

Published May 22nd, 2013

Mail Order House

By Cathy Dausman



The Kit House today Photo Andy Scheck

Humboldt, but was finally delivered to Reliez Station in Lafayette, before being trucked to the building site to await assembly.

The Fords upgraded the original home plans, paying an additional \$125 for a half bath and laundry, and a bit more for a garage. They installed a Sears wood burning stove in the kitchen. The house had a fireplace; its exterior was painted white. In 1940, Mount Diablo was visible from the back of the home; its view has since been obscured by local vegetation, but the kit home has sat virtually unchanged for the past 50 years.

Ford's widow was still living in the house in 1986 when her son, Andy, and his wife, Mariana, returned to Lafayette. They moved into the house of Andy's youth to help his aging mother, and together, little by little, they began to remodel.

"My father-in-law loved roaring fires," Mariana said. One of his fires set the roof ablaze. They replaced the original shingled roof with an aluminum roof and converted the fireplace to gas.

The first interior improvement in 1987 was building an 800-square-foot downstairs bedroom and bath for the elder Ford, who has since died. A front porch with a ramp was added in 1992. In 1996, the younger Fords added 1,000 extra feet of living space by building an upstairs master bath and office. They also added a second water heater. And in 2000, the back of the garage was enlarged to create a workshop.

Along the way, the Fords brought in 200 yards of earth, moss, rocks and gravel, and re-landscaped and terraced the original back yard, which Mariana said was "just ugly."

The house blossomed from its humble 1,500 square feet into a 5 bedroom, 3.5 bath showpiece with over 3,100 square feet of living space, the exterior now painted green. In 2011 Mariana was ready to downsize, so the Fords put their house on the market.

"I wanted a ranch house," she said, noting up until that time, she and her husband had never picked out their own house. "We've had fun, we really liked it, but we're not sorry we moved," she added.

The house remains in good hands, however - the Ford's friends and former neighbors, Chris and Becky Kenney, snapped it up.

"I love that it's got history," Kenney said. "It is the most organized house." She likes the original tongue and groove oak flooring, and has had workmen admire its true 2 x 4 solid framework construction.

The Kenneys love their home and have no plans to move. As for the hard work the Fords invested in upgrades, "I'd do it again," Mariana said simply.

To learn more about kit houses, visit www.kithouse.org

Does a 75-year-old mail order house stand out in a neighborhood residents call "eclectic"? Not if it's the Lafayette home built by James Ford and his wife, Mary, in 1940.

The Fords, who moved to Lafayette from Oakland in 1937, saved for three years to build their 3 bedroom, 1.5 bath home. Lot, contractor and house - a kit house they ordered from the Sears catalogue - cost them a mere \$7,500.

Not just plans, but the entire house of wood was delivered to their lot. Sears sold about 70,000 similar kit homes in 48 states between 1908 and 1940, according to Sears' archives (www.searsarchives.com/homes). As many as 30,000 pieces and the 75-page instruction book were shipped via rail to each site.

The wood for the Ford's home - the Aladdin Marblehead B plan, a modified Cape Cod-style house - was cut in Oregon of clear heart redwood; each piece was labeled with paint to facilitate its assembly. It shipped south on the Great Northern, Western Pacific and Sacramento Northern railroad lines. The load was misplaced once in



Photo courtesy Ford family

FREIGHT PAID ORDER BLANK AND GUARANTY

The ALADDIN Guaranty Satisfaction, or your money back, is the soundest guaranty ever written. When this guaranty is backed by a company whose assets run into the millions you are assured of absolute safety in all your dealings. Aladdin guarantees the quantity and quality of all materials and their safe arrival at destination. The Aladdin Company guarantees you satisfaction or your money back in every transaction with us.

ORDER TO
THE ALADDIN COMPANY
 The Oldest and Largest Manufacturers of Read-Cut Houses in the World
 NORTH PORTLAND, OREGON

Please Ship FAF&E:SHRAD Plan "B" Page Regular Reverse PRICE \$ 1755.00

Price of Porch (if wanted) _____
 No. 1 Red Cedar Wood Shingles or Green Hex Butt Asphalt Strip Shingles _____
 Closet Doors (See Catalog Page 50) House to be finished with shutters _____
 Cellar Windows (See Catalog Page 50) _____
 Extra window/right rear bedroom \$ 7.13
 Pair French doors hall to living room \$ 41.90
 8'x10' laundry (2 windows) including 2x4 stoop & hood \$ 118.00
 Cedar lining for closets \$ 50.00
 1/2x6" Bevel cedar siding, paint and nails \$ 90.00
 Oak flooring except kitchen, nook and bath \$ 87.73
 Allowance for 2-light windows 3.50 \$ 214.06
 Allowance for cellar stairs 10.00 \$ 19.00
 Kind of Foundation—Solid Wall or Post Total \$ 511.74
 Outside Body Paint white Trim white S&S Tax for use \$ 511.74
 Color of Stain for Inside Trim and Doors or Color of Rayonite Interior Finish for Inside Trim and Doors light oak
 Color of Stain for Inside Floors light oak
 Poreh Floor Paint _____

If Wood Shingles are used on OUTSIDE WALLS give color of stain.

SHIPPING INSTRUCTIONS	ORDERED BY
Ship to <u>James P. Ford</u>	Name <u>HEAVY BROWN, DEALER</u>
Town <u>Lafayette</u>	Address <u>2605 East 14th Street,</u>
County <u>Contra Costa State Calif</u>	Town <u>Oakland</u>
Ship on <u>W. N. W. P. S. S. Northern</u>	County <u>Alameda</u>
Is there a Freight Agent there? <u>No</u>	State <u>Calif.</u> Date <u>Sept. 26, 1940</u>
When is shipment wanted? <u>at once</u>	Enclosed <input type="checkbox"/> For \$ _____
Export Documents Required <u>Yes or No</u>	EXPORY TERMS: Bank Draft, Post Office or Express Money Order or Irrevocable Letter of Credit for Full Amount.

(Use reverse side of blank for Special Instructions or Remarks)

Original bill of lading for kit house. Courtesy Ford family



Becky Kenney (left) admires a photo timeline of the Kit House she now lives in, prepared by former homeowner Mariana Ford. Photo Cathy Dausman



Photos courtesy Ford family

Reach the reporter at: cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA