen could open a delivered Sears home container and quickly assemble a completed home.

The process was usually much faster than traditional contractors could find, order, deliver, and assemble all of the required construction materials, including boards, millwork, and adjunct supplies like wiring and plumbing parts. It was not unusual for relatively handy citizens to order Sears homes and then have friends and family help them with the construction in the style of oldtime barn raisings.

There are several Sears homes in Erie, but my favorite example is the current Presque Isle State Park superintendent’s home that is on the south side of the Waterworks property. That house was ordered for the original Waterworks superintendent, delivered by boat, and assembled for him and his family years

before the state park opened in 1921. Erie's Water Department had taken possession of the property in the center of Presque Isle earlier so that it could develop the infrastructure for the city's water supply.

As a concession to recreation, the old Water Department opened beaches and other recreational facilities at its Waterworks Park, that were accessible only by ferry. The first roadways were not developed for several more years. During those early times, the Waterworks superintendent, who traveled back and forth to Erie by boat, was in charge of policing, providing lifeguards for the beaches (which were originally on the Presque Isle Bay side of the compound), and overseeing the operations of the water system, which ran across the bay to the Chestnut Street waterworks.

The original Sears house provided for the Waterworks superintendent has since been passed to the state park, which took over the administration of the original Waterworks compound in the 1950s. Since its building, it has been the private home of both Waterworks and Presque Isle State Park superintendents. It can be seen from the all-purpose trail that passes immediately to the south of it. It stands proudly today and is in near perfect shape, a testament to the quality and durability of Sears homes.



The Sears house has been home to Waterworks and Presque Isle State Park superintendents.



This Sears “Ashton” model, newer and more opulent than the Presque Isle Waterworks house, sits at the corner of West Fourth Street and Lincoln Avenue.

A total of 370 Sears homes were built in the United States. Most were distributed and assembled throughout the country in random but concentric circles, emanating from Chicago, which was the original railroad source for most of them. Sears home aficionados have emerged over the years, and many are organized into clubs and touring organizations, which travel to see and sometimes visit them. These “Sears home lovers” imagine the living examples of their beloved catalog houses to be an important form of “American architecture,” designs for the common man.



This stately “Magnolia” model Sears home is in North Carolina.

One of the most popular visiting locations for Sears houses is Aurora, Illinois, a western suburb of Chicago. In addition to its near-Chicago location, the large number of Sears houses (150) in Aurora is explained by an odd post-World War II phenomenon. The once powerful industrial town suffered from having its workforce lured to metropolitan Chicago during and after the war. When the factory owners attempted to resume production during the late 1940s, they could not find workers.

Desperate to attract new employees, Aurora and its chamber of commerce made an offer to adopt several Mexican cities, where there were willing workers looking for jobs. Aurora adopted several “sister cities,” inviting and welcoming their unemployed but experienced factory workers to come to Illinois to staff struggling factories. The deal included a commitment to help find housing for the new arrivals and to assist them in becoming American citizens if they were to prove their production skills in Aurora’s factories. And they did.

As new workers and their families arrived from Mexico, there was a pressing need to find housing. And that was when Aurora’s leaders turned to Sears and its kit houses. To accommodate the new citizens of Aurora, scores of Sears homes were ordered, delivered, and assembled throughout the city. The building process became a city initiative with volunteers, municipal employees, and contractors working in concert to assemble new homes in record time.

As new Sears homes were being assembled, other citizens began to note their low price and construction efficiency, and they began to order Sears homes as well. Many of the additional Sears homes built in Aurora during the 1940s and 1950s were from the very high-end sections of the Sears home catalog. Several were built in the Prairie Style that had been popularized by Frank Lloyd Wright. His designs were enormously popular in and around Chicago at the time since his studio was near Aurora in Oak Park, Illinois, another suburb of Chicago.



Frank Lloyd Wright's Oak Park home and studio



Today's Aurora, Illinois may be most famous for its beautiful Fox River casino, but students of architecture are more likely to revere it for its 150 Sears houses.

