



**PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION MATTERS**  
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## Yes, Virginia Sears Did Sell Barns

During the years prior to 1920, the largest segment of the United States population was rural. By necessity, every pioneer became a farmer, growing crops and raising livestock for personal use. The largest building on the farm was the barn. It was used for the storage of farm products, for feed storage and to house animals.

As farming evolved towards mass produc-

tion, the need for barns grew. Companies which sold mail order housing took an interest, and began to offer agricultural buildings in their mail order catalogs. Since 1986, Sears, Roebuck's history as a supplier of precut mail order homes has received much publicity, but few people are aware that Sears also offered agricultural buildings in its catalogs. Less publicized have been the mail order farm buildings of Gordon-Van Tine, Aladdin, Montgomery Ward, and Harris Brothers, mail order firms which also sold residences.

Initially, the barns offered in most mail order catalogs were primarily sold as “plans and materials,” which meant that the buyer received a complete set of building plans and enough material to construct the building. By 1918, barns were being offered as precut buildings. The exception to this was the Aladdin Company, that offered precut barns from 1910.

Precut, or “kit” buildings were an American innovation in building technology. As far as we know today, no other country has ever marketed such buildings. All the framing elements were cut to size at the mill, labeled with identifying numbers, and shipped by rail to the buyer, along with doors, windows, millwork, roofing materials, flooring, exterior siding, paint and varnish. Catalog advertisements claim that the buyer could save up to 30% of the cost of standard construction by choosing a precut building.

Advertisement  
from HONOR  
BILT MODERN  
HOMES, Sears,  
Roebuck and Co.,  
1927.

[illegible]

Barns were offered in all the basic styles popular with farmers. The popularity of a given design can be judged by the number of models offered in each style, and by the total number of years a particular model appeared in catalogs, assuming that less commonly ordered models were soon discontinued. Most prevalent were designs for gambrel roofed barns, followed by gabled, gothic, round and polygonal barns. Therefore, in the field, we would expect to see a larger number of gambrel style barns, and fewer of the gabled, gothic, round and octagonal models.

The foundations were not included in the materials package or in the precut kits. Farmers were advised to dig the foundation down to the permanent moisture line for their region. Farmers were also told to check state laws governing foundations.

## Brief histories of companies offering barns by mail

Sears, although the best known, was not the only mail order building supplier to offer farm buildings. Of the eight major suppliers of mail order homes, five also offered agricultural buildings. Aladdin,

Gordon-Van Tine and Montgomery Wards all preceeded Sears in the marketing of agricultural buildings. In 1909, Gordon-Van Tine offered six barns and six additional agricultural buildings; Aladdin Company showed one barn in their 1910 house catalog; and in 1910, Wards offered four barns, a poultry house and a city stable. Sears joined them in 1911, followed by Harris Brothers in 1912.

Harris Brothers and Aladdin apparently abandoned the agricultural buildings market by 1919. Sears, Gordon-Van Tine and Wards went on to introduce precut barns in 1918, offering a variety of styles in varying lengths and widths. Wards discontinued their agricultural buildings by 1920, leaving Sears and Gordon-Van Tine to reign as sole suppliers of mail order barns until the early years of the Great Depression. The last known Gordon-Van Tine barns catalog is dated 1936, and the last Sears version is from 1930.

Aladdin Company, Bay City MI 1906-1982  
Aladdin Company appears to have originated the concept of the precut or “kit” home in 1906. Like their later competitors,



they also produced agricultural structures. The first Aladdin barn appeared in the 1910 house catalog, vanished and did not appear again until 1914, when the Aladdin Houses catalog shows a gambrel barn and two gable design barns, and invites the reader to send for the special catalog on Farm Buildings. In 1914 two versions of a specialty barn catalog were issued, a "blueprint" catalog and an "illustrated" catalog. In 1916 a metal Drednot barn was offered. The last specialty barn catalog was published in 1917. That year, the 1917 house catalog shows the same three Read-Cut barns as 1914. The Special Barn is 16' by 24'; the other two are offered in twenty different combinations of length and width. No barns appear in the 1918 house catalog, but in 1919 gambrel and gabled barns were offered. Aladdin appears to have had a minor role in the production of farm buildings.

