

Drawn Quarters

The evolution of the mobile home industry has tested American ideals of proper housing

by Allan Wallis

This article reprinted with permission from NATURAL HISTORY, Vol. 93, No. 3; Copyright the American Museum of Natural History, 1984

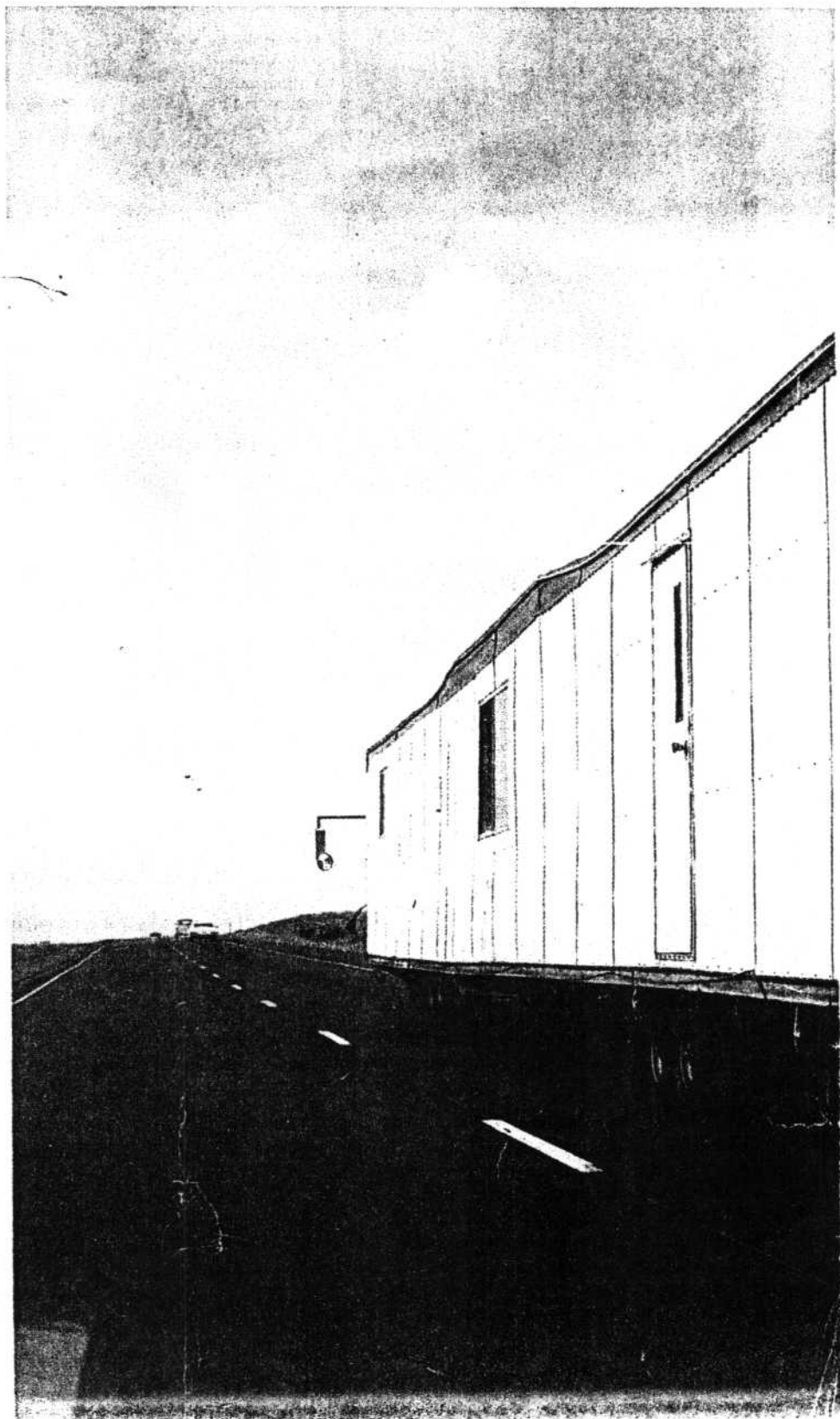
photographs by Geoffrey Biddle

"Most men appear never to have considered what a house is," wrote Thoreau, "and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have" (*Walden*, 1854). The ideal house, he went on to suggest, would be easy and cheap to obtain, unencumbered by luxuries that are primarily for social display. It would not be so fixed or permanent that it would trap persons in a neighborhood not to their liking. The house, in short, would be a tool facilitating the freedom of the individual or family, rather than a burden.

