

THE AUTO HOUSE

"Early Automobile Shelters"

WRITTEN BY ROBERT SCHWEITZER

In the latter part of the 1890s, and especially the first few years of the 20th century, Americans discovered the freedom of the open road through the new technology of the automobile. This transportation revolution person-

alized travel as never before. Throughout the latter part of the Victorian age, the development of light-rail interurban lines had helped families reach the country and seaside with greater speed and convenience. It, along with the

trolley, transported workers in vast numbers to factories and office buildings in urban centers. It allowed the cities to expand at a rate unknown in human history. People could now live miles from their place of employment



Cover of the Sears Roebuck *Simplex Sectional Garage* catalog. During this period color reproduction was difficult and costly and not many houses were advertised in color. To show a garage this way highlighted its importance in the company's product line.

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and yet quickly reach work in comfort and safety within minutes just by taking the trolley.

With the introduction of the automobile in the 1890s, all the means of transport expanded at a faster pace. People could now make their own travel schedule. Evenings and weekends became times to "hop in the car and go for a ride." Owning an automobile became a symbol of status and affluence. Hundreds of thousands of these newfangled vehicles worked their way into every neighborhood in the nation in a very short time. The problem that then arose was: where to store them? Most people had no buildings in which to place their new autos. Most families boarded their horses at a common livery, some of the more wealthy owned carriage barns. But no one owned auto storage facilities. With typical Yankee ingenuity the "Auto House" or "Garage" was born!

Beginning in the mid-19th century, architectural pattern books offered plans for carriage barns. These large buildings were usually constructed at the back of suburban or country lots. They were frequently two floors with elaborate detailing to match the pre-

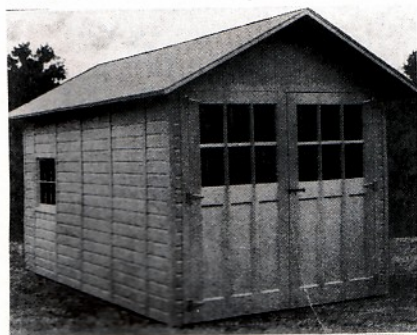


Fig. 1 Close-to-Nature company's sectional garage. These are easily identifiable by the tell-tale vertical boards or seams every three to six feet. This model "A" came in six sizes ranging from 9' x 12' to 12' x 12' and ranging in price from \$175 to \$300.

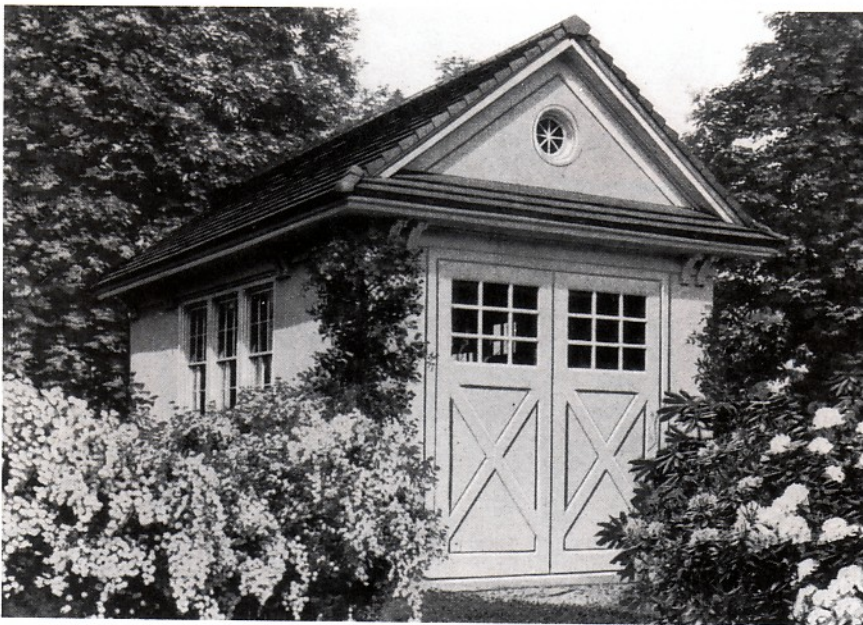


Fig. 2 Colonial style Auto House by NATCO built in West Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Architect C.E. Schermerhorn used hollow tile bricks to craft this picturesque structure. It contained six windows, a classic gable with circle window and brackets under the eaves. These upper-crust garages often reflected the architectural style of the main house.

vailing architectural style of the period (Gothic, Italianate, Queen Anne, etc.) The ground floor contained storage facilities for the wagons and carriages of the family and space for the horses. The upper floor contained horse food storage and rooms for servants. These utility buildings remained popular throughout the 19th century. The main problem they presented for auto storage was that their entry doors and ceiling height were not designed for the upright dimensions of the car. Most autos simply would not fit into them.