#### Gordon-Van Tine, Davenport IA 1906-46

As early as 1909, Gordon-Van Tine offered plans for agricultural buildings. Included in the 1909 catalog are two round barns, three gambrel barns, one cross-gable barn, poultry houses, granary, ice house, corn crib, hog house and an implement shed. By 1912, agricultural buildings appeared in a separate catalog. Separate catalogs of agricultural buildings were published in 1918, 1923, 1926, 1929, and presumably also in the intervening years. The 1918 catalog is remarkably similar to the Sears 1918 edition in number and style of barn models, and in variety of other farm buildings. The latest Gordon-Van Tine catalog which has surfaced to date is from 1936; it is only twelve pages, and offers only five barns, five poultry houses, five hog houses and two cribs. Testimonials with photographs in house and barn catalogs reveal the locations of a some of Gordon-Van Tine barns.

#### Harris Brothers, Chicago IL 1912-31

Beginning in 1912, Harris offered a variety of agricultural buildings in their house catalogs. The 1912 catalog includes a circle barn, eight gambrel barns, a clipped gable and a cross gable barn, and a corn crib. These, plus an additional cross gable barn are also included in the 1914 and 1915 catalogs. In 1916 and 1918, readers of the housing catalog desiring information on agricultural buildings are asked to send for the special barns booklet. From 1920-28, no mention is made of agricultural buildings either in the housing catalogs or in the building materials catalogs.

#### Montgomery Ward, Chicago IL 1910-31 (Wardway Homes)

Wards, Sears biggest competitor in the mail order catalog market, was also a competitor in the market for agricultural buildings. Wards' 1910-1914 housing catalogs also offer four barns, a city stable for three horses, and a poultry house. From 1915-1916, four new barn models are offered. By 1918, barns proliferated in the Wards housing catalogs. sixteen variations of a stock barn appear, eight of these not pre-cut and eight "frame cut." Twenty versions of a gable roof barn and twenty of a gambrel barn are included, each available either frame cut or not pre-cut. The different model numbers represent different barn lengths. The 1919 catalog offers the above, plus a grain crib and poultry and hog houses. From 1922-1931, there is no mention of agricultural buildings in the housing catalogs, and to date, separate barn catalogs have not surfaced.

#### Sears Roebuck, Chicago IL 1908-40

Beginning in 1908, Sears entered the housing market with a catalog of house plans. From 1908 to 1914 Sears sold only plans, with enough material of standard sizes to construct the building. In 1915 Sears began marketing pre-cut, or kit, buildings, at the same time offering mortgage financing in hopes of attracting customers who did not have the cash to purchase buildings from competitors such as Aladdin or Gordon-Van Tine.

As early as 1911, four barn designs were added to the *Modern Homes Catalog*. By 1915, corn cribs, hog houses, chicken houses, a tool house, and a milk house were added to the line of barns. In 1918, Sears issued its first specialty Honor Bilt Modern Farm Buildings catalog, *The Book of Barns*, which featured pre-cut barns. Specialty catalogs for barns and other farm buildings continued to be published until 1929, after which time Sears appears to have discontinued selling agricultural buildings. The number of barn models offered declined from a high of twenty-six in 1918/1919 to a total of only thirteen in 1929.

#### **Locating mail order barns today**

To discover and authenticate mail order barns today is one of the great challenges for preservationists, architectural historians and researchers. In order to preserve mail order barns, they must first be located. The country's former rural areas are fast shrinking as population grows and as

cities expand into areas which once were agricultural. This expansion usually entails the demolition of any farm buildings remaining on the land to be developed. Usually, these buildings have already fallen into disrepair. Because of this, the locations of most mail order barns are not known. Only the Aladdin Company has preserved any sales records. Other than that, there are no good resources for locating large numbers of mail order barns. Testimonials published in early mail order building catalogs list the locations of a small number of barns. Usually, the only information given is the city and state to which the buildings were shipped; the actual addresses still have to be discovered.

Data do not exist to allow us to determine what percentage of all barns built from 1909-1930 were mail order barns. If we may conclude that a mail order barn was about as common as a mail order home, we may extrapolate from available data on mail order homes. Only an estimated 3% of housing starts in the 1920s are thought to be mail order homes; if the same is true for mail order barns and farm outbuildings, they are indeed rare.

#### **Authenticating mail order barns**

As is true of mail order homes, it is more difficult to authenticate structures from mail order companies which were not pre-cut. In these cases, we must rely on external appearance, interior and exterior measurements, surviving documents and oral history.