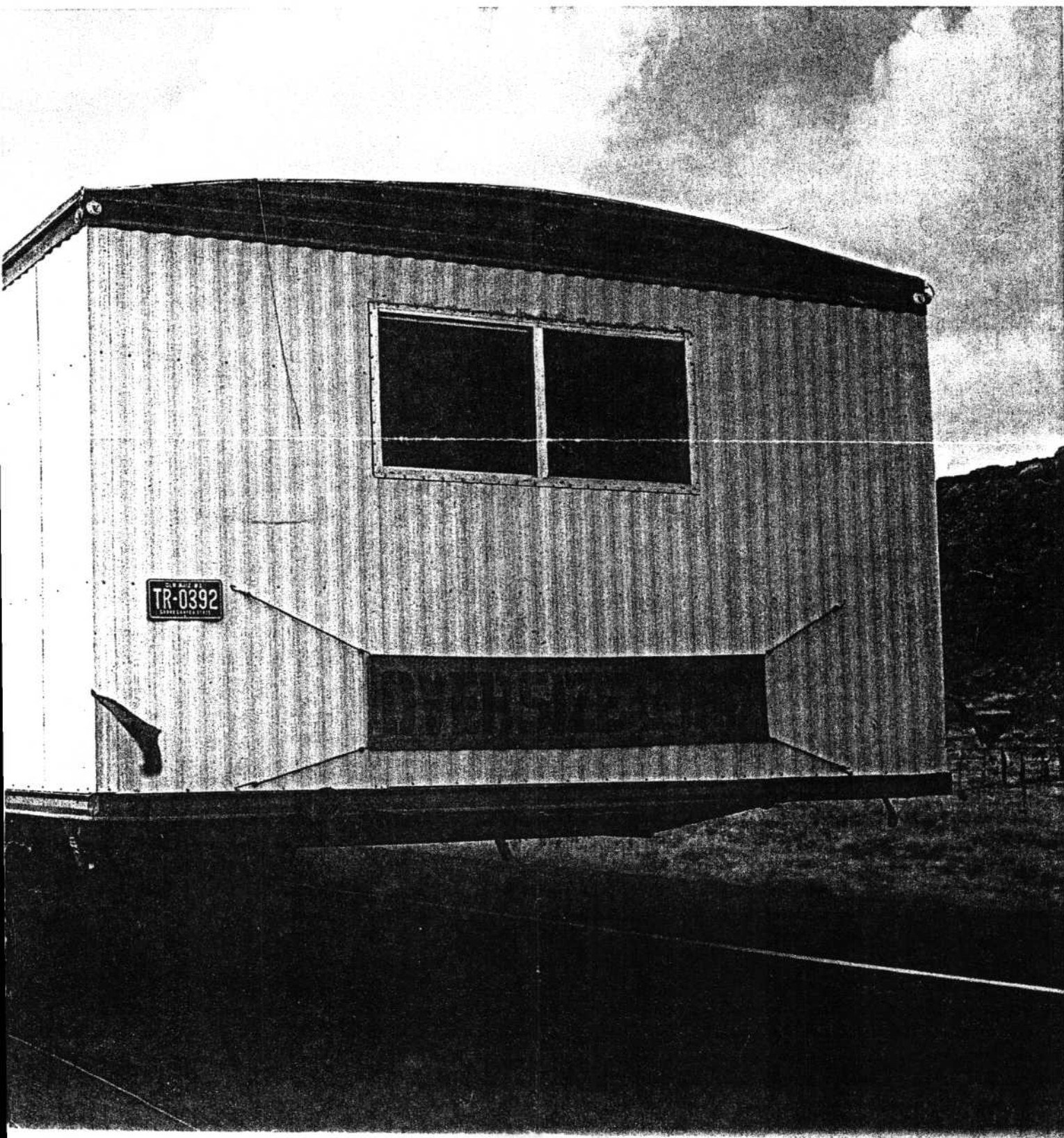
In the mid-1930s, R. Buckminster Fuller evoked the same image when he wrote the architecture classic *Nine Chains to the Moon*. Like Thoreau, he called for houses that would be as mobile as the population itself. They would be produced in a factory, and like phone service and equipment, they would be leased rather than purchased. If we could only divest ourselves of our antiquated values and beliefs regarding the house and the ideal of "home," Fuller argued, we would be able to have the houses we need at a price that we could afford. In the travel trailer industry, then one of the fastest-growing segments of the U.S. economy, he perceived a real, if unintended, field experiment to test this vision of industrialized housing.

