

*Dan and Pam Rodenberg and their daughter, Danielle, live in an early sixties Richardson model home in Sauget, Illinois. For many young couples starting out, a mobile home is an affordable alternative to the traditional single-family house.*



His 1954 report concluded:

The trailerite construction workers possess characteristics that are generally prized by all American communities—sobriety, occupational skill and a genuine interest in contributing to and improving the community in which they live. . . . They view themselves as a community asset and are, therefore, extremely sensitive to charges that they are irresponsible trailer trash.

As the travel trailer became a house trailer, the change in its function required a corresponding change in its form. Since mobility was still a prime consideration, the house trailer remained small and streamlined, growing in length and height, but essentially restricted by the limitations of highway transport. The styling of the exterior continued to draw on an association with the car. Two-toned cars with jet-stream chrome strips, for example, heralded similar details in the trailers they towed. At the same time, trailer interiors were slowly changing. Fixed convertible or lightweight portable furnishings were replaced with scaled-down Colonial-style suites. Intelligently and efficiently designed storage walls, which had been featured in the early commercially built trailers, were replaced by conventional closets where shoes lay in heaps on the floor but in which the suggestion of mobility was at

least avoided. By the Korean War, complete bathrooms had become standard.

The changes in house trailer interiors paralleled the efforts of magazines published for trailer users to suggest that trailers could be as livable as conventional houses. During the Korean War, these magazines commonly pictured women looking at cakes that had just emerged from the oven, kissing children good night, or engaging in other normal household activities. Articles instructed people on such topics as how to hold a Thanksgiving dinner in a house trailer.

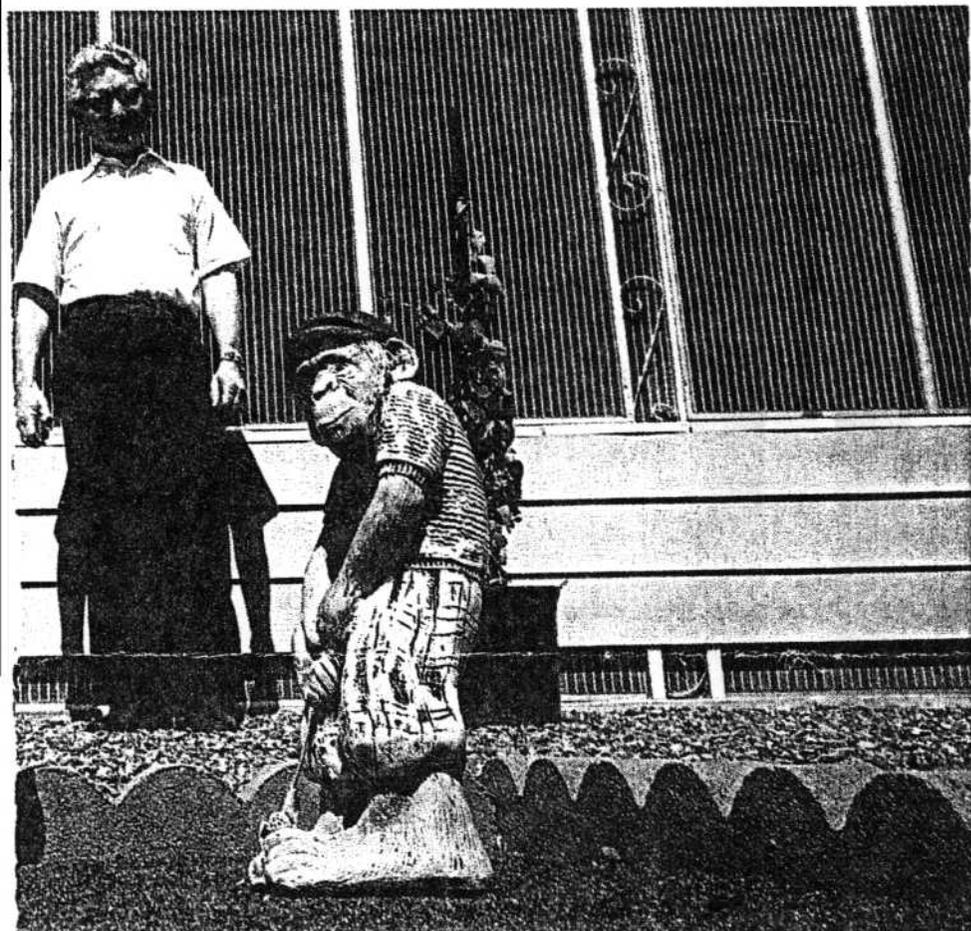
At the same time, parks were assuming a more permanent appearance. Whereas in the early 1940s a trailer that had become permanently attached to its site by virtue of additions was regarded as a curiosity, a decade later trailer magazines were featuring parks with lots separated by picket fences. The size of parks also increased, notably in boomtown areas, requiring planners to think about them more as communities than as temporary parking accommodations. Woodall's *Guide to Trailer Parks*, which began publication in the mid-1940s, rated parks in terms of the quality and permanence of their facilities. Paved streets, patios, and lighting were some of the features regarded as signs of a superior park.



