

The Reader's Guide

TO ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

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The Last Lustrons

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAVERIO TRUGLIA

By Mary Beth Klatt

Even houses of steel don't last forever.



TOM FETTERS



When Tom Fetters travels for his job as a consultant for packaging company Crown Cork & Seal, he makes a point of seeking out Lustron homes. Some 2,500 of the one-story enamelized-steel houses went up around the country between 1948 and 1950, and Fetters can usually spot them by their distinctive roofs—which resemble the ones that came in Lincoln Log sets—and their luminous pastel exteriors: pink, surf blue, maize yellow, dove gray, desert tan. A few years ago he came across one in Madison that had been converted into a three-story house, making it virtually unrecognizable. He nevertheless added it to his list. • Fetters, president of the Lombard Historical Society and the author of three books on historic railroad lines, first got hooked on Lustrons around 1986, when he helped his daughter Jean make a scale model of one for a history project at Glenbard



537 S. FAIRFIELD, LOMBARD

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than conventional wood-frame houses, Lustrons were also supposed to be fireproof, rodent-proof, and lightning-proof. You didn't have to paint a thing; it was just wipe and go. Radiant ceiling panels supplied warmth and limited dust movement. Built-in cabinetry provided essential storage without taking up floor space. A state-of-the-art machine that washed both clothes and dishes was a draw for mothers used to doing the work by hand.

The federal government ordered them in the biggest numbers, for use on military bases. Civilians also heard the prefab siren song, ordering the homes from 143 franchised dealers nationwide. About 40 Lustrons were originally built in Lombard; Fetter attributes the large number to the sales efforts of an unknown but ambitious franchise dealer, a vast amount of available residential lots, and an enthusiasm for Lustrons among village officials, residents, and local unions.

But unions elsewhere were unhappy, because the homes could be assembled without them. Zoning boards quibbled over their unusual features. Franchisees needed start-up capital, and orders backed up at central headquarters. In February 1950

there are the... folks who cannot tolerate the epoxies and plastics of modern houses and seek out the Lustron as environmentally neutral, a natural 'bubble house,' as it were, that will not affect allergies."

Lombard residents Steve and Ellen Maglio bought their Lustron in 1996 because they thought it would make a great starter home. Not knowing much about its history, they visited Jim Morrow's now defunct Lustron museum in Chesterton, Indiana, for a crash course. There the Maglios learned how their radiant ceiling worked and saw a working clothes-

by the Iowa City PBS station, which had heard about his book. Other media followed suit. Soon Fetter started receiving unsolicited letters from devoted Lustron owners.

He got another boost when the Helen Plum Library in Lombard, in conjunction with the Suburban Library System, got behind his project. Librarians Donna Slyfield at Helen Plum and Linda Ameling at SLS gathered yellowed newspaper clippings from sources as obscure as the March 1949 issue of *Ceramic Industry*. Fetter tapped Chicago's National Archives office on South Pulaski and the Ohio

sidered is building a new house on the property. They'd need to sell the Lustron to finance the new construction, and they already have a couple of prospective buyers. A Lustron in Boston recently sold for \$500,000; another, in Sarasota, Florida, went for \$330,000. Fetter says Lustrons in Lombard currently fetch \$85,000 to \$100,000.

Locally, their numbers are dwindling. A Lustron in Elgin was razed a couple of years ago to allow an elementary school to expand. Not long after that, two in Lombard were replaced by three-story wood-frame

East High School. "She got an A, and I got the bug," he says. Soon he was scouring Glen Ellyn and Elmhurst and Dallas and Scranton and Philadelphia and Champaign for Lustrons.

Curious home owners would come outside when they saw him with his camera, but if they didn't he'd ring the doorbell and introduce himself. Then he'd ask to see the house's serial number, which is usually located on a small steel plate in the utility room. The number would help him determine when the house was built.

"When I had a list of more than 200, I knew I was well on the way to having another book," says Fetter. The result was *The Lustron Home: The History of a Postwar Prefabricated Housing Experiment*, published in 2001. As Fetter learned researching his book, the Chicago suburbs are rich in Lustrons. In Lombard alone there are 34, making it second only to the marine corps base in Quantico, Virginia, where 60 Lustrons still stand.

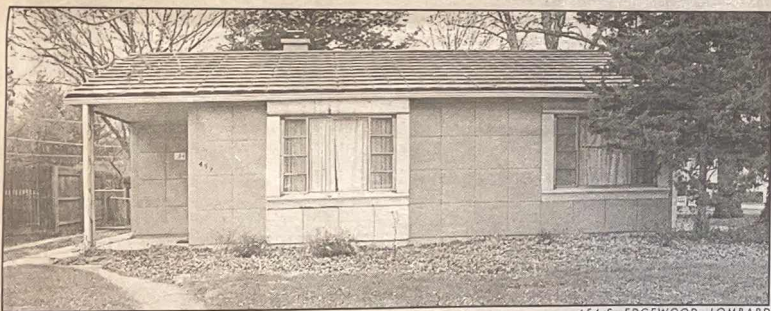
The Lustron story begins in 1947, when U.S. soldiers were returning



STEVE AND ELLEN MAGLIO



A Lustron in Elgin was razed a couple of years ago to allow an elementary school to expand. Not long after that, two in Lombard were replaced by wood-frame houses. The interior of a third Lombard Lustron has been completely stripped; a fourth has been standing vacant while new construction goes up on the same lot.



