

'I Live in a 1900s Sears Catalog Home—Here's What It's Like To Own a House That Arrived in a Box'

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Once upon a time—way before online shopping—you could order just about everything you needed from the Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog—including a house.

In the early 20th century, the massive Sears catalog (often 500 to 1,000-plus pages, a hard-copy equivalent of what Amazon.com is today) made it possible for people to get just about everything they needed within its pages. From

1908 to 1942, Sears sold approximately 75,000 mail-order home kits.

The Sears catalog homes were called "modern" at the time because they included the latest in home conveniences—like indoor plumbing and electricity. But they were also a feasible and affordable way for a middle-class family to live in quality housing.

Shoppers perusing "Sears Modern Homes and Building Plans" could pick a home from the catalog and write a check for a few thousand dollars. A few weeks later, all of the housing parts would arrive by railway train—often including 10,000 pre-cut pieces of lumber, screws, nails, paint, and even doorknobs and drawer pulls. It was truly a home in a box (which would then have to be built, of course, usually by a contractor for an extra fee).

Today, these catalog homes are something of a historic phenomenon. Not only have they beautifully stood the test of time in most cases, but the people who live in them form an unofficial niche housing club. Realtor.com® decided to reach out to some of these homeowners to get the scoop on what it's really like to live in a home that originally was ordered from a catalog.

The Villa (Aladdin home kit)



This beautiful Ohio home, built in 1921, originally came from a mail-order catalog. TRISHA MILLS

Before moving into their catalog stunner in Lorain, OH, in January 2025, **Trish and Tim Mills** didn't know anything about these mail-order homes from days of yore. But now, they're delighted to be a part of the rich history that their catalog home possesses. This particular house, which was built in 1921 from an Aladdin home kit called "The Villa," has quite the story.

"Though we paid \$330,000 for our house today, I believe it was shipped here on a train in 1920 for a little less than \$4,000, and then they paid the construction crew \$1,000 to put it together," Trish told Realtor.com.


For years, this catalog home was called "Wickens Manor" after the owner and one-time mayor of the area, **George Wickens**. It's also noteworthy for being one of the few homes to survive a violent F4 tornado in 1924 (the worst

The Villa
\$3,420.00



Price, \$2,600.00
Cash discount, \$250
Net price, \$3,420.00

IT is difficult to select words suitable to describe the beauty and convenience of this thoroughly modern home. While the architectural lines are strong, yet the artist has rendered them extremely pleasing to the eye. The pergola effect at the front and side, combined with the stately columns, lends a certain dignity and grandeur that at once places The Villa in a class by itself. Like the beautiful everywhere, this house challenges the lover of the artistic and furnishes a concrete example of sturdiness and strength which at the same time is an embodiment of the finest culture.

On passing through the ventilated front entrance into the large and spacious hallway, the visitor's attention is at once attracted by the beautiful and easily ascending stairs at the rear, and on each side by the double door to the living room on the right or the large dining room on the left. Without changing one's position, there is easily visible across the living room the French doors leading to the sun porch. This sun room extending the entire width of the house, affords by means of the casement windows a protected porch in pleasant weather or a comfortable lounging room when the elements outside so dictate. The breakfast room, ample for a small family dining room, a better's pantry, and a conveniently arranged kitchen complete the first floor. On the second floor, opening off a central hall, are the owner's room with bath and three corner bed rooms with closets. A large, well lighted third floor furnished, when desired, convenient space for the maid's quarters. See Terms on page 2 and General Specifications on pages 12 and 13.



A BIT OF OLD ITALY

First Floor Plan—The Villa

Second Floor Plan—The Villa

"The Villa" catalog ad showed what the Aladdin mail-order home kit could become when purchased and assembled. COURTESY OF ROSE THORNTON



This catalog home stayed standing after the worst tornado in Ohio history. COURTESY DANIEL BRADY
degree weather."

While it was the Lake Erie view that initially drew Trish and Tim to attend an open house, it was the old-world details that made them want to buy it—which they did *that day*. "We walked through, and both of us immediately fell in love with the house—it had everything we had been looking for and reminded me of my grandparents' home," says Trish. "So much of the house is original, so I did research and found out the best way to clean the wallpapers and floors and care for the chandeliers and so on."

Trish says she also decorated the home based on photos of the house from when it was first built, which she was able to do thanks to the Lorain Historical Society. The organization provided the new homeowners with historical information about the property. "Curtains were a challenge and had to be custom-made because the many, many windows were so many different sizes, but we had a blast traveling to Philly and other

tornado to date in Ohio's history) that leveled most of the town, thus giving the home its current nickname, "The Tornado House." "This house is in better shape and sturdier than new-built houses—I love the secure feeling," says Trish. "We live on Lake Erie, and if I am inside the house, I cannot hear the worst storms—it's extremely solid with thick walls that also keep the house cool even in 90-



