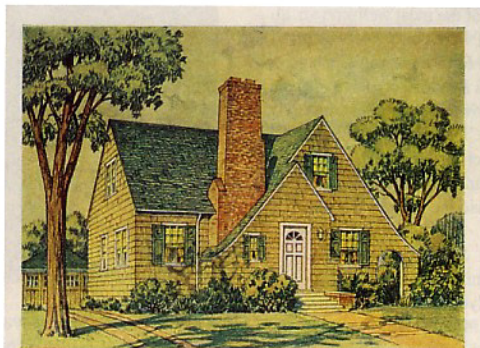


The House That Lewis Built

For fifty-nine years Bay City's Lewis Manufacturing Company built ready-cut homes and sold them by mail.

I Save You \$300 to \$1000 On Your Home," boasted Thomas Dixon, president of the Lewis Manufacturing Company, on the cover of the company's 1929 Liberty Homes catalog (opposite). Fifteen years earlier the Bay City, Michigan, company had established its own ready-cut-home business after over thirty years of producing "lumber, ceiling, flooring, siding, and door and window frames." The 1914 Lewis catalog was impressive by industry standards of the day, offering illustrations of 105 models ranging in price from \$300 for the front-gabled bungalow Mecca to \$2,620 for the gracious Tudor Revival Stratford. Calling itself the manufacturer of "'Easy Built' homes," Lewis's kits supplied its customers with building plans, pre-cut lumber and many pre-assembled pieces.

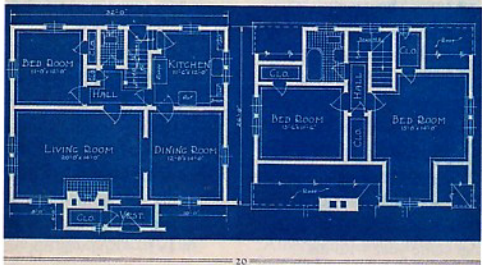
Throughout America's housing history, people have made use of prefabricated and preconstructed structures. For centuries Plains Indians used tepees as a means of portable housing. The earliest known example of colonial prefabricated housing was the



The ST. REGIS—A Home of Tasteful Design and Roomy Interior

In this popular home, the St. Regis, we are proud to offer the very latest style of home, from the standpoint of exterior design as well as interior arrangement. A delightful balanced effect is given by the sweeping lines of the roof which extends down just the chimney on one side and over a trifled archedway on the other side, giving

it a total footage of 75 feet. The exterior may either be shingled, as shown above, or finished with wide siding. Notice how large and pleasant the rooms are and how conveniently they are arranged. Height of ceilings: first floor 8'6", second floor 8'0". See detailed specifications beginning on page 40.



Photos: Robert Schwartz unless otherwise noted

The St. Regis home (above), a modestly priced Tudor Cottage, was first offered during the 1930s as part of Lewis's efforts to downsize their larger models.

residences since most permanent homes were built in a post-and-beam or balloon-frame fashion. Some examples do exist

"great house" of Edward Winslow, who shipped the building from England to Cape Ann, Massachusetts, in 1624 to provide housing for a fishing fleet. Throughout America's great western migration, pioneers used flatboats and wagons to travel westward, then utilized the lumber from their vehicles and vessels to construct new homes. In Hawaii, missionaries and traders arranged for structures to be shipped from the mainland, like Honolulu's Old Mission Home, which arrived from Boston on Christmas Day 1820.

In the 1850s Cincinnati companies shipped sectional buildings via flatboats on the Ohio River to western settlements. Boston's Skillings and Flint Company supplied the Union Army with portable field buildings during the Civil War. During the late 1880s until well into the twentieth century companies like the Mershon & Morley Company of Saginaw, Michigan, sold summer cottages and hunting lodges in portable or kit form.

Most of the early "kit" houses were not primary

of nineteenth-century attempts to provide complete house packages. George Palliser of Connecticut began selling house plans with material specifications by mail in 1876.

The establishment of rural free delivery in 1896 and the expansion of the railroad network took the "kit" house business out of the realm of the curious and into the commonplace. By the 1920s thousands of prefabricated homes were shipped to all parts of the country and overseas. The Aladdin Company of Bay City supplied several blocks of worker housing for Austin Motor Works employees in Birmingham, England, and also shipped houses to Tahiti and Africa.

