



MID-WEST: SEARS HOUSE, AKRON, OHIO.

Gwen: For our next investigation, we traveled 800 miles south to Akron, Ohio. Our story begins in a small neighborhood just outside the city center. Construction of Firestone Park began in 1916 at a time when America was going suburban. All over the country, new neighborhoods were created, built with local materials and by local builders. Owning a house on one of these leafy streets had become the epitome of the American Dream. Well, a local couple thinks there might be more to some of these suburban houses than meets the eye. They think these houses might be part of a phenomenon that changed the country forever.

The Sears catalog made the latest products available to millions. You could buy anything from a Sears catalog: Corsets, furniture, hats and even horse-drawn carriages, almost anything under the sun. But the ultimate catalog product was the mail-order home. Over 75,000 of these self-assembly houses were made. Today, experts have only managed to identify 5,000 of these little gems, and they've become collector's items. Ray and Sherry Tooten hope their house is about to become one of the select few.

Ray Tooten: Almost from the very beginning, we just knew this was the house for us. It just looked like a dream house that I never thought we would have.

Sherry Tooten: If we would find out that this house was really a Sears House, it would be just like the icing on the cake.

Gwen: I'm Gwen Wright, and I've come to meet Sherry and Ray to find out why they think their home could be a Sears house.

Ray: It all started with a day out on a local bus tour. We went on the tour and they said, this is a good example of a Sears home. And we didn't say that we were the owners. Shortly after then we had a man that was the son of the people who built the house came through and we had a long conversation. And he said it was not a Sears house. He was emphatic it was not a Sears house. I just want to know one way or the other if it is a Sears house or if it isn't a Sears house.

Sherry: Our house is a very, very, very fine house

Gwen: To answer Sherry and Ray's question, I need to look into the history of Sears' houses, and it's quite a tale. The do-it-yourself kits revolutionized American home-buying habits, from 1908 through the early '40s. The timing was impeccable. After the Ford Model T was introduced, more people began moving to the suburbs and Sears had just the houses for them. The kit houses were cheap and made of high-quality materials. Everything was pre-cut, so almost anybody could build one. This opened up home ownership to people who, until then, could never have afforded a house of their own. This was the American Dream in kit form. To own a Sears house today is to own a unique piece of American history. I've tracked down Sears house specialist Rosemary Thornton. She'll be able to tell me about mail-order houses and, crucially, how to identify one. Well, tell me, what would somebody expect if they ordered a Sears home?

Rosemary Thornton: The typical Sears home actually included about 30,000 pieces of house that were shipped in two boxcars. And it included about 750 pounds of nails, 27 gallons of paint and varnish, 27 windows, 25 doors, and also included a 75-page instruction book that told you how it all went together.

Gwen: How many people ordered these Sears houses?

Rosemary: Sears sold about 75,000 of these kit homes. They offered these houses in about 370 different styles. They had very modest 4-room homes that sold for around \$600. And for about \$6,000, look what you could get. [laughing]

Gwen: This is something.

Rosemary: This was the "Magnolia". That was Sears finest, grandest and largest home. At only \$6,000, the Magnolia was a fraction of the cost of a traditionally constructed home of the same size.

Gwen: How did you know that this was a Sears house?

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Rosemary: Well, I actually memorized each of those 370 different designs that Sears offered, so that makes it quite a bit easier.

Gwen: So, does the Tootens' house match any of the Sears designs in the catalogs? So Rose, what do you think?

Rosemary: It's not a Sears home I recognize. I couldn't say I could peg it as a Sears home.

Gwen: But all is not lost. Rose assures me there are many different tests we can try at Ray and Sherry's. We're starting in the basement.

Rosemary: You can look over here and I'm going to look under the stairs, see if we can find any labels or anything labeled "Sears, Roebuck" old shipping labels are the easiest way to identify a Sears house.

Gwen: We're also looking for some distinctive stamps, 3-digit numbers imprinted on the timber that helped the homeowner put the pieces together.

Rosemary: They have some termite damage but no Sears labels.

Gwen: While I focus on the basement, Rose is examining the rest of the house for telltale signs of a Sears house. Rose is recording the dimensions of the Tootens' house to compare with her index of Sears ground plans. But this layout doesn't measure up to anything she has seen.

Rosemary: The attic roof can be a giveaway. Sears used sheets of plasterboard in many of their designs, but this doesn't have them.

Gwen: Rose and I compare notes. There's no physical proof to suggest that this is a Sears mail-order house. But I'm not giving up. I've come to meet local tour guide Christine Braiman, who can tell me more about the building of Firestone Park. Tell me something of what Akron was like in 1919.

Christine Braiman: Well, actually between 1910 and 1920, the rubber industry was growing and there were about 25 rubber companies. Akron was the fastest growing city in the United States.

Gwen: That must have been quite a housing shortage with that kind of an increase.

Christine: Definitely, there was. It was a problem. My great-grandfather had told us when he came here, they were renting out the boarding houses in shifts, in 12-hour shifts, so that you would go to work and then go back and you would actually be sharing your room or bed with somebody else that was working at the factory, or the Firestone, as they called it. And so Firestone Park was established as a company town to try to take care of these various problems.

Gwen: Was it named for the company?

Christine: Actually, it was named for Harvey Firestone, who founded the company. He set up the community and named it Firestone Park, and the central part of the community is a park that is shaped like the shield from the Firestone Corporation. And you can see it when you fly over in a Plane. You can really see the shield.

