

INTRODUCTION

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Home Is Where the Heart Is

In 1948, Stanley and Wini Reben bought their first home for ninety dollars down. It was one of the many tiny two-bedroom Cape Cod homes springing up all over Levittown, New York, after World War II.

"I was thrilled," Wini remembers, more than half a century later. "After living in an apartment, those four rooms were like a palace."



*The typical Cape Cod home of Levittown, New York, ca. 1948.
Image courtesy of the Levittown Public Library collection.*

Built at the astonishing rate of thirty a day, the homes in America's first planned community were small and affordable, often purchased with low-interest loans the government offered returning GIs. Stanley, who had just finished service in the Coast Guard, and Wini, who worked at a cosmetics counter at a local store, borrowed their down payment and occupied their \$8,000 home before their street was even paved.

Levittown's 17,000 homes were built in an assembly-line fashion—they were identical on the inside and nearly so on the outside as well. In fact, a folk tune popularized by Pete Seeger in the 1960s dismissed planned communities like Levittown as "little boxes

made of ticky-tacky" that "all looked just the same." But Stanley and Wini would tell you today that the home is defined by the homemaker, not the house itself. You see, the people who moved into the houses were all unique, with their own ideas about what makes a house a home.

The Rebens added a deck and finished the attic. Their neighbors added porches and gardens, bay windows, and dormers. Over the years, the fruit trees planted by the developers in each yard stretched their branches toward the sky, each taking a slightly different path. Fifty years later, when the Levittown Historical Society set out to purchase a home in its original condition, there were absolutely none to be found. All the once-identical houses had been individually transformed into homes as distinct as the people who lived in them.

And for those of you curious to know how much those 1948 homes later were selling for, a quick check of Levittown's real estate postings revealed 2007 prices in the \$400,000-plus range.



*A Levittown home today.
Image courtesy of the Levittown Public Library collection.*

Your first home may come with jewel-toned carpets or solid-beige walls. It may be a challenging fixer-upper, a quaint old cottage, or a sleek modern. But from the moment you unpack your furniture and start hanging your pictures, your home becomes a mirror that reflects your taste and personality, your likes and dislikes, your values, and your dreams. It becomes yours because you make it yours.

The pride of ownership that comes with buying your first home is inevitable. Over the days and months to come, you will most likely create an environment of your very own—one that expresses your taste, style, and creativity. A home is also your haven—a place where you can be yourself and escape from the daily grind of the outside world. Once that front door is shut, you are free to be and do as you please.

There is a special category of life's firsts. First kiss. Driving for the first time. Going away to college. Starting your first job. Saying, "I do." Having a child ... All these unique moments bring significance to the story of your life. Whether you're from Calgary, Cocoa Beach, or any place in between, walking into your own home for the first time is just as magical.

Gary's First Home



When I was growing up, home had three different addresses in Houston, Texas. But some of my fondest memories are of my very first one, which was also my parents' first home. It was one of those sturdy tract houses you saw everywhere in the 1950s—three tiny bedrooms, two baths with shiny, pastel-colored tiles on the walls, a small den, and a tight two-car garage.

Our home stood on Dorothy Street, surrounded by others that were almost identical except for the color. The homes were separated by chain-link fences that kept the kids and pets safe but still freely invited conversations between neighbors. The lawns were all mowed and manicured. It was a great place to grow up. Looking back, I'm not surprised that the first house I wanted to buy—the one that got away—was the spitting image of that childhood home.

When I think of that house, so many heartfelt memories come crowding in. I recall my dad playing with us on the hardwood floor and tossing us up in the air. There was the huge swing set in the backyard. It wasn't one of those lightweight ones that rocks back and forth. Dad bought ours from a place that sold park playground equipment and then cemented it into the ground. It had swings, a slide, monkey bars, and even a trapeze, and it set the stage for many adventures. He also built a sandbox next to it, and my buddies and I spent hours there building tunnels and playing with our plastic cars and trucks. We built elaborate backyard forts, using

cardboard boxes we scavenged from the nearby furniture store. Each summer Dad put up a blue plastic pool that would hold seven or eight kids. Everyone in the neighborhood congregated there.

I can still see my mother standing at the back fence and talking to our neighbor, Mrs. Ramsey, and my father, with a bandana around his head, mowing the lawn in his plaid shorts, dress shoes, and dark socks—dads didn't wear tennis shoes back then. I remember the cozy, wood-paneled breakfast nook with a Formica table where we gathered for meals, and where my mother once washed my mouth out with soap for saying something she thought was disrespectful. I recall birthdays and holidays, especially the aluminum Christmas tree with the color wheel—my two sisters and I spent hours watching the tree change colors as the wheel turned. Dad built a workshop in the backyard. He had someone pour the concrete foundation, and he constructed the rest. I carried his tools, and it was there I first learned how to hammer nails. Building the workshop took him a year; and although it was only 12 foot by 12 foot, I thought it was huge.

In each of our moves, my parents used the money they made from the previous home sale to buy something bigger with nicer features. Our third and last home had dark paneling, bright red carpeting, and a mural, painted by the builder's wife, in the formal dining room—my parents walked in and fell in love. For them, it was their dream home. And for the rest of my school days, it was mine, too.

Buying your first home is probably the most exhilarating material experience you can have. Nothing else compares. It's where you hang your hat, where you rest your head; it's a source of security, an investment in your financial future. More importantly, a home becomes part of the psyche that houses your most powerful memories. You can reminisce about a rental, but you'll never love it the same way. Your home is where you build a workshop or cement a swing set into the ground or plant a rose garden like my dad and I did. There really is no place like home, especially when it's your own—and it's on Dorothy Street.

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