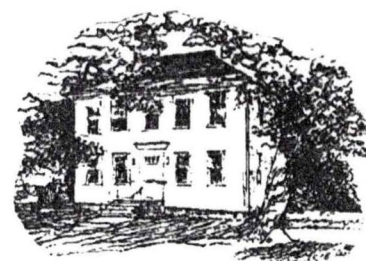


IMAGES

... then and now

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

Simple, Solid, and Enduring – Sears Homes

Between 1908 and 1940 Sears Roebuck Company sold over 100,000 kit homes to Americans mostly by mail order. Middle class people moving to the suburbs fulfilled the American dream of home ownership by purchasing these ready-to-build houses. Several were built in Indian Hill.

Families familiar with Sears' catalogs purchased precut homes according to their needs, tastes, and finances. The first *Modern Homes Catalog* (1908) offered 22 models ranging from \$650 to \$2500. Buyers were urged to "save rent money", "get close to nature", and "be independent" and quality was guaranteed. Eventually 447 different structures were offered – designed by anonymous architects and costing from \$107 to \$5000. Homes could be customized by adding or subtracting features, and it was possible to order a reversed floor plan. Sears classified their homes by expense level: good (Simplex), better (Standard Built), and best (Honor Bilt). Included in the price were millwork, cabinetry, lath, roofing materials, flooring, siding, building paper, downspouts, doors, window sash, shutters, hardware, nails, paint, and varnish – as well as a complete set of blueprints, specifications, and instructions. Not included was the foundation, although a suggested materials list was.



Sears estimated that their Modern Homes cost 40 percent less to build than a conventional house of the same size. Buyers could hire a local carpenter or put the kit together by themselves.

Having precut materials, marked pieces, and no waste saved labor costs. Homeowners avoided architectural fees and were provided guide books, e.g. *How to Build the Ready Cut Way*. The catalog also published testimonials with photographs from satisfied customers in various parts of the country. In 1911, Sears began offering financing packages – a down payment of 25 percent of the cost of the house and lot, and 6% interest for a 5 year loan. In 1923, the company introduced two new specialty catalogs: *Modern Farm Buildings* and *Barns*.

Components of Sears homes were assembled at large factories in New Jersey and Illinois, and the 17 acre millwork plant currently know as the Norwood Sash and Door Manufacturing Co. locally. Delivery was by railroad, and boxcars transporting an average of 30,000 pieces of building material went all over the nation, with three staggered shipments timed to arrive sequentially. Catalog sales were so brisk that sales offices sprang up during the 1920s. One was located at 141 W. Fourth Street in Cincinnati.

For over three decades, models were developed or updated, ranging from an outhouse to a 10 room residence. Styles included Bungalow, Prairie, Colonial, Old English, Craftsman, Mission, and Art Deco, keeping pace with changing tastes. There was no typical Sears house, but certain features were common: e.g. tall first floor ceiling heights (9'), smallish rooms, built-in bookcases and buffets, and closets in every bedroom. Most kit homes had descriptive names – ranging from the exotic (Alhambra, Del Rey) – to the historical (Martha Washington, Puritan) to the horticultural (Cedars, Magnolia). Models usually appeared in the catalog for just a few years, but the Winona, Cape Cod, and Westly were all available for much longer due to their popularity. There was a wide variety of interior options, with stylish hardware, built in nooks for breakfast, telephone, china storage, or ironing boards available. Lighting fixtures, considered the "jewelry" of the house, varied from utilitarian to elegant.



With the stock market crash in 1929, millions of dollars of mortgages were lost through default, and Sears stopped offering financing, selling only houses after 1935. Sales never rebounded to the 1920's peak years, and Sears abandoned the housing business in 1940.

At least three Sears homes are located in the village. These are on Indian Hill Rd., Old Indian Hill Rd., and Given Rd. Though these houses have been remodeled over the years, the premium materials, sensible design, and craftsmanship of the original buildings remain...testaments to a bygone era with a current day unique cachet.