

## 12,000 easy pieces

**Was your '20s house built from a kit? Many local gems came 'assembly required.'**

By Gayle Pollard-Terry, Times Staff Writer

July 16, 2006

SHORTLY after Craig and Kim Proctor moved into their Monrovia house in 1993, they discovered the original blueprints for their two-story 1926 Tudor.

Much to their surprise, they learned they were living in a house built from a kit. Craig turned to the Web and learned that the classy oak floors downstairs, the gleaming Douglas fir floors upstairs, the charming built-ins and the sconces in every room all came as part of a do-it-yourself kit ordered from a Pacific Ready-Cut Homes catalog.

"We had no idea what a Pacific Ready-Cut home was," said Kim Proctor. "We never thought it was a kit home."

Back in the 1920s, "buying stuff out of mail order was kind of the 1990s equivalent of buying stuff from the Internet," said Rosemary Thornton, who along with Dale Patrick Wolicki wrote "California's Kit Homes: A Reprint of the 1925 Pacific Ready-Cut Homes Catalog." "You've never touched it. You've never seen it. You send your money in a little brown paper envelope and somebody sends you back a house."

Thornton, who also wrote a book about Sears' mail-order homes, says that although those houses may be better known nationally, Los Angeles-based Pacific Ready-Cut Homes Inc. — once the biggest home builder in the West — dominated the pre-cut market in Southern California during the company's pre-Depression peak.

Eight decades later, many Pacific Ready-Cut houses still stand in neighborhoods as varied as Beverly Hills and South Los Angeles. From the outside, it's hard to tell that a house was built from a kit, unless, like Thornton, you're familiar with the designs in the catalog. And in most cases, not even the current owners know they are living in a kit home.

From 1908 to 1940, Pacific Ready-Cut sold 37,000 ready-to-assemble homes based on 1,800 plans, plus some custom-designed ones, as practical California bungalows replaced fancy Victorians. Although most of the company's houses were one story, it also produced two-story homes, duplexes, bungalow court apartments, hotels, gas stations and offices.

After World War I, the prefabricated housing market in Southern California really took off, Thornton said. "Returning soldiers needed a place to live, and that's when Pacific Ready-Cut Homes started making bigger, better houses."

The firm's heyday in the 1920s coincided with a spike in California's population and a booming economy that created a new generation of homeowners. At that time, the firm operated branch offices in 53 California cities, expanded nationally and also shipped kit houses to Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, Guatemala and Japan.

Locally, the homes cost anywhere from \$200 to \$25,000, which paid for everything — the framing wood as well as the kitchen sink — except assembly and, in most cases, the land. Models popular with the increasing number of working- and middle-class families settling in Southern California were the Spanish, English or Italian styles advertised at \$636 to \$2,817.

The company put up a dozen model homes at South Hill Street near Pico Boulevard in 1922 and said 80,000 people toured them that year. The sales center showed off the quality of first-growth, high-altitude Douglas fir framing, built-ins and porcelain plumbing fixtures that were sold in categories rated "good, better and best."

The next year, visitors to the South Hill Street grounds could watch a 90-minute film on how a typical Pacific Ready-Cut home was built, starting in the Northern forests, where trees were cut and sledged through snowy passes to lumber mills, shipped to San Pedro Harbor and then transported to the firm's mill on Boyle Avenue, on the edge of Slauson Boulevard in Huntington Park.

"This was a 24-acre mill," Thornton said, "and they were shipping 25 houses a day."

In 1928, before they made it big, Walt Disney and his brother Roy bought Pacific Ready-Cut houses for lots they owned on Lyric Avenue within walking distance of their studio in Silver Lake. The houses are still there.

Like the Sears houses, Pacific Ready-Cut's kit homes arrived via boxcar. The 12,000 pieces included lumber, nails, doors, windows, screens, hardware, paint and a thick instruction manual. Homeowners spent about a month building the houses with help from relatives and neighbors, or they hired a contractor and a crew to put them up in as few as five days.

Because kit houses helped to extend the American dream of homeownership beyond just the wealthy, Southern California writer and historian Mike Davis nicknamed them "democracy bungalows."

"The kind of mass-produced bungalows of the early '20s, and their variety of facades, responded to the movies and to people's fantasies about California," he said.

"In the 1920s," he added, "you had a prefabricated-home system that allowed people to choose from different varieties so you could build neighborhoods where no house looked like another, but in the post-World War II housing revolution, you had cookie-cutter houses."

Because the company, which also was one of the first to produce commercial surfboards, went out of business years ago, identifying the houses takes determination and legwork. By canvassing neighborhoods developed in the 1920s, Thornton and her co-author, Wolicki, have identified homes in Pasadena, Torrance, Claremont, Ontario, Pomona, LaVerne, Fullerton, Monrovia, Anaheim, Glendale, Santa Monica, Whittier, Highland Park, West Hollywood and Long Beach.

