Some Assembly Required

E.L. Crain's company proved that ready-cut houses could be efficient, cheap, and ... charming

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Crain Ready Cut House Co.

BY MARGARET CULBERTSON
Drive through the tree-lined streets of Cherryhurst today and you will find picturesque bungalows of the 1920s surrounding a small park where children and dogs play. It does not look like a neighborhood of pre-fabricated houses. Even if you take the time to walk in this area, just north of Westheimer and east of Mandell, it is impossible to tell that most of the original houses were actually built from pre-cut lumber according to standard plans. They vary in design, size, and style. In fact, they look just like conventionally built houses of the period.

In the 1920s, houses all over Houston were built by the same local company that produced these: the Crain Ready-Cut House Company. Edward Lillo Crain's company built thousands of houses and also developed entire subdivisions from scratch before his death in 1950, but Crain left only one street name that serves as a subtle memorial to his involvement in the city's growth: Edloe Street, named for his son, Edward Lillo Crain Jr., merges the first and last syllables of their shared first and middle names.1

Born in Longview in 1885, E.L. Crain came to Houston in his early twenties and initially found work as a bank clerk. By 1913 he had established his own real estate business and begun to buy scattered lots in Montrose and other new subdivisions, building one or two small houses at a time. Successful sales helped his finances, and his marriage in 1915 to Annie Vive Carter, daughter of lumberman and banker S.F. Carter, could not have hurt either, for in 1917 Crain purchased the T.J. Williams House Manufacturing Company.2

Established only two years before, the Williams company had produced small one- and two-bedroom bungalows, ready to be assembled on-site with precut lumber and materials. Sears, Roebuck & Company had been selling ready-cut houses through catalogues for almost ten years before Williams started his company, but Williams was the first Houston company of any size to do so. Its catalogue claimed that Williams' "single thick wall" construction techniques produced stronger, tighter houses than traditional construction.

With the Williams plant, located at Harrisburg Road and Baker Street, Crain could build his speculative houses more cheaply than before, in addition to selling houses through catalogues. Crain changed the name of the company, eventually settling on the Crain Ready-Cut House Company. He moved the plant to the corner of Milby Street and Polk Avenue, increased the variety and improved the quality of the designs, and produced more substantial catalogues for their display. His catalogues distinguished between sectional buildings, made from pre-fabricated panels, and ready-cut houses, made from precut lumber that then was assembled using traditional construction methods. Sectional buildings served primarily in industrial and commercial settings, while the ready-cut houses went into a wide range of residential neighborhoods.3

Crain significantly expanded the company's activities when he established a real estate department. The company bought land, developed subdivisions, and sold lots in addition to producing houses. By combining these separate functions within a single company, Crain was in the forefront of expanding the traditional role of the developer. In the early 20th century, house-building was generally separate from the physical development of the land, streets, and utilities. The developer of a subdivision prepared the streets and the lots, which were then sold either to individuals or to real estate developers, who would build the houses. The original developer could influence the character of the neighborhood through deed restrictions and by providing architectural and construction services to buyers, but those buyers were free to hire their own architects or builders. The real estate developers who bought lots almost always used their own builders. The construction of entire neighborhoods of speculatively built, uniformly designed houses, which later became common, was unknown.

Over his career Crain worked to integrate these two aspects of development. He started with Cherryhurst, a small subdivision between Westheimer and Fairview that D.B. Cherry platted in 1908 and revised in 1916. Perhaps World War I slowed Cherry's development plans, for he sold very few lots. In 1921 Crain bought the major portion of Cherryhurst for $94,380, and Cherry deeded the remainder to the Houston Land and Trust Company. In addition to providing the building and design services
of the Crain Ready-Cut House Company to buyers, Crain provided financing. County records have preserved several of his mortgages and contracts. One — a typical mechanic's lien dated April 12, 1922 — is for a five-room brick veneer bungalow (Plan no. M266) and 12-by-22-foot garage in Cherryhurst. The cost was $3,535, a typical 1920s price for the house of a middle-income Houston family.

In 1922, Crain bought a tract east of downtown, north of Harrisburg Avenue at Milby Street, known as the John T. Brady Home Place, and filed his first plat with Harris County for a subdivision called the Brady Home Addition. As with Cherryhurst, Crain bought the land in his own name and sold houses through the Ready-Cut House Company. But with his next subdivision, Pinewick Place (platted in 1923), the Crain Ready-Cut House Company was the official owner. Located just south of Harrisburg Avenue at 75th Street, the site for Pinewick Place was fairly unpromising, bordered on its two long sides by railroad tracks. However, Crain visually camouflaged the tracks with housing and plantings, creating a picturesque bungalow neighborhood that he advertised as "The Rose Garden of Houston." The original entrance gateposts and the many remaining bungalows have suffered from lack of maintenance over the years. However, the neighborhood survives and demonstrates a higher level of planning and design than much of the surrounding area.

The Crain Ready-Cut House Company was also the official owner and developer of Southside Place, at the intersection of Bellaire Boulevard and Edloe Street. The company filed the subdivision plat with Harris County in 1924 and revised it in 1926. Few of the Crain Ready-Cut bungalows survived the transformation of this neighborhood into an upper-middle-class enclave during the '80s and '90s, but the generous community space at its center remains from the original plan. Southside Place was probably the first Houston subdivision to provide a swimming pool and tennis courts for the use of property owners. Maintenance of these amenities was covered by an annual fee of $50 per lot that was included as a provision in the deed, an early example of a subdivision maintenance fund.

