

States of the Union

NIRVANA ON WHEELS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



WEST PALM BEACH

FLORIDA is a land of dog races and mobile homes. Retired Northerners come here to chase the mechanical rabbit of hedonism, their just reward after 30 years of low-echelon service to IBM, Esso and the like. In an age when everyone is searching for meaning, this improbable state seems to have been invented to justify, *ex post facto*, a million meaningless careers. "This is why I worked so hard," the retired bookkeeper tells himself as he sprinkles the postage-stamp lawn in front of his house trailer. "This is what life is all about."

So round and round he goes,

gathering his diversions while he may: on the beach, brown with the sewage of a million pleasure-seeking defecators; on the crowded golf course; at the track, a place to squander one's pension; then back "home" for a beer and the late show. Surely his mug runneth over.

Much of this has come to pass through the triumph of the mobile home industry, which this year will crank out more than a half-million instant dwellings, most of them 12-14 feet wide and about 60 feet long. In states like Arizona, California and Florida, the house trailer is a wry symbol of retirement. Both it and its occupants may depreciate rapidly. Mobile homes are often shoddy goods: They leak in the rain, bake in the sun and rattle in the wind. In five years the value of a typical model plummets to 30 per cent of its original price; in ten years it is likely to approach zero. (By the turn of the century the American landscape may be groaning with mobile home graveyards of an ugliness beyond surmise.)

You can buy a house trailer in Florida for as little as \$4,500; and if you approach the right dealer, you may get free golf lessons or even a

trip to the Bahamas thrown in. It comes fully furnished, right down to a vase of plastic daisies for the coffee table and a large painting of a little boy fishing beneath a covered bridge. Clearly, builders of conventional homes cannot compete. Last year 95 per cent of all new dwellings priced below \$15,000 were mobile units.

But there is more than economics to the mobile home craze. It seems related in strange ways to the American wanderlust, the old dream of putting one's destiny on wheels and heading for the open road. The covered wagon, the Pullman car and the trailer have all nourished this notion that it takes a heap of traveling to make a house a home.

The first modern home-on-wheels, according to trailer buffs, was designed by a Virginian, W. J. Casterton, in 1923. Casterton had racked up his Studebaker in a highway accident; instead of junking it he went to nearby Hampton Institute—then as now a college primarily for blacks and Indians—and persuaded some of the students to salvage the wreck and convert it into a camper, complete with cots, closets and a gas stove.

Casterton and his family drove

their foldable home up and down the East Coast, attracting considerable attention wherever they parked. In New York state, police searched the camper, found a rifle and pistol, and tried to arrest Casterton for violation of the Sullivan Act. "But this is my home," he protested. "A man's home is his castle." The police backed off, thus legitimizing the concept of a home-on-wheels.

Before long, millions of Americans were imitating Casterton. "The old homestead has gone joy-riding," wrote a sociologist of the period. "America is entering a new pioneer era. In fact . . . the whole country seems to be crossing the continent again. . . . And what are they driving? You guessed it. They're driving their own home on wheels." By 1936 the *Saturday Evening Post* estimated that 500,000 Americans were "living on wheels." The *Post* ascribed "this amazing tendency to a revolt against . . . misgovernment, high taxes, and economic insecurity." In other words, people were fleeing for their lives.

Florida was one of the places they fled to. There they established new, semipermanent communities—trailer camps where one could park his trailer alongside a gerry-built cottage, lining up the two entrances so that the trailer became an extra room. The privy was out back.

It wasn't until World War II that trailers evolved into "mobile houses." That term may have first appeared in the *Science News Letter* of June 26, 1943. "Mobile houses at present," noted the editors, "are available only to war industries and the National Housing Agency, but in the postwar era we may look forward to being able to purchase these haul-away homes at low cost. Imagine waking one morning and finding that the neighbor's house has disappeared overnight!"

It was a shrewd prediction. After the war trailer manufacturers, taking advantage of new, broad Federal highways, began to build 12-foot-wide mobile homes. To nearly every-

one's surprise, the public snapped them up. As Arthur Decio, a mobile home manufacturer, explains, "Some years ago builders just decided to forget about low-income groups. This was our opportunity, and we are trying to make the most of it."

Ironically, the industry has kept raising the tariff, building double-width models and designing posh trailer parks that command high rentals. Few low-income families today can afford anything but a used mobile home. Besides, house trailers are financed like cars—short-term loans at high interest rates.

THE WHOLE IDEA nowadays is to make people forget they are living in mobile homes. The trailer parks in Florida—there were more than 2,000 at last count—sell not mobility but a kind of nutty Nirvana. Their names tell the story: Happiness Village, Paradise Regained, Carefree Cove.

According to Woodall's *Mobile Home and Park Directory*, the Duncan Hines of the industry, 71 parks in Florida merit a five-star rating. Since these establishments presumably represent the ultimate paradise, the place to which future pensioners aspire, Woodall's criteria are worth noting. In the first place, "Five-star parks are the finest. . . . They should be nearly impossible to improve." Second, a five-star park is apparently designed to shut out the world: "In some locations [the] park should be enclosed by high hedges or ornamental fences. . . . *Most five-star parks are for adults only.* . . ." (Woodall's italics.) And third, it definitely should not look like a mobile home park: "All homes must be skirted with metal skirts, concrete blocks, ornamental wood or stone," thus hiding the telltale tires. "All hitches are to be concealed. . . . Any existing tanks concealed." In short, the best parks should closely resemble a suburban subdivision—without children.

"It's not just a park," says James E. Brown, the proprietor of Carefree

Cove, a five-star haven that features a lake, a pool, a shuffleboard club, a recreation hall with a crystal chandelier, a three-acre tropical garden and a private chapel that seats 70. "It's a way of life." If you're not carefree in the right way, however, you may never be admitted into Carefree Cove. The park has a long waiting list and Brown is very finicky about who gets in. "One of the first things we check is what are their hobbies. If they don't have any, we don't want them."

I asked Brown what happens when some of his tenants grow too old to pursue their hobbies. "As a rule they move out," he said. "We don't ask them to leave—they just do." But where do they go? To a one-star park, perhaps, where there are children but no hobbies.

Recently I visited a park so low in the mobile home hierarchy that Woodall does not even deign to list it. Pine Needles Park is an old trailer camp harking back to the '30s, when people were running from "misgovernment, high taxes and economic insecurity." Today it is home to a dozen-odd pensioners, people who have narrowly eluded welfare. William Lind and his wife live in a small trailer that he bought, used, for \$800 in 1961. I asked him how he liked it. "Well, it's not home," he replied. "I'm lonesome for New Hampshire." He had worked 51 years in a New England brush factory; since coming to Florida he's never been back.

"I couldn't stand the winters up there," he said. "The Florida climate has added years to my life." He glanced around his trailer. "This isn't much," he said. "The trailers are too close together, and at night somebody's got his TV on too loud, or somebody else's cat jumps on our metal roof and makes a racket. Or it's just plain too hot. I can't get a good night's sleep.

"But I'll tell you something: It's better than dying. Can you understand that?" He gave me a long look. "I guess you can't," he said. "Not until you get to be old."