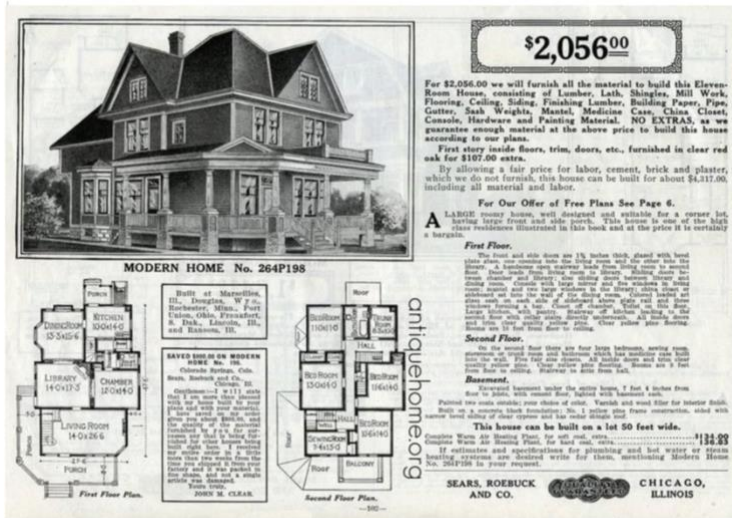
This catalog home survived a violent tornado in 1924, and it's still standing today. TRISH MILLS

places to find the perfect items for this house," says Trish. "We also added a flagpole and outdoor carpet to mimic pictures of the house when it was the Mayor's Manor."

The Palmyra. When **Wendy and Terry Bell** first looked at their Lincoln, IL, home, the real estate agent said it was a Sears kit home built in 1912. The Bells didn't know what she meant, so Wendy went to the local library to do some research. "I found the book 'Houses by Mail,' which includes photos of all the Sears house plans and where they were shipped to/presumably built," Wendy tells Realtor.com. "We learned our home was the Palmyra model from the book and that [there were other homes of this type] located in Lincoln, Paxton, and Ransom, IL." That discovery was just the beginning of the Bells' Sears catalog home journey. In 1997, after moving into their Palmyra model—for which they paid \$119,000 and which is now

valued about double that—they started to connect with other Sears catalog homeowners in the area and beyond.

"The owners of the 1914 Palmyra on the other side of Lincoln sent us a nice note shortly after we moved in, and we visited the Palmyra house in Paxton, IL, and found that their back porch was enclosed rather than open with just stairs, a landing, and a roof," says Wendy. It inspired them to also enclose their porch since their property abuts a cornfield. Other than that, the original details of their home remain intact.



The Palmyra model home kit as it appeared in the Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog COURTESY OF WENDY BELL

"The woodwork was not painted, which was a big thing for us, and the dining room has a built-in china cupboard that is flanked by a leaded-glass window on each side," says Wendy. "Only one of the original light fixtures was hanging when we moved in, but all of the ones that had been on the first floor were in the basement, so we rewired them and replaced the 1990s ceiling fans."

The home has a gas fireplace in the parlor, a beautiful archway from the hall to the living room, a stained-glass window on the stairway landing, a mirrored console from the 1910 Sears catalog, and the original claw-foot bathtub and built-in medicine cabinet in the upstairs bathroom.

Only standard upgrades like HVAC, central air, a water heater, siding, and storm windows make it more 2025 than early 20th century.

On a fun note, the home is known in the area less as a Sears catalog home and more as Santa's House, because Terry is a professional Santa and spends the holiday season at White Oaks Mall in



The photo of this Sears Catalog home was taken in July, showing that it keeps a touch of Santa alive all year—making it doubly unique. WENDY BELL

Springfield, the Children's Hospital, two parades, and various other events. "Our house is Christmas 365 [days a year] inside. As our seasonal activities begin in October, I've found it easier to leave the decorations up all year than trying to figure it out during the traditional holiday months ... and nobody who comes is ever surprised as it's 'Santa's House,'" says Wendy.

Those decorations include seven Christmas trees on the first level, a large vintage Santa Claus collection, a lighted village, and a Macy's-inspired "Believe" sign that stays up year-round on the front of the house. "We love our home—it's warm and inviting, has a very open floor plan, lots of windows for sunlight to stream through, and every one of them open," says Wendy. "We're caretakers that will someday leave it to someone else and want it to retain its character."



Christmas is year-round at this Lincoln, IL, Sears catalog house because "Santa" actually

"Our home was updated, but original features [were] maintained, and it was verified to be an Osborn by **Rosemary Thornton**, the Sears home expert, by sending photos of the doors, hardware, and layout," says Rice. "Our porches have been enclosed, and after the war, an apartment was added on the back."

The Rices also built a large garage (to address the lack of storage in this bungalow model) and a new boat lift and dock after they purchased it for \$250,000 in 2013. Beyond that, it has stood the test of time since it was constructed in 1924–25.

"We love our home—especially the great location downtown and Gulf access, and that it isn't like others," says Rice. She and her husband recently decided to downsize and put their Sears catalog home on the market. "We would like to sell our home to someone that appreciates the unique history and significance to our little city."

The Osborn. When **Linda Rice** and her husband moved into their New Port Richey, FL, home in 2013, they were unaware they were also acquiring a piece of history. "We did not know it was a Sears home until after purchase, when my brother researched this house in the historic downtown city of New Port Richey, FL," Rice tells Realtor.com. The couple then learned of the history of **Emil Nyman**, who settled in the area with his family around 1915. He became the original waterman, owned the grocery store in town next, and had this home built—The Osborn model from the Sears catalog.



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