

THE EVOLUTION OF MOBILEHOME PARKS IN CALIFORNIA:
A BUTTE COUNTY CASE STUDY

*Jo Ann Gibeson**

A new look has begun to envelop the outer fringes of residential communities and is a cause for growing concern in many areas of California. In the early 1960's prefab houses were blamed for the creation of blighted subdivisions which sprang up and covered the landscape in a matter of weeks. In 1965, it was the endless rows of pre-cut houses on the hillsides of Daly City which inspired Melvina Reynolds to write the words popularized by Pete Seeger: "Little boxes, little boxes, all made out of ticky-tacky, and they all look just the same."

Today, the growing concern is over the large scale construction of mobilehome communities which seem to become fully grown overnight. Between 1960 and 1970, the national increase in mobilehomes was 141 per cent compared to 16 per cent increase in total year-round housing. In his presidential progress report of 1970, President Nixon emphasized the role that mobilehomes must play in order to meet the congressional set goals of twenty-six million new housing units within the ten year period from 1968 to 1978.¹ By 1971, one-third of all single-family dwellings being constructed were mobilehomes and 96 per cent of all new dwellings priced below \$15,000 were mobile units.² Mobilehomes have now captured 4 per cent of the nation's total year-round housing. The most rapid rate of growth of mobile living during the last five years has been experienced in resort areas of California, Arizona, and Florida.

The origin of the modern mobilehome lies in the small ten to twelve-foot trailers of the 1920's which sportsmen and vacationers pulled behind their automobiles. In the 1930 Census of Housing, only 1,300 trailers were enumerated separately from other

*Mrs. Gibeson has an M.A. degree from California State University, Chico, and now resides in Medford, Oregon.

types of structural dwellings. As the depression deepened and job searching became a more mobile occupation, the use of trailers as dwellings became more prevalent. By 1940, trailer living had increased to 170,000. The need for easily transportable housing for military personnel and G.I. families and the post-war housing shortage further accelerated the sales of house trailers.³

By 1950, the 315,000 trailers still represented slightly under one per cent of the total housing units in the United States.⁴ However, during the 1950's and 1960's structural changes which provided more room and facilities within the units made trailers more acceptable as permanent housing. Indeed, the term mobilehome has almost become a misnomer for the enlarged mobilehomes can no longer be towed behind the family automobile. The expense of professional movers renders the sectional homes nearly "immobile" over a long distance.

Housing shortages continue to be a prime factor for an increasing number of medium to low-income families choosing mobilehomes. The baby boom of the 1940's intensified the housing shortage in the later 1960's, while the concern for ecological preservation of the nation's forests encouraged homebuilders to seek substitutes for wood. The mobilehome producing corporations have accepted the challenge through both the stepped up production and the use of steel frames, aluminum siding, fiberglass and plastic molding products.

The rise in the cost of construction from \$14 to \$30 per square foot over the last five years has effectively priced the conventional site-built home far above the factory assembly-line technique of housing production. Though prices have risen on mobilehomes, the degree of inflation has been lower than on other types of dwellings. The mobilehome still averages less than \$12 per square foot which includes delivery and set up. Tight money, high interest rates, and spiraling land prices are also swaying the decisions of many home buyers.

The Federal Housing Administration and the American National Standards Institute have sought to improve construction and safety standards for both mobilehome units and mobilehome courts. California has maintained the highest minimum standards for the construction of mobilehomes and parks in any state.⁵

County ordinances and zoning have also contributed to the improvement of parks and their locations. The trend is for newer parks to occupy a buffer zone between conventional residential areas and rural land use. The addition of modern facilities within the parks and the use of a variety of exterior sidings, skirtings, and awnings which compliment the structural style have also aided in making the mobilehome a desirable choice rather than a circumstantial necessity.

California ranks first in the number of mobilehomes by more than 32,800 occupied units. California also leads in the production of mobilehomes, manufacturing an average of 30,000 units annually.⁶ The largest number of mobilehomes are located in areas of greatest population. Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino, all southern counties, lead with more than 10,000 mobilehomes. Santa Clara, in the Bay Area, is the only other county which had more than 5,000 mobilehomes in the last census (see Table 1).