The trailer occupants themselves were adding enclosed porches, mud rooms, and carports. In Berwyn, Maryland, and elsewhere, however, trailer owners were brought to court and enjoined to remove their additions and otherwise keep their homes mobile in fact as well as in form. In general, the court rulings of this period upheld the idea that a house trailer could serve as a home, but preferably when its use was restricted to parks and its stay limited.

Not surprisingly, many communities, and especially their real estate interests, sought to restrict the establishment of trailer parks. What is curious is that house trailer manufacturers themselves seemed to be slow to realize that what they were producing was year-round housing rather than vacation housing whose purpose had been temporarily diverted by war. In

*Because of their manageable size and convenience of maintenance, mobile homes are popular with retirees, either as vacation homes or as principal housing. The quality of life offered by a particular mobile home community can also be an attraction. The amenities at the Apache Wells mobile home park in East Mesa, Arizona, where Marvin Justice has his '73 Coronada, include a golf course and swimming pool.*



1954, Elmer Frey, president of Rollohome Corporation, suggested in an article in *Trailer Dealer Magazine* that the house trailer industry should recognize that its market—98 percent of it in fact—was with home buyers:

I believe that products should be called exactly what they are. . . . If you saw a truck and semitrailer loaded with a bulldozer, would you say, "There goes a trailer?" No—you would say, "Look at that bulldozer!" By the same token, when you see a man towing his home, why do you call it a trailer? Why not say "There goes a man towing his home!" Why not call it exactly what it is—a home which is mobile—hence a MOBILE HOME.

Since the mid-1950s, an increasingly sharp distinction has been drawn between vacation trailers and mobile homes. The ideals that had been associated with the

travel trailer have been retained to this day by vacation trailer advocates. Mobile home manufacturers and users, by contrast, have sought to establish the idea that a dwelling, even on wheels, can function as a perfectly adequate home.

The transition from house trailer to mobile home was marked by a major change in physical form. In 1954, the first ten-foot-wide mobile homes were introduced. Within three years a third of all manufacturers were offering "ten-wides," and after five years they had become the market standard. The increase in width from eight to ten feet allowed for a corridor, which could be used to get from room to room, providing more privacy and a more houselike floor plan.

Professional towing and setup were required for the larger mobile home. The cost of a long-distance move might equal

the resale value of the unit. Whereas house trailer occupants had been more mobile than the average household, the mobile home population was less mobile (moving every 5.2 years versus 5 years for the population as a whole, according to the 1970 census). These new, more stable occupants were different from their predecessors in other ways. They were less affluent, less well educated, and younger. They chose mobile home living, not because it supported their life style, but because it was a starter home on the way to owning a conventional house.

These mobile home dwellers often made additions to their units. Some, such as a porch or stairs, were necessitated by the characteristics of the units themselves. Others, like skirting that covered the undercarriage, might be required by a park or municipality; while still other additions—mud rooms, carports, and even boathouses—were matters of personal taste and need. When located on a private lot, instead of in a park, these additions were sometimes so elaborate that the mobile home itself disappeared beneath them. The total effect of these changes was to disguise the mobility of the home. Particular attention was given to the tell-tale hitch. It might be buried beneath bushes or used to support flowerpots or prop up a wagon wheel.

