

Aluminum siding marks 50th anniversary

BY MARTHA SLUD
AT NEWSPAPERS
RICHMOND (AP) — It was 1945, and Reynolds Metals Co. was looking for a way to continue producing the aluminum it supplied for wartime defense needs.

The solution? Aluminum siding, that ubiquitous, middle-class American household exterior that's been denigrated as a suburban epitaph and hailed as a marvel of mass production during its 50-year history.

Aluminum siding — heralded as a rust-proof, rot-proof, termite-proof ultra-convenience — helped Reynolds and other companies capitalize on what today has become an estimated \$6 billion household exterior products industry, according to the NAHB Research Center in Upper Marlboro, Md., a subsidiary of the National Association of Home Builders.

Reynolds, however, estimates siding could be as much as a \$20 billion annual industry. Many homeowners used to paint their wooden houses every few years, but aluminum panels — first applied to a cement home and garage in Louisville, Ky. — provided a low-maintenance, relatively inexpensive alternative.

"It was a product that came at a time when Americans were changing," said Terry Olbrysh, a spokesman for Richmond-based Reynolds. "People wanted more leisure time."

The development of aluminum siding paralleled the post-World War II rise in discretionary income, two-carrier couples and the spread of suburbia. People no longer had the time or desire to paint their homes every few years, Olbrysh said.

This is mass production at its best. It serves a genuine need," said Marshall Fishwick, a Virginia Tech humanities professor who specializes in popular culture.

But mass-produced siding also has a flip side, Fishwick said. "It doesn't have the warmth and grain of wood, nor does it have the continuity of brick," he said. "It depersonalizes the house."

Aluminum siding is "just one aspect of Americans' fascination with technology," said James Kermow, a professor of modern art and architecture at the College of William and Mary. "Anything new that made things easier just caught on."

Aluminum because it costs less and is dent-proof. In its early days, aluminum siding often has changed considerably over the last 50 years. Today, aluminum accounts for just 3 percent of the market, said Gerry Malbach, residential marketing manager for Reynolds' Construction Products Division.

Vinyl siding, which became available in the early 1970s, accounts for 44 percent of the market, while wood has a 39 percent market share and masonry 14 percent, Malbach said. He said vinyl siding surpassed

riore with aluminum siding, their homes would appear in an attractive magazine picture spread.

Many builders used to think aluminum and vinyl siding was a maintenance-free home... It's going to take over the whole country eventually. Sr., owner of Richmond Aluminum and Remodeling Corp.

"Now you'll find homes worth half a million dollars that have vinyl on them," he said. "Everyone wants a maintenance-free home... It's going to take over the whole country eventually. Sr., owner of Richmond Aluminum and Remodeling Corp."

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