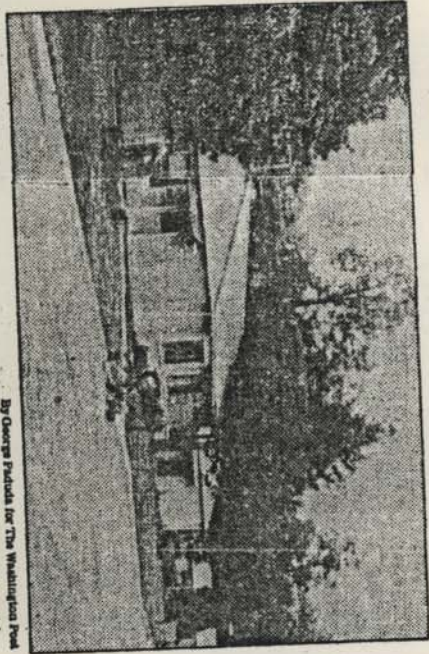


Little 'Tin' Houses



By George Padula for The Washington Post
Lustron houses on Geiger Ridge are home for Martin families of Quantico.

rooms, and a porch across half of the front. Bliss also designed a similar three-bedroom model with 1,209 square feet of floor space.

The house came in any one of four colors for the roof, and any one of four other, complementary colors for a surface. The heating system was a surface, and cut down on cleaning. As indicated earlier, there were many built-in features such as a washer that could be used for dishes or clothes.

The plans won the approval of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a lending institution set up by Congress to stimulate economic progress. The RFC gave Strandlund a \$125 million loan.

A hand-made prototype was built in Hinsdale, Ill., in the fall of 1946, and in coordination with a large advertising campaign, models were erected in the following months in Chicago, New York City, Washington, D.C., Detroit, Des Moines, Boston, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Miami and Minneapolis. Public reaction was enthusiastic. Many visitors to the models were so impressed that they offered down payments on the spot.

The model house erected in New York City, at 82nd Street and the Avenue of the Americas, drew over 30,000 visitors in the first week after it was opened in mid-April 1948. In Columbus, Ohio, where the Lustron plant was established, inquiries indicated that 15,000 houses could be sold in that area alone.

In addition to building a revolution-ary house, the Lustron Corporation evolved a radically new system for the production, storage, transportation, and assembly of the new house. This involved the factory mass production of the house components and the use of custom-made trailers for storing and transporting all 1,450 parts, exclusive of nuts and bolts, needed to erect a Lustron house.

Thus, when an order was received for a house, a trailer containing all the parts needed to build the house was towed to the building site. At the site, the trailer served as a weather-proof

fire-proof, theft-and-vandalism-proof storehouse for the parts until the complex structure was assembled by the specially trained technicians. Actual erection could take from nine days to three weeks, once the building site had been prepared.

While the first models were hand-made, less than a year later the Lustron Corporation had established itself in a well-equipped plant in Millington, Ohio. The plant could mass produce nearly 2,000 of the 2,334 different components needed for the house. The remaining items were readily obtainable from any building supply firm.

Ironically enough, Lustron's first efforts to get a factory, the war-surplus Dodge plant in Chicago, had been thwarted by another industrial new-comer, the newly founded and soon-to-fade Trucker Automobile Corporation. The Trucker firm, which planned to produce a truly new car with front-wheel drive, never got beyond the crating of a few hand-made models.

house that dominates the building industry?"

Unfortunately for the people interested in buying, selling, and living in the Lustron house, it suffered from a sort of legal and financial schizophrenia. While it was "on wheels," disassembled and in its custom-made storage trailer, it was, like an automobile, then considered chattel. Not until it was dismounted and erected on a foundation did it become real estate. The financing and laws governing chattels are different from those considered for prospective home buyers, and adversely affected the initial marketing efforts of Lustron sales agents.

Establishing a selling price proved another serious obstacle to sales. As a mass-produced item similar in many ways to an automobile, the Lustron house should, according to Padula, have been sold like an automobile: at an F.O.B. price, plus shipping and preparation charges. Instead, the same house was valued differently according to where it was erected, thus adding another burden to an already shaky marketing structure.