In addition to its development activities in the 1920s, the Crain Ready-Cut House Company built houses for individuals in neighborhoods throughout Houston. Mechanic's liens in the Harris County Clerk's archives record that Crain Ready-Cut Houses were built in more than 35 different Houston subdivisions. The Texas General Contractors Association's monthly bulletin recorded additional construction activity by the company in Houston. Since Crain offered a wide range of sizes, styles, and finishes, its customers and building sites were equally varied. For example, in 1925 bookkeeper Fred P. Yeager and his wife contracted to pay the company $6,500 to build a six-room bungalow (Plan No. M-6472) at 1906 Wroxton in Southampton Place.

One of the most expensive houses that the company built was the house at 1511 North Boulevard for Crain's engineer, Edgar G. Maclay. Although the house was designed by Briscoe and Dixon, the Texas General Contractors Association's monthly bulletin recorded that Crain Ready-Cut House Company was awarded the $20,000 contract for construction of the two-story Mediterranean-style stucco house.

On a more modest scale, in 1921 widow Beatrice W. Arrington paid $2,500 for a four-room frame house (Plan No. M239) to be built in Woodland Heights at 606 Teetsbore. The company sold houses to African-American clients as well, including Veola J. Redick and his wife. The Redicks contracted in 1921 to pay $1,288 for their five-room frame house to be built on Hermier Street, in the Houston Heights, within an area that the original Heights planners had set aside for African-Americans. Redick worked as butler for the James L. Autry family on Courtlandt Place.

Crain Ready-Cut house designs generally were not exceptional, but they reflected popular stylistic trends. The catalogs never credited designers of the early Crain Ready-Cut houses, but architect Charles O. Bovee worked for the company from 1923 until his retirement in the late 1950s. Born in 1891 in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Bovee studied and practiced architecture in Buffalo, New York, until World War I, when he was drafted into the Army. The Army brought him to Texas, where he was discharged from Camp McArthur at Waco in 1919. He worked in Dallas until January of 1923, when Crain offered him the position of chief architect in his company. Bovee married the next year and designed and built a house for his family at 4709 Clay Avenue in Eastwood.4

When the Depression halted the 1920s boom in house construction, Crain Ready-Cut had to find alternative construction work in order to survive. Bovee's son Charles remembers his father's projects from this period — a distinctive portable ice cream parlor for the Dairyland Ice Cream Company and a portable short-order-restaurant building that the Houston-based Toddle House adopted for its chain. (An example of the latter still survives at the intersection of
South Shepherd and Harold.) The oil industry's need for pre-fabricated, sectional workers' housing and the construction of a number of camps for the Civilian Conservation Corps also helped keep Crain and his re-named Houston Ready-Cut House Company going. In addition, Crain responded to new government programs designed to help the housing industry. In fact, after the passage of the Federal Housing Act, Crain began the most ambitious project of his life: the development of Garden Oaks.

In March 1937, the Garden Oaks Company, with E.L. Crain as president, purchased a 750-acre tract of land northwest of the Heights, outside Houston's city limits. Only four years later, Crain wrote that the company had platted 1,150 building lots, constructed ten miles of concrete roads, created parks and playgrounds, and constructed 681 houses, most of which were financed under the FHA program.

Though the development offered relatively inexpensive lots and houses for the middle class, Crain strove to incorporate the latest advances in planning, including curving streets and extra-long blocks laid out by the Kansas City landscape architects Hare & Hare. He kept many of the original oak and pine trees and gave a crape myrtle tree and rose bushes to each homeowner. Recognizing that some homeowners might use their own architects or designers, the company retained design control by requiring that plans for any improvements be submitted for approval. Since Garden Oaks was just outside the Houston city limits, Crain used the latest legal means to provide services for residents, including the creation of a water district. The property deeds included provisions for a maintenance fund to care for the streets and parks.

J.C. Sutles took over as president of Houston Ready-Cut House Company when Crain started the Garden Oaks Company, but the House Company was still intimately involved with the Garden Oaks development, and offered a series of plywood homes designed to qualify for FHA financing. Even as the Houston Ready-Cut House Company converted to war work during World War II, producing workers' housing, army barracks, and ammunition crates, it also planned for post-war housing work. Those plans were included in a 1944 article about prefabricated houses that ran in the influential design magazine *Arts and Architecture.*

When Crain died in November 1950, his vision of a thriving Garden Oaks community was finally reaching fruition. The entire pattern of suburban development was also changing, taking his practices of vertical integration and efficient building to extremes that led to a loss of the design variety and picturesque planning that Crain had incorporated into his own developments.

3. Surviving catalogues include T.J. Williams, Better Built Homes for Less Money, Houston, 1913 (private collection); Crain Ready-Cut House Company, Crain Ready-Cut House Company, Catalogue 6, Houston, n.d. and Crain Ready-Cut and Sectional Houses, Catalogue 5, Houston, ca. 1923 (Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library); and Crain Ready-Cut House Company, Ready-Cut Homes, Catalogue No. 4, Houston, n.d. (Library of Congress).
8. Strids.