In 1972, there were 5,500 parks in operation with 281,000 spaces. Approximately 29,000 spaces are being added annually. The average new park under construction contains two hundred spaces for mobilehomes. Still, the mobilehome industry claims that a lack of new spaces is a limiting factor in the sale of mobilehomes.⁷

During the last five years mobilehome communities of large proportions have flanked the highways in the most populous counties. Many conventional homeowners view this rapid development of mobilehome parks with mixed feelings of prejudice and suspicion. Complaints against unequal taxation and planned obsolescence have been heard throughout California and have activated efforts to legislate ad valorem taxation and limitations on further expansion of this new type of living.⁸

Though concentrations of mobilehomes surround metropolitan areas, the ratio of mobilehomes to population and total housing units in these areas is among the lowest. Generally, less urbanized counties have a higher proportion of housing in mobilehomes. (See Table 2 for comparison.) Later periods of population growth and the development of recreational facilities in rural areas are possible factors influencing the housing structure characteristics.

Table 1

Number of Mobilehomes by Counties, 1970

County	Mobilehomes	County	Mobilehomes
1. Los Angeles	36,841	30. Mendocino	1,580
2. San Diego	22,192	31. Lake	1,344
3. Orange	17,640	32. Yuba	1,268
4. Riverside	14,543	33. El Dorado	1,165
5. San Bernardino	11,652	34. Inyo	1,102
6. Santa Clara	9,833	35. Siskiyou	1,085
7. Kern	4,963	36. Tehama	1,078
8. Ventura	4,754	37. Merced	957
9. Sacramento	4,706	38. Tuolumne	899
10. Sonoma	4,270	39. Nevada	806
11. Santa Barbara	3,809	40. Del Norte	623
12. Contra Costa	3,694	41. Kings	589
13. San Joaquin	3,312	42. Sutter	538
14. Santa Cruz	3,206	43. Marin	531
15. Shasta	3,009	44. Madera	460
16. Alameda	3,918	45. Trinity	436
17. Fresno	2,763	46. Lassen	421
18. Monterey	2,760	47. Calaveras	397
19. Stanislaus	2,637	48. Mariposa	340
20. Butte	2,550	49. Plumas	339
21. San Luis Obispo	2,528	50. Glenn	322
22. Humboldt	2,459	51. San Benito	236
23. Tulare	2,167	42. Mono	228
24. Solano	2,057	53. Amador	220
25. San Mateo	1,924	54. Colusa	220
26. Placer	1,781	55. Modoc	133
27. Imperial	1,717	56. San Francisco	85
28. Napa	1,618	57. Sierra	35
29. Yolo	1,599	58. Alpine	19
		Total	197,358

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Housing, 1970, Vol. I, Housing Characteristics for States, Cities, and Counties, Pt. 6, California, pp. 6-419-33.*

Table 2

Mobilehomes: Percent of Year-Round Housing
by County, 1970

County	Percentage of Housing	County	Percentage of Housing
1. Inyo	18.12	30. Colusa	4.73
2. Trinity	11.95	31. Modoc	4.70
3. Del Norte	11.73	32. San Bernardino	4.67
4. Lake	11.35	33. Alpine	4.65
5. Mariposa	11.06	34. Kern	4.51
6. Shasta	11.02	35. Santa Barbara	4.29
7. Tehama	10.40	36. Amador	4.26
8. Mono	9.14	37. Ventura	4.24
9. Yuba	8.96	38. Stanislaus	4.04
10. Riverside	8.63	39. San Benito	4.02
11. Siskiyou	8.53	40. Sutter	3.86
12. Mendocino	8.41	41. Solano	3.84
13. Tuolumne	8.09	42. Orange	3.81
14. Imperial	7.39	43. Monterey	3.63
15. Lassen	7.03	44. Tulare	3.51
16. Humboldt	7.00	45. San Joaquin	3.42
17. Nevada	6.92	46. Madera	3.15
18. Plumas	6.86	47. Merced	2.94
19. Butte	6.77	48. Kings	2.93
20. San Luis Obispo	6.73	49. Santa Clara	2.92
21. Santa Cruz	6.25	50. Sierra	2.64
22. Placer	6.22	51. Sacramento	2.21
23. Napa	6.03	52. Contra Costa	2.07
24. Calaveras	5.64	53. Fresno	2.05
25. Sonoma	5.53	54. Los Angeles	1.45
26. Yolo	5.39	55. San Mateo	1.01
27. Glenn	5.18	56. Alameda	0.76
28. El Dorado	4.97	57. Marin	0.75
29. San Diego	4.93	58. San Francisco	0.02
		State Mean	5.64

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Housing, 1970, Vol. I, Housing Characteristics for States, Cities, and Counties, Pt. 6, California*, pp. 6 - 419-33.