Once it arrived at the erection site, the Lustron house usually came up against swarms of antiquated building codes. In New Jersey alone there were 621 such codes. They were written with conventionally built houses in mind. Today, many codes are based on performance, but in the late 1940s building codes went into great detail specifying what types of material should be used for plumbing, heating, electricity, etc. Because it was a new item, built of what were then often exotic materials, the Lustron house often fell prey to such standards. Thus, in part because it was so far ahead of its time, the Lustron house found itself ensnared in financial and bureaucratic red tape and controversy. In some cases the problems were caused by the Lustron Corporation itself.

The most controversial thing about the Lustron Corporation was its almost total reliance on federal financing. While Strandlund contributed his genius and valuable patents, through-

out its life the corporation relied mainly on federal loans from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation for funding.

As months passed, and Lustron was forced to cut production when marketing of the house faltered, Lustron repeatedly turned to the RFC for additional money. This brought criticism and charges of waste and inefficiency, especially from some business and congressional critics. At the beginning of 1948 Strandlund was having to deny charges of putting political pressure on the RFC to obtain additional loans. Probably the least felicitously phrased criticism was that made by a business competitor, a plumbing-supply manufacturer, who said there was a "bad odor" about the RFC loans to Lustron.

Despite projections of building 6,000 houses in 1948 and 44,400 in 1949, by the end of October 1949 the Lustron Corporation had manufactured just under 2,000 houses. Except for the 61 sold to the Navy Department for Quantico, sales were usually to individuals often for erection in partially developed neighborhoods. By late 1949, when the company was about to go under, most of the 235 Lustron dealers were ordering an average of less than two houses per month.

In the latter part of 1949 and first part of 1950, Strandlund and the Lustron Corporation were overwhelmed by economic and political problems that had nothing to do with the value or need for the unique product they conceived and produced. A last-ditch effort by a group of Lustron dealers to save the company was an early casualty of the Korean War, when the U.S. Navy, the biggest buyer of the Lustron houses, took over the Lustron plant to reconstruct it to the production of military aircraft.

So, if you are looking for a well-designed, low-maintenance house, keep your eye open for a light-colored, compact rancher with a semi-gloss finish, a neat porch across half of its front, and no signs of peeling or cracking on its surfaces. There are a few thousand of them around, and, on the basis of past experience, they will be around for a long time to come.

LUSTRON, From El

doors and windows make them "very comfortable" according to Jan Atkins, a Marine wife who has been living in one for 2½ years. As a mother of young children, she particularly appreciates the ease with which she can clean the attractive, hard-finish interior.

Many of Jan Atkins' views are shared by her neighbors, the Elks and Teasons. They generally find the houses comfortable, provided there is carpeting to complement the radiant heat in the ceilings. The only general complaint, usually expressed in mild tones, is about the difficulty of hanging pictures and other items on the metal walls. Such praise would be welcomed by Carl Strandlund, the "father" of the Lustron house if he were alive today.

Strandlund had first come to the attention of the industrial and engineering world during the Second World War, when he developed a process for hardening armor plate for tanks that cut processing time from 14 hours to 8 seconds. This process had been of great value to the United States and its allies during the war. Strandlund also had patented a method for bonding enamel to metal.

Shortly after the end of the war, he went to Washington seeking a government allocation of scarce, federally controlled metal and other materials. He planned to build gasoline stations out of metal panels coated with vitreous enamel by means of his special process. The federal regulators said there were no materials for gasoline stations, but that there were materials for much-needed single-family houses.

Moving quickly, Strandlund contacted architect Roy Bliss of the firm of Bliss and Beckman in Wilmette, Ill. Bliss designed a compact, modern trailer to be built with steel panels coated with enamel by Strandlund's bonding process. It was simple, full of new concepts, and characterized by durability and ease of maintenance found nowhere this side of the Pyramids.

The plans called for a two-bedroom model with 1,065 square feet of floor space, divided into a living room, dining room, kitchen, utility room, two bed-