

Built to last

LeTourneau all-steel

“Carefree Home”

renovated in Peoria

By Mark L. Johnson

LeTourneau, “Dean of Earthmoving”

Robert Gilmore LeTourneau (1888–1969) was known throughout the construction world as “The Dean of Earthmoving.” He is still considered to be the world’s greatest inventor of earthmoving equipment. LeTourneau was undoubtedly one of the most innovative and successful businessmen in central Illinois.



LeTourneau, known commonly as R.G., was granted over 300 patents for his inventions, primarily of earthmoving equipment, between 1923 and 1965, averaging over seven patents per year. He was also known as “God’s Businessman” for his devout Christian faith and very generous support of his church and charitable organizations. Instead of donating 10 percent of his income, LeTourneau believed in donating 90 percent. He and his wife Evelyn traveled extensively throughout the country giving testimonials to their faith.

LeTourneau was born in Richford, Vermont, in 1888. By the age of 14, his family had relocated to Portland, Oregon, where he began to work in a foundry and several machine shops. He later moved to San Francisco where he learned welding and electrical application principles from a variety of jobs. LeTourneau was married in 1917 at the age of 29. Because of permanent neck injuries received during a car racing accident, he was exempted from service during World War I. In 1920 LeTourneau purchased a used Holt track-type tractor and began contracting work in the earthmoving business. The following year he began to design and build pull-type scrapers at a factory in Stockton,



Front of the “Carefree Home” discovered at the Komatsu America factory in 2015 by the Central Illinois Landmarks Foundation. The structure had served as a manufacturing office for approximately 50 years at the factory, but had sat abandoned since the 1980’s.



The house after the awnings were installed over the windows during the summer of 2018. The Museum experienced a notable increase in attendance during the 2018 season as folks stopped by to tour the renovated “Carefree Home” 80 years after it was originally constructed at the LeTourneau factory.

California, the same location as the factories of the Holt Manufacturing Company. By 1929 his operations were incorporated in California as “R.G. LeTourneau, Inc.”

LeTourneau builds all-steel houses in Peoria

Six years later, in 1935, LeTourneau moved his factory operations to Peoria at the urging of Caterpillar Tractor

Company (formed in 1925 thru the merger of the Holt Manufacturing Company with the C.L. Best Gas Traction Company). Many of the LeTourneau earthmoving products such as the towed scraper depended on the tractors produced by Caterpillar for power. His invention of the cable control unit for a bulldozer blade revolutionized the functionality of the track-type tractor and became a universal tool in the earth moving industry.

When LeTourneau arrived in Peoria, the country was still coping with the impact of the Great Depression. As he began hiring workers for his new factory along the banks of the Illinois River, LeTourneau found that the men faced a common problem: a lack of affordable and decent housing in the community for their families. With his creative approach to solving problems, LeTourneau conceived and designed a small, simple, low maintenance, all-steel house. Between 1936 and 1938, LeTourneau's factory built and delivered approximately 150 of these welded, all-steel houses.

The all-steel houses were branded "The Carefree Home." These homes were advertised to be Flood Proof, Dust Proof, Fire Proof, Germ Proof, Weather Proof and even Trouble Proof.



The objective of the Interior Furnishings Committee was to outfit the house as if one of the LeTourneau plant employees and his family was living in the house in 1938, the year the house was originally constructed, so it was kept quite simple and modest.

"Carefree Homes" were available for sale to both his employees as well as the general public. The sale price of a "Carefree Home" is believed to have been approximately \$4,000, although a specific price list has not been discovered.

The primary building block used in

the construction of the houses was a steel panel, 3 feet, 10 inches wide by 7 feet, 8 inches long and 4 or 6 inches thick. Each hollow panel was filled with insulation – 4 inch panels being used for walls, partitions and ceilings, 6-inch panels for floors. The houses were constructed in three sizes: 24 feet x 24 feet (576 square feet); 27 feet x 27 feet (729 square feet); and 30 feet x 30 feet (900 square feet). The interior layout of each of the homes was similar; a kitchen, a bathroom, two bedrooms and a living room area.

Twenty-three of "The Carefree Homes" were located immediately southwest of the LeTourneau plant along Grant Street adjacent to the Illinois River. The neighborhood was referred to a "LeTourneau Court." In 1943 however, these homes were relocated due to a historic high water flood. Another site was planned for 30 of "The Carefree Homes" across the river from the plant about two miles north of East Peoria on 233 acres owned by the R. G. LeTourneau Foundation, Inc. This meant the homes had to be floated across the Illinois River. Water-tight shields were placed over the doors and windows of the houses. It took about two hours for the journey across the river. The



The main living room area as it appeared at the Grand Opening of the house on April 30 and May 1, 2018. Many of the period furnishings were donated by Wheels O' Time Museum members and Steel House Revival Project volunteers.

homes, weighing 42 tons, were lifted into and out of the river by huge LeTourneau-built cranes.

Today, approximately three dozen of the LeTourneau all-steel houses can still be found in the Peoria area, including several clustered around the water tower in Peoria Heights. Most of these “Carefree Homes” have been modified over the years; some have even had a peaked roof or a second floor added.

Abandoned all-steel house discovered

In 2015, the Central Illinois Landmarks Foundation discovered that one of these “Carefree Homes” still existed on the grounds of LeTourneau’s factory, now owned and operated by Komatsu America. The structure had been used as a manufacturing office within the factory until the early 1980’s, but was scheduled for demolition as part of a factory modernization project by Komatsu. Following discussions, Komatsu generously agreed to donate the house to the Landmarks Foundation.