Butte County, located in northern California on the eastern side of the Sacramento Valley, is representative of the growth in mobilehome living which is taking place throughout the State and the Nation. In Butte County mobilehome living has increased by more than 132 per cent since 1970. In the last five years mobilehomes represented 44 per cent of all new housing increases in the County. They presently represent 12 per cent of the total housing units compared to 6.77 per cent in 1970.⁹

As of January, 1975, there were 5,440 mobilehomes in Butte County. Of these, 3,300 or 60 per cent are set up within mobilehome parks. Roughly another 22 per cent are located in condominiums or subdivisions designated specifically for mobilehomes. The balance or 18 per cent of the mobilehomes are placed on scattered lots throughout the Country.

The mobilehome park differs from the condominium or subdivision in that parks are licensed by the State Department of Housing and spaces are rented to mobilehome owners, whereas sites within the condominium or subdivision are sold to the mobilehome owner. Mobilehome units in parks do not need any county permits for set up, while units on private property are subject to the same lot requirements and permits as are conventional homes. The mobilehome park offers space for permanent residency rather than transitory purposes as opposed to eighteen other trailer camps in the County which provide sites for migrant agricultural employees.

There are ninety-four mobilehome parks in Butte County offering 4,050 mobilehome lots for rent. An additional 900 spaces in seven parks have been approved for construction by the Butte County Planning Commission. The majority of the parks are clustered around three principal population centers: Chico has twenty parks, Oroville has twenty-one parks, and Paradise has twenty-eight parks. Of these, only seven of the smallest and oldest parks are situated within the incorporated city limits of Oroville and one in Chico. The other twenty-five parks are in rural areas commonly associated with the smaller towns of Gridley, Palermo, Biggs, and the foothill communities of Forbestown, Clipper Mills, Big Bend, Forest Ranch, and Cohasset.

The density of spaces within the mobilehome parks ranges from one to thirty-nine spaces per acre with the lowest density

generally within the larger and newer parks. The average occupancy rate is 83 per cent. The occupancy rates in rural parks and those in the Oroville area tend to be lower while parks in Paradise and Gridley report only a 6 per cent vacancy rate. (Figure 1 represents the total relative capacity and percentage of occupancy of mobilehome parks associated with urban and rural communities within the County.)

Because rental parks have frequently placed regulations upon the number of occupants to the unit and restrict the population to adults only, population characteristics peculiar to mobilehome parks develop. Mobilehome owners come predominantly from two