When the automobile became widely popular people had to have a place to store and service them. Early cars were "canvas topped," semi-open, more akin to a carriage, so the elements could easily damage the interiors. Likewise, these autos required a great deal of tinkering to make them perform in a reliable manner. A dry warm building was a must. During the early years of this century the general reasons for needing a garage were:

Cost savings: not having to board your car at a livery blocks from your home, which could cost \$10-15 a month. **Fireproofing:** cars dropped oil and gasoline, fires were common and insurance expensive for wooden build-

ings used to house them. **Convenience:** having the ability to work on your car when you wanted and having it close to your home. **Shelter:** many owners did not have the luxury of off-site storage for their cars. Autos left out in the open rusted and generally deteriorated rapidly. **Additional Storage:** people quickly learned that the garage was a wonderful place to store extra items.

An enormous need for a new type of

building grew in America. That need was filled in a variety of ways. Some of the initial garages were sectional buildings, panels bolted together to form a box-like shelter. This type of structure was pioneered in the 1840s, used during the Civil War, and by the railroads in the 1870s. The Close-to-Nature Company of Colfax, Iowa was one of the first to offer this type of garage configuration (Fig. 1). Simple and inexpensive, it sold to those who were trying out the idea of an automobile as a transportation alternative. Large wooden panels that were three or six feet wide were assembled into cottages, play houses, bungalows, and garages.

More permanent structures were offered by companies like NATCO (National Fire-Proofing Company) of Pittsburgh. These were made of hollow core tile blocks (12" x 5") and could be constructed like any masonry house. They were favored by the more well-to-do who had larger, more luxurious cars and wanted the safety of a permanent building to house them. These garages were stylish with colonial details, fancy gables and brackets (Fig. 2). NATCO even offered a two-car model for the wealthy suburban family, or for neighbors who wanted to share the storage in one building. In advertising these auto houses it was pointed out that they were, by design, permanent, attractive,

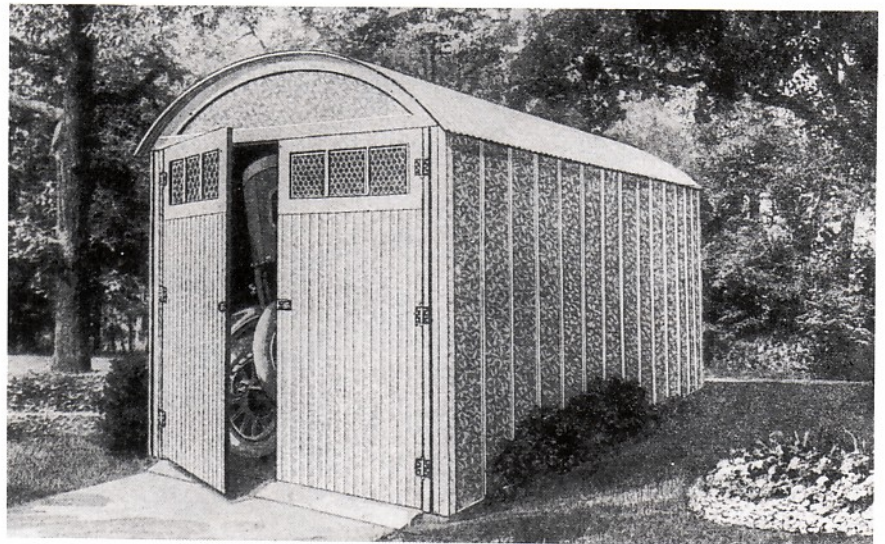


Fig. 3 All Steel Monitor garage from Sears, Roebuck. The company used 26 gauge heavy galvanized metal for its guaranteed indestructible, fireproof, storm-proof model. Early auto houses came in wood, tile, and metal varieties from hundreds of sources.

and fireproof. They were dry and provided a good place to service the vehicle. They could be easily expanded and could be built quickly. The blocks could be color glazed or covered in stucco.

