

Widely Copied Design

'Blandings' House Built in Record Time

By LES HAUSNER, *Chicago Sun-Times*

CHICAGO—Tara's plantation mansion in "Gone With the Wind" and the old Victorian on a hilltop in "Psycho" and "Psycho II" may be Hollywood's best known fictional residences.

But for a time shortly after World War II the most prominent house in the nation was the New England-style farmhouse built by Cary Grant and Myrna Loy in the comedy "Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House."

When David O. Selznick released the picture in 1948, scores of builders throughout the nation, in concert with Selznick, had erected copies of the four-bedroom home. Everybody was happy. The movie was a howling success. The "Blandings House" was in much demand. And the buyers got a quality product.

Ask the man who owns one.

"After 35 years, this house has yet to develop a single crack in an exterior wall," said Richard Gaussein, whose two-story "Dream House" is in a near north suburb.

Gaussein's house was built by the late Irvin A. Blietz, not only as a part of the movie's promotional hoopla, but as a sort of challenge.

Cooperation Led to Record

Blietz, who had been building in the Chicago area since the 1920s, was attending a National Assn. of Home Builders meeting when a fellow builder stated he would erect "Blandings Dream House" in 90 days.

"I can do it in far less," Blietz said, proceeding to set up a 58-day schedule in order to complete the house in time for the movie's premiere.

Everything, weather included, went so well that he finished the house in 45 days. That may have been a record then for that style and size of frame home.

At the time, Blietz said "the home building industry has been accused of being archaic; the achievement in building the 'dream house' in such a short period demonstrates that the big problem in building is one of adequate supply of materials, labor and proper supervision."

The material and labor problems were eased through the cooperation of 28 manufacturers and the Chicago Building Trades Council.

In the movie, based on Eric Hodgkin's best seller, Blandings has to deal with incompetence, gouging contractors, delays, inefficiency and cost overruns as he attempts to relocate his family from a small New York City apartment to a single-family home in the country.

Massive Cost Overrun

He's absolutely whipped spiritually—and somewhat financially—by the time the house is completed. He's spent four times what he originally budgeted. Blandings' faith in mankind and the housing industry is restored when a well digger refunds a few dollars because he miscalculated the depth of the well.

Gaussein, who bought the house 10 years ago from its third owner, experienced something of a cost overrun himself.

"We paid \$56,000 for the house, but could have gotten it for a lot less," Gaussein said.

"We were living close to the Blandings house, as they call it around here, and had always admired it. The owner put it on the market in 1972 for \$48,000, but for one reason or another we didn't buy it then," Gaussein recalled.

"The house was taken off the market and the following year my wife, Mary, and I decided we really wanted it.

"With six children we needed the four bedrooms. We convinced the owner to sell—but for \$8,000 more than he previously wanted."

Gaussein estimated the house, which sold for about \$35,000 in 1948, is worth \$150,000 to \$160,000 today.

The present owners added a family room and installed central air-conditioning and an updated electrical system.

A do-it-yourselfer, Gaussein (with the help of four sons) repaints the exterior every three years.

A far more tedious task was reputtying the windows. Each window has a minimum of 24 small panes, some 400 in all.

Except for the modern improvements, the house remains faithful to the movie version. Blietz had made a few variations from from the original design: relocating the front door, and repositioning one of the two fireplaces.

thermostat. The furnace needed only two inches of clearance and could be hidden behind grilled doors or placed in a small utility room. The furnace had air-filtering system and the fan could be used for circulation in the summer.

- An electronic garage door opener.
- A self-defrosting refrigerator.
- An automatic dishwasher and garbage disposer.

— A "daylight" television set. (The early TV sets had to be viewed in semi-darkness.)

Anything about the house that displeased the Gausseins?

"Not exactly. But after 35 years this house hasn't really caught up to the electronic age. We found it necessary to replace the electrical system because parts were getting hard to find," Gaussein said.

"The kitchen is too small by today's standards," his wife added. "But in the movie the Blandings had a cook, so I suppose they did all their eating in the dining room."

Gaussein installed church pews in the kitchen eating bay, but admitted it's a little jammed if the entire family tries to eat there at one time.

Surprisingly, he hasn't seen the movie.

"I just never got around to it. But I read the book," he said.

"This house has unbelievable storage space. A full attic and full basement," Gaussein said.

"When a friend and I installed the air-conditioning we put the unit in the attic, and ran the ducts right through the attic floor."

Gaussein is convinced that the house never developed a crack because of the reinforced concrete floor above the basement.

The house sits on an 80-by-165-foot corner lot.

In June, 1948, in conjunction with RKO's premiere of "Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House," Blietz opened his version to the public. The house was furnished by Wilson-Jump exactly as in the movie.

Thousands of people paid 25 cents each (the proceeds went to the Infant Welfare Society of Chicago) to see the latest in home technology. Among the unusual features for 1948, which we take for granted today:

- An energy-efficient oil furnace with an automatic