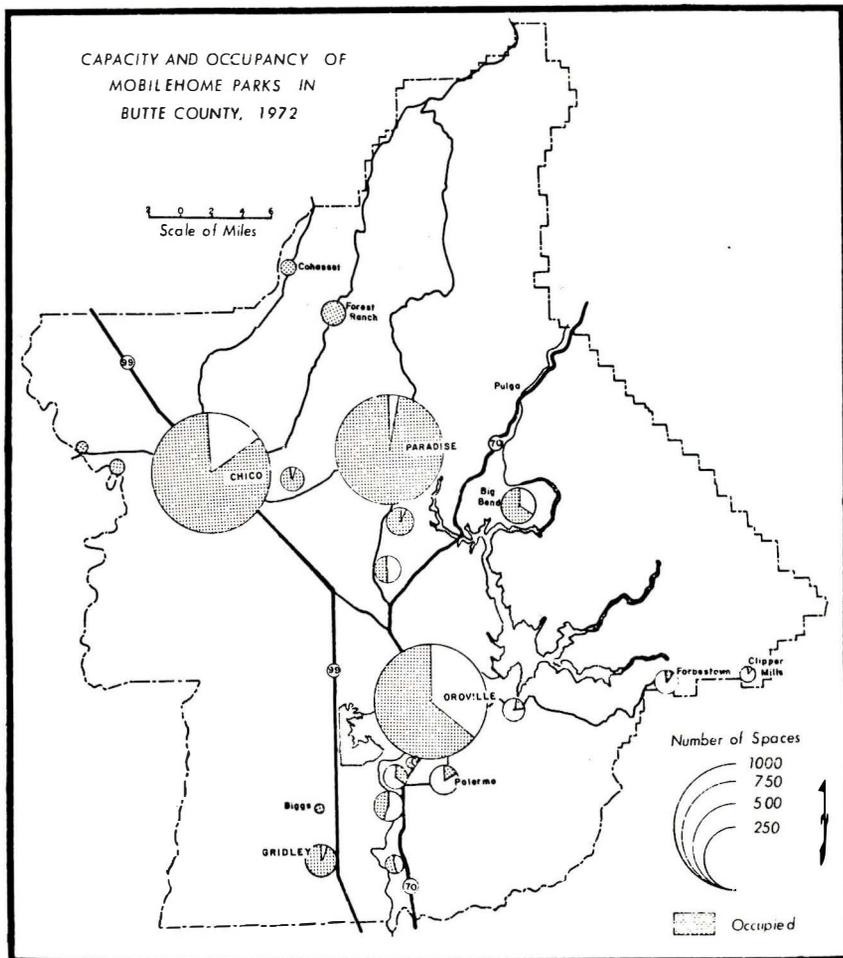


Figure 1. Capacity and Occupancy of Mobilehome Parks in Butte County, 1972.

age groups: the 18 to 34 and the over 55 groups. Young couples under 35 years make up 49 per cent of the mobilehome occupants in the United States.¹⁰ In Butte County, fewer than 16 per cent of the park tenants are in this age group. Persons over 65 years of age, on the other hand, make up 58 per cent of the park occupants. In Paradise and Gridley this percentage rises to 88 per cent. Indeed, during an interview, some of the park managers in Paradise referred to their parks as "retirement" or "convalescent" homes. The resemblance of parks to a widows' dowager row and the decision of young couples to postpone starting their family while living in a trailer is reflected by the average occupancy rate of 1.87 persons per mobilehome.¹¹ Children under eighteen years make up only 9 per cent of the total park populations. Family type parks are found most frequently around Chico and in rural areas.

Retired people give a variety of reasons for choosing a mobilehome in a park. Reduced responsibilities of upkeep inherent in a mobilehome and the lessening of concern over rising expenditures was given for the improvement in health experienced by some facing their golden years. Park managers expressed their concern that personal contact with each occupant be made daily, and that social and recreational programs be conducted regularly within the park facilities. Freedom to travel knowing their home is safe in a park was a popular decision making factor. Hence, many tenants own a travel trailer, camper, or motor home besides their mobilehome. It is not unusual for a trailer to sit vacant for several months of the year while the owner travels in his vacation vehicle. However, few of the mobilehomes within the parks serve the function of a "second home."

Mobilehome parks in Butte County range in age up to thirty-five years. The evolution from the early trailer courts to the modern spacious mobilehome parks is clearly in evidence in Butte County. The parks generally date themselves by their size, location, and the quality of facilities offered. Three periods of active park construction can be identified. Each period is associated with an era of population influx into the County. The first coincided with the migration of workers to the construction site of the Military Pilot Training School near Chico during World War II. The second, likewise, got its impetus during the preparation for

and early construction phases of Oroville Dam in the late 1950's and early Sixties. Park construction during these two periods generally centered around Chico and Oroville within reasonable commuting distance from the work sites. The third period of park construction began in 1969-70. Unlike the first two, the present immigration settling in mobilehome parks comes principally from the senior citizen class from metropolitan areas. Rather than seeking employment these people are retiring to Butte County. Park development since 1970 has centered primarily around Paradise and northern Chico.

The twenty-one parks established prior to 1955 range from less than a half acre to just over three acres. The average density is seventeen lots per acre, but several parks have as many as twenty-eight units and one has thirty-nine units per acre. Because trailers were towed behind family automobiles, and job-hunting and military-associated tenants were highly mobile, these early courts were located beside major transportation arteries just outside the city limits. Many of these early parks developed in connection with auto courts and still retain some of the original cabins which are rented within the park areas.

