

The Birth and Growth of Cranford

Part VI (Final): Sunny Acres

By Vic Bary

The announcement in the June 6, 1940 *Citizen and Chronicle* that the Modern Homes Division of Sears Roebuck & Company had submitted plans to build at least 200 homes on property that had been part of the old Thomas Sperry Osceola Farm estate was attention-getting in several respects. First, it was an unusually large residential building project for an economy still emerging from the Great Depression. More importantly, while Sears Modern Homes Division had been in existence for 45 years, during which it had sold an estimated 100,000 pre-cut homes, it had never before bought land and built homes on it at its own expense in a development Sears, itself, would manage.

Sears Modern Homes Department History

Sears sold home building materials from 1895 to 1907 through the Modern Homes Department. In the face of flagging sales, Sears appointed its china department manager Frank W. Kushel to close down the failing department in 1906. Instead of closing the department, Kushel came up with a plan to sell complete homes, from pre-cut lumber down to 750 pounds of nails for joining these pieces, accompanied by a construction manual of up to 75 pages. The materials would be delivered by rail to the purchaser in a phased series of deliveries intended to get the materials on site as needed. In this era before power tools, it was estimated that pre-cutting the lumber would reduce on-site carpentry hours by 40%. Sears boasted that "a man of average abilities could assemble a Sears kit home in about 90 days."

The first catalogue was published in 1908, with 22 home styles, priced from \$650 to \$2,500. The construction catalogue was accompanied by a catalogue of interior furnishing ideas - all illustrated with Sears products. In 1918 Sears began offering financing for these purchases. In 1929, Sears added contractor services (either to build the house itself, or to consult to the purchaser planning to personally erect the home). Over 100,000 such homes were eventually built, in 447 different styles. Although architects for these styles were usually not identified, one who was is Randolph Evans, whose name would appear on the blueprints for the Sunny Acres numbered Cape Cod designs. (Evans, along with architect Albert E. Olson, were prominent members of the "Small House Movement".)

Sears was not alone in offering pre-cut homes - Aladdin, Harris Brothers, The Hodgson Company, Lewis Homes, and Montgomery Ward were also in the business - but Sears was arguably the largest supplier. During WWI, Sears also built pre-cut hospitals for the Red Cross for shipment to and assembly in Europe. After the War, using its pre-cut home designs, Sears built worker housing for factory towns for corporations such as Standard Oil (Carlinville, IL) and American Magnesia (Plymouth Meeting, PA).

As sales began to flag during the Great Depression, Sears withdrew from pre-cut home sales and from financing in 1933. (When some borrowers proved unable to keep up payments, Sears generally absorbed the losses, not wanting to appear heartless.) In 1934, Sears' annual report stated that the Modern Homes Department had been closed, and \$11MM in mortgages liquidated (written off as a loss). In spite of the closure, Sears kept its major Modern Homes Department sales offices in place - including the one in Port Newark.

However, Sears began selling pre-fabricated homes again in 1935. But now the houses were made by General Homes, Inc. of Chicago and featured steel framing members and roofs, and plywood walls. (The relationship seems to have ended by 1940.)

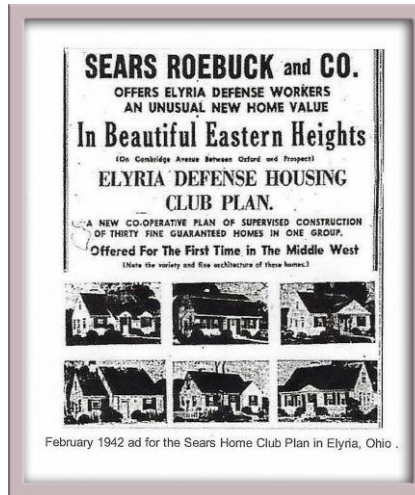
Sears Modern Homes Division becomes a Developer - the Home Club Plan

Sunny Acres represented an extension of the activities engaged in by the Modern Homes Department, as Sears was now buying the land, building the dwellings on it, and offering them for sale through the Home Club Plan. The Home Club Plan, operated out of its Port Newark offices, allowed Sears to work with local bonded contractors who would build large numbers of new Sears standardized homes at a single time to realize economies of scale.

The July 7, 1940 *New York Times* and the July 18, 1940 *Citizen and Chronicle* stated that 63 one-family dwelling permits had been issued to Sears, Roebuck & Company's Home Club Builders, Inc. According to the *Citizen and Chronicle*, "Work was scheduled to get underway yesterday, and the homes are expected to be completed and ready for occupancy within six months. ... All of the homes in the tract were sold within five weeks" (even before the first spade full of earth was turned).