Aladdin, which was founded in 1906, was one of seven major kit-house companies. Two of the most well-known, although not necessarily the largest, were Sears Roebuck and Company and Montgomery Ward & Company of Chicago, Illinois. They were joined by Harris Brothers of Chicago and Gordon-Van Tine of Davenport, Iowa. The two remaining companies, both centered in Bay City, made up the bulk of the kit-house industry: Sterling Homes, which first offered kit houses in 1916, and the Lewis Manufacturing Company, which produced the Lewis-built and the Liberty Homes.

The history of the Lewis Manufacturing Company began in 1881, when John W. Hyde and William H. Trombley moved a lumber-planing mill from nearby Kawkawlin to Water and Twelfth Streets in Bay City, where they began manufacturing sashes, doors and blinds. George H. Merrill and William M. Campbell took over the mill in 1883. Two years later George Lewis and Albert Miller of Miller & Lewis bought it. Lewis, a prominent Bay City businessman, also served as the Bay City Bank president from 1881 to 1886 and participated in the Joseph Turner & Company, another Bay City lumber firm.

In 1889 Lewis expanded his lumber holdings with an investment in the G. H. Merrill & Company, which owned a mill at the corner of Twenty-third Street and the Pere Marquette Railroad. The site eventually became the permanent address of the Lewis Manufacturing Company.

Adna G. Lewis, George's son, first worked as a bookkeeper with Miller & Lewis in 1889. By 1893 he was a clerk at the G. H. Merrill & Company. (George probably wanted his son to gain financial experience in various aspects of his empire.) Lewis also formed a partnership that same year with his second son, George H. Lewis. Their firm, George Lewis & Son, was listed in *The Bay City Directory* as a real-estate and lumber business.

In 1895 George Lewis incorporated the Lewis Manufacturing Company, a business that initially supplied a wide range of lumber products. His wife, Frances, and two of his sons, Adna and George H., were listed as the firm's principals.

In 1901 two events seriously affected the company: the Lewis plant burned to the ground and the elder George Lewis died. By 1906 Adna Lewis had become the firm's manager and Frank, another of George's sons, served as vice president.



Dale Walicki and the Bay County Historical Society

(George H. may have moved out of town and on to other ventures by then.) The Lewis Manufacturing Company, as both a retail and wholesale company, now manufactured and sold "lumber, sash, doors, and interior finish, lath and shingles."

Adna Lewis's prominence in the Bay City business community received another boost when the North American Construction Company, headed by William J. and Otto E. Sovereign, contracted with Lewis Manufacturing to make its Aladdin knocked-down houses in 1907. Thus, the earliest homes sold by Aladdin, the first and largest of the kit-house companies, were actually manufactured by Lewis.

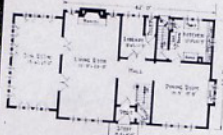
By 1909 Adna had become president of Lewis Manufacturing. Frank continued as the vice president from his residence in Portland, Oregon. Gansser's 1905 *History of Bay County, Michigan*, noted that the Lewis Manufacturing Company was "one of the city's most flourishing industries." Adna married Gertrude L. Layton of Bay City and together they had two children, George Merrill and Gertrude.

In 1910 Adna was appointed vice president of North American Construction. The company's secretary, Fred C. Westover, also served as secretary of Lewis Manufacturing, further strengthening the ties between the two firms. Aladdin's 1910 address was Lafayette Avenue and the Pere Marquette Railroad, the site of the Lewis plant since 1896.

Aladdin's house kits proved extremely successful. Orders poured in from all across the country. The Aladdin contract helped Lewis's business expand considerably. To keep up with demand from the Sovereign brothers, Adna purchased a controlling interest in Sheldon-Kamm & Company, an interior-finishing firm, in 1910. The Lewis enterprise then



The MARLBORO



THE distinctive colonial characteristics embodied in the design of the "Marlboro" are exceptionally impressive. It is a home that lends itself admirably well to artistic landscape effects. Once seen it is never to be forgotten.