In 1936, automobile designer William B. Stout, writing in the first issue of *Trailer Travel Magazine*, predicted that an increasing proportion of people can be expected to give up the "house and lot" idea of a permanent residence and go to an automobile trailer existence.... Neither the present nor future generations will be tied to routine; they do not want to live in old homesteads. They seek progress and advancement in which they themselves have a major part. Within three decades, half of America will be living on wheels.

Although the mobile home has never achieved the success envisaged by Stout, it has nevertheless become the most widely diffused form of factory-built housing in the United States. Currently almost 10 percent of the American population lives in mobile homes. In 1982 more than 36 percent of all new single-family homes, and more than 80 percent of all new hous-



The modern mobile home, like this one on the road in New Mexico, is so large that it must be transported and set up by professional movers. Until the late 1950s, the typical house trailer would have been towed by the family car.



Mary Jane Bruneau's daughter, Crystal, has her own small room in the family's '76 Deerfield. The home is located in Del Ray Park, on the north side of Albuquerque, New Mexico.



ing selling for under \$35,000, were mobile homes.

Among many who are unaware of the current character of mobile homes, an unflattering stereotype prevails: that mobile homes are unadorned metal boxes plunked artlessly down beside the road; that they are to real homes what fast food is to home cooking. The low cost of mobile homes, according to the stereotype, results

from the use of cheap materials and poor workmanship. Ten years ago, Ralph Nader's Center for Automotive Safety produced an exposé of mobile homes that included stories of filled and occupied bathtubs plummeting through floors and of units exploding from their own air pressure when exterior pressure dropped during the passing of a hurricane. While such problems once plagued the industry, fed-

eral standards placed in effect in 1976 have significantly and uniformly improved the quality and safety of mobile homes. The principal cost savings in mobile home construction today results from factory production under controlled conditions, mass purchasing, and the use of less specialized labor.

Mobile homes have evolved through four phases: the travel trailer period

A Navajo in Fort Defiance, Arizona, stands in the doorway of her home, a travel trailer dating from the late forties or early fifties.



(1928–40), house trailer period (1941–54), mobile home period (1955–76), and manufactured housing period (1977–present). The original travel trailer industry eventually branched into two distinct segments. In one, the vacation trailer has been perpetuated in the form of the modern RV (recreation vehicle); in the other, since the mid-1950s, the travel trailer has evolved into the modern mobile home, or manu-

factured house. While upwards of 100,000 people may live in RVs year-round, it is the mobile home industry that has carried forth the principal experiment in factory-built housing.

During the travel trailer period (commencing in the late 1920s) mobile homes were used primarily as vacation lodgings. Three-fourths of the trailers used in this period were homemade affairs, constructed in backyards from spare parts and plywood. Both commercially manufactured and homemade trailers were small, averaging 6 feet 6 inches by 18 feet, and lacked such amenities as hot-water heaters, showers, and toilets. Crude as it was, the trailer offered a convenient alternative to tents or the newly emerging motels. Prominent among early trailer users were retired professionals, such as schoolteachers and doctors, and middle-class families that liked to travel and could afford the time for long vacations. Of the estimated 10 percent of users who occupied their trailers as year-round housing, few were unemployed drifters—most were skilled construction workers who moved from job to job.

The popularity of travel trailers reflected the same ideals that had boosted automobile ownership after World War I. As described in *Harper's Weekly* at the

turn of the century, the excitement of the automobile lay in "the feeling of independence—freedom from timetables, from fixed and inflexible routes, from the proximity of other human beings than one's chosen companions, to linger and stop where the country is beautiful and the way pleasant, or to rush through unattractive surroundings, to select the best places to eat and sleep."

The travel trailer, like the automobile, appealed to two seemingly contradictory ideals: a cherished past and a desired future. From the past came the image of pioneer independence—self-reliance, a simple existence, and unspoiled landscapes. Yet trailers simultaneously evoked a technologically liberated future in which a machine transports its occupants from one setting to the next with all of the ease and convenience of staying at home. These two ideals are evident in the brand names given to the early trailers: Covered Wagon, Conestoga, and Pioneer, as well as Aerocar, Glider, and Silver Dome.