Gwen: The question I still need to answer is, did Harvey Firestone buy Sears mail-order houses for his fast-growing work force? If he did, it will be recorded here at the Firestone archive. Here's a letter from Firestone's secretary speaking about the houses being constructed, saying, "it is the opinion of those who looked into the subject "that we could build houses in quantities for less money than the ready-cut companies could supply them." In fact, he goes on: "none of these houses are of the ready-cut type." So in 1917, Harvey Firestone was resolute not to use mail-order houses for Firestone Park. It doesn't look good. And here's something else, from a major New York architectural firm. It's a letter from Trowbridge and Ackerman to the Firestone Tire and Rubber company saying, "we will be glad to cooperate in this problem of workingmen's houses." Trowbridge and Ackerman were among the most important architects of the early 20th century, and they specialized in workers' housing. It looks like they designed the houses in Firestone Park. That

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would certainly make them special, but not in the way I was hoping. I've just discovered the files of Firestone's building contractor, Shannon construction. If Sears were involved, then there must be something in here. Extraordinary. This reads, "our man is now in Cincinnati awaiting the delivery of promised material from Sears, Roebuck, February 11th". Here we have the very first indication that Firestone Park and Sears are connected. This document tells us that in 1920, three years after Harvey Firestone had said he wasn't going to use ready-cut homes, he turned to Sears for the lumber supplies to finish off his houses. I have a list here of the lot numbers waiting for that express delivery. I'm checking these off on the site plan to see if the Tootens' house is part of this group. Here's the park, shaped like a shield, and here is the Tootens' house. And there it is. The Tootens' home was definitely finished with timber supplied by Sears. But I know it was designed by a big firm of New York architects, not Sears in-house designers, which means it can't be considered a Sears Catalog home, or can it?

Just when I thought the investigation was over, Rose calls. She's been doing some more research and found another house in Firestone Park almost identical to the Tootens'. And that's not her only discovery. Look at this. This is a picture from the 1925 Sears catalog. That's the house right in front of us. Fantastic! Isn't that grand?

Gwen: The house featured in the catalog is part of an attempt by Sears to win contracts to build entire company towns. The picture has a caption, "Street view of Sears, Roebuck and Co.'s houses at Akron, Ohio". So Sears is claiming this is one of their homes, but we know they didn't design it. So what is it? These houses were special order, just for Firestone Park, so you're not going to see Sears houses like this anywhere else. They're just for Firestone Park. And then Sears put them in the front pages of their catalogs just as an advertisement. So these were company towns and Sears is saying, we can produce all the houses fast. All this means that the Tootens' home is even more special than they'd hoped. It's part of a one-off order of homes Sears helped produce exclusively for the Firestone Rubber Company. So we've discovered that the Tootens' house was built by order of Harvey Firestone. The early 20th century saw a spectacular boom in industrial output. Firestone was a key player and he needed houses fast to cope with the huge influx of workers for his rubber factories. Initially reluctant to use ready-cut mail-order homes, eventually he turned to Sears for help. But these houses aren't traditional Sears catalog homes. They were built with Sears materials, but designed by a renowned firm of New York architects. The designs are exclusive to Firestone Park and were never made available to the general public.

Gwen: Now it's time to tell Ray and Sherry what I've learned. Well, you wanted me to find out if this is a Sears home and I can tell you definitively that it is.

Ray and Sherry: Wonderful. Nice. I'm happy.

Gwen: Well, at least you know.

Ray: At least we know.

Sherry: Now we know.

Gwen: But it's truly unique in a way that most Sears catalog houses aren't, because this was part of a special order that Harvey Firestone commissioned Sears to make exclusively for Firestone Park.

Ray: Really? So it was real special.

Gwen: All of these houses were available to employees of Firestone, but Sears never carried any of these houses in any of its modern homes catalogs. So how does that leave you feeling about your house?

Sherry: That's better yet. That's better yet. Now we can really sit up straight. [laughter] at least the tour guy, the tour bus driver is doing his job then when he's informing these people that it really is a Sears home.

Gwen: Sears helped Harvey Firestone achieve his vision of affordable workers' housing. They repeated their success on a grand scale, building company towns like Carlinville, Illinois, for Standard Oil, Hellertown, Pennsylvania, for Bethlehem Steel and Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, for the American Magnesia company, among many others.

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Elyse: The Sears catalog changed the way that Americans lived forever. At the height of its circulation, the only book more common in America than the Sears catalog was the Bible. The ultimate collectible to come out of one of these: a house. Through the years, there have been over 2.5 million items available in this little piece of Americana, some of them true treasures. So where do you start? The catalog itself. Got the first one from 1896? Today, it's worth over \$200. But if you really want to find some true collectibles, take a peek inside. Take a standard horse saddle. In 1923, it sold for \$45. Kept it in your stables? Today, it's worth at least \$500. Fancy a quick smoke? In 1917, a pound of tobacco cost less than 50 cents. Now, the tin alone could be worth \$500. Surprised? It gets better. Some of the most mundane household items straight out of the catalog are the most collectible. Why? Take this 1930s kettle, art deco. Collectors love it. This Kenmore toaster from the 1950s, a design so sleek it's being reproduced today. An original sells for over \$150. Getting ready for that garage sale? Be careful what you give away. Remember: those everyday items may some day be worth a pretty penny.

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