According to old newspaper stories announcing new sales offices, other Southern California locations for the homes included somewhere in Hollywood, Larchmont Village, South Los Angeles, Huntington Park, Studio City, Van Nuys, Burbank, Redondo Beach, Manhattan Beach, El Segundo, Hyde Park, Inglewood, Hawthorne, Lennox, Wilmington, Azusa, Bellflower, Eagle Rock, El Monte, San Pedro, Compton, Redlands, Santa Ana, San Bernardino and Riverside.

"Who knows how many of these houses are undiscovered?" Thornton said.

On a recent visit to Southern California, her third trip to the region in search of kit homes, she discovered a neighborhood of Pacific Ready-Cut homes near the La Brea Avenue off-ramp on the westbound 10 Freeway. As she rode slowly down streets off Adams and Washington boulevards, she consulted a field guide that she put together with catalogs from about five years of the company's production.

In Beverly Hills, on Carson Road north of Wilshire Boulevard, she lamented that only five out of 51 Pacific Ready-Cut high-end houses have survived in their original form. In 1923, the prices for these homes, including the land, started at \$6,100, with a down payment of \$1,250 and a monthly payment of \$45, and topped out at a \$9,250, with a down payment of \$1,850 and a monthly payment of \$75.

In South Los Angeles, on 81st Street between Figueroa and Main streets, Thornton pointed out the rows of Pacific Ready-Cut "beauties" that survived construction of the 110 Freeway.

In Monrovia on El Nido Avenue, she explored the Proctors' home, climbing up into the attic, poking through the basement, crawling under the bathroom sink in search of evidence. She watched as Kim Proctor pulled a drawer out of her built-in buffet. There was the carpenter's marking in blue grease paint, "China Closet 7556" — the same as the job number on the blueprints.

"When they were cutting all of this at the mill, they were bundling it together and scribbling 7556 so they knew which train it went on, which boxcar all the parts went on," Thornton explained.

Down the street, Kirk Nelson and Mark Fredo's completely restored Spanish-style home exactly matches an illustration, as well as the list of building supplies, in the 1925 catalog.

"We found everything in our house — our pantry, our plaster, our sink, our toilet, the hardware — everything," Nelson said. Identical elements also included a built-in mantle, bath cabinets, a linen closet, a built-in ironing board and a spice cabinet between the kitchen windows.

When they renovated the kitchen, they found the number 499 written in blue grease pencil on a wall stud. That number matches the numbered design of their house.

During Thornton's hunt in the house, they discovered the words "service door" in blue grease pencil, written on the access door to the bathroom pipes, which matched the writing on a built-in at the Proctor house down the street, more evidence of the Pacific Ready-Cut heritage.

Thornton doesn't have a 1925 price list, so she doesn't know what Nelson and Fredo's 1,369-square-foot house, with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, cost to build. However, they recently sold it for \$840,000, top dollar for the neighborhood.

"A lot of times, people assume because it is a kit home, it's an inferior home in some way. In my opinion, nothing is further from the truth," Thornton said. "They used first-rate materials, irreplaceable resources. These were men and women building homes for their families. They were meticulous and methodical in making sure that the house was perfect. They did not slap these homes together. In materials and quality craftsmanship, these homes were exemplary."

Thornton would like to see the Pacific Ready-Cut homes preserved, and a few, such as the houses in Monrovia, have received California historical landmark status, which means they can't be torn down.

"These houses are worthy of recognition," she said, and "a significant part of architectural history — particularly in Los Angeles."

\*

(INFOBOX BELOW)

### Looking for kit-home clues

Authenticating a Pacific Ready-Cut Home requires detective work. A house may match a photo in the reprinted 1925 catalog, which is available at most libraries, but that book leaves out nearly 1,700 designs. Kit-house author Rosemary Thornton suggests starting with finding neighborhoods developed in the 1920s, laid out in a grid and situated near railroad tracks. Below are some other tips from Thornton.

\*

**Stamped lumber.** Marks on framing materials, visible in attics and crawl spaces, helped the novice home builder assemble these home, she said.

**Markings in blue grease pencil.** Either the model number or the job number was used to help packers keep track of what lumber went where.

**Original documentation.** Blueprints indicate Pacific Ready-Cut Homes. Shipping labels and other authenticating paperwork are occasionally stored under the bottom shelf of built-in cabinetry or in the far reaches of the attic.

**Plumbing and electrical fixtures.** If the original fixtures are still in the home, compare them with the ones pictured in the catalog.

**Original building permits.**

If it is a kit home, the architect's name will be listed as "Pacific Kit Home" or some derivation.

**Look at the listed addresses,** illustrations and photographs included in the reprinted catalog.

**For more information,** contact the author at *ThorntonRose @hotmail.com*.

— Gayle Pollard-Terry

<http://www.latimes.com/classified/realestate/news/la-re-kit16jul16,0,7519748.story?page=1>