As the number of trailers increased, so did the demand for places to park them. Trailer parks, or auto camps, started out as spaces in existing vacation-cottage sites. By the mid-1930s there was sufficient demand to justify the development of exclusive trailer parks. A typical park

site was 30 by 30 feet, with a water hook-up, a seep hole for waste, and electricity where available. Communal bath, laundry, and toilet facilities were provided. Most parks were run as mom and pop operations, where the owner/managers lived in a single-family house, tending to a park of perhaps thirty transient trailer families.

While the early trailer was designed and used for travel, once set up on the shore of a lake or on private property in the woods, it could be treated as a vacation cottage. Some trailer owners placed their units on blocks and boarded them up in the winter when they were not occupied. This type of use drew heated criticism, most notably from summer resort communities. The controversy soon reached the courts, where the question of where and for how long trailers could park at a site was fought in terms of whether the trailer was a dwelling or a vehicle. Towns were concerned that an influx of trailers would increase density without simultaneously providing an adequate tax base to support the services they required. Some residents also expressed concern that people who lived in trailers posed a threat to the moral standards of the community.

Devoted trailerites (as contemporary trailer users called themselves) defended the mobile life style as a return to essentials, a simplification and perhaps even a purification of home life. "If you don't like your neighbors," wrote Blackburn Sims in his 1937 book *The Trailer Home*, "if you don't like the scenery—if you don't like the temperature—if you don't like the dog your dog associates with . . . when you're living trailer life you simply move." From a somewhat more objective point of view, sociologist Don Cowgill wrote in his 1941 doctoral thesis:

If we may credit the statements of many of these trailerites, they resorted to trailer life to obtain freedom and adventure and get away from the city. . . . My observations lead me to believe that the average trailerite is happier and has more zest for life than his brother who is tied to one spot and feels more of the weight of the world on his back.

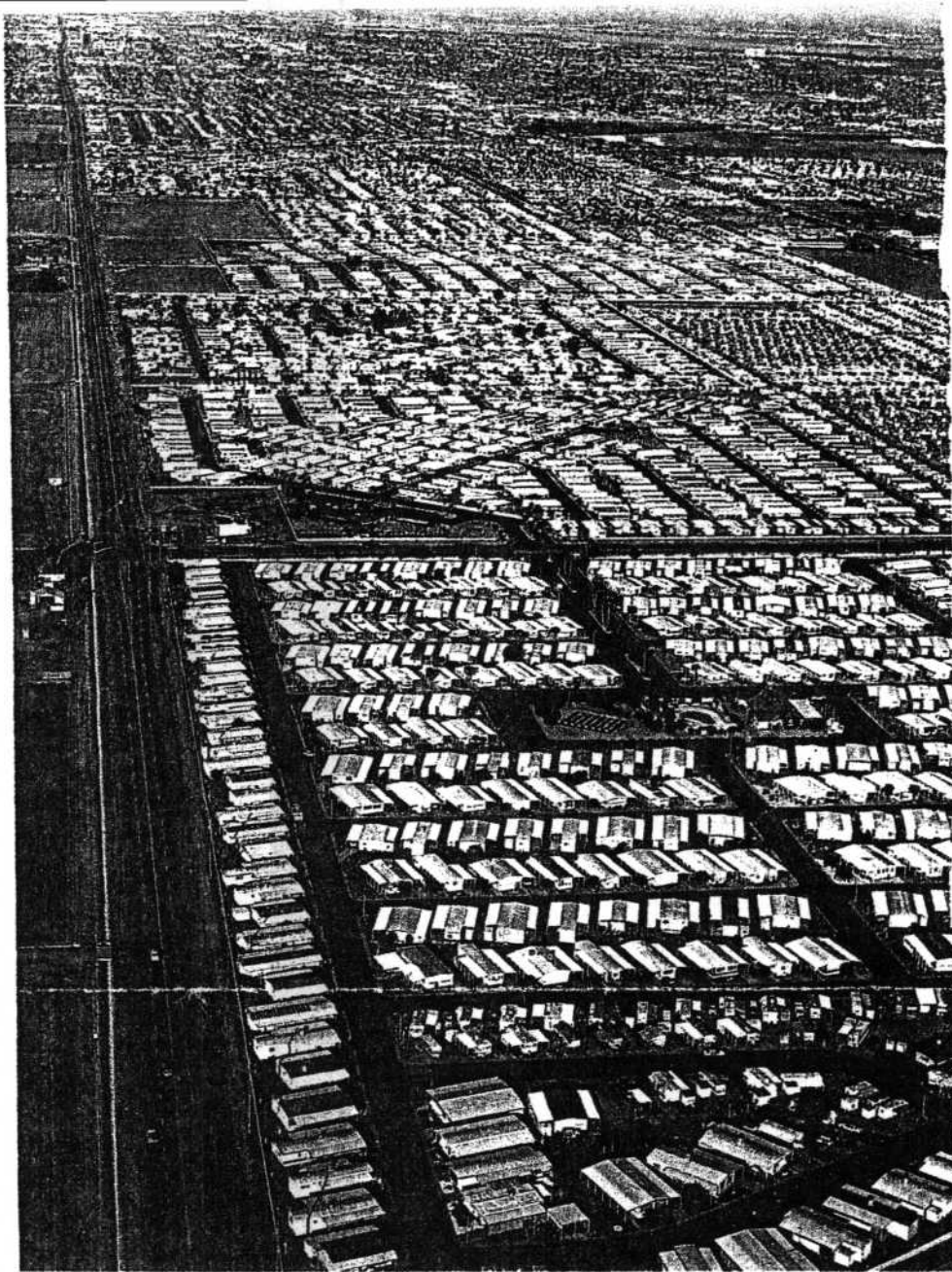
In this first period of trailer development, the advocates of trailers as both vacation and year-round dwellings selected