Double-wides (consisting of two units joined along the long axis) and expandable units (with pull-out sections) were regarded as more houselike, and therefore more desirable. Zoning officials and the courts agreed. Mobile homes that looked more like houses were more likely to be accepted into areas zoned for single-family residences. And park developers began to build parks that looked more like conventional suburban subdivisions. To support the development of better parks the Mobile Home Manufacturers Association sponsored a park design service. Its publications showed parks with playgrounds, clubhouses, and swimming pools. Curvilinear street layouts, typical of the new suburbs, were also featured.

The improved characteristics of the mobile home and park, coupled with low cost, attracted an increasing number of retired

*The Tom Stones live in a 1981 Premier "triple-wide," in the high-class Palmas del Sol mobile home park in East Mesa, Arizona. A manufactured house this substantial would have seemed a contradiction to the pioneer "trailerites," who envisioned simple dwellings that facilitated an unencumbered life style.*



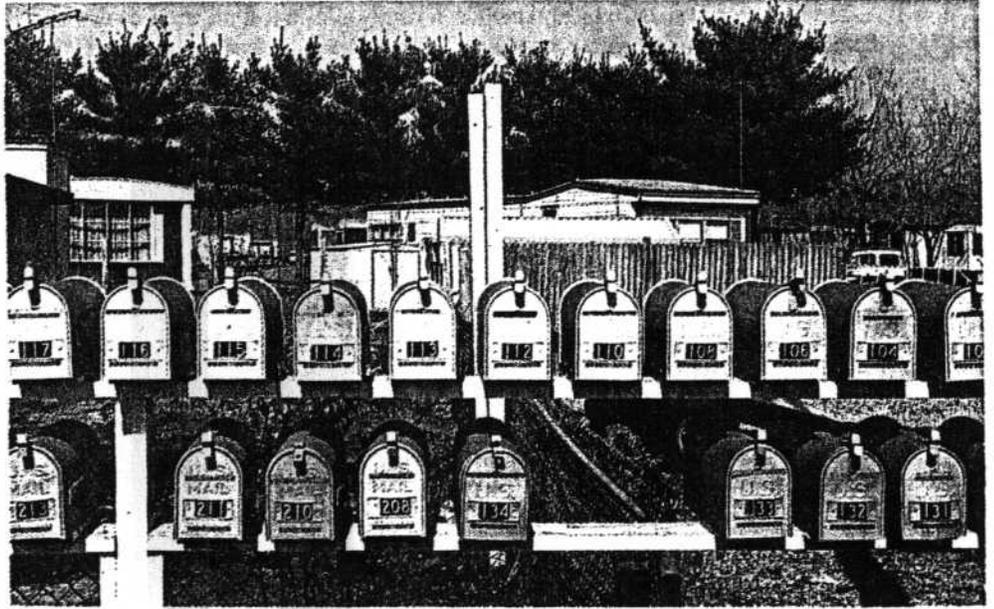
people, who settled throughout the Sun Belt. In parts of Florida's west coast mobile homes began to outnumber conventional dwellings. For many of the elderly—the "snowbirds"—the mobile home provided a winter retreat, but others saw it as their last home.

The development of larger mobile home parks, in which units were clearly intended to be more permanent, was re-

sisted by real estate interests. They argued that mobile homes did not return the cost of their community services, and that the indiscriminate placement of mobile homes on lots adjacent to single-family houses would depreciate the resale value of the latter. None of these objections were new—they had first been raised in the 1930s. What was new were the grounds on which some of them were be-

ing made, namely, that the mobile home was not a proper single-family dwelling because it was built in a factory. Permanent housing, it was argued in the courts, should be defined as being built on a site rather than transported to it. Given the nature of this objection, it is surprising that it was raised by real estate interests rather than by builders. But organized labor, which has often resisted attempts to indus-

*Mailboxes at the Jack and Jill mobile home park in Portage, Indiana, suggest that in some ways, residents who rent their lots are like tenants in an apartment building. Increasingly, homes and lots are being sold and financed together, providing the rights and equity associated with conventional home ownership.*



to the effect of such living on the sense of community. The supposedly transient nature of the population, nonownership of the land that mobile home dwellers lived on, and the way they were often fenced in and fenced off from the rest of the community were expected to result in social isolation. Once again the findings did not confirm the expectations. People living in mobile homes were found to socialize more frequently with their neighbors than those living in conventional subdivisions. In turn, their sense of security was high, in part because they felt that others were watching out for their homes.