Illustrate plan with picture for a party and larger house.

And the completeness of the interior has not been sacrificed in order to obtain its rich exterior beauty.

The huge living room will be a constant source of pride and comfort. Imagine the pleasure of entertaining in a home like this.



Dubbed the suburban dream home, the Dutch Colonial Marlboro model was designed to look comfortable rather than imposing (note the sun porch and second-floor deck on the left side of the house). Examples of this 1920s four-bedroom home still stand in Bay City, Caro and Holland, Michigan.

encompassed two plants, the original at Lafayette and the Pere Marquette Railroad intersection (Plant No. 2) and the Sheldon-Kamm yard at Center and Livingston Streets (Plant No. 1). In 1911 Aladdin moved its offices from the Lewis plant site to the third floor of the Bay City Bank building. This change of location provided the first indication that the Sovereign brothers may have wanted to limit the degree of control that Adna Lewis exercised in their firm. In 1914 Aladdin broke its contract with Lewis Manufacturing and took its milling business to William D. Young & Company, whose principal founded International Mill and Timber in 1916, later known as the Sterling Ready-Cut House Company.

Despite the severing of relations with Aladdin, the Lewis Manufacturing Company enjoyed a banner year in 1914. The company released its first ready-cut-home catalog, plunging into the national kit-house market with its 105 different models and a wide range of prices. The catalog showed evidence of its prior seven-year association with Aladdin in its sophisticated marketing techniques and the similarities between several of the models.

The publication boasted a board of supervisors, similar to Aladdin's Board of Seven, who subjected architects' designs to the "acid test" of practicality. The catalog also guaranteed that the customer would receive materials or cash, "at the option of the company," if the firm failed to fulfill its obligations. It touted the "Great Advantages of the Lewis-Built Way," promising that customers would save up to 40 percent on labor costs and 30 percent on materials; that, along with a

guaranteed price at the time of purchase, the customer would receive free house plans; that the highest quality materials would be shipped; and that one-third of the construction time could be saved. Lewis also sold kits for garages, schoolhouses and barns.

With its ready-cut-home business underway, Lewis expanded its plant. Its Sheldon-Kamm operation at the corner of Center and Livingston Streets became a separate corporation and was renamed Westover-Kamm. The firm provided high-quality interior-finishing products to such customers as General Motors and the Cranbrook schools until 1972. Adna Lewis remained president of Westover-Kamm after the company separated from Lewis in 1914. Also serving on the board were Michael Kamm, vice president; Norris Wentworth, treasurer; and Fred C. Westover, secretary and manager. The complex relationship between the Bay City lumber firms at that time continued with Westover's terms as secretary of Lewis Manufacturing in 1914 and as secretary of North American Construction in 1910. The Lewis 1914 Westover model home was named for him, and he lived in the original Westover in Bay City.

During World War I Lewis interrupted its residential ready-cut-home business to meet war needs. The Lafayette Avenue plant made portable buildings for the Knights of Columbus, the YMCA and other service organizations. The firm also constructed waterproof boxes to ship airplanes to Europe.

The only Lewis Company records known to have survived are a collection of fifty file cards dating from 1918 to 1920 (located at the Bay Country Historical Society). Although it is unlikely that the cards represent all of the Lewis homes sold

during this three-year period, an analysis of the geographical information does yield some interesting information.

The largest number of homes, 163 of 550, was sold in Michigan; 116 units were shipped to Ohio, 62 to New York and 52 to Pennsylvania. Of the 163 homes mailed to Michigan addresses, 84 were purchased by Flint residents and 17 went to Detroit. Sales were concentrated in twenty-eight states, the bulk of which were in the Midwest and mid-Atlantic regions. A few homes were sold elsewhere: 4 in Florida, 3 each in Oklahoma and Nebraska, 2 in Montana and 1 each in California and Oregon. In Michigan 3 units were sent to the Jackson State Prison. Other companies that bought Lewis homes included Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio; Crawford & Zimmerman of Flint, Michigan; Allegheny Ore & Iron Company of Buena Vista, Virginia; Ivy Branch Coal Company of Charleston, West Virginia; and Phoenix Refining of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Adna Lewis's involvement in the Lewis Manufacturing Company ended in 1920. Whether this came about because of his death or because he was bought out by John C. Ross and Norris R. Wentworth, who became the company's president and vice president, respectively, is not known. Ross had been listed as vice president of Lewis in the 1910 *Bay City Directory*. He was also a partner in the Ross & Wentworth lumber firm in 1914 and vice president and treasurer of the German-American Sugar Company in 1916.

