

It's a steel

Lombard holds nation's largest concentration of Lustron houses

By Susan Steger-Polay

Tom Fetters, a 29-year Lombard resident, has found Lustron houses a topic of interest in his home for a long time.

He documents where the houses are located, their colors, serial numbers and other noteworthy information just for fun.

Having dug up so much information he decided to convey his findings into a book, which still is in search of a publisher.

One outstanding fact he uncovered was that 36 of the little steel dwellings are in Lombard, the highest concentration of Lustron houses anywhere.

All this interest began when his daughter, Jean, was small. While driving through town he would use the houses as a game to keep her amused. He would suggest she watch for the steel houses built with 2-foot by 2-foot steel panels coated in porcelain.

The whole family's interest increased with time. While

attending Glenbard East High School his daughter researched and wrote a term paper for a history project about the rare construction, did research at the Lombard Historical Museum — where she now works — and interviewed someone who lived in one.

Curious, he accompanied his daughter to the steel house for the interview. Fetters' interest peaked and he began taking photographs and documenting other information about the metal single-family dwellings in Lombard and nationwide.

In addition to the 36 Lustron houses in Lombard, Villa Park holds one and Elmhurst had two, but one was torn down.

His research uncovered that Hinsdale had the very first Lustron house, which since has been torn down. It sat on the property of the Hinsdale Nursery.

"It was a real treat to find the first one," he said.

Twenty more have been documented in Brookfield,



LIFE photo by Steve Johnston

Tom Fetters of Lombard explains the construction of a steel house in Lombard. Fetters has written a book on steel houses.

one in Westmont and four in Downers Grove.

He hasn't done all the research by himself. His wife, Gloria, has accompanied him on his adventures, planning their vacations around seeking and documenting Lustron houses nationwide.

Because Fetters sometimes travels on the job, his spare time has been spent scouring suburbs of big cities in search of the rare dwellings.

People also call to give him information about houses he didn't know about, and he exchanges his information with interested folks in anticipation of learning more.

According to Fetters, in 1948 the houses were being sold and built along the train routes running from Chicago in a 15-mile radius. Construction lasted 2-1/2-years.

Many of the houses were built near railroads because roads were poor or scarce at the time, he said.

Just one of these odd structures was built in Chicago but it had to be moved because it was not built according to city code.

That was just one of many snags the Lustron Corp. encountered.

According to Gloria Fetters, it seemed the houses were so efficiently planned that it rattled many union plumbers and electricians concerned about losing jobs in the areas where they were being built.

Everything came prefabricated according to plans.

The plumbing already was intact, and the electricity was laid out and stretched to the different rooms, Fetters explained.

A U-joint was bolted down on a cement slab provided by the owner. The porcelain-coated outer walls of yellow, tan, gray or blue/green were attached to it, and the steel roof placed on top. The porcelain-coated interior gray steel walls were movable.

The kitchen and washroom walls were yellow, pink or blue.

Nothing ever needs painting.

A good washing down and a coat of car wax is sufficient upkeep for the outside walls.

For the five years Laurie

McEnery has owned her yellow Lustron house on Stewart Avenue in Lombard, the interior walls of her 50-year-old house only have needed to be washed and have never needed — and shouldn't be — painted, she said.

Fetters' wife said when the union workers learned their jobs were not threatened, Lombard made concessions for erecting the houses. She added she feels that is why there are so many of the steel homes in the village.

The steel parts were delivered by truck and trained people, who also drove the truck, erected the house, according to Fetters.

As the parts were pulled off the truck, the next piece needed was fed to the assembler. The house was erected in two to four days, depending on the builders' experience, he added.

The Lustron house was intended to be maintenance free, which can be a deterrent to some home owners.

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Steel House

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McEnery's husband, Tom, who once was a carpenter, said he would love to make changes in the house but feels limited in what he can do.

"The whole benefit of the house being maintenance free is also its downfall," he said.

But his wife disagrees. Being a single mother when she bought the house, the price was right and she wanted a yard for her small son, Nicholas.

"It was maintenance free. There wasn't a man around to do little chores," she explained. "It was something

I could afford at the time."

Because their family has expanded, they are considering moving, McEnery said.

"It (the Lustron) has all the comforts of home," she added. "It is just too small. I don't want to give it up."

Although Fetters' book was finished in 1993 and hasn't been published, he said he isn't too disappointed. He constantly updates his findings.

"In a fashion, it is still being written," Fetters added.

According to his wife, at least once a week they are given more information about a Lustron house somewhere.

"This is constantly unfold-

ing," she said.

He has documented about 2,500 of the little steel beauties mostly west of the Rocky Mountains because of the delivery trucks' difficulty in crossing the mountains 50 years ago. The exceptions are two in Alaska and several in Caracas, Venezuela.

Fetters is no slouch when it comes to writing books. He already has three railroad books published and another to be published next year.

The steel housing still can be found on military bases where it is preferred housing to barrack living, Mrs. Fetters said.

Four styles were offered in

the Lustron brochure in four colors. The baby blue models were placed in strategic areas around the country in heavily populated cities. Most are two-bedroom houses, but some three-bedroom styles were built in downstate Illinois. Most have no basement.

The Lustron single-family construction was the brain-storm of Carl Strandlund. Working for Chicago Vitreous Enamel Products Co. in 1946 after World War II, he introduced his idea to Wilson Wyatt, the housing expediter and head of the National Housing Administration.

The company already was producing enamel-coated steel panel industrial buildings for gas stations and hamburger stands, according to Fetters. But steel still was under the control of the gov-

ernment after the war. The government would not release steel for commercial use but had an unlimited supply for housing, according to Fetters. To encourage allocation of steel from the government, Strandlund designed the steel housing for returning veterans, as the government desired.

Thus the birth of the Lustron.

According to Fetters, Strandlund's plans came to an abrupt halt in 1950 when the government foreclosed on loans made to Strandlund. Unable to pay, the Columbus, Ohio, factory closed.

More information about Lustron houses is available by calling Fetters at (630) 629-3514 or by accessing a World Wide Web site at www.porcelainamael.org.

Primary filings draw to close