



Sale prices of area homes are listed H2



Judy Fidkowski/Daily Southtown

Greg Weiss of Homewood bought a Lustron home, which are all-metal homes built after World War II. The home, although small, is perfect for Weiss, a teacher at James Hart Junior High School in Homewood, because it is very low maintenance.

# Full metal homes

## Post-WWII steel housing holds its mettle

By Mike Nolan  
Business Writer

Greg Nicholson gets a laugh when he tells people calling to sell him siding that he lives in an all-steel house.

Greg Weiss' friends like to send him refrigerator magnets, which he can stick anywhere on the metal walls throughout his house.

The two Homewood residents live in homes that were the brainchild of Chicagoan Carl Strandlund, who sought to fill the housing needs of soldiers returning home from World War II.

From early 1948 until his company, Lustron Corp., went out of business in early 1950, Strandlund produced about 2,500 of the pre-fabricated, all-metal homes.

Built using porcelain-enameled steel panels attached to a steel frame, the homes were touted by Lustron Corp. as being rustproof, fireproof and termite proof.

Lustron homes can be found throughout the Chicago area and in the south and southwest suburbs. In addition to Homewood, there are Lustron homes in Bedford Park, Flossmoor, Hazel Crest and Oak Lawn.

"The records of the company are gone, and there is no master list of where all the Lustron homes went to," said Mike Jackson, chief architect for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency in Springfield. "In Illinois, there were a lot of them sold here."

He said groups such as the preservation agency rely on "spotters" who compile lists of Lustron locations.

"Most of the houses that were built are still around," Jackson said. "They have proved to be incredibly durable. You're talking about glass fused on steel."

Tom Fetters, a Lustron buff who lives in Lombard, said Lustron homes are concentrated in Midwest states, including Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin and Ohio. Nearly all Lustron homes were built in states east of the Rockies, but Fetters said there are two in Alaska.



Photos by Bill Konway/Daily Southtown

James J. Downs stands in the kitchen of his all-steel Lustron home in Bedford Park. To hang pictures, he uses magnets.

"It's completely different from the average house," Nicholson said, adding that when hail smacks against the metal roof it's also louder than most houses.

Weiss, drama teacher at James Hart Junior High in Homewood, moved into his Lustron about three years ago. He said he was attracted to the homes because they require almost no upkeep.

"They were designed to be relatively maintenance-free homes, and as a person who is very active with school and after-school activities, I don't have a lot of time for housework and maintenance," Weiss said. "It's nice to know that, when I'm busy, the house isn't going to fall down around me."

The homes' features included radiant heating panels in the ceiling, pocket doors that slide into gaps between walls, built-in metal cabinets and shelves, and, in the kitchen, a combination dishwasher/clothes washer.

Because the interior walls are metal, homeowners couldn't pound nails into the walls to hang pictures or other



A Lustron home in Bedford Park.

items. Some owners use magnetic hooks, and the original Lustron sales brochures suggested putting screws into the plastic sealing strips between the two-foot by two-foot panels.

Customers had a choice of colors — including pink, gray, tan, green and white — which were baked into the

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# Metal

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enamel. Lustron brochures pointed out that interior walls could be cleaned with a damp cloth and exterior walls hosed down.

A real estate agent who was selling the Lustron that Weiss bought convinced the prior owners to paint the outside to spruce up the home, making Weiss' house not quite maintenance-free.

Strandlund had worked for a Cicero company, Chicago Vitreous Enamel Products Co., that produced porcelain-enameled steel panels used to build gas stations and White Castle restaurants. He was convinced the same material could be used to mass produce inexpensive homes.

"Lustron was one of the innovators in the history of American housing," Jackson said. "The Lustron is to housing what the Tucker was to the automobile. It was a new approach to something that didn't make it."

In fact, both companies did cross paths in their early days.

