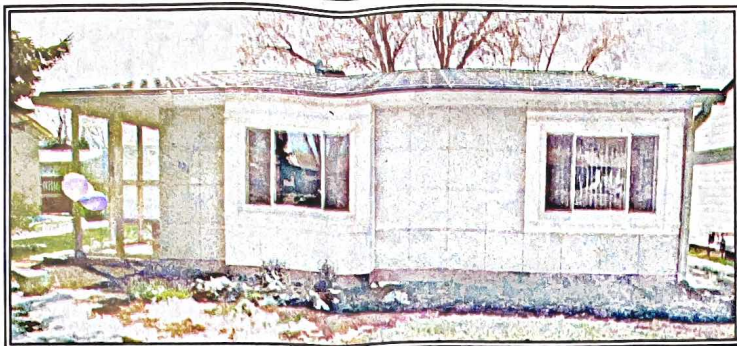


LIFESTYLE



Snow from a recent storm melts in the sun by Julie Swenson's Lustron home on Fairfield Avenue in Lombard. Swenson's house was part of the Lustron house walk April 8.

Jeff Krage/Press Publications

Illustrious Lustron

Lombard honors 50th anniversary of vintage homes

By Marie Lazzara
Press Publications

After World War II, people across America learned about a structure touted as the house of the future.

The name associated with the claim belonged to the Lustron, a house fit for the returning war veterans.

These small steel structures came with notable characteristics such as exterior porcelain enameled walls, heated ceilings panels, generous closet space and a serial number. From 1948 through 1950, Lustron was making a name for itself.

Lustron found its way to DuPage County during those years. The village of Lombard has 36 homes throughout its neighborhoods.

Though production stopped in 1950, the interest in these homes has not waned.

On April 8, the Lombard Historical Society sponsored a Lustron house walk for those curious to revisit a past era. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the end of Lustron.

Lombard residents Jean Conner and her father, Tom Fetters, know about Lustron homes. Fetters spoke at Lombard's Helen M. Plum Memorial Library about his Lustron knowledge before participants visited the homes on April 8.

He and Conner talked to the museum about presenting such an event. Conner is a volunteer coordinator at the museum, while Fetters heads Lustron Research, which happens to be his home and is a place for inquiries. It is recognized by the state as a cultural agency.

Conner remembers how her interest began as a child when she and Fetters would ride around seeing what she calls "these strange little houses made of tile."

In 1987, Conner did a high school project about the homes with her father helping her. He eventually took over the project and handed it to her teacher, she said. These homes enchanted him so much that Fetters

decided to get more information and created Lustron Research.

"Lustrons are found all throughout the country from the East Coast to the Rockies but not past there," Conner said. "Lombard has the most Lustrons standing (36). That is the most of any other town, city or village in the country."

Conner said that Carl Strandlund, the creator of the homes, thought of the idea after studying the building structures of old Amoco gas stations and Fanny May Candy stores. The baked enamel on steel frames had a "nice shiny appeal." She said that the name Lustron comes from the term "luster on steel."

Strandlund received a government grant to create maintenance-free low-income housing for the returning World War II veterans. Mass production of these homes began at the Lustron Corporation in Columbus, Ohio.

Conner said that the homes were delivered by means of large trailers to the building site and erected quickly. The original price was \$8,000.

In a Lustron home, there are two bedrooms, a dining room, living room, kitchen, bathroom and utility room. The homes usually total more than 1,000 square feet.

According to Lustron literature, buyers purchased a home through a Lustron dealer. The dealer purchased the home direct from the factory, erect it and sell it to consumers.

For the exterior, families could choose from five basic colors: aqua blue, tan, gray, yellow and light blue. Conner said, "Inside, the neutral color of tan was used to blend with your decor. You could change the decor over the years and then the room would self-adapt to the look," she said.

"The only cleaning material that was needed was soap, water and a damp cloth. You didn't have to budget for painting because you has a standard wall. You had porcelain enameled steel and neutral colored walls."



Some Lustron homeowners such as Lombard resident Julie Swenson remodel certain rooms. This newly remodeled kitchen brings a modern touch.

Jeff Krage/Press Publications

The heating system lies in the roof and is operated the same way as the sun warms the earth. Hot air from the overhead furnace unit circulates through a chamber in the ceiling. As the temperature of the ceiling rises, heat rays come downward. Air is not coming through grills or registers. Conner said this device would be good for people who have allergies or asthma because "there is no current of air sucking in dust and pollen."