Trailer courts constructed during this early period have changed very little. They still offer meager accommodations to the smallest and most varied styles of house trailers. Facilities within the smaller units are limited so that the occupants must depend upon the park provisions for restrooms, showers, and laundry which are housed in a centrally located building. The narrow roads lack paving and the absence of rain gutters often creates surface drainage problems during the rainy season. Only the parks within the incorporated city limits are serviced by city water and sewage systems. Space sizes restrict the occupancy to single-wide trailers of lengths less than fifty-five feet. Little extra space is provided for storage or parking; therefore, the small lots often appear cluttered with cars, boats, bikes, campers, and storage sheds.

It is in these small parks that persons with limited fixed incomes find rental spaces from \$23 to \$45 per month. The older parks located nearer to the core of the city of Chico and to the

California State University, Chico, contain a higher percentage of college students.

The major impact of mobilehome park construction shifted from Chico in the 1940's to Oroville and Paradise and into rural communities in the late 1950's and first half of the 1960's as the influx of construction workers for the Oroville Dam project began. Though a small increase in park sizes is discernable prior to 1960, it was not until the adoption of State legislation and County ordinances regulating mobilehome parks in 1961, that a marked change in mobilehome park construction became universal. This change coincided with the mass production of twelve-foot wide models and the application of the term "mobilehome" to the wider models and pop-out units. A year later production of double-wide models began in earnest. Beginning in 1962, the average park acreage increased to seven acres with an average density of eight lots per acre.

The forty-four parks established between 1957 and 1965, still offered few amenities for the work oriented occupant. Most of these parks have paved streets within the park, but not all of them furnish a hard surfaced trailer pad in each lot. Fewer than one-third of the parks provided a center for recreation.

Following the completion of Oroville Dam in 1967, many of the Oroville trailer parks were deserted as workers hitched up their trailers and left to seek work elsewhere. As the third period of mobilehome park construction got underway at the turn of this decade, some of these parks reopened under new management. Prior to 1970, most of the parks were "Mom and Pop" operations, but as park sizes and facilities have increased, a significant change to ownership by investment corporations and administration by professional park managers has taken place. Under new ownership several adjacent parks have been fused and renamed. Another result seems to be that many family parks are now in transition to adult only parks with formerly maintained playgrounds being converted to mobilehome sites. In an effort to up-date the park appearance a number of managers restrict the age of entering trailers to no more than three years. Expansion has caused a number of older parks to be divided into separate sections for single and double-wide units. Tenants in the newer sections are

required to install skirtings, awnings, and landscaping. In keeping with reduced responsibilities desired by many senior citizens, desert scenes, shrubs, artificial turf, and pea gravel or fir bark over black plastic dominate much of the landscaping in the newer sections.

Including the expanded portions, the parks originating between 1957 and 1965, provide forty-four percent of the total mobilehome lots for rent in Butte County. Most of these lots may be leased between \$30 and \$65 a month. Generally, the parks in Oroville and in rural areas have a lower rent base.

Since 1970, the dominate portion of new park construction has centered in Paradise and the northern portion of Chico. A change in zoning attitude from commercial to residential use has had the effect of locating new parks in a buffer zone between conventional housing and rural land use. The twenty-nine parks established since 1967 contain forty-two percent of the total park lots. New parks have averaged eight acres in size with an average of thirty-six spaces. This falls somewhat short of the ten contiguous acres with a minimum of fifty developed spaces before opening as required by a County ordinance signed in 1967.¹² Other required innovations include thirty-foot wide paved streets with overhead lighting, underground utilities including TV cables, permanent office and laundry buildings, and centrally located recreation areas equal to at least 200 square feet per mobilehome site. In new parks such recreation facilities may include a community hall, swimming pools, shuffleboard courts, putting greens, hobby workshops, and even areas for small vegetable gardens.

Storage parking for campers and boats, and in a few cases, overnight sections and park sewage treatment plants also contribute to the reduced density of the park. However, lower density must also be attributed to expanded lot sizes in keeping with the popularity and styling of the new double-wide mobilehomes which can be obtained with from 1,500 to 2,500 square feet of living space. Indeed, with matching skirting, shake roofs, and exterior finishes resembling stucco, wood, brick or terra cotta, it is becoming difficult to distinguish between a mobilehome and a middle-class conventional home.