By 1920 Thomas P. Dixon had become an important figure in the Lewis Manufacturing Company. Born in Wales, Dixon worked in an Ontario, Canada, lumber mill as the financial manager. He joined Lewis management in the late 1910s, climbed the ladder to general manager by 1920 and continued to run the company until 1961, when his son Richard succeeded him.

During the 1920s Lewis maintained its retail-lumber concern as well as its ready-cut plant at the Lafayette and Pere Marquette Railroad location. A 1920 advertisement described the firm as makers of "Lewis-Built Homes and Retailers of Lumber." Retail-lumber sales were an essential part of the Lewis business until 1955, when the company decided to focus solely on its ready-cut activities.

The Lewis catalogs of the 1920s continued to feature the labor-cost savings of earlier catalogs. The 1920 Lewis Homes catalog, offering ninety-six models, guaranteed "direct to you, cut costs in two."

Testimonial letters from happy customers and the company bank's name were also printed to lend credibility to Lewis products and services. Clients were offered a number of payment options, including a 2-percent discount if payment accompanied the order. Customers could also choose to pay one-third of the amount at the time they ordered and the balance when the materials were received. By 1925 the catalog offered a testimonial program that encouraged customers to visit Lewis models in their community. Rising



concerns about the ability of ready-cut homes to meet building codes were answered with, "Each Lewis Home is so designed and constructed as to pass the requirement of the most rigid code."

In 1924 a fire destroyed the Lafayette Street millwork yards. A replacement fifty-thousand-square-foot building was erected on the same site, "completely equipped with the most modern electrically operated wood-working machinery." During the mid-1920s the company also revamped its marketing program by changing the name of its catalogs to *Liberty Homes*. Sales increased and remained strong until 1929. A 1929 *Bay City Times* article, written only weeks after the stock-market crash, tried lifting spirits by publishing Lewis sales statistics. The company was reported to have shipped eight thousand homes to "customers in all parts of the country" since its inception and was reported to have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in national advertising in the last sixteen years. Shortly after its entry into the ready-cut-housing market, Lewis, like Aladdin and Sterling, advertised in many popular magazines.

When the stock market crashed in 1929, Thomas Dixon bought the Lewis Manufacturing Company from President John Ross and Secretary Norris Wentworth for a modest



Carefully Planned FOR CONVENIENCE AND COMFORT

Everything Figured Out for You in Advance— to Save Time and Labor

IN THE Liberty System of home building, nothing is left to chance. Every construction detail is figured out by our architects in advance, so that when the house is shipped to you, every piece of lumber is cut the right length and at the correct angle to fit properly. Consequently, when the work of erection is completed, you have a house that stands four square—with walls straight and plumb, and every detail of its construction carried out exactly as called for in the plans.

Even though you were to pay an architect several hundred dollars to design your home, you could have no home more solidly and substantially constructed than a Liberty.

The construction of Liberty Homes is carried out in strict accordance with the best modern engineering practice and will fully meet the requirements in practically all localities.

If, however, there should be any change from standard construction that your local when requested, to provide for such changes and furnish the materials accordingly, charging only for the extra material, if any, that may be needed.

One of the advantages of ordering a ready-cut kit home was that many of the difficult pieces were already assembled (center). Even kitchens (left) were "carefully planned for convenience and comfort."

amount. He presided over the company during the Depression, as national housing sales plummeted. Lewis discontinued its larger, more ornate models and introduced smaller plans with less detail and simple colonial designs. The company tried to ease the financial blow to its workers by paying them as little as fifteen to twenty-five dollars per week without laying them off.

