

The Boxed In Blues

FROM PAGE ONE

"It doesn't really affect me," Joanne says. "Except you can't hang anything on the walls. So all the plants are hung from that wooden beam on the ceiling."

I ask about their feeling for the neighborhood.

Molly replies, softly, "Well, we don't know too many people around here. But there are a lot of activities, like adult education. I haven't found folks too friendly around here."

"We haven't gone out of our way to meet any of our neighbors and they haven't gone out of their way," offers Joanne.

Across Iowa Street from Gaslight Village lies another set of mobile homes, Mobil Acres. Here fewer yards are fenced in, no car-ports exist, and front lamps burn even in the middle of the day.

And Steve Frazier, a resident of the Acres, is burning at the attitude of his questioner. Do you think the home construction business had ever opposed mobile-home sites?

"I don't think they've had to," Steve replied. "There's enough zoning opposition and enough psychological opposition..."

What kind of psychological opposition?

"Well, like the sort of questions you've been asking. My dad's company's homes get 30-year FHA loans. (Steve's father operates a tri-state mobile-home manufacturing company based in McPherson, Kansas.) Now that they're better built, they can get that. And they're safer now, too. Last year's new HUD regulations for new mobile homes make it mandatory that water-heaters are kept separate from the home in a sheet-rock lined compartment. And the ventilation systems have to be less flash-fire prone. Tie-downs and smoke alarms are also mandatory.

Last summer, Steve worked as a cost analyst in his father's factory. He explains why mobile homes are so inexpensive.

"Assembly-line. Specialized labor. Set out a floor frame and set it on a chassis. When

it's rain or cold you still make them. And you're talking about unskilled labor. You can hire off the street and have them putting them together within a week. They just do one task. At a regular construction site you're talking about carpenters, plumbers, electricians, all of whom are highly paid. Whereas these unskilled guys start out at \$3 an hour, a carpenter starts at \$10.

Steve shares a mobile home with Pete Czamecki--both KU students.

and the thick carpeting. All trappings to cover what is otherwise an ice tray with cubicles.

But Steve puts the doubter in his place.

"I would like to think I have an open mind. I wouldn't buy a house in the trailer parks, because trailer parks are depressing. I wouldn't buy a single-wide because they're a long box. But," he leans forward, "a double-wide is a completely unique experience." So he directs the doubter to the

price is \$4,500 for the simpler models to \$20,000 for the flagship of the mobile-home fleet, the double-wide. Bill Webster says, "Go have a look."

Again, the stapled-on-wood, again the padded bar, the plastic cabinets, the thick carpet. But here inner-space has expanded and the illusion is that of a moderately sized home. Three bedrooms, two baths, but also some added... features. Like the lime-green artificial turf on the doorstep, and the contraption no good space