If swiftness of assembly was a primary concern then companies like Aladdin and Sears had the answer. A demonstration of the assembly of a Sears' Simplex Sectional Garage took only 5 hours and 45 minutes (Fig. 3). This fact was even confirmed by an affidavit signed by a notary. Both these companies had a ready-made market for garages through their ready-cut house business. Home builders could purchase the house and the garage from one company in the same order. They both were delivered by train with complete assembly instructions. Some cases have been documented where the family built the garage first, lived in it, and then finished the house. Aladdin had specific model garages for specific car lines. Their "Ford" model was designed for all cars in the Detroit automaker's line (Fig. 4). Most models were made of wood with prenumbered,

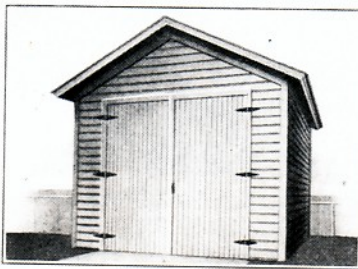


Fig. 5 Advertisement for the Sears Simplex Sectional Garage showing that it could be assembled in less than six hours. Sears offered kits for wood and metal auto houses well into the 1920s.

precut parts just like their houses. They even came in colors to match the house. Most Aladdin house catalogs contained one or two pages of garage listings near the rear of the pamphlet.

POPULAR ALADDIN GARAGES

Aladdin Garages are staunchly built of the same splendid grades of material entering into the construction of our dwellings. Quick shipment, simply and easily erected, paints of colors to match your house included. Walls and roof furnished in metal at same price.

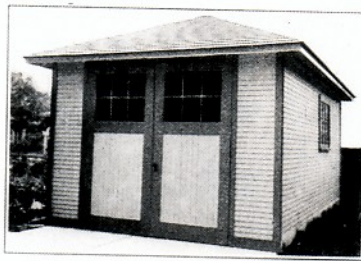


THE FORD

Size, 8 x 14 ft. Price includes everything cut to fit, either wood or metal. Net Price, \$68. No Discount.
Size, 10x16 ft. Net Price, \$88. No Discount.

POSITIVELY the lowest-priced auto garage on the market. Doors will admit Ford or any other auto of same size with top raised. Can be built in one day by unskilled labor. All material sent cut to fit with complete instructions.

Size of garage, 8 x 14 ft., rafters, 2 x 4 in., roof sheathing, 1/2 in., siding, 3/4 in., tongued and grooved, shingles or prepared roofing for roof, doors, 7 ft. 4 in. wide, 7 ft. high. Hardware, paint for two coats, any color desired.



THE WINTON

Size, 12 x 20 ft. Price complete, either wood or metal, \$130. Cash Discount, 5%. Net Price, \$123.50. See Terms on Page 2.

THE Winton will take the largest car on the market, with ample room at sides for working about car and for supplies. It has swinging glass doors and one window on each side. It is of a splendid type and always looks good wherever it may be erected. Painted to match your house. See general summer cottage specifications, page 105.

ALADDIN

Read carefully pages 2-10, 101, and 127 of this catalog

READI-CUT

Fig. 4 Page from an Aladdin Readi-Cut Homes catalog showing two of their garage offerings. The Bay City, Michigan company sold kit houses, garages, and barns. Some of the garages were designed for a specific line of autos such as the Ford line or the Maxwell or the Packard.

Sears, Roebuck also sold garages in their Modern Homes catalog, but they also issued a special garage catalog. Complete with a color cover, it extolled the virtues of their complete auto house line. Their less expensive models started around \$110, while the larger two-car models cost three to four times as much. These garages were outfitted with a special siding that was guaranteed to hold its color for 15 years. The doors on these new garages did not fold up into the ceiling as they do today but rolled to the side on tracks or folded like a modern bi-fold closet door. Sears noted that if you rented garage space at the livery at the going rate of \$10-15 a month their garage would pay for itself in less than two years. Sears offered Simplex paneled models, ready-cut kit garages, and metal units as well (Fig. 5). The metal kits advertised that they required no soldering or riveting, but could simply be bolted together with the use of only a small number of tools. All models from both Sears and Aladdin were fully guaranteed for quality and durability. Tens of thousands of them were sold in the first three decades of this century. An advertisement from Harris Brothers of Chicago just after World War I noted that they distributed over 10,000 garages in the metropolitan area.

Ninety years ago the Auto House was new, different, and unusual. Today they are always called garages, they come attached to the home, and they are as a part of modern life as the family room and the kitchen. Few of these old-fashioned buildings survive. Those that do deserve the identification preservation efforts have afforded carriage barns.

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