Ironically, evidence of this strong sense of community began to raise new objections to mobile home parks, this time on the basis that they were too homogeneous (although so are many new suburban subdivisions). Elaine Kendall, in *The Happy Mediocrity* (1971), observed:

In this whiskery age, it is possible to drive through forty-seven parks without ever seeing a beard, a mustache, or even a set of sideburns on any male, young or old. And then one realizes—of course—there are no students in the parks. No blacks, no urbanites. Nobody in communications, advertising, show business, the arts, or the sciences. No one, in fact, who even approves of these categories.

Blacks and other minorities were conspicuously underrepresented—they still make up less than 3 percent of all occupants. Why this should be is not really understood. Prejudice cannot be the only factor, for it does not explain the scarcity of mobile homes in minority communities.

Since 1976 the climate of American housing has changed in ways that have significantly affected the mobile home. An ever larger number of households cannot afford a traditional single-family house, and the high cost of financing has caused a precipitous drop in the construction of new housing units. Mobile homes have been increasing in cost, but at a slower pace than conventional homes. In 1982, for example, the average new single-family house cost more than \$83,000, while the average mobile home (exclusive of land) sold for less than a quarter of that.

The lower cost of mobile homes is especially important to first-time home buyers, who make up the largest percentage of owners. Ease of maintenance follows as a reason for their purchase, while mobility ranks low on the list. For the second largest group of buyers, the elderly, it is not so much the cost of mobile home living that is of primary importance but its convenience, as well as the quality of the mobile home community.

trialize building, has largely ignored the mobile home. Perhaps this is because the mobile home has consistently and primarily sold to the lower end of the housing market where conventional, unsubsidized builders simply cannot compete.

In the house trailer period of development, sociologists had been concerned with the effect of mobile home living on child rearing. Now their concern shifted

The passage of the 1976 federal mobile home construction and safety standards, which certify the structural durability of mobile homes, has helped to increase the amount and term of federally guaranteed mortgage money available for their purchase. The effect has been to legitimize the mobile home as permanent housing and to encourage the production of more houselike units.

In light of these developments the industry has chosen to change the name of its product once again, from mobile home to manufactured housing. The new name emphasizes that this is housing produced in a factory rather than housing made to be mobile. Many manufacturers have diversified and also produce modular homes, which differ from mobile homes in that their chassis and wheels are not permanently attached. Ironically, the change in industry name marks a further shift away from the earlier aesthetic of the shiny, metal-sided travel trailer, cruising off into the sunset, toward a "stick built" aesthetic, emulating the appearance of a house assembled piece by piece on its site. The manufactured house is not only designed to the insulation requirements of a specific region; it is also often styled to assimilate regional preferences—simulated-stucco hardboard in the Southwest, simulated-brick fiberglass in the Northeast, and rough-sawn veneered plywood on the West Coast.

