

First historical marker of the season

The Wheels O' Time Museum in north Peoria was the setting for the dedication of first ISHS historical marker unveiling on May 4. Friends of the museum gathered at 11 a.m. at the location of the a LeTourneau Steel House, an incredible architectural relic of Depression-era Illinois that has been restored to its vintage glory and is now open for tours at the museum.

Mark Johnson, who led efforts to erect the 250-word historical marker at the site, served as master of ceremonies, while Marcia Johnson (no relation) gave tours of the home and Jim Baldwin answered questions about the museum and its latest acquisition. ISHS Executive Director William Furry gave remarks about the Historical Marker Program and helped Ms. Johnson unveil the marker, which reads:

R.G. LeTourneau's Steel House

Robert Gilmore LeTourneau (usually referred to as R.G.) was known as the "Dean of Earthmoving" and "God's Businessman." At the urging of Caterpillar Tractor Company, he moved his manufacturing business from California to Peoria in 1935.

LeTourneau discovered the men he hired struggled to find affordable housing in the Peoria area. Being an innovative problem solver, (LeTourneau received almost 300 patents in his lifetime), he conceived and began to build small all-steel homes to address the problem. Between 1936 and 1938, LeTourneau's factory built approximately 150 of these homes. Marketed as "The Carefree Home," about two dozen of these structures still exist in the Peoria area. Construction of the homes ceased in 1938 as the demand for steel increased with the beginning of World War II.

In 2015, this "Carefree Home" was discovered on the grounds of the former LeTourneau factory, then operated by Komatsu America. Never sold, the building had been used as a manufacturing office within the factory complex. Long abandoned, the house was intended to be scrapped as part of a factory renovation.

Komatsu America generously donated the house to the Central Illinois Landmarks Foundation. In 2016 to 2018, it was renovated through a collaborative partnership with the Peoria Historical Society and the Wheels O' Time Museum. The Grand Opening of the renovated home was held on May 01, 2018. The interior of the home reflects the life of a family in 1938: an employee of the LeTourneau plant, his wife and their eight year old son.

Sponsored by the Wheels O' Time Museum and the Illinois State Historical Society.

Efficient, cozy, and practical, the restored LeTourneau Steel House is less than 900 square feet but includes a living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen and bathroom. "LeTourneau



The LeTourneau steel houses were only 900 square feet but included two bedrooms, bathroom and kitchen, and a living room.

built these steel houses for his workmen and their families, who had trouble finding decent affordable housing in Peoria during the height of the Depression," said Furry.

"This particular steel house was used as office building and never lived in," said Mark Johnson. Nevertheless, the repairs required to renovate and restore the house were extensive. "We had the involvement of several labor unions in the reconstruction—steelworkers, plumbers, electricians, and painters—and their handiwork is visible everywhere. Many of the everyday items in the home came from donors and the Wheels O' Time Museum."

The Wheels O' Time Museum itself is a fascinating destination in Peoria County and features vintage automobiles, tractors, clocks, mechanical and electronic devices, musical instruments, and dozens of curiosities, including a singing barbershop quarter comprised of ex-U.S. Presidents.

Wheels O' Time is located at 1710 W. Woodside Drive in Dunlap, Illinois, 15 miles north of Peoria just off Highway 40. Hours are noon to 5 p.m., Wednesday thru Sunday from May to October.



Mark Johnson explains the living room furnishings of the LeTourneau Steel House to Jim Baldwin and Carlotta Bielfeldt.

Photos by William Furry