

SUDDENLY CHIC: SEARS

Photos By Bill Metzger



Kathy Isola's "Rodessa" on Spruceton Avenue looks like it jumped right off the pages of the catalog.

"We'll build a bungalow big enough for two
Big enough for two my honey, big enough for two.
And when we're married, happy we'll be
Underneath the bamboo, underneath the bamboo tree."

Everybody knows about Sears & Roebuck: they sell lawnmowers and batteries, underwear and crescent wrenches, vacuum cleaners, insurance and houses.

"What's that?" you say, "houses?"
Well, shoppers, Sears does not sell houses any more, but they did from 1908 to 1940. Not real estate, mind you, houses. In kits.

Back then, Mr. and Mrs. Mt. Lebanon Homebuyer could pore over Sears Modern Homes Catalogs with Buddy



By Bill Metzger

and Sis, then go down to the regional sales office, which in Pittsburgh was in the Jenkins Arcade downtown, and make their selection. Or they could simply mail-order a house, just like anything else Sears sold. Illustrations were marvelously detailed, down to such design particulars as where to place the piano and what the catalog called a "graphophone."

After financing was arranged, which Sears was happy to do, and the lot was purchased, Mr. and Mrs. H. needed only to choose paint colors, hire the masons to build the foundation and find a carpenter to do the construction. A service representative was assigned to each customer, but thanks to Sears' easy-to-assemble kit which included pre-cut lumber, numbered and keyed to the instructions, the house practically built itself. Some folks have had more trouble putting together model airplanes.

Continued.

THE ARGYLE



The Argyle is a bungalow whose exterior appearance suggests extra-fine interior arrangement and furnishings. The front elevation, as you glance at it, bespeaks richness and comfort on the inside. The living room and dining room prove this conclusively. Note the bookcase colonnade, the beamed ceiling, the massive brick mantel with the built-in bookcase on the side. Note also the extra depth of the living room and dining room, nearly 30 feet long.

THE RODESSA



It is hardly necessary to say that this is a most attractive little home. Furthermore, the price is also attractive. Much thought and expert advice have been expended in designing an exterior that will make this bungalow appeal to lovers of artistic homes, while the floor plan appeals to all people desiring the utmost economy in space. This plan has proved to be one of our most popular houses, and owners are delighted with it.

Details and features: Four rooms and one or no bath. Front porch with gabled roof; trellises; glazed front door. Roof and porch details vary slightly from year to year.

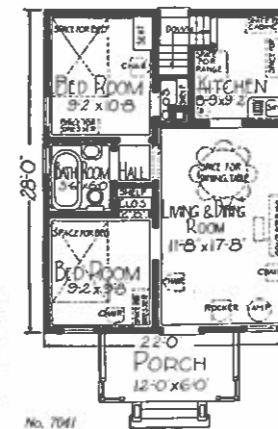
Years and catalog numbers: 1919 (7041); 1921 (7041); 1922 (7041); 1925 (7041, 3203); 1926 (P7041, P3203); 1928 (P7041, P3203); 1929 (P7041)

Price: \$998 to \$1,189

Location: Rocky River, Ohio



No. 7041 (1925)



No. 7041

302



The first thing you have to do is throw your saw away. Just clean your glasses and read their rules. Don't ever cut one board. If you have to use your saw, or if it's not square, you made a mistake.

Charlie Mueller, 81
Retired Contractor



Therese and James Crawford own this "Avalon" at the corner of Scott Road and Broadmoor Avenue.

According to "Houses by Mail," by Katherine Cole Stevenson, (Preservation Press, 1986), 100,000 American families purchased these houses. Why? The price was right, the quality was good and the designs satisfied middle American sensibilities. Most of the Sears dwellings still stand, including several prime examples in Mt. Lebanon.

Bear in mind that these structures were kit houses, not prefab. Prefabricated houses have their large components — walls, roof, sometimes whole rooms — built in a factory and shipped to the building site; Sears houses were assembled from scratch on the site. Prefab was often synonymous with "shoddy;" a Sears house was anything but.

Ask Charlie Mueller, 81, of Whitehall, retired contractor and part-time building inspector for Mt. Lebanon, about the quality of Sears houses: "Everything they had in them was top-notch compared to the price."

