

# History project becomes Dad's hobby

It all started out as a short-term project.

Fifteen years ago, Tom Fetters' daughter Jean wanted to do a history fair project to boost her grade in that high school subject. Jean chose to find out more about those tile houses, known as Lustron

## Diane Dassow

### People to know



homes, that caught her eye during her childhood years in Lombard.

A man of many interests and hobbies, Fetters found himself involved in his daughter's project.

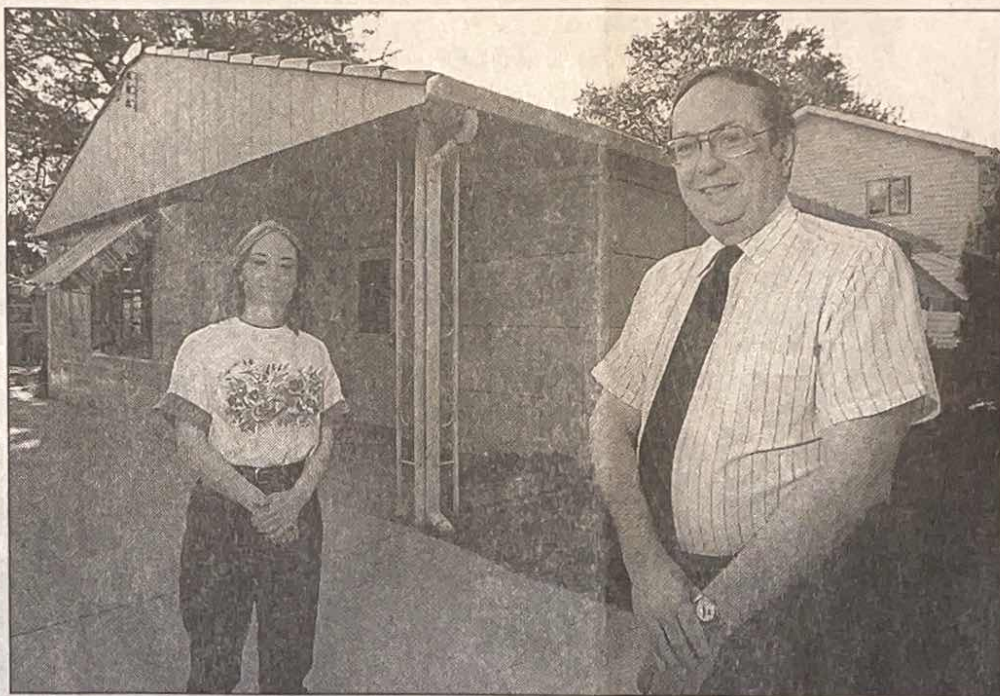
"I made a model in H-O scale to be used to demonstrate the rooms," he recalled. "I went out to sketch a couple of houses and said, there's got to be a better way. So I started taking pictures."

Jean was through with the project shortly thereafter. But Dad didn't let go.

Today Fetters is known as an expert on the factory-built, porcelain-enameled steel houses. He knows so much about them that he's even written a book that is currently making the editorial rounds in search of a publishing house.

"It got to be bigger than I thought," Fetters said with a smile. His research took him to the Lustron factory in Columbus, Ohio, as well as across the United States and even to Venezuela to look at houses.

"You find a subject you're interested in and you just keep dogging



**Tom Fetters, right, will present a program about Lustron houses at the DuPage County Historical Museum Monday. Fetters has written a book about the porcelain-enameled steel houses. He is pictured with Laurie Huizenga, who owns one of the houses in Lombard.**

Daily Herald File Photo/Jeff Knox

away at it," he said. "I've done a lot of steam locomotive research and this is not a lot different from researching steam locomotives."

Although Lombard has 36 of the houses and is known as the capital of the Lustrons, Fetters' research has never included living in one of them.

"They're too small for me," he said. Most of the Lustrons in Illinois, in fact, are two-bedroom models.

They were intended to help relieve the housing crunch brought on by the veterans returning from World War II. A typical house 50 years ago cost \$7,600 plus trans-

portation from Columbus, Fetters said.

The house was delivered on a special trailer and was meant to be set up in a day by a fully trained crew.

"The house was like an Erector set," Fetters said. One house that Life magazine photographed, laid out as parts, consisted of 3,300 parts and weighed 35,000 pounds.

In honor of the 50th anniversary of the Lustron home, Fetters recently regaled members of the Lombard Historical Society, as well as members of the public, with sto-

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ries of the history, politics and technicalities of the famous houses.

As part of his ongoing research, Fetters told the group, he is trying to record as many Lustron serial numbers as he can. He has enlisted people in other areas to help him gather this information.

Here at home, he keeps his information up to date by "patrolling."

"When we're on our way home from somewhere, my wife says, 'Why would you take this extra street?'" Fetters jokes. Of course, after 15 years, she's used to his side trips down Garfield, Park, Westmore and the other Lombard streets where Lustrons stand.

From years of stamp collecting, Fetters has developed an uncanny ability to notice patterns and curiosities. He has identified such details as the differences in Lustron window styles from state to state.

He says there are still many particulars left to be learned. But time may be running out.

"They're starting to be torn down," Fetters said. "That's kind of a sad thing."

Folks interested in learning more about the Lustron houses might want to attend Fetters' program at 7:30 p.m. Monday at the DuPage County Historical Museum, 102 E. Wesley, Wheaton. For details call (630) 682-7343.

Fetters will also conduct a Lustron House Walk, sponsored by the Lombard Historical Society, from 2 to 5 p.m. April 8. The fee is \$5 per person.

Reservations are requested. The tour will begin at the Coach House behind the Lombard Historical Museum, 23 W. Maple St. For details call (630) 629-1885.