



One of the many Sears houses is shown that was shipped by rail car to Cape Charles as a building kit. A tour of several of the kit houses in Cape Charles will be Saturday. / JAY DIEM/THE DAILY TIMES

## Eastern Shore News

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CAPE CHARLES -- The railroad brought many things to Cape Charles, and for residents of the town in the first half of the 20th century, it might even have brought a new home -- in about 30,000 pieces.

Between 1908 and 1940, Sears, Roebuck and Co. sold mail-order, ready-to-assemble Sears Modern Homes complete with everything the purchaser needed to have a part of the American dream -- right down to the paint and nails.

As part of a month of events celebrating the 125th anniversary of the town of Cape Charles, tours will be a given of four of the town's Sears homes on Saturday.

"This was a railroad town and this is what made these accessible," said Trina Veber, a real estate agent, who will be conducting tours of the Sears homes, which arrived in two or three boxcars and had to be unloaded in 24 hours.

"They are often found in clusters," said Veber, adding that Rose Thornton, the authority on kit homes, came to Cape Charles in 2004 and the town has 11 documented Sears homes in the historic district.

Veber said there are probably close to 20 kit homes in the town and research needs to be completed to document all of them. Authentication can come from research of deeds and building permits that can reveal Sears as the architect, as well as the structural details of the exterior and interior of the home.

Since the railroad had to travel the length of the Eastern Shore to Cape Charles as its southern terminus, there are probably Sears homes in other towns along its path.

The homes came in three styles with Honor Bilt being the top seller.

"They were really ahead of their time," said Veber, adding the homes offered the latest modern conveniences and the ability to customize your home with many choices.

Materials and labor for the Honor Bilt Phoenix model -- with seven rooms and one bath, built from 1911 to 1918 -- could cost between \$1,000 and \$2,000 or more depending upon options and how much labor the purchaser did himself or had to hire in construction of the home.

Veber said there were 48 sales offices and most of the Sears homes in Cape Charles came from Ohio warehouses.

The homes were designed to be easy to put up and came with a 75-page leather-bound book with directions.

Lumber was numbered to correspond with the numbers on the building plan.

Veber said some of the reasons it requires a lot of detective work to authenticate a Sears home is because the purchasers were able to customize their homes, including being able to reverse floor plans and select from a range of different catalog items.

Also, some have been added on to through the years, there were other companies that offered kit homes, and there were copycat builders who either watched a neighbor build his home or helped him put one up and then decided to try and build his own.

Veber said Sears had offered home mortgages, but after the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression of the 1930s, the company had to foreclose on those that could not make payments.

She said Sears got out of the homes business and never resumed it.