Conner said that other features include interior pocket doors that slide into the walls on ball bearings, wall fixtures in the hallway and bathroom, a bedroom built-in vanity and the corresponding built-in book case in the living room, the dining room divider with kitchen cabinets and drawers on the other side and the pass through feature, and a general flow of movement patterns from bedroom to bath to living room to kitchen terminating in a utility room. The homes also came with a built-in dishwasher/clothes washer in the kitchen.

A short life

Before Strandlund's dream could grow, the idea of the Lustron died in 1950 when his government grant was not renewed. A total of 2,500 homes were made.

"The home of the future died very quickly before its time," Conner said.

For those modern dwellers who want a Lustron in Lombard, the going price is \$129,000, Conner said. She added that the Lustrons are quickly snatched by homeowners as soon as they go on to market. Of the 36 in Lombard, seven have been sold within six months. Convenience and affordability are the main attractions.

"The reason they are not going for more is because they are only 1,000 square feet," she said. "Families are looking for room in the year 2000. Back in the 1950s, things were simpler and families wanted the basics such as a roof over their head and enough room."

"Everyone who has them loves

them. The only reason we see them going on today's market is because they become too small once you start having children. People outgrow the home so it becomes a great starter home or a great retirement home."

Lombard Lustron owners Ellen and Steve Maglio were looking for that first starter home. Four years ago, a mutual friend put up his gray-colored house on the market. That was the first time they ever heard about Lustron.

Before they purchased the home, they learned from their realtor about a Lustron expert who owned a museum in Indiana and contacted him.

One of the aspects that lured them in was a low-maintenance house. Ellen said that she and her husband are "not really handy" and liked the fact that they can, for instance, wash the walls with glass cleaner.

They also liked the space that it had. Ellen said that they used one of the bedrooms as a den. Now with newborn twins, she added that the home is a little small for their family and they will move on to a bigger residence.

Ellen said that they will rent out the Lustron "because it's one of those houses that renters can't wreck plus it's a nostalgic thing. It's one of those conversational pieces where people will say, 'Wow, you live in a metal house.'"

Though the Maglios like it, their extended family has different opinions.

"There's a 50/50 mix," Ellen said. "[Some people say] 'I really like this house' and some people are like, 'Wow, this is really weird.'"

Across the country

Tom Fetters has made it his mission to find every Lustron that ever existed in this country and to educate people in person, through letters or over the Internet.

He is the manager of new product development for Crown, Cork and Seal in Alsip.



This built-in bedroom vanity shows an abundance of closet space in the home of Lombard resident Julie Swenson. Swenson's house was part of the Lustron home walk on April 8.

Jeff Krage/Press Publications

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His journey to the world of Lustron began in 1987 with his daughter's high school project. Feters spoke to some people at Helen M. Plum Memorial Library who helped him find information about Lustron. Later, he would talk to former Lustron Corporation employees to uncover more facts.

His road trips to discover Lustrons started in 1988. Because he was able to travel for his work, he had some free time to find these homes and talk with owners. Among the places he visited were Dallas, St. Louis and Terre Haute, Ind.

Locally, he has found standing homes in Elmhurst, Addison, Villa Park and unincorporated Glen Ellyn.

"Sometimes we'll take a vacation and make a Lustron trip," he said. "Instead of taking the interstate, we might take old roads and go through towns because I know where some of the houses are but not precisely their addresses.

"You could go to the library or the fire department. They are usually aware because it is a steel house. A mail man on his route [might know] where they are."

There are different prices for the Lustrons across the country. Feters said that, for example, one will pay over \$200,000 for one in Arlington Heights. In a town in Iowa, one might pay \$10,000 or \$20,000.

Feters said that his family finds his research to be "funny."

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Tom Feters
Lustron expert

"They enjoy it," he said. "My wife, Gloria, goes along with it. In Iowa, for example, quite often it's the thing where owners want you to go inside and see their house. You say, 'I've been in quite a lot of houses and I don't need to see it.' They say, 'Come on in.' You have to figure that when you stop and talk you're probably good for half an hour for lost time."

Feters' goal was to find half of all the Lustron homes and he has surpassed that number. He is up to 2,000. For the future, he would like to find a publisher who would take on his book of Lustron information. In June, he and his daughter will visit Columbus, Ohio, to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of Lustron.

To him, doing the research is like stamp collecting.

"Each house represents something to collect and there's only a finite number of houses out there," he said.

For information, call Tom Feters at (630) 629-3514.