There seem to have been two driving forces behind this shift in Sears Modern Homes approach from simply being a manufacturer, to being a supplier and developer under the new Home Club Plan. Initially, the advent of FHA mortgages under FDR's second "New Deal" in 1934-1935 made 90% financing for extended periods of time (up to 30 years) available for the first time. Under the Home Club Plan, FHA financing customers would not have to pay legal fees or title and survey fees, and could get into a new home with a modest 10% down payment. This was the driving force behind Sunny Acres, Sears **first** Home Club development, which was laid out according to FHA subdivision plans and specifications.

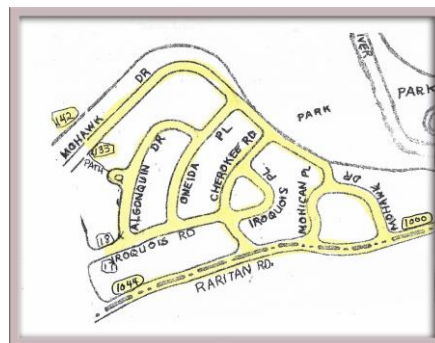
Later, as the fourth decade of the 20th Century unfolded, it became increasingly clear that the U.S. would be drawn into WW II. With this in mind, the federal government foresaw the need for increased housing for defense industry workers. This additional factor influenced new Sears Home Club Plan developments as early as February, 1942.

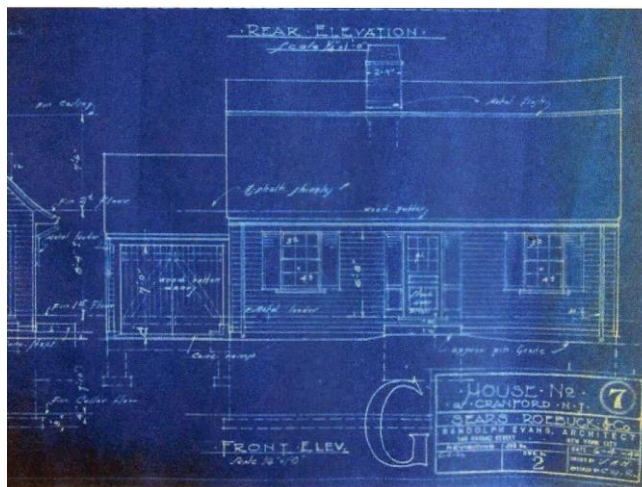


Sears responded to either or both of these driving forces by initiating Home Club Plan developments in Cranford (started mid-1940) and North Plainfield ("Green Acres" started September, 1940) New Jersey; Elyria, Ohio; and in Briarcliff Manor, Grandyle Village, North Tonowanda, and Sidney, New York. Ultimately, 10,000 - 20,000 Home Club Plan houses would be built. With its proximity to manufacturing centers in Elizabeth and Newark, and excellent train service, Cranford was a natural choice in which to locate the first of these developments. It didn't hurt that Sears had Modern Homes sales staff and a lumber mill in Newark.

Sunny Acres - Phase I

Sunny Acres (which at its inception didn't have a formal name yet) was built over a period of slightly more than two years in three rounds of construction, all accomplished by Phillip J. Bowers & Company of Newark. The first round of building consisted of 63 homes erected roughly between July, 1940 and July, 1941. The new homes all followed a similar standardized Cape Cod design, but by placing the main body of the house lengthwise or endwise to the street, moving the placement of the garage to either side of the house, set forward or back, and adding a breezeway to detached garages, 12 numbered designs of the basic house were offered. The first floor alone was finished in the basic offering, priced at \$4,335 providing four rooms. The second floor could be finished to produce a 6-room house for a total cost of \$5,250.





All 63 homes were completed according to these plans (nine of which we have records for), and potential purchasers bought them by responding to a newspaper ad which required answering a series of questions on a qualifying application. Descriptions of the houses and floor plans could be viewed at a Sears office at 15 North Avenue West, but no model home was yet available for inspection. The first round of houses occupied the northwest side of Raritan Road between Mohawk Drive and just west of Cherokee Road, Mohican Place, Mohawk Drive to Cherokee Road, Cherokee Road itself and the tiny Iroquois Place. No. 5 Cherokee Road was the first of these houses to be occupied. All property transfers were from Sears' Home Club Plan to the purchaser.