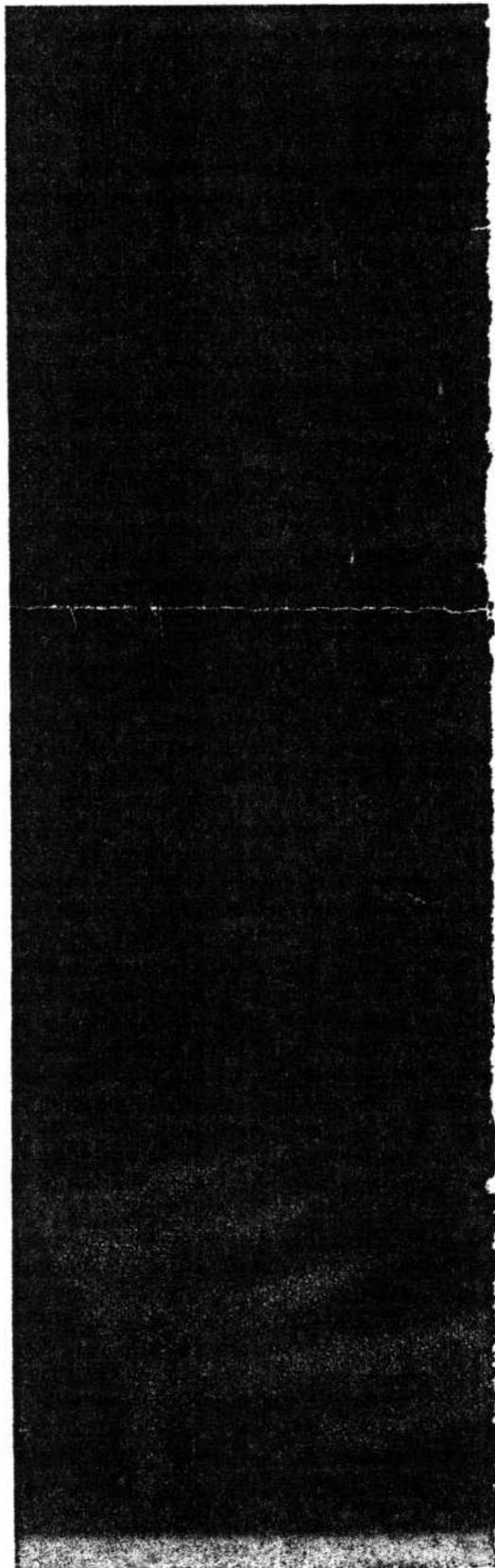
Current industry estimates suggest that only 7 percent of the mobile homes being built today will be moved once they are set up on a site. This trend is evident in the increased popularity of mobile home subdivisions and condominium parks in which the residents own their homesites. Several states (for example, Vermont, Indiana, and California) have recently passed legislation or received court rulings that forbid discrimination against the use of mobile homes per se in residentially zoned districts. And the Department of Housing and Urban Development has proposed a new program to allow mobile homes and lots to be financed together, thereby encouraging acceptance of the permanently sited mobile home as real estate. Recent studies show that a mobile home perma-

nently affixed to a privately owned lot will not depreciate, as a car does, but will appreciate, although at a slower rate than a conventional detached house. Fuller's vision of cheap, portable housing that could be recycled or traded in for more advanced units has given way to a desire for permanence.

As the evolution of the mobile home suggests, there is pluralism and inconsistency in the American ideal of housing. We place a high value on advanced industrialized products—every home must have the latest gadget—but the home itself should be hand built, preferably in Colonial style. We look with nostalgia to traditional neighborhoods and small towns as the cures for a multitude of social problems, and yet we have always been a highly mobile society. We believe that economic advancement is demonstrated by physical as well as social mobility, but our institutions continue to favor the establishment and maintenance of fixed and stable communities. The average household now moves once every 4.5 years. Why is it assumed that people who buy a conventional house and move out within 5 years are pillars of the community, while people who buy houses on wheels but don't move them are a threat?

In *Democracy in America* (1851), de Tocqueville observed some of these contradictions: "In the United States a man builds a house to spend his later years in, and sells it before the roof is on; he plants a garden and lets it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he brings a field into tillage, and leaves other men to gather the crops."

That such contradictions are less evident and more tolerable to us is perhaps the result of the perceived permanence of our houses and communities. Their physical stability has masked our transience and the transformation of our life style. The American household may be attempting to preserve what it believes to be the traditional ideals of home and community as a refuge against broader changes in society. Perhaps, then, the mobile home is regarded with distrust, not because it fails to conform to our ideals, but because it so openly reveals their inconsistencies. □



*Jeremy Handyside, who lives in Park City, Illinois, need not fear deprivation because he lives in a mobile home instead of a site-built Colonial style house. Sociologists studying mobile home communities have found that they support neighborliness, family ties, and child rearing.*

