

Some Assembly Required

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Prefabricated homes have been part of United States history for most of the 20th century. Likely the most recognized name of Kit Homes, as they are often called, is Sears. However, there were many other companies that got in on this phenomenon as well. The ease of ordering from a catalog and the fact that the homeowner could build his or her own house made this way of obtaining a home a very attractive and affordable option for many a would-be homeowner. These homes were typically not fancy and often not roomy. They were mostly modest and simply built homes that were mass produced to provide a remedy for the voracious need for housing that was a great concern in post-WWII America.



Figure 1: 1943 Gunnison Home Advertisement. The Rotarian 62, No. 5, (May 1943): 25.

Kit Homes came in many models and sizes and included various options for layouts and materials. This customization was a great selling point. A prefabricated pioneer, Foster Gunnison started Gunnison Housing Corporation and in 1936 began shipping prefabricated “Magic Homes” from New Albany, Indiana. The location of New Albany made it an ideal place for this type of company because the town had access to good transportation networks (the Ohio River) and a long history of wood product production. Despite WWII temporarily halting production of the homes, thousands of them were quickly produced and shipped all throughout the country. A 1944 Time Magazine article claimed that Gunnison’s patented “conveyor-belted production methods” produced all the parts of a house in 25 minutes. These homes were made from insulated plywood panels that were bolted together at the home site. These panels came to the homesite complete with windows already installed (as seen in Figure 2) and doors and the walls themselves were already finished.

Gunnison eventually sold controlling interest in his company to U.S. Steel in 1944. Gunnison retired completely in 1953 and U.S. Steel continued to produce these panel homes until the company closed its housing division in 1974.

One of the main reasons for Kit Homes' popularity was their price. Another company with Indiana ties, Lafayette, Indiana based National Homes, became popular for its starter homes in the 1950's with GI's returning to the United States in the post WWII years. Homeowners purchased the plot, poured a concrete slab, then constructed housing units starting at \$2,000 for a two-bedroom and \$2,400 for a three-bedroom. National Homes Corporation began production in 1940 and was started by a former Gunnison executive, Donald Lowman. When National Homes' Lafayette plant was working at its maximum capacity, it would send out 750 houses a month over 300 miles.

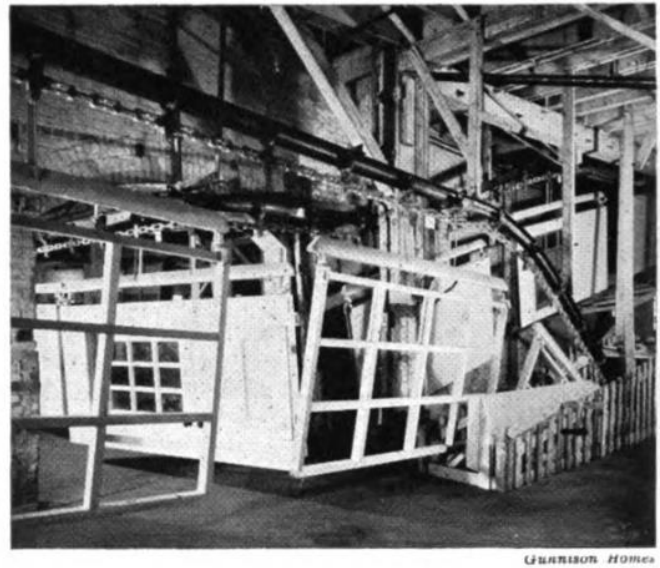


Figure 2: A Gunnison Home in Factory Production, Alfred Bruce and Harold Sandbank, *The Prefabricated House* (New York: John B. Pierce Foundation, July 1943), 64.

PRICES RANGE FROM \$1,500 TO \$17,000
Available in 2, 3 and 4 Bedroom Sizes. Some with full and partial. Some with full and long floor.

NATIONAL HOMES Scoops Entire Building Field with Exciting New 1953 Models!

SENSATIONAL RESTYLING... outside and in ... PROVIDES MODERN LIVING at its BEST!

- Living, dining and kitchen areas flow together to provide for open modern living, yet can be divided by decorative folding doors when desired.
- Dramatic new ceiling to floor Thermopane or Twinlow picture window in living room.
- New shoulder-high bedroom windows, giving more privacy and increased wall space for furniture placement.
- New step-saving kitchen with Formica-top work surfaces on all base cabinets.
- New home laundry alcove including automatic washing machine and dryer.
- Decorative folding doors, enclosing spacious ceiling height closets.
- Large, steel slope-type bathroom featuring extra-large medicine cabinet with sliding mirror doors, full-width vanity shelf and built-in lighting.
- Inside storage for suit bags, trunks, baby carriage, housekeeping equipment, canned goods, etc.
- Outside access storage with ample space for bicycle, garden tools, lawn chairs, screens, etc.
- Dozens of other amazing new features!

Color-Styled by Beatrice West
Beatrice West of New York City, nation's foremost home color consultant and interior decorator, color styled of more than 65,000 homes, has furnished and completely overhauled thousands, both exterior and interior, including all trim, paint and steel colors.