There are two lasting results of this amazing post-World War II deal. (1) Aurora continues to enjoy a population that is disproportionately of Mexican heritage. Latest demographic statistics suggest that the proportion of the city population who identify as Mexican is almost 40 percent. Foodies continue to be attracted to the many Mexican restaurants that continue to populate the city. (2) There may be more Sears homes in the city of Aurora than in any other single location. These days, the Sears house has become a powerful attraction for students of architecture who now see Aurora and nearby Oak Park, Illinois, the epicenter of

Frank Lloyd Wright architecture and home to several of the best examples of his work as a field trip attraction.



This Aurora, Illinois “Goldman Family” home was built in the Frank Lloyd Wright style, demonstrating the diversity of Sears styles.

There were other examples of kit or prefabricated homes as well, and several can still be seen in the Erie area. The other highly popular kit home was developed by a Chicago industrial engineer – the Lustron House. Appearing in 1949 as another example of American ingenuity and a solution to the post-war housing crisis, an astonishing 3,000 Lustron homes were sold and assembled in North America during a five-year period. Lustron homes were built of baked metal panels and came with preassembled interior features. They could be built on a concrete slab or over a pre-dug basement.



A typical Lustron home

Sadly, many of the early prefab or kit homes have been adjusted so that it is almost impossible to distinguish them from other homes. There was a bit of a negative

connotation associated with the metal construction and it was common for owners to disguise original kit homes. My grandmother's house, for example, was sold after she passed away and the new owner went to great pains to screw wooden battens to the metal exterior so that he could add modern siding, an addition that seems odd since it was expensive and has required ongoing maintenance.

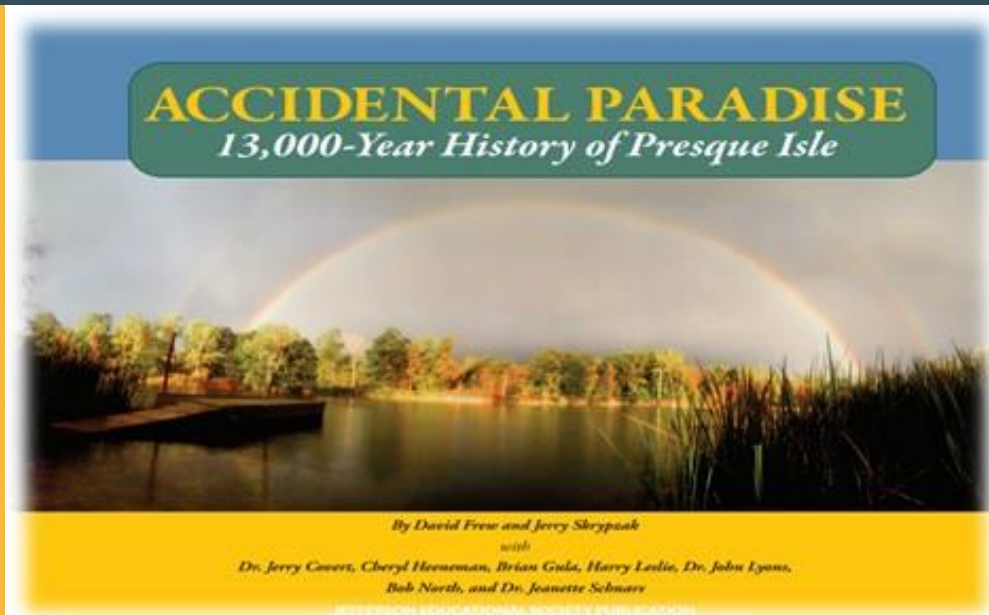
In a bit of irony, the new owner also covered the original metal roof with typical roofing shingles, finishing the job just in time to welcome the new trend toward long-lasting metal roofs that seem to be popping up in many neighborhoods.

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Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle recently published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – **“Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of**

Presque Isle” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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