Strandlund had planned to manufacture the homes at a plant on Chicago's Southwest Side that had been used to build aircraft engines. The plant, which was in the hands of the government's War Assets Administration, had already been leased to Preston Tucker, and it is where he built his famous Tucker '48 automobile.

The plant is now the site of Ford City Shopping Center.

The War Assets Administration instead leased Strandlund an aircraft manufacturing plant in Columbus, Ohio. The government also lent Strandlund \$15.5 million to get Lustron Corp. off the ground.

Strandlund, seeking to achieve the mass-production efficiencies used in automobile manufacturing, hired auto assembly line workers to build the Lustron homes. He then set out to establish a network of dealer-builders who would sell and erect the homes, and launched an extensive ad campaign.

The typical home comprised about 3,000 pieces, which were trucked to the home site.

Adelaide Wasserman and her husband, Henry, had a Lustron home built in Homewood. Nicholson now lives in the home.

In an article titled "Lustron living: or my life in a baked enamel home," which Adelaide, since deceased, wrote for the July 1986 newsletter of the Homewood Historical Society, she describes the building process.

Adelaide Wasserman describes the pieces arriving at their home site in October 1949, watching the home's steel skeleton being bolted onto a concrete slab foundation and watching workers bolt the steel panels to the framework. The couple moved into the home on Jan. 7, 1950.

Bedford Park resident James Downs said his Lustron home was erected in four days.

"The whole house came on one truck," he said. "Everything came with the house — the kitchen fixtures and bathroom fixtures — all you needed was a refrigerator and range."

Downs, who bought the home from his brother in 1957, said he has spent "a minimal amount of money" maintaining the home and has never had to paint it.

He said his Lustron house is a natural conversation piece when friends come to visit.

"They can't (imagine) having the inside walls of a house made out of steel," Downs said.

Strandlund originally estimated the homes would cost about \$7,000. Production problems, however, pushed selling prices to between \$10,000 and \$13,000.

Lustron Corp. was also having other troubles.

Strandlund had initially expected the factory would be able to churn out 100 homes a day. While Lustron needed to produce 50 homes a day to break even, the company was turning out fewer than 30.

The government lent Lustron an additional \$22 million, but it was not enough to keep the company going. In early 1950, the government foreclosed on the loans, and production stopped by the summer of that year.

Fetters got interested in Lustron homes a few years ago after he helped his daughter do research on the homes for a high school history project.

"I travel on business, so when I have time I'll be off looking for Lustron houses," Fetters said.

Lustron built three models — the Westchester, the Newport

and the Meadowbrook. Fetters said the two-bedroom Westchester is the most prevalent model found in the Chicago area.

"Their (the Westchester) distinguishing feature is they have a niche cut out at the front door (which creates a small front porch)," he said.

Fetters said Lustron homes are not found in the city of Chicago because the city's building codes at the time required plaster walls and ceilings.

Weiss learned about Lustron homes while doing research for a celebration of Homewood's centennial in 1993.

"I just thought, 'What an interesting idea,'" Weiss said. "The whole idea that it is a house for people who don't want to spend all of their time on home projects and repairs."

Weiss said that although made of steel, his home stays very cool in the summer and is easy to heat in the winter.

Also, despite what one might think, the homes are not dangerous places to be in during thunderstorms, Weiss insists.

He said that a friend who is a firefighter and electrician assured Weiss that because the homes are all metal, electrical charges dissipate throughout the home and weaken. That means there's much less of a chance a strong surge of electricity will course through the home's wiring, frying the television or computer.

The homes are fairly small, offering about 1,000 square feet of living space.

"They were fine for the era they were built in, but, by modern standards, the homes are too small for most families," said Vince Michael, a professor at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he teaches historic preservation.

Michael said he is interested in Lustron homes because "they were pre-fab and arrived on a truck," and they are symbols of an era that included "TV dinners, bomb shelters and the Hula-Hoop."

In fact, the school will be offering a class this fall titled "From Lustron to neon: preserving the recent past," Michael said.