"I had a foreman who used to work for me who told me how to build a Sears house. 'The first thing you have to do is throw your saw away. Just clean your glasses and read their rules. Don't ever cut one board. If you have to use your saw or if it's not square, you made a mistake, not them.'"

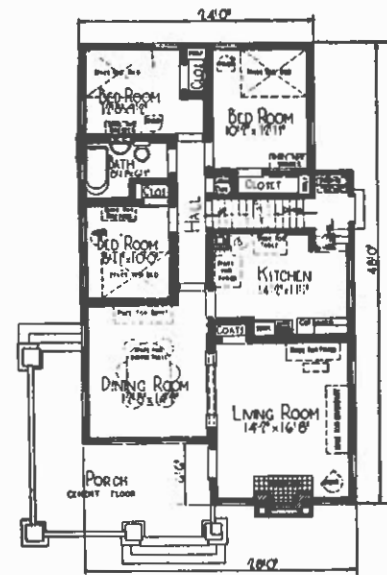


Says the catalog: "This story-and-a-half bungalow-type design contains everything to be desired in a small home."

THE AVALON



From California comes the idea for this delightful bungalow. Honor Bilt construction makes it cozy and warm enough for any part of the country. The architects of California have studied and experimented until they have built houses of this type which are the most beautiful in the world.



Details and features: Six rooms and one bath. Wraparound front porch with battered piers. Fireplace in living room; built-in bookcases between living and dining rooms.

Years and catalog numbers: 1921 (3048); 1922 (13048); 1925 (13048); 1926 (P13048)

Price: \$1,967 to \$2,530

Location: St. Bernard, Ohio



Front porch when screened

71



SUDDENLY CHIC: SEARS

Mueller adds, "Anybody who bought a Sears house really got a bargain." He should know. He figures he's inspected about 5,500 residences, Sears houses among them.

Sears lumber mills operated in an era when there was still plenty of straight, clear virgin timber in this country. A specification sheet from that era details a house to be built of red cedar, clear (no knots) cypress, and No. 1 yellow pine. Oak and maple were also used. Much of the lumber that went into a Sears house can't be purchased today at any price.

A man and a horse and wagon brought the house home from the railroad station.

Once the house was ordered, the new owners waited a few weeks until the house arrived by rail in a boxcar. Herb Haughin, a retired Mt. Lebanon Department of Public Works employee whose father built a Sears bungalow on Beadling Road across from Bird Park, recalls his dad hiring a man with a horse and wagon to bring the house home from the Pennsylvania Railroad Station (now the library) in Bridgeville. He lives next door to that Sears house today.

What came in the kit? A page from the 1919 catalog proclaimed "One order brings it all. ...We ship the lumber, lath, and shingles; millwork such as doors, windows, molding; building paper, flooring, porch materials, etc.; hardware, nails, eaves trough, down spouts, paint and varnish." Heating, plumbing, lighting fixtures and wall-paper were extra.

The number of parts, not including nails or screws, averaged about 30,000.

Author Stevenson says, "the number of separate parts, not including nails or screws, averaged about 30,000 in an average house."

Detailed construction manuals were available for both the owner and the contractor, but confusion still resulted sometimes.

Continued on next page.

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SUDDENLY CHIC: SEARS

"Back around 1923 or '24, I was working for a guy who was building two Sears houses, one in Brookline and one in Carrick," Felix Caste of Hoodridge Drive, a contractor in this area for more than half a century, relates. "I was working on the one in Brookline when they delivered the material, and a lot of it must have gotten mixed up, because I spent a couple of hours trying to find the numbers on the stuff they sent. Finally I gave up and called the guy I was working for and he spent about an hour and a half looking himself. First thing you know,

I knew that if you cut those things you were done. I figured right then I knew as much as he did and that's when I decided to go into business for myself."

Felix Caste, 88 Developer

he started cutting. I knew that if you cut those things you were done. I figured right then I knew as much as he did and that's when I decided to go into business for myself. I quit that afternoon."

The mishap may have left Caste disenchanted with Sears houses, but plenty of other folks had better luck with their kits. The prime examples of their efforts have become today's Sears classics and are the focal point of a burgeoning sport.

