



Episode 706, Story 3: Boxcar House

Gwen: Our last story investigates a house with an underground past. 10 million American service men and women came home at the close of WWII, eager to turn their energies from fighting to building a modern postwar nation. An emerging network of interstate highways would encourage a new scale of housing in large new suburbs, places like Levittown New York -where the company's factory produced one 4-room house every 16 minutes in 1950. But the building boom takes a while. The Depression, followed by the war years, had left the nation with a critical housing shortage. Where would the army of returning GI's live? Now the Strathearns of Lakewood, Colorado, have made a discovery which may offer a unique look at how necessity became the mother of invention in postwar America.

Bill: When I discovered what was down in the basement, it made the house that we're living in much more interesting.

Gwen: I'm meeting Kathy and Bill to get this investigation on track. You must be Kathy and Bill.

Kathy: Hi, Gwen. It's nice to meet you.

Gwen: It's nice to meet both of you. Oh, really lovely.

Kathy: Thanks. Basement's right this way. Here we are.

Gwen: Well this certainly isn't your usual basement rafter, is it?

Kathy: No, that's what we thought when we first looked at the house.

Bill: It is amazing. This is several hundred pounds of steel looking at you. And there's another one at the other end.

Gwen: So when did you first see this?



Bill: Well, we came one afternoon to look at the house and I immediately noticed this because basically I am a railroad buff.

Gwen: Kathy and Bill believe that the beam is the undercarriage of a railroad car. The deed says their house was built in 1949. Bill has a plan of the neighborhood, known as Daniels Gardens. It's dated 1939. So tell me exactly what you'd like for me to find out about your house. Not surprisingly, it's the basement roof that has Kathy and Bill mystified.

Kathy: We would like you to find out exactly what it is, and, why it's here.

Gwen: Well it's certainly an intriguing story. These beams certainly look like the undercarriage of some kind of train car. Well measurements are useful. I'll get my tape measure. 8 feet. I'm not sure, but this seems a little narrow for a railroad car. In any case, this isn't a fashion statement about the beauty of industrial objects; it's a real piece of equipment that's holding up the house. It seems to be covered with grease and dirt, as if it were taken right off the tracks and put down on this lot. Well this must be the edge of the under carriage. Look at that: "only". The undercarriage is directly below the kitchen. There's no indication that there was once any kind of train car right here or that there's an under carriage of a train right below my feet. It's clearly recent although the façade evokes American architecture of a century ago. A mix of shingle style and craftsman style, American houses. Bill told me the house had undergone renovations. I wonder what it looked like before. Let's take a look at this map, now. So, Daniels Garden addition, 1939. These lots are very narrow and quite deep. And this depth may be suggesting that people had small vegetable and even fruit farms in the back. And here's our plot right here. Twenty-one. Oh, look at this. No lot or tract may be used for fox, mink, skunk or hog farms; dog kennels, junk yards, or salvage places. This seems like it could have been a working class neighborhood. And here we have Leonard Zahl, owner and sub-divider. So who was Leonard Zahl? I want to learn more about the early residents of Daniels Gardens. I've arranged for a tour with Katie Thorsheim. She's co-author of *50 Cents Down*, a history of this neighborhood. Well I can see that all these plots are pretty much the same size. So who was Leonard Zahl who did this?

Katie: He was a Turkish immigrant. We believe he came from Detroit. He followed a fairly common model of the time which was to divide the land into little pieces, hold the title, and sell them to people who would then build.



Gwen: Katie says the map is Zahl's original site plan. The land is just 10 miles from downtown Denver. Zahl bought it in 1938, laid out the plots, and priced them to sell.

Katie: He had a - a big billboard on Colfax, right up here, and a little tin shack under it. And on the billboard was a hen and bunch of chicks and it said, "50 cents down, 50 cents a week."

Gwen: That's 50 cents a week -11-and-a-half years for 300 dollar lot plus the cost of building a house. The economy had improved, but money was still tight. This was a high-risk deal for the early residents.

Katie: If you didn't pay the money Zahl was knocking on your door. If you didn't have it, you were out of there.

Gwen: Even if you had built part of a house or a whole house on there, he would get the whole thing and could sell it again.

Katie: The whole thing back, yes.

Gwen: So who came to live here?

Katie: Almost every single one of them was the child of a homesteader. They had helped their family establish something, usually in the eastern plains where the Dust Bowl came.

