

Sears Catalog Homes

Have you ever ordered something from a Sears Catalog? It's common today to shop on the internet and catalogs, and the variety of goods seems endless. Back in the early 1900's there weren't quite so many different styles and items, but Sears offered some surprising options. You could buy a house from their catalog! In 1918, soldiers were returning from World War I and immigrants were streaming through Ellis Island, creating a shortage in housing, lumber and skilled builders. Sears, Roebuck and Company was ready to meet this need. Their 1905 catalog offered: "Write your order in any language. We have translators to read and write in all languages."

Between 1908 and 1940 more than 100,000 American families purchased a new home from the same pages which brought them books, baby bottles, beauty aids, and at one time even automobiles and tractors. These homes were not "prefabs," but accurately cut kits which could be assembled by any homeowner who could wield a hammer. No sawing was required since each pre-cut piece was perfectly shaped, which saved the home owner time and money.

For just \$146, one could purchase the modest, two-bedroom, "Golden Rod Cottage," or the top of the line ten room "Magnolia" for \$5,410. Sears salesmen would help buyers through choices of doorknobs, cabinets, sinks, toilets, and amenities such as built-in breakfast nooks...followed by paint colors, draperies and carpets. Furniture and appliances could be purchased from the same catalog. The whole home kit, with an average of 30,000 parts (not counting nails and screws), would arrive in one or two boxcars. Think how thrilling it would be for a family longing for a home of their own to watch that boxcar roll into town!

By 1929, Sears was manufacturing 250 homes a month. In 1934, fearing a negative impact from the publicity of homes being repossessed during the depression, the Sears Modern Home Department began scaling down. In 1940, the company concluded their home-building business.

By visiting Carlinville, Illinois you can see more Sears Catalog Homes than in any other community. Unlike Sears homes elsewhere, which were mostly purchased by individual families, the Standard Oil Company was in such dire need of housing for new employees working in a nearby coal mine in 1917 that the company ordered 156 houses for a nine-block area called the "Standard Addition" neighborhood. One hundred fifty-two of Carlinville's houses in four different architectural styles are still standing. However, Downer's Grove, Illinois, a community close to Chicago, showcases 120 Sears' homes in a greater variety of styles. Make a visit to either of these towns and picture yourself buying a home (in pieces) for only a few thousand dollars!

Source(s):

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