

Alton's Sears Kit Homes Featured in AALA's Fall Tour

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November 24 2020 5:59 PM



Alton - Looking for something fun to do this winter that's both entertaining and safe? Alton Area Landmarks has put together a driving tour of the Sears Kit Homes in the city. You can download a brochure at their website (link: <https://www.altonlandmarks.org/>) which includes a map, house addresses, historical details and original catalog images from the 100-year-old "Sears Modern Homes" catalogs. The brochure is free.

And what is a "Sears kit home"?

In the early 1900s, Sears and Roebuck sold just about everything through their 100,000-item, 1400-page mail-order catalog, including live chicks, sewing machines, tombstones and even cast-iron cookstoves. In 1908, Sears launched a new specialty catalog which featured “Modern kit homes.”



Each kit came with detailed blueprints (designed for the novice), and a 75-page instruction book that promised that a “man of average abilities” could have the house ready for occupancy in about 90 days. The average kit had about 12,000 pieces and included everything from door hinges to doorbells, as well as roofing shingles, heating systems, wood putty, and paint. The homeowner was expected to furnish plaster and masonry (due to weight).

The pieces and parts were loaded onto a boxcar and shipped to the closest railroad station. When the boxcar arrived, it was placed on a siding and the soon-to-homeowner was notified. Typically, the homeowner had 24-48 hours to get the boxcar unloaded. This is why Sears Homes are often found within 1-2 miles of railroad tracks. The logistics of moving 12,000 pieces necessitated having a building lot close by.

In 1940, due to increasingly complex building codes and declining sales, Sears closed their Modern Homes department. From 1908-1940, Sears offered about 370 designs, ranging from trailing-edge Victorians to Craftsman Bungalows to 500-square foot cottages. About 70,000 kit homes were sold in all 48 states. Not surprisingly, the Midwest has a surfeit of Sears Homes.

Alton has more than 40 authenticated kit homes, and 10 of them are featured in this year's tour.