Gwen: Katie tells me that Leonard Zahl got lucky in 1941. The Federal Government built a munitions plant just a mile from the neighborhood. At the height of the war it employed 20,000 people. The managers built a small rail line to bring in raw materials and carry out the finished products.

Katie: Then we see people who worked at the munitions plant who drove through Daniels on their way home and they went "honey, we could buy a house." So we had both the munitions plant feeding these people and the munitions plant providing wages for the people who were already here.



Gwen: Daniel's Gardens residents who worked in factories retained their rural roots, planting gardens and raising livestock. That's still happening today. Now I'm sure that most of these houses have changed a lot since they were originally built. But how were they first put together?

Katie: Well you were starting with bare land. So you started with a little square house.

Gwen: Katie's description of a nearby freight track that serviced the munitions plant has caught my attention. Was our house built from one of those rail cars? Have you heard of anything like that? Katie explains that farming roots and Depression era frugality meant Daniels Garden's residents were creative builders who made the most of ad hoc, recycled materials. But she's not familiar with our house.

Katie: You were trying to avoid spending too much money. To be honest the preferred material was packing crates, or recycled wood. There were a lot of little kids that spent their lives pulling nails for their dads. If the materials were available you'd make a house that worked around those materials. If somebody had a shed, glom it on.

Gwen: I'm meeting Sarah Jo Peterson, an expert on what she calls "urban homesteading." Sarah Jo explains how working-class neighborhoods just outside large cities, expanded during the national housing shortage.

Sarah: I brought this to show you really the severity of what was going on. And this is a chart of new housing that is being built, starting '25 and ending with our house in '49.

Gwen: The government restricted home building during World War II.

Sarah: A lot of people know about rationing during World War II. And the Federal Government rationed sugar. The Federal Government rationed gasoline. But the Federal Government also rationed new houses. Because construction materials had to go to the war. An easy way to think about it, in the 1930's people had no money and in the 1940's they had no materials. But during this entire time the population was growing.



Gwen: The crisis reached its peak when these 10 million GI's returned home from the war, most of them starting new families. Yet four years after the end of the war, the private sector still wasn't building enough homes. And this is the beginning of the baby boom. These GI's are coming home. They get married and they have babies right away.

Sarah: That's right. And they want to have places of their own. And they're just - aren't available. And they're living in their parent's garages, and they're doubling up with their younger brothers. And what the country needs to do is build a lot of housing, a lot of affordable housing fast.

Gwen: The eventual response to the crisis would be mass suburbia: planned communities that took advantage of industrial building materials and standardized designs. The 1949 Housing Act helped launch these large-scale suburbs. One of the first, known as Levittown, was built by William J. Levitt and sons in Long Island NY.

Sarah: Levitt's houses start being opened in 1949 and by 1951 he has put up around 17,000 houses using this mass production.

Gwen: Neighborhoods like Daniels Gardens, where people built their own houses out of unconventional materials, were also common.

Sarah: Today we think that a builder builds a house, and then you get a mortgage, and the house is all done, and you pay for it over time. They instead built the house, over time, as they could afford it.

Gwen: Sarah hasn't heard of houses being built out of railroad cars, but she says it makes perfect sense.

Sarah: That would have been the perfect solution to the housing materials shortages. To find something that had that kind of structure that you could move right into. You could bring it on the site and then make it your home.

Gwen: My office has put me in touch with Flint Schmiekel, the previous owner of our house.



Flint: We bought it September 14, 2001. Yeah. These are pictures of the original structure when we first bought it. This is basically a rectangular house and there was a boxcar that was basically.

Gwen: Running lengthwise.

Flint: Half the house, yeah, running lengthwise.

Gwen: When Flint began remodeling, the entire structure attached to Kathy and Bill's basement ceiling became visible.

Flint: This is from looking down through the old rafters on to the roof of the train car and you can see that this is the whole train car running right along the side of the walls which was our kitchen and the small bedroom.

Gwen: Yes. So this was the ceiling of the train car here?

Flint: Yes

Gwen: So you did this major expansion?

Flint: Yeah I completely remodeled the whole house with adding a 2-car garage, and a second story, and tearing off the old roof.

Gwen: Flint thinks that the kitchen once housed a different kind of eating establishment - a dining car from a passenger train.

Flint: You can see here the walls were kind of arched; ours had these special wood beams, and windows on the end of it to make it a special dining car.