Barns which were pre-cut offer the possibility of discovering part numbers on the basic structural boards. The presence of part numbers not only proves that a structure was a pre-cut building, but also gives an indication of which company built it.

Below is the information currently known about part number location and format in homes from various mail order companies. It remains to be seen whether these data apply equally to farm buildings.

The wooden parts of a pre-cut or "kit" building were numbered in order to facilitate construction. After the structure is built, it is usually possible to see some of these numbers. Presence of part numbers constitutes proof that the house is in fact a mail order kit. The style of the numbering may be a good indicator of which company built the house. Post-construction, the



numbers are usually not visible on every board, so it may take a few minutes and a good flashlight to find one. Look on ceiling joists, attic rafters, stair risers and treads, wall studs -any visible board that has not been painted. In the case of barns, it is less likely that numbers will have been obliterated by plaster, wallboard or paint, so the chances of finding them should be increased.

SEARS part numbers are stamped on the wood in dark blue, black or gray ink. They are just over one inch high, and usually consist of a capital letter followed by one or more numerals, for example: A159, L23, C2. Rarely, the format is two numbers separated by a hyphen, for example 12-9. Very rarely, red ink was used. Numbers are usually found near the end of a board, on the wider surface. Homes built before 1915 and barns built before 1918 were not kits, and would have no part numbers.

GORDON-VAN TINE/WARDS numbers are handwritten in grease pencil, and are usually found on the middle of a board. They consist of numerals, hyphenated in groups, e.g. 47-13-19, or four or five digit numbers. Part names are stenciled in capital letters (e.g. "ceiling joist" "top rail"). Delivery address may be stenciled in ink. Homes prior to 1916 were not pre-cut.

ALADDIN, LEWIS and STERLING company numbers are handwritten in grease pencil, usually on the middle of a board. They consist of numerals, hyphenated in groups of two or three. Some of the terminal numbers are dimensional fractions, e.g. 42-18-11 3/4. Part names may be stamped in ink. These companies produced pre-cut homes from their inception, so older homes will also have numbers.

HARRIS Brothers numbers are stenciled in ink, often in the middle of a board, and may be numerals alone, or numerals and letters, or Roman numerals: E.g. 76, HR 50, RI 32 or AII. Model number and/or order number may be handwritten in grease pencil. Early homes and all barns were not pre-cut.

For additional information about mail order buildings, refer to the bibliography at [www.kithouse.org](http://www.kithouse.org).

Today, as urban areas expand, barns and other agricultural buildings are falling prey to development and disuse. Most are demolished, but some are preserved by adaptive reuse as homes or commercial enterprises. Fortunately, barn preservation groups across the country are now actively striving to identify and save significant barns. Among these will be some mail order barns, some of which can be authenticated using the information above on part numbers.

Recently, a reprint of the Sears Roebuck 1919 *Book of Barns* has been published. Editors Dale Wolicki and Rebecca Hunter hope that publication of this catalog reprint will reawaken interest in Sears barns, revive stories of their construction, and encourage owners of such buildings to carefully preserve them for the future.

Currently, efforts are underway in many states to compile listings of authenticated mail order homes from Sears and other companies. A similar effort would be valuable in order to locate as many barns as possible, before they fall prey to urban development, or are forgotten by relatives of the families who built them.

If you know of a barn or other agricultural building from Sears or any other mail order company, please notify Rebecca Hunter, P O Box 608, Elgin IL 60121, 847-697-4551 or contact her by email at [rebecalhunter@sbcglobal.net](mailto:rebecalhunter@sbcglobal.net). If possible, please provide pictures of all four sides of the building, give any known history and indicate whether part numbers were seen.

#### Barn Preservation Resources

Endersby, Elric. *Barn Preservation and Adaptation, Giving Old Barns New Life Series; Volume 3: Bibliography on Barns and Barn Preservation*. Wisconsin Historical Museum, Madison WI. 608 264-6555.

Hunter, Rebecca. *Putting Sears Homes on the Map*, R L Hunter 2004, lists 27 testimonials from barn buyers which were published in Sears Modern Homes catalogs.