SEND FOR FREE CATALOG - JUST OFF THE PRESS
Choose your own National Home from many smart designs. Carefully classified phone book for your nearest National Homes dealer holder. Or write National Homes Corporation, Department L.P. 2, Lafayette, Indiana, for latest catalog.

Nationwide Showing in Hundreds of Cities Begins October 26th... All Open Houses Identically Color-Styled and Furnished!
SEE LOCAL PAPER FOR DEALER ANNOUNCEMENT

National HOMES
NATIONAL HOMES CORPORATION
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA • HONOLULU, HAWAII

Colonial

Cape Cod

Contemporary

California Contemporary

1959

National HOMES

Figure 3: **Left:** 1952 advertisement for National Homes. *Life Magazine* 33, No. 17, (October 27, 1952): 143. **Right:** 1959 advertisement for National Homes. *National Homes, 1959*, (National Homes Corporation, 1959), 1, from the Collection of Floyd Mansberger, Association for Preservation Technology, Inc. Building Technology Heritage Library.

Not surprisingly considering its founder, National Homes produced its homes in a very similar fashion to Gunnison by taking advantage of ease of an assembly line of panels that could be transported to the sites of what would ultimately become a new home.

Unlike the prefabricated homes of today, these were accurately cut kits that homebuyers could either build themselves or hire a general contractor to build for them. In addition to Gunnison and National, there were a multitude of other companies that jumped on the bandwagon of kit homes. In addition to the well-known Sears kit homes, Montgomery Ward, Craftsman, Aladdin, Pennsylvania, and Standard Homes were just a few of the companies that also provided these modest affordable homes.

Based on their many years of popularity within the 20th Century, it is very likely you have either lived in a kit home or know someone that does or did at some point. There are a few ways to be able to determine if you are living in a kit home. The first step is to conduct a record (deed and permit) search. Also, if by chance you have original plumbing fixtures, look to see if they were marked with an indication of which company they came from. For instance, Sears homes were marked with an SR, or an R enclosed in a circle. Additionally, if you have exposed, original wood on your home, often this wood had marks or labels. If you do find out you live in a kit home, there is a good chance your neighbor's house is one as well. Talk to them and swap stories about your homes. You may learn a great deal more about the history of your home as well as your neighborhood!

Montgomery Ward & Co.



"The Raymond"—Materials Supplied Either Ready-Cut or Not Ready-Cut

Moderate Priced Home of Attractive Design

UNUSUALLY skillful designing has overcome, in "The Raymond," much of the monotony of appearance found in homes of moderate cost. The strikingly handsome exterior, its gracefully balanced proportions, and the exceptionally pleasing way in which each detail has been arranged, give this Wardway Home the charm and dignity of a home costing more than twice as much, if built without the benefit of Ward's experience.

The price makes a distinct appeal to all who must be careful of expenditures. No extravagance, no waste, nothing but sound common sense and good judgment is found in the exterior or interior design. It is a home economical to build, requires but very little ground space, and is easy to keep warm and comfortable during the cold months. These, added to its beautiful appearance, leave little more for the most critical and discriminating buyer to wish.

The interior has been planned with your comfort and utmost convenience constantly in mind. Every inch of floor space has been used to the greatest possible advantage. The large dining and living room which is entered from the sunny porch demonstrates this point admirably. Where some might have made two rooms of this, Wardway architects knew that you would prefer one large, well lighted and thoroughly livable room to two small, dark rooms. You will agree, after studying the accompanying floor plan, that they were right and that this large and comfortable room is one of the features which raise "The Raymond" far above other homes of its price.

A hall opening off the living room allows free access to the conveniently located bathroom, which also is handy to the two bedrooms of generous size which are found, one on each side of it, at opposite ends of the hall. A sunny closet is in each bedroom.

Large twin windows in the kitchen provide ample light and are placed so as to afford light at the sink, where it is generally most needed, without obstructing the light for the rest of the room. Steps lead down to the cellar from the kitchen.

Considering beauty of appearance, convenience of arrangement, economy to build, and low cost of heating, "The Raymond" offers as much, we believe, as any home ever seen. It furnishes an actual example—proof that cannot be contradicted—of how building a Wardway Home saves you money, now and in the years to come, and assures you satisfaction and comfort in the house itself.

See Prices on Pages 1 to 4—Specifications on Pages 10 and 11

Unless you request otherwise, we furnish for the "Raymond," deep gray paint for the body and white for the trim.

See Page 4 for cost of heating equipment, plumbing, electric wiring, storm sash, screens, and your option of Radio asphalt shingles and oak flooring and finish. Write us for suggestions and estimates on a water supply system and sewage disposal for this home.



Size of Home,
22 feet wide by 30 feet long

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Figure 4: 1924 advertisement for Montgomery Ward's "The Raymond" model. *Wardway Homes, (Montgomery Ward & Co., 1924), 82, from Association for Preservation Technology, Inc. Building Technology Heritage Library.*