454 S. EDGEWOOD, LOMBARD

from overseas to a housing shortage, while the steel that had been waiting for use in submarines and tanks was sitting around in factories. Carl Strandlund, vice president of the Chicago Vitreous Enamel Product Company, wanted to use some of that surplus steel to construct gas stations nationwide; he envisioned crisp, enamelled white service depots. The federal government had other ideas. It agreed to supply Strandlund with steel if he would help build homes for the returning GIs.

Strandlund promptly sketched plans, estimating he could produce 100 or more prefabricated homes a day. For his trouble he received \$37.5 million in government financing to start up the Lustron Corporation plus a deal on a former aircraft factory in Columbus, Ohio. (He wanted the Dodge factory on Chicago's southwest side, but that went instead to Preston Tucker, who had an idea for a car company.) A prototype Lustron was built toward the end of 1946 in an unincorporated area south of Hinsdale, and the first Lustrons off the assembly line were two-bedroom, one-bath, 1,000-square-foot models priced at \$10,000 to \$12,000.

Touted as three times stronger

the government's Reconstruction Finance Corporation foreclosed on Strandlund's company, contending that it had defaulted on its loan payments. In May of that year Strandlund declared bankruptcy.

Half a century later, the surviving Lustrons have acquired a certain charm, even if it's accompanied by a few dents. At a 50th-anniversary celebration in Columbus three years ago, more than 150 devotees gathered to hear a speech by Richard Reedy, who was once one of Lustron Corporation's top executives.

"The Lustron is so 1950s that it really has a new following by yuppies who see it as a great house to fill with 50s furniture," says Fetter. "Then

dishwasher combo. The visit gave them a new appreciation for their own Lustron, and they vowed to change it as little as possible.

"A lot of the Lustrons in the area have been modified with drywall on the inside and siding on the exterior," says Maglio. "Ours has not been. I like to maintain the integrity of the original house." That meant buying \$200 in magnetized picture hangers to use on the metal interior walls. "If you hang a picture on a magnet and it's a little heavy, it will slowly creep its way to the floor when you close a door hard, from the vibrations."

When Fetter first realized he wanted to turn his obsession into a book, he approached numerous architectural publishers. "Most of them were in New York and were devoted to 'stick and brick' architecture," he says. "I learned of a North Carolina publisher, McFarland & Company, that did obscure books like *The Charlie Chan Film Encyclopedia* and knew that they might find the subject interesting." They did.

In addition to his field trips, he began writing letters to Lustron home owners, asking them for more information. In 1989 he was interviewed

Historical Society in Columbus for original Lustron Corporation documents and photos.

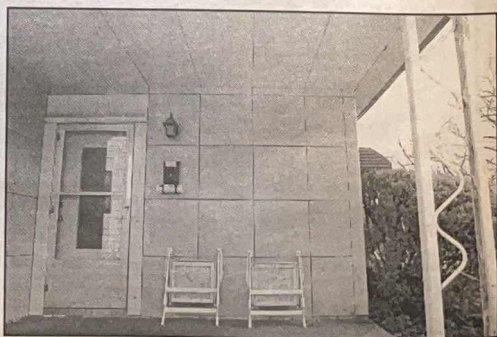
In 1990 he met Elmer and Jeanette Thiedel, who had once lived in the prototype Lustron near Hinsdale. In the Lustron's heyday some people didn't believe that the Thiedels, who were depicted in the original promotional brochures, owned the house they were photographed in. They did. Jeanette Thiedel told Fetter she received a bottle of Chanel No. 5 for her modeling efforts.

The Thiedels' famous former home was demolished in 1995. By then they had built a brick ranch house nearby and were renting out the Lustron to nurses from Hinsdale Hospital. "They had a few parties, and the house began to bruise on the inside, and by 1995 it was beyond economical repair," says Fetter. "The owners took it down to free up the front yard. [By the time] I saw it, it

houses. The interior of a third Lombard Lustron has been completely stripped; it's not clear what the home owner intends to do. A fourth has been standing vacant while new construction goes up on the same lot.

The Lombard Historical Society would like to convert the interior of a Lustron into a museum if they could find someone willing to donate one, but there have been no organized efforts to save Lustron homes anyplace besides Quantico. Former Lustron employee Alex James is spearheading an effort to keep the federal government from replacing them with larger homes. James has won a temporary reprieve; government officials won't make a final decision on demolition until 2006.

In the meantime, Fetter is still getting testimonials from happy Lustron homeowners—"one to two letters a week," he says. "I think you have to have the deep connection with Lustron to see the aura," Fetter says. In 1998 he



117 N. ELIZABETH, LOMBARD

really was no longer attractive."

The Maglios say their house is getting too small for them and their three-and-a-half-year-old twins, who share a bedroom. They need to move, though another option they've con-

visited Quantico, "where the street shimmers with the gleam of the Lustrons, even more for me and my wife than for the marines who live there.

"What's the attraction?" I was asked. "It's a bit like visiting mecca," I told them." ■



PHOTO: I. GOODREY, COLUMBUS