certain ideals of "home" to support their way of life. If, for example, the home is considered to be a center for child rearing and especially for the education of the young, then the family that moves together and allows its children to experience the diversity of life firsthand is giving them a superior upbringing. Those who opposed trailer living could likewise draw on time-honored images of the permanent home (the garden, the picket fence) to show how the trailer threatened them.

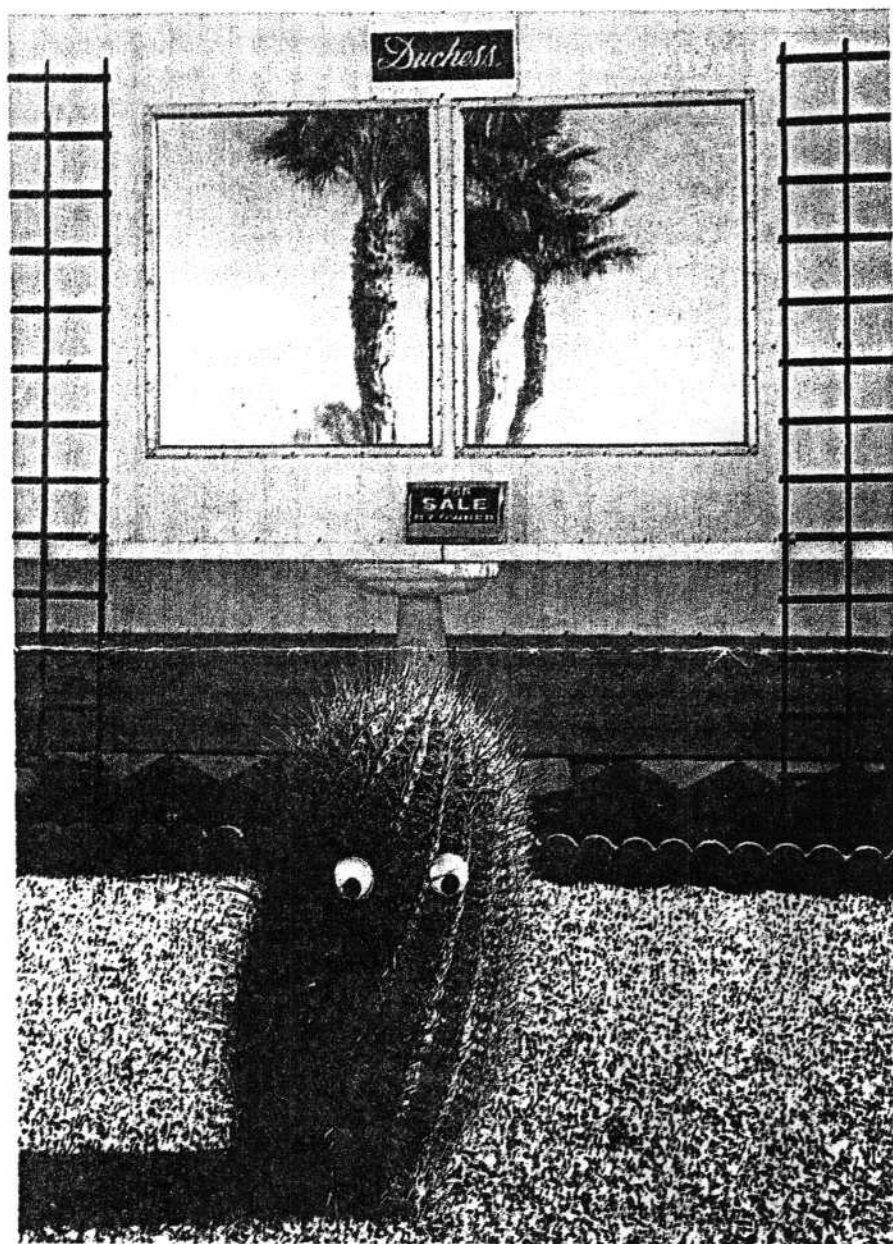
World War II abruptly altered the conditions under which trailers were used, transforming the travel trailer into the house trailer. The war effort curtailed the sale and use of trailers for vacations and created a huge demand for housing in isolated rural areas that were selected as sites for war materiel plants. During the first years of the war the government was the