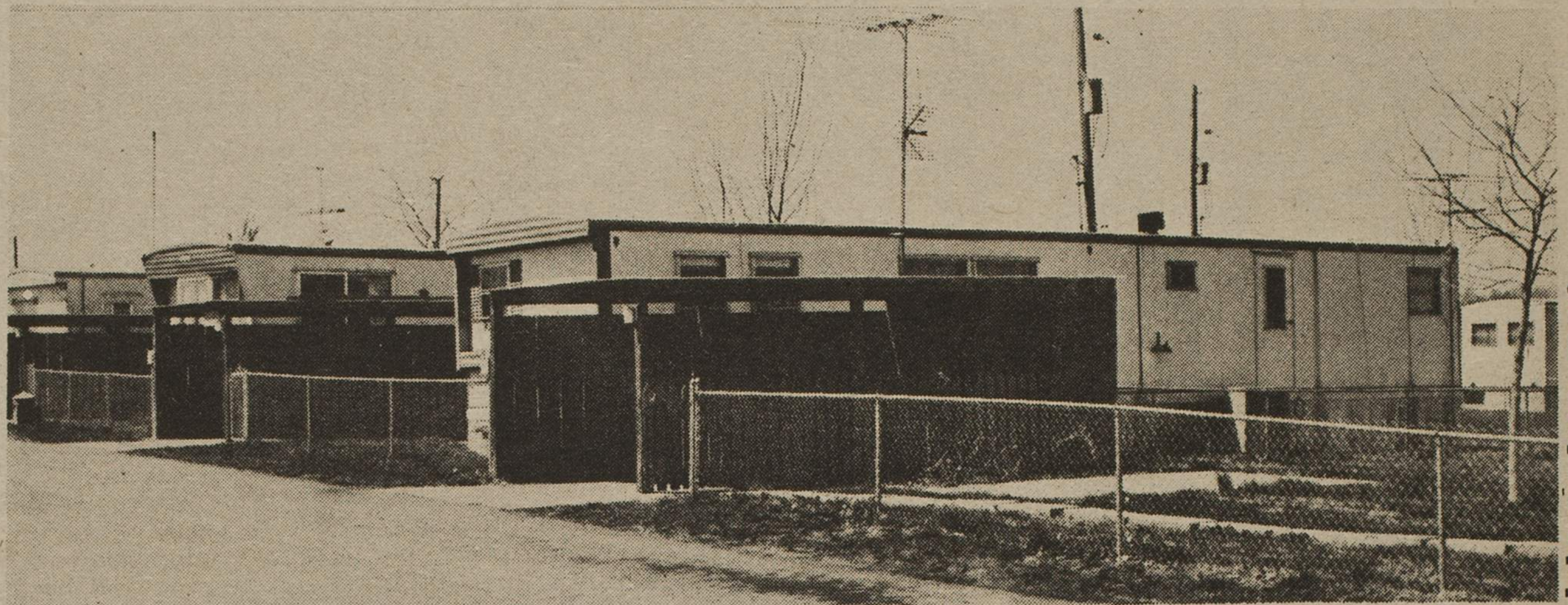


photo Barry McMurphy

"The majority of people who live in these parks are middle-class people with families," says Pete. "The people who rent are students."

Again that pesky question of social interaction crops up.

"It's just not conducive to neighborliness since you don't go outside."

Their living room features laminated wood paneling, plastic chandeliers, flowery curtains, and brass curtain rods. The only departure in style from Molly and Joanne's place is a peaked roof that makes their living room seem more spacious.

Illusion is the thread that binds mobile homes together. The brown plastic cabinets in the kitchen that you have to run your fingertips over to tell what they're made of; the thin layer of laminated wood that covers the metal walls; the gaudy curtains

Mecca for mobile homes in Lawrence, Bill Webster's Mobile Homes, 3409 W. 6th. Webster is an affable man, and he plays the standard Navy joke on his visitor.

"How many trailers do you own in Mobile Acres?"

"None," he deadpans.

A moment of confusion, and then, "Oh, I get it. It's like asking an admiral how many boats he has in a fleet, right?"

He nods his head solemnly, obviously having played this game many times before.

"Okay, how many mobile homes do you own there?"

"We're projecting 400 for over there, but right now we only have half that."