After considerable searching, the Landmarks Foundation finally found a new site for “The Carefree Home.” The Board of Directors of the Wheels O’ Time Museum just north of Peoria agreed to accept the house if it could be restored and renovated. The restoration project was launched in the fall of 2016 through a unique collaborative effort between the Landmarks Foundation, the Museum and the Peoria Historical Society. The restoration effort was branded as “The Steel House Revival.”

In short order, a project steering committee was established, a budget developed and a fundraising effort initiated. With the fundraising effort well underway, in May 2017, the house was moved from the Komatsu factory location through downtown Peoria to a site for sandblasting to remove the lead paint from both the interior and exterior walls of the structure. The interior was stripped of electrical, plumbing and heating fixtures, the windows were removed and the rusted portions of the steel base of the house were repaired. Two coats of gray primer paint were applied and a new roof installed.



Over the winter, the interior of the building was completely renovated. The original wood floors were refinished in the living room and both bedrooms. After the walls and ceilings were painted, the house was ready to have the furnishings installed.

House moved to new site

Finally on October 18, 2017, the house was moved to the Wheels O’ Time Museum site. Once located on its new foundation, a new heating and cooling system was installed in the house. New windows were installed and the exterior was given a final coat of bright yellow paint. The house was completely rewired and period lighting fixtures were installed. New sidewalks were constructed around the house including a ramp to the kitchen door which would provide disabled access to the home.

Over the winter of 2018 the restoration project focused on the interior of the house. An “Interior Furnishings Committee” directed this work and coordinated the search for period furniture and fixtures for the house. The objective was to furnish the house to replicate a working class family’s residence of the late 1930s.

The original wood floors were in remarkably good condition and were repaired and refinished. Hundreds of holes in the interior walls of the steel panels were repaired before the entire interior was painted.

A new tile floor was installed in the bathroom and a linoleum floor was installed in the kitchen. Period-correct steel kitchen cabinets, a stove and a refrigerator were installed. Furniture, much of it donated by Wheels O’ Time Museum members, began to be installed in April 2018 in preparation for a Grand Opening of the House at the end of the month. Extensive landscaping and drainage around the house was completed in spite of a very wet spring.

The project received considerable support from Peoria-area labor unions and construction contractors. This aspect of the project was coordinated by Dan Silverthorn, the retired chair-



As a result of the generous support of the Peoria Park District, the statue of R.G. LeTourneau had been removed from its original location in Glen Oak Park and was being refurbished by craftsmen from the Hot Scotsman Fine Art Foundry in Peoria.

man of the West Central Illinois Building Trades Council. Dan devoted hundreds of hours to the project and was instrumental in ensuring that the renovations were completed in time for the Grand Opening of the house on Monday and Tuesday, April 30 and May 1.

LeTourneau statue joins house

While the restoration of the house was underway, a corollary project also developed. In 1988, LeTourneau factory retirees had funded the construction of a statue of their boss which was donated to the Peoria Park District and placed in Glen Oak Park. After the Trustees of the Park District agreed to loan the statue to the Wheels O' Time Museum, an extensive renovation of the statue was completed by The Hot Scotsman Fine Art Foundry in Peoria. The statue was erected upon a new foundation at the Museum in the spring of 2018 just prior to the grand opening of the house. Today, from his renovated pedestal,

R.G. can gaze upon his all-steel "Carefree Home" every day of the year.

Construction of the "Carefree Home" was halted after only a couple years in 1938 as the demand for steel increased significantly in the years prior to World War II. The plant expanded during the War as LeTourneau's earthmoving equipment was in great demand by the Allies around the world. It has been estimated that the LeTourneau plants provided over 50 percent of all the earthmoving equipment used by the Allies during the war.

By 1945, LeTourneau had four factory locations in addition to the Peoria plant: Toccoa, Georgia; Vicksburg, Mississippi; Longview, Texas; and Rydalmere, Australia. In 1953, he sold the Peoria and Toccoa factories to the Westinghouse Air



The finished statue of R.G. LeTourneau is now located directly across from his renovated "Carefree Home." The Hot Scotsman Fine Art Foundry did an outstanding job of restoration on the statue and pedestal.

Brake Company and moved his company headquarters to Longview, Texas. In 1966, at the age of 77, R.G. handed over his role as President and Chairman of the Board to his son. Still full of creative energy however, he continued to work at the company, designing new ways to move larger loads of dirt faster and more economically.

In 1946, LeTourneau had purchased land and buildings in Longview and established the LeTourneau Technical Institute. This Institute grew into a college and eventually became LeTourneau University, offering degrees in engineering, aeronautical sciences, and liberal arts with a strong emphasis on a Christian approach to life.

In 1960, at the age of 72, LeTourneau published an autobiography, titled *Mover of Men and Mountains*. In the last chapter of the book, he wrote, "All too often we are so busy scrambling around to make our worldly future secure that we fight for minutes when we should be preparing ourselves to earn eternity. Only God holds the future, and when you have found Him, you might not know what your future holds, but you will have the blessed security of knowing Who holds you, now and forever." He died on June 1, 1969 in Longview, Texas.

Today the renovated all-steel "Carefree Home" R. G. LeTourneau designed and constructed stands at the Wheels O' Time Museum north of Peoria as a tribute to his creative genius and dedicated commitment to his employees, his family and his faith. While the Museum closed for the winter on November 1, the house will reopen when the Museum opens for the 2019 season on May 1 next spring. At that time the project planning committee is expecting to dedicate an Illinois State Historical marker at the site.

Mark L. Johnson is a past president of the Peoria Historical Society. Mark has taught adult continuing education classes in various topics relating to Peoria history at both Bradley University and Illinois Central College. He served as the Chairperson for the "Steel House Revival Project" Planning Committee.