

Postwar Prefab, Minnetonka

 IN THE 1950s, the prefabricated home industry was booming in Minnesota. Not only was the state in sync with an urgent national demand for affordable housing for returning servicemen and their families, it was also a region with deep roots in the timber industry. Enter Page & Hill, a company that made its mark producing cedar poles and log houses in the early-twentieth century and manufactured prefab grain-storage units and ammunition containers during World War II. In short, Page & Hill was perfectly positioned to respond to the postwar housing shortage with prefab home solutions.

While the company possessed the technological know-how to produce the houses, it lacked the architectural skills to design them. Happily, the company learned of local architect Elizabeth “Lisl” Close, who had researched prefab houses for her 1934 MIT undergraduate thesis. Page & Hill hired Close, a partner with her husband Winston in the firm of Close Associates, to design a series of plans. In company ads, Page & Hill touted the factory-made Devonshire, Andover, and Hiawatha models as possessing “advanced styling, ruggedness and honest value.” The 40-by-25-foot Jubilaire model, priced at \$14,500, was one of 85 dwellings planned for Acorn Ridge, a subdivision in Minnetonka. If all went well, a house could be trucked from the

factory in Shakopee and erected on site in 27 days, to the delight of eager families. Hundreds of Close-designed Page & Hill prefabs were distributed and erected within a 15-state region from Ohio to Montana.

During the coldest days of the Cold War, an early Jubilaire model traveled behind the Iron Curtain when the U.S. State Department selected the house for display at the 1950 Berlin Industrial Fair. In two weeks nearly 50,000 Germans, about a third from the Soviet Zone, visited the efficient, light-filled,

three-bedroom house where they beheld such domestic marvels as automatic heat control, electric washing machines, vacuum cleaners, and Mixmasters. In the end—as intended—the modest Minnesota prefab sent a powerful propagandistic message to conflict-weary German visitors: this is the American way of life under democracy.

— Jane King Hession

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Jubilaire home at Acorn Ridge, Minnetonka, 1956 (MHS COLLECTIONS)



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