Near the end of the first building period, Sears held a contest to name its new development, awarding \$25 to the winner. A committee comprised on Cranford's Mayor Osterheldt, Chairman of the Board of Education Plummer, and *Citizen and Chronicle* editor Ray made the selection. The winner was Mrs. Helen Cederholm of 4 Mohican Place. She later admitted that her submission of the name "Sunny Acres" was in part an oblique complaint that hardly a tree stood in the new development.



The new name was announced at a meeting held at the Cranford Casino. At that meeting, the newly formed Sunny Acres Civic and Improvement Association voted to petition the Union County Parks Commission for sidewalks to be built on that portion of Raritan Road owned by the Commission. The Association would become increasingly active and vocal as the development progressed.

Sunny Acres - Phase II

The second round of building most likely commenced before all the homes in the first phase had been completed and resulted in 52 additional houses. Again, all were the standardized Cape Cod designs, however, by now; a model home was available for inspection. The new homes were to be found on Oneida Place, Algonquin Drive and much of Iroquois Road. Property transfer records, now between Sears Port Newark Lumber and Materials Company and the new owners, ran from July, 1941 through May, 1942.

As the second phase of constructing Sunny Acres progressed, relations between the Sunny Acres Civic and Improvement Association and Sears became decidedly less "sunny". The October 2, 1941 *Citizen and Chronicle* reported on an association meeting attended by approximately 50 residents. Sunny Acres residents complained about building delays caused by a trucking strike, and listed un-remediated complaints made against Sears, its builder, and subcontractors. A letter from Sears to the Association the following year indicates that wet basements had also become a source of contention. In the letter Sears acknowledged the problem and secured the services of a contractor to remedy the problems (apparently at its own expense).

Throughout its history, the Association (which would file with the State of New Jersey as a not-for-profit association March 1, 1950) was a voice for the needs of the development and a source of social action and community activity. The Association pressed for sidewalks, street lights, street signs, extension of bus service to cover the development, and a footbridge across the Rahway River so that children could get safely to school. Social activities included, but were not limited to, fielding children's and adult sports teams, dances and social outings, and perhaps most notably, the annual Baby Parade.



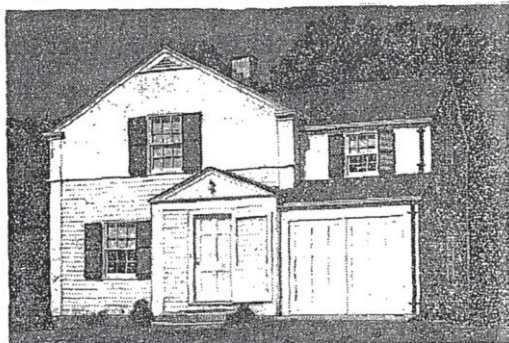
Initially charging members 25 cents a month (collected at their homes), the Association remains an active force in town to this day.

Sunny Acres - Phase III

The last building phase resulted in 57 additional homes with the final transfers (again between Sears Port Newark Lumber and Materials Company and the new owners) occurring in May, 1943. More than half of the houses were on Oneida Place, with the balance on Mohawk Drive west of Oneida Place and on parts of Iroquois Road. Responding to requests for more variety in house designs, Sears added a Colonial design, again moving the garage to provide several variations. Most of these can be found on the western portion of Mohawk Drive.

HOME PURCHASED IN NEW JERSEY COLONY
New York Times (1923-Current files), Oct 27, 1941;
 ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006) w/ Index (1851-1993)
 pg. 32

HOME PURCHASED IN NEW JERSEY COLONY



Edward J. Kohler bought this residence from the homes division of Sears, Roebuck & Co. Erected in the company's development at Cranford from plans by Randolph Evans, it will be duplicated in Green Acres, new Sears, Roebuck colony on Breenbrook Road, North Plainfield.

Final Thoughts

With the completion of phase III, Sunny Acres reached a total of 172 homes (171 built by Sears and one built by a private contractor when Sears deemed the lot too steep to build on). Why this house count fell short of the 200+ Sears originally announced it planned to build could not be determined from available records. It's quite possible that, by 1943, the required manpower and materials had been diverted to the War effort, but that is conjecture, rather than verifiable fact.

What is undeniable is that Sunny Acres holds a unique place in Sears history (the first housing development it built for itself) and an important place in Cranford's history and present. The Sunny Acres Civic and Improvement Association has played, and continues to play, a vital role in the family and social life of Cranford.

(The author wishes to acknowledge a profound debt of gratitude to Carole Esposito, whose knowledge and records of Sunny Acres and its Civic and Improvement Association were invaluable in the preparation of this article.)

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