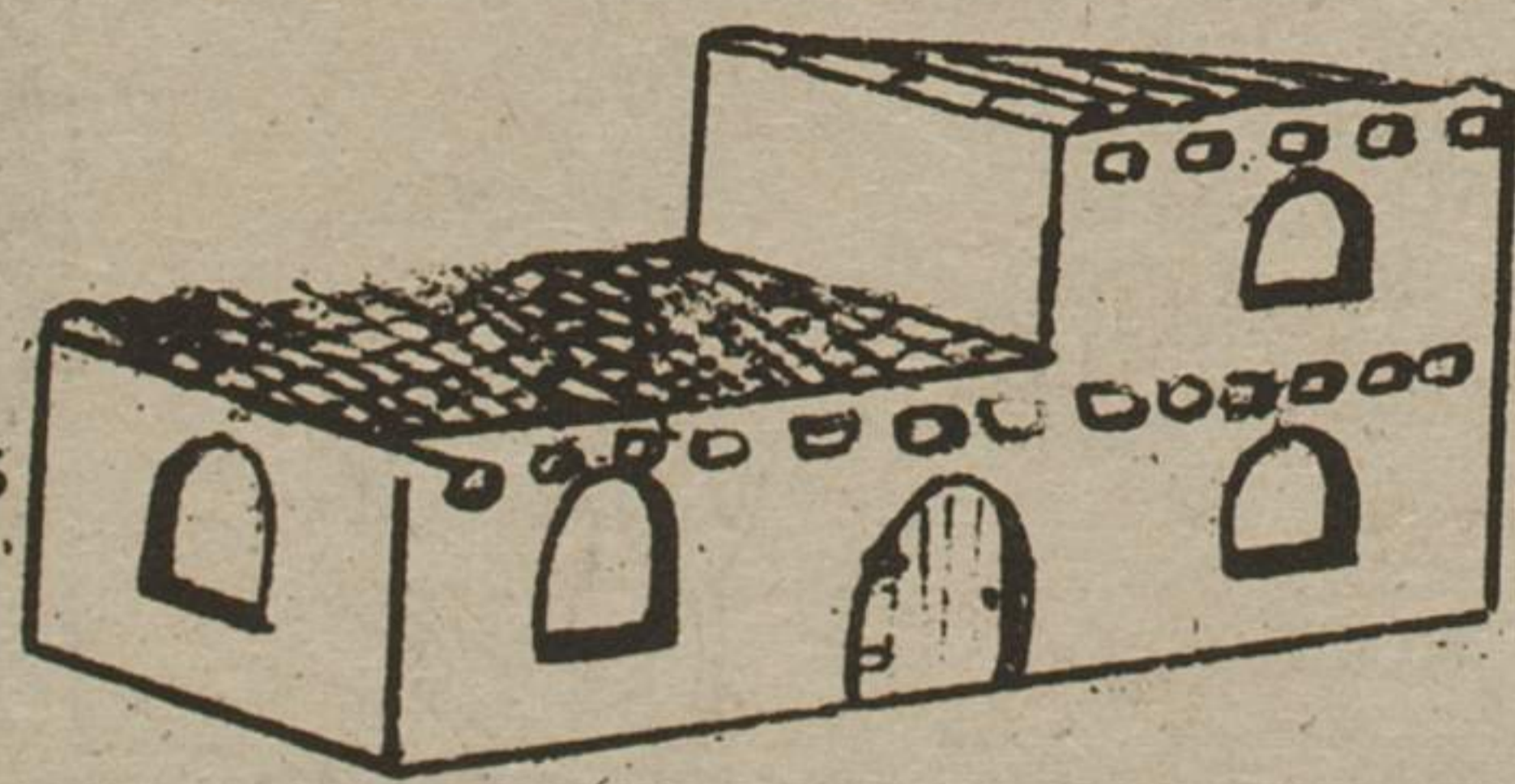
At his 6th Street site, Webster sells mobile homes. Starting

age home would be without, the intercom, as if communication is impossible by natural methods and added circuitry is necessary.

So you step out of the oversized capsule. In the parking lot of Webster's Mobile Homes is a blue chevy with a "For Sale" sign on its windshield. You shiver in a brisk wind and wonder why mobile home parks don't have more windbreaks. And then you remember the only sustained batch of trees you've seen on your odyssey through mobile home parks--a long row of evergreens dividing Gaslight Village from the suburban homes on the north. How many of the mobile homers occasionally sneak looks through those evergreens trying to catch a glimpse of their future dream houses? And how many of those people on the suburban side, who may have once lived in places like Gaslight Village, would just as soon forget the whole thing?

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