Gwen: But something bothers me here. Flint thinks our railroad car was originally part of the line that serviced the nearby munitions plant. But why would a dining car have been running on a freight line? I had my office check those measurements I took in the basement. An 8 foot width is



narrower than a standard gauge railcar. Colorado Railroad Museum archivist Ken Forest has agreed to meet me at the house. Ken.

Ken: Hi

Gwen: Thanks for coming out here, let's go inside.

Ken: Ok.

Gwen: It's in here Ken. Let me show you. Now this does seem to me to be the under carriage of some kind of train car.

Ken: A car, right. We can tell by this thing here which is called a bolster, and this is what held the wheels to the car.

Gwen: Now would the proportions or the size of these give you any information?

Ken: From this width I can tell it's a narrow gauge car.

Gwen: But he's not certain the basement structure was ever a railroad car. He spots the word "only" – which prompts him to show me something in the museum's archive. The curious stenciling in Bill and Kathy's basement has given ken our answer. "Exit only." Is that our "only" sign?

Ken: I believe so

Gwen: Let me get it out. Let's see. Oh it is the same typeface. Only and only.

Ken: I'd like to show you some pictures of some Denver Tramway trolley cars. Here passengers would enter in the front of the car, and then when they left they would go back here. Here's the floor and where we were standing in front of the "only", that was the exit door.



Gwen: In Denver, as in other American cities, horse-drawn 'railways' provided the earliest public transportation. Then, from the turn-of-the-century until the 1950's, a network of electric trolley cars replaced the horse-cars, criss-crossing downtown areas and pushing suburban growth outside the city limits. So what happened to these trolley cars?

Ken: Right after the Second World War they started getting rid of routes and replacing them with busses, which at that time was the modern thing to do, because now you had new highways.

Gwen: What Ken shows me next gives me the information to complete my investigation. Well Kathy and Bill I can tell you the origins of your house and a much larger story that it reveals. I met with an expert at the Colorado Railroad Museum and he told me the key is that "only" sign downstairs on the wall.

Bill: Exit only. Yes.

Kathy: Look at that.

Bill: I'll be darned.

Gwen: So Bill and Kathy your home was originally a trolley car on the Denver Transit System. I explain that the story of their house begins with the demise of the Denver Trolley Car System just after World War II. So what happened to these trolley cars?

Ken: Well after they converted to buses they either sold them for scrap or they sold them to people.

Gwen: How much did they sell them for?

Ken: Well, just happen to have a little piece of newspaper here for you.

Gwen: Ha. Look at that.

Ken: And here they're selling them for \$100.



Gwen: So they were a hundred dollars. Look at this “for summer cabins, grain storage, trout hatcheries, playhouses, waiting rooms, etc.” Where there other housed that you know of?

Ken: Oh yeah. Now here, this is the company magazine, *Tram Topics*, in 1950. And here is a picture of a Denver street car and they added a little porch on the front, put some screen windows in, and you can see they are all just sitting here out here enjoying the summer breeze. And then, here is one where they put two together and this made a chapel.

Kathy: A hundred dollars

Bill: Oh my. A lot of...

Gwen: Cheaper than a house

Kathy: Wow

Bill: I'll be darned

Kathy: Isn't that neat?

Bill: That really is neat

Gwen: Your house is fascinating. It also connects us to a much bigger story. At the very time that this Rapid Transit System was being dismantled, cities like Denver committed themselves entirely to building new roads and highways. And here's a report from the Denver Planning Office of their vision for those new highways. Six lane highways with clover leaf intersections, the highways we know today.

Bill: Ah that's right out here, Federal Boulevard to Clear Creek Canyon.

Gwen: Your house has quite a story. And it tells us about a transformative moment in American history.



Bill: To have a trolley car in your basement and be a railroad buff at the same time is kind of exciting.

Gwen: This is really a remarkable house.

Kathy: It is.

Gwen: And the story it opens up is great. After 1950, suburbs grew an average of ten times faster than cities. The new mass-suburbs changed the landscape of American society. Unlike cities, almost everyone here looked alike: young white couples with little children. Earlier suburbs always had some form of public transit, but now suburban homeowners needed their own cars to get to work. To accommodate the new cars and expand new outlying neighborhoods, Congress passed the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956, paving the way for more suburbs, further and further outside cities.