The 1930s *Liberty Homes* catalogs offered models ranging from a \$660 Cape Cod Castlewood to a \$1,652 Tudor Cottage St. Regis. The plans reflected the trend towards downsized housing. In addition to the payment options offered during the 1920s, the 1930s catalogs added a Three-Year Monthly Payment Plan to appeal to Depression-era customers. Testimonial letters from satisfied customers made claims of having saved up to two thousand dollars, an impressive amount in an era when the average American home cost under eight thousand dollars.

As the nation began recovering from the Depression, kit-home orders increased again. A 1937 *Bay City Times* article reported "the company [since 1914] has manufactured and shipped upwards of 10,000 homes to all sections of the country, as well as to many foreign countries."

When America entered World War II in late 1941, Bay

City's three ready-cut firms discontinued home sales and undertook government contracts to assist with the war effort. Lewis was awarded a contract by the War Department's Detroit Engineers to produce prefabricated huts for use in Alameda County.

When two-by-fours and two-by-sixes were nearly impossible to buy due to war allocations, Production Manager E. C. Weller was able to procure huge, uncut Douglas-fir timbers from the West Coast through Matt Greenberg, a Bay City lumber wholesaler. Upon arrival, the gigantic timbers, green and rough-sawn when shipped to Lewis, were cut by the company's huge band saws into the desired dimensions. The boards were then dried in the yard. Although this was a monumental task, the company was able to stay in business during the war, thanks to Greenberg's resourcefulness.

From 1938 until the end of World War II, the National Plan Service of Minneapolis began designing the Liberty homes. The company returned to its own designs after the war. The *Low Cost Homes*, *Select Homes* and subsequent catalogs featured groups of models with names that began with the

same letter of the alphabet. For example, *Select Homes* offered Cape Cod and composite Tudors named the Elean, the Extol and the Erin while *Low Cost Homes* presented the Overton, the Ogden and the Owens.

The 1949 *Liberty Homes* catalog closely resembled the 1937 publication, although costs had increased significantly, reflecting postwar inflation. The Richmond model soared from \$1,544 in 1937 to \$3,595 in 1949. The same five payment plans were offered in the 1949 catalog, except "temporarily discontinued" was printed across the Three-Year Monthly Payment Plan. Eighteen of the thirty-nine model offerings were identical to those featured twelve years earlier.

During the 1950s the Lewis Company continued emphasizing quality control and customer satisfaction. Great care was taken to stock and ship materials of the highest quality. When a customer order was received, it was processed by a salesperson, who then maintained contact with the customer throughout the order, delivery and building process, thereby minimizing client problems and dissatisfaction. Complaints were immediately addressed by the salesperson.

Once the order was processed and any changes were made on the model blueprints, two sets of bills were issued: one for the cutting department and the other for the loading department. The bills were sent to the main plant, where the studs, floor joists, moldings and other large structural pieces were cut on the first floor. The windows, doors and interior- and exterior-trim pieces were cut on the second floor by expert craftsmen. Once it was cut and marked, the structural lumber was carted to the marshaling area, where the trim pieces from the second floor arrived by elevator.

To ensure quality control the shipper referred to a multi-page materials list and checked off each component as it was loaded, from the floor joists to the floor system to the ceiling. The plant produced two houses a day and guaranteed delivery within two weeks. Lewis traditionally manufactured its own windows, doors and trim materials, but as the aging wood masters retired, the company found it was cheaper to buy trim by the carload from California, Arkansas and St. Louis, Missouri, mills. These precut and prepackaged windows and door trim were loaded on a railroad car or a truck with the Lewis-cut components. Fifty percent of all orders were still delivered by rail during the 1950s, unlike Aladdin, which began shifting more towards tractor trailers.

In 1955 President Dixon discontinued retail lumber sales so that the company could concentrate exclusively on Liberty kit homes. The plant had grown to an eight-block-square section of its South End site and employed 140 people during its May to September peak season. A 1957 *Bay City Times* article claimed that "almost a million persons have accepted Liberty homes for their housing," an exaggeration of the thirty thousand customers reported in a 1962 article. Even if the homes built with lumber from the Lewis retail operation are

Dale Wolinski and the Bay County Historical Society



included, the one million figure seems excessive. It is worth noting that between 500,000 and 750,000 kit homes were produced altogether by the larger firms from 1900 to 1960.