major purchaser of trailers and also built many of the boomtown trailer parks.

The trailer occupants of this period, as in the previous period, were somewhat more affluent and better educated than average. The vast majority were either military personnel, construction workers who moved around, or war materiel plant workers. By 1948 upwards of 7 percent of the U.S. population was living in house trailers. Unlike the early trailerites, however, many of these users looked upon the trailer as the lesser evil rather than as a desirable life style. Compared with the boardinghouse alternative, the trailer enabled family members to live together in relative privacy from others, if not from each other. Because of a shortage of housing, the demand for trailers as full-time housing continued after the war ended. Subsequently the need was maintained by



Left: Mobile home parks clustered along Apache Trail, east of Phoenix, Arizona, contain a variety of homes, many with built-on additions such as porches and carports. Below: With her wheels concealed, this Duchess seems permanently affixed to her park site in East Mesa. The cost of moving a large mobile home any distance is so great that it often makes more sense to sell it, even if the owner plans to occupy a similar dwelling elsewhere.



the Korean War and the construction of major federal projects such as the National Defense Highway System.

Trailer life in wartime boomtowns was difficult. Trailers were relatively small, and up to the Korean War most remained dependent on trailer parks to provide toilets, showers, and laundry facilities. The diary of a housewife who lived in Michigan near the Willow Run bomber plant,

which employed 42,000 people at its peak, provides the following account of trailer life in 1942:

What a time getting breakfast! I bumped into John several times while he was trying to shave. But when the bacon and eggs, toast and coffee were on the table we both said it seemed just like camping out. . . .

I attempted to bake for the first time today. Made a chocolate cake, John's favor-

ite. There is no regulator on the oven and my guesswork didn't work because my cake burned before it was done. . . .

There is no playground equipment here, only one swing which becomes a source of trouble when there are about 35 children all wanting to use it at the same time. Of course the little tots just love to wallow in the mud around all the trailers at this end of camp. But mothers find it too difficult to wash and to let them play in the mud.

The conditions of boomtown trailer camps gave trailer living, along with its occupants, a bad image that helped fuel resistance to the establishment of new trailer parks after World War II. Articles such as Alexander Wellington's "Trailer Camp Slums," which appeared in *Survey* magazine (1951), exemplify this widespread attitude:

Trailer camp slums are a very real if unrecognized menace to our American way of life. They should be eradicated now, even in the face of an acute housing shortage, for the creation of more slums is not the solution to the problem of housing shortage.

Trailer camp occupants felt abused by such characterizations. They saw themselves as making a sacrifice for the war effort and, after the war, sacrificing stable home life in order to build the projects that the nation needed. In a 1945 editorial in *Trailer Travel Magazine*, the trailerite is portrayed as the true American:

Who is it today, like the pioneers in their covered wagons, feels the desire to dip over the horizon—who but the trailerite? Like the pioneer he, too, is hardy and self-sufficient—he can live and thrive wherever he goes. Why not? His house and home go with him. . . . He solves the manpower problems and the housing shortage of the nation. He is independent and entirely democratic.

While statements such as this seem self-serving, they were not without support. Several sociological studies done in the early 1950s were concerned about the character of trailer camp communities and the impact of trailer life on children. One such study, sponsored by the Girl Scouts, was by sociologist Don Hager. Contrary to expectations, his research revealed families with a high degree of solidarity and a strong sense of community.