

There Are Still Three Lustron Homes in Monroe

After the soldiers of World War II returned to their wives and families in the mid-1940s there was a major shortage of housing throughout the country. During the depression years the finances weren't there to build much housing. This was followed by the war with rationing due to the fact that most of the resources were being funneled into the war effort.

In January 1947 Carl Strandlund, who had been hired by the Chicago Vitreous Enamel Product Company to transform their factory for defense production, had a great idea. The company had formerly produced Standard Oil gas stations and White Castle restaurants. He invented and promoted the prefabricated Lustron homes that were to be the answer to this housing shortage. They would manufacture the parts for the homes in a factory in Columbus, Ohio. These parts were enamel steel panels to be used for both the exterior and interior walls, the roof, the ceiling, and the kitchen cabinets. They were to be maintenance free, giving the family more free time.

This business was financed with an initial loan of more than \$12,000,000 from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. The government was behind this project because Mr. Strandlund said that the plant would be able to manufacture more than 100 houses per day on the assembly line that was nine miles long. After the parts for the houses were manufactured, they would load the pieces for an entire house on a Lustron semi, and deliver them to wherever they were to be constructed. The company expected to construct 15,000 homes in 1947 and 30,000 more in 1948.

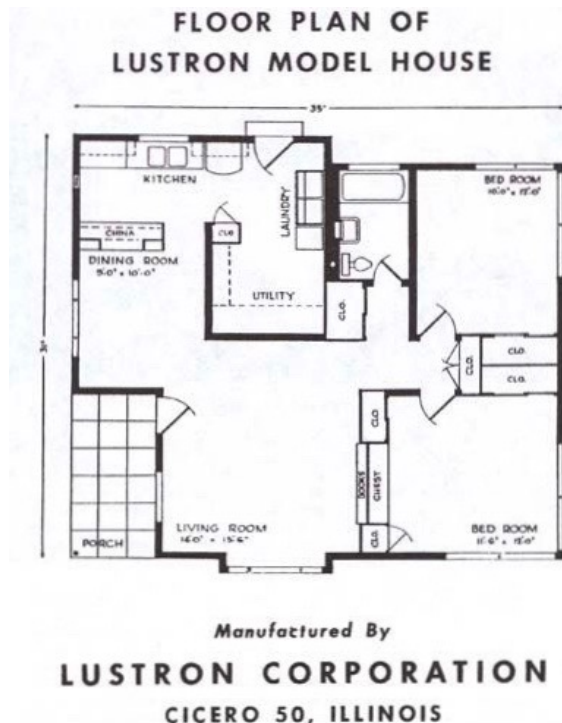
The houses initially sold for between \$8,500 and \$9,500 and were meant to need very little maintenance since they were made of metal. Since the walls and cabinets were also made of metal, there was no painting necessary inside or out. Each home had a kitchen, dining room, living room, two or three bedrooms, and a bathroom as well as a utility room. The homes had many built-ins with a china cabinet in the dining room and a vanity with storage above in the master bedroom. The pocket doors each weighed 80 pounds.

The first model home was erected in Hinsdale, Illinois near Chicago. A man from Des Moines, Iowa visited the model home on a Sunday and ordered one of the houses. He returned to Des Moines where he already owned a lot. They poured a cement slab on Tuesday. The house was delivered by the Lustron semi and erected by Saturday. The man was living there on Sunday, one week after ordering the house.

Each home consisted of 4,000 parts that were delivered to the specific location. With only eight different models available, builders simply followed the manual to construct them. All the homeowner had to provide was a range and a refrigerator. The homes were available in surf blue, dove grey, maize yellow, or desert tan.

Thousands of people in 36 states bought into these homes, but the company was better at marketing than they were at manufacturing the homes. The company was only able to produce less than 30 houses per day and was forced to close down in 1950. The company was using more electricity than all of Columbus, Ohio and was losing \$500,000 monthly. They had received more than \$34 million in federal loans and declared bankruptcy, never paying back the loans. The company had built less than 3,000 houses and failed to deliver 8,000 additional orders. Roughly 2,000 Lustrons still stand today.

Monroe still has three of these homes. The 1950 Monroe city directory shows that R. C. Larson owned the one at 1626 25th Avenue and that Mrs Alvira Risley lived there. G. V. Poff owned the one at



This diagram shows how large the inside of the Westchester version of a Lustron house is with no hallways or stairways to use the valuable space.

1717 21st Avenue with Mrs. Marie Liotzbarske as the tenant. Royce ZumBrunnen and his family owned and lived in the one at 1715 20th Avenue. All three of the homes now have garages on their property and the exterior of the houses look like they have been kept the same as when they were new in the late 1940s. If the enameled surface breaks off the steel can rust. The house can actually be polished with a car wax to preserve its finish.

I tried to find early photographs of these Monroe homes, but had no luck. Even though there were three styles that could be chosen with either two or three bedrooms, it appears that the three homes here are the Westchester model. Each has more than 1,000 square feet and the one on 21st Avenue is maize yellow in color and the other two are surf blue.

There is much information about Lustron homes on the internet with conflicting facts about dates and amounts of money. The Ohio Historical Society completely assembled one of these homes inside their museum in 2013 as part of an exhibit on life in the 1950s. Others are being torn down to build larger homes on the property.

After the column was published, I received a message from Walt Rufener that there were two Lustron houses in New Glarus located at 419 8th Avenue and 318 11th Avenue.