"Mail Order Homes Sears Sold Are Suddenly Chic," proclaimed a recent headline in the Wall Street Journal. According to that article, a growing number of Sears homeowners have become preservationists, some going so far as to apply for National Historic Landmark distinction. And among history and architecture buffs, "Sears spotting" has become a popular new pastime, according to Diane Maddex, editor of "Houses by Mail." "Most people didn't know Sears did this (sold houses), and they're fascinated by the whole phenomenon," she says.

This writer, the proud owner of a Sears house, decided to join the vanguard of the coming megatrend and, armed with camera and a copy of "Houses," went a-hunting. But Sears spotting proved to be no "piece of cake," for several reasons:

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SUDDENLY CHIC: SEARS

• Stevenson makes it clear there is "no such thing as a typical Sears house." The book reveals 447 different designs, ranging from Spanish-style bungalows to Dutch colonials to Cape Cods to Queen Anne farmhouses.

• Construction materials could be brick, stone, frame, asphalt, shingles (called Oriental slate or surfaced siding), stone or "Stonekote," Sears' brand of stucco.

• Designs were almost relentlessly reflective of the popular architecture of the time. Explains Stevenson, Sears architects who drew up the plans selected them "for their broad appeal and acceptance." The result? Sears houses look like lots of other sorts of similar vintage houses.

• Floor plans could be, and often were, reversed.

• "People can't keep their hands off a saw," says Charlie Mueller. "They always want to change things." Window patterns have been changed, porches have been added, removed or enclosed, rooms have been tacked on and ornamental trim has often been removed. In the interest of individuality, simplicity or modernization, a once "pure" Sears design might not look much like itself anymore.

The best approach to Sears spotting proved to be virtually memorizing the capsule descriptions of the houses pictured in the book and complementing that background information with a good eye for detail. Even so, it's tough for the novice to be sure. Beyond finding an owner who knows his house's history, the only sure-fire way to identify a Sears house is off limits to the casual spotters — examining the interior floor joists for traces of the telltale numbers. Given the time frame of the Sears era, the search centered on the Washington and Lincoln School neighborhoods and the older part of Sunset Hills, areas which developed in the '20s and '30s.

In addition to this writer's own "Hampton," a surprisingly spacious six-room plus bath frame bungalow with a broad front porch, an afternoon of spotting turned up four examples that appear to be prime candidates.

Kathy Esola of Spruceton Avenue owns a "Rodessa," a four-room bungalow which looks like it jumped off the pages of the catalog. The "Rodessa," described as one of Sears most popular models, originally retailed through the catalog for \$990 to \$1,189, probably depending on the trim package.

Of the "Rodessa," Sears contended that "much thought and expert advice have been expended in designing an exterior that will make this bungalow appeal to lovers of artistic homes."

Somebody obviously loved Esola's little house. Nothing has essentially changed on it since it was built in 1924. Its front porch with gabled roof and the trellises which frame the front door are pleasant reminders of a quieter era when people had time for porch sitting.

Details like the arched insert and cross pattern on the chimney, the notched detail on the porch columns and the window pattern make this a powerful candidate for "Searshood."

Neither Esola nor Henry and Gail Chasey, who owned the house from 1960 to '79 and now live next door, had any idea the house came from Sears. But shown the catalogue illustration, they confirmed, "Even the floor plan's exactly the same."

What is almost surely an "Avalon", a six-room California-style bungalow with a wraparound front porch, is located on the corner of Scott Road and Broadmoor Avenue. Details like the arched insert and cross pattern on the chimney, the notched detail on the porch columns and the window pattern make this a powerful candidate for Searshood.

The abundance of Sears bungalows attests to the fact that this compact, usually story-and-a-half style, which came in many variations, was in many parts of the country the single most popular style of residential architecture during that era. While a modest five room "Lakecrest" at 196 Birch Avenue bears little resemblance to the much larger "Avalon," Sears claimed its "bungalow-type design contains everything to be desired in a small house."

Sears' "Stonekote" stucco put the finishing touch on all "Argyle" houses, and if Jean Carlisle's house on Mabrick is the genuine article, then it's bound to be covered in Stonekote. The pattern in the roof beams and the porch columns are dead giveaways. There's an exact match on the window pattern, too.

If these four houses make a tantalizing beginning for prospective "spotters," or if you suspect you may have a Sears house of your own, the best bet is to order a copy of "Houses by Mail," from The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. The book costs \$24.95 and will come in the mail. There's a nice symmetry to that.

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