Larkin, David et al. *Barn: Preservation and Adaption*, Dutch Barn Preservation Society [threeivershms.com](http://threeivershms.com)

#### Illinois Barn Preservation Associations

Preservation Coordinator, Save Our Barns Committee, 328 S Douglas Ave, Springfield IL 62704.

McHenry County Historical Barn Preservation Society.

For other states, contact the State Historic Preservation Office and/or the Cooperative Extension Office. Some counties may also have barn preservation organizations

Architectural historian and researcher Rebecca Hunter focuses her research on mail order buildings from 1906-1946. She is available to carry out surveys to locate these buildings, to lecture, or to give workshops on how to locate and authenticate mail order buildings.

## P.A.C.A. MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

### MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY

- ☐ Adult \$15
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- ☐ Senior Citizen \$10
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- ☐ Corporate \$75

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MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO PACA

### TYPE

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- ☐ Renewal \_\_\_\_\_

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217 359 7222

### INFORMATION:

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

## Heritage Fund Grant Awarded

Landmarks Illinois (formerly Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, LPCI) awarded PACA a \$5,000 matching grant toward the Solon House roof project. This grant was matched with a \$5,000 donation from an anonymous donor.

PACA is in the process of repairing the gutters and eaves on the house, prior to the installation of a metal standing seam roof. Carpenter Dave Landes and crew have run into many "mushroom" factors in this project from additional deteriorated eave sections to unstable masonry. Such factors have increased costs, so these additional funds are a timely gift. Once the underlying structure is repaired, Bash/Pepper Roofing will install the roof. Lightening protection will be the last step.

A special PACA members-only open house is planned for this fall, prior to a general public open house. Invitations will be sent to all members in good standing. A public open house will be held later and the house will then be put on the market.

## SAVE THE DATE!

**Mount Hope Cemetery  
Walking Tour  
October 7  
1-4 pm**

**presentations by the C-U  
Theatre Company**

**volunteers needed**

## Salvage VIP's

Rich Cahill	Mike Morford
Bob Swisher	Zach Tammen
Brian Duffield	Ross Tenczar
Neil Lasater	Betty Swisher
Jerry Schmidt	Darrel Foste
Mike Richards	Mike Miller
Lee Stoops	Samantha Malloy
Bob Craft	Christopher Foste
Dan Leasure	
Suzanne Ashley-Wannemuehler	

## Salvage Donations

Dick Newman  
James Lindenburger  
Dorothea Blue  
Anonymous  
Chris Hill  
Hadley & Chase Phillips  
Meurlot Family  
Tony Blanck  
Bill Ritter

## New & Renewing Memberships

(received since the last newsletter)

### Charter Members (1981-1983)

Louisette Zuidema

### Fantastic Supporters (Over Twenty Year Members)

Elizabeth Rogers  
Melanie & Chris Hill  
Glenna M. Bartell

### Eleven to Twenty Year Members

Joe & Phyllis Williams  
Andrew B. White family  
Richard Cahill  
Mark Netter  
Lianne Anderson  
Michael & Bonnie Irwin  
Robert & Sarah Nemeth  
Anthony Bamert & November Walker

Dan & Kim Wurl  
Solberg/Seyler family  
Cheryl Kennedy

### Five to Ten Year Members

Dorothea Blue  
Robert Selby  
Anna Barnes & David Riecks  
Charlotte & Ronald Hampton  
Karen Werth  
John & Carol Leasure  
Nanette Koerner  
Wes Jarrell & Leslie Cooperband  
Christine S. Fucciolo  
Alan & Kristine Chalifoux  
Ginny Sims & Janice Lines  
Elisabeth Jenicek & Michael Clewley, Jr.  
Nancy Uchtmann

### One to Four Year Members

Joan & Bill Price  
Ray Bement  
Kate Hunter & Jens Sandberger  
Maureen Reagan  
Susan & Chris Harbourt  
Stephen Campbell & Heather Munson  
Russ Arnold  
Doug Anderson

### New Members

Eileen Hamer  
Michael Lindeman  
Michael Ladue  
Vince & Wanda Hock  
Mary Yarbrough  
Stacy Harwood  
Jason Knauff family

*Remember to check your mailing label for your membership renewal date. The date shown indicates when you last renewed; membership runs for one year from that date.*

Preservation Matters: newsletter of the  
Preservation and Conservation Association  
P.O. Box 2575, Station A, Champaign, IL 61825

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**Preservation makes history live in the present.**