In the early 1960s many of the Lewis executives retired and were replaced by their sons. In 1961 Richard V. Dixon replaced his father, Thomas, as company president and treasurer. Donald J. Massnick became vice president and secretary when his father, George, retired. Robert J. Haverkamp became director of the architecture department and Thomas G. Weller became the production supervisor when their fathers retired. In 1963, when Donald Massnick resigned to join the Dow Chemical Company, Edward B. Randall was appointed vice president; Thomas Weller was promoted to mill supervisor, resigning one year later to start a truss-manufacturing business; and Dick Schultz was placed in charge of the new Builder-Dealer Program, with the hope that it would stimulate sales in a declining market.

In 1962 Lewis's new merchandising policy employed dealers at the local level in its Builder-Dealer Program, with seventy-five representatives in Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, New York and Michigan. Builder-dealers attended annual meetings held in Bay City to recognize outstanding service and thereby stimulate sales. Richard Dixon announced at the 1966 annual meeting that 1965 sales had increased substantially. He also introduced a new series of duplex and apartment units. The company was clearly attempting to meet new housing needs in a difficult economic environment.

In the early 1960s Lewis brought out a line of prefabricated leisure vacation homes, offering a seven-year financing program for up to \$5,000. The Chalet, Sportsman and Catalina



The MALVERN



HOSPITALITY breathes from the massive contour and big, inviting porch of the Malvern. The good looking dormer harmonizes closely with the unusually shaped porch roof, and siding to the belt course with shingles above allows a pleasant color scheme.

The Malvern's square shape, called "four square" by architects, was easier to build and came with a smaller price tag. Although the popular Lewis model was standardized to keep costs low, creative owners personalized their four-bedroom homes to suit their tastes. Malverns standing today reflect styles as diverse as Prairie, Tudor and Japanese fashions.

A-frame models ranged in price from \$748 to \$2,315. Descriptions of the homes were printed on single, unbound sheets of paper and delivered to the customer in large envelopes, evidence of tough times and cost-cutting measures. During the 1960s annual sales dropped to no more than 150 homes.

On 15 November 1972 the Bay City Bank & Trust brought suit against Lewis Manufacturing Company, asserting that the company missed paying a \$131,602 mortgage dating from 1967. On 27 November 1972 Judge Leon R. Dardas appointed Bay City Bank & Trust the receiver of the company's real estate. Six months later the judge issued a foreclosure on Lewis. The bank bought the firm's assets for \$192,009 on 15 August 1973. The buildings at the intersection of Lafayette and the Pere Marquette Railroad remained empty until they were razed in 1985.

Although the inability to adapt an aging plant to modern industrial needs may have contributed to Lewis Manufacturing Company's 1973 bankruptcy, various other factors may have also played a strong role in the failure of all three Bay City ready-cut firms. Following World War II, conventional, balloon-frame construction—where the house was built on site from scratch—remained the norm. Precuts offered a cost-effective alternative to conventional construction because of the efficiencies of factory construction and cheaper and quicker erection at the site.

In recent years, however, innovations in house-building technology have made precut construction for standard American house forms, such as ranches and colonials, a less

cost-effective alternative. Mobile homes rapidly grew in popularity as an alternative for relatively inexpensive housing. Panelized or component construction, which represented greater ease of construction over ready-cut kit homes, took an increasing share of the new housing-construction market. Modular and sectional houses, which arrived from the factory to the site nearly complete, represented even stronger competition. The prefabricated-kit industry has survived and even thrives, but log houses, A-frames, round houses and post-and-beam houses are the heart of its business today.

While older kit-house firms like Lewis and Aladdin no longer exist, interest in these ready-cut homes from these companies has increased substantially among historic preservationists and homeowners. Many ready-cut homes have been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, and cities such as Portland, Oregon, and Chevy Chase, Maryland, are currently researching their kit houses with great fervor. During the fall of 1992 Chevy Chase held a home tour that featured several historic Lewis kit homes. Increased appreciation of this important mode of American housing will hopefully lead to its preservation in cities across the country. ■

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