Extended eaves, window shutters, sidewalks and planters add to the attractiveness of the newest mobilehomes. Certainly the subdivision or park which accommodates mobilehomes with rain gutters, patio decking, and open-beam and picture window designing has come a long way from the auto and trailer court combinations of thirty years ago.

Exotic designing of mobilehomes which include double-wide, two-story, A-frame styling or triple and quadruple-wide units adaptable to multifamily housing is indicative of the need for change in the traditional mobilehome park construction. Rectangular parking-lot type developments with their higher density are giving way to more aesthetically pleasing circular designs with radiating streets or cul-de-sacs. Reduced density permits room for open space within the parks. Butte County has yet to experience the multistoried park where mobilehomes are lifted by crane and pushed into place. In other areas, high rise condominiums are confining the effect of suburban trailer sprawl, permitting higher density without compromising the greater potential for recreational areas.¹³

With expanded spaces and more and better quality facilities, the mobilehome tenant can expect to pay a higher rate of rent. Mobilehome space within the more luxuriant parks range from \$55 to \$115 a month. Most parks adjust the rate to the size of trailer and number of occupants per unit. Additional charges are usually made for storage sheds and parking space for an extra automobile, camper, or boat.

In conclusion, mobilehome parks in Butte County and throughout the State and Nation have increasingly dominated the residential landscape over the last decade. The mobilehome industry in California has voiced its confidence that mobilehome communities will continue to grow at a rapid pace. Of major importance among the factors which influence the popularity of mobilehomes are the improved image of parks through lower density, better facilities, and more desirable locations within the community. The mobilehome park offers physical and social security, freedom from straining responsibilities, and stable expenditures for both senior citizens and young people starting their first home away from home.

Social conditions which have favored the choice of mobile-homes as permanent residences have been equally multifaceted. Smaller families, lower retirement age, more leisure time, better health care, and park congeniality have contributed toward the popularity of mobilehomes and mobilehome parks.

In Butte County, the evolution of mobilehome living has been associated with three periods of population fluxions. The parks generally date themselves by their size, location, and quality of facilities provided. Though the first two periods of park construction were primarily for a work oriented and highly mobile tenant, today the population of all parks is dominated by citizens who are retiring away from metropolitan areas.

Certain factors provide limitations to mobilehome living in Butte County. Perhaps the most important is availability of park space. The size and appearance of the mobilehome may determine its reception in a park. The park managers also consider the family size, ages and number of children, and even race and occupation when approving an application for park space. Still the mobilehome parks in Butte County are an asset to the community in terms of a housing supply, tax revenue, and services rendered to the park population.

NOTES

¹U.S. President, "Administration Housing Goals Message to Congress," quoted in "Flash Facts on Mobile, Sectional and Modular Homes" (Chicago: Mobile Homes Manufacturers Association, June, 1970); "Nixon Counts Mobile Homes in House Goal," *Sacramento Bee*, November 15, 1970, p. M22.

²U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1971*, p. 669; R.W. Murray, Jr. and C.W. Walsh, "Mobilehomes and Parks," *A Good Life for More People, Yearbook of Agriculture, 1971* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 106.

³B. Hodes and G.G. Robinson, *The Law of Mobile Homes*, 2nd ed. (New York: Commerce Clearing House, Inc., 1965), p. xxiii.

⁴U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Housing, 1950*, Vol. I, *Housing Characteristics for States, Cities, and Counties*, Pt. 1, Summary.

⁵"Mobilehome Construction Standards in Force," *Housing and Community Development News*, VI (January-February, 1971), p. 1; (May-October, 1971), p. 2.

⁶"Mobilehome Hearing Held in Sacramento," *Housing and Community Development News*, VII (Sacramento: State Department of Housing and Community Development, March-May, 1972), p. 5.

⁷"Mobile Home Park Business is Booming in California," *Chico Enterprise-Record*, March 25, 1972, p. 5A; C.E. Dole, "Wanted: Parks for Mobile Homes," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 26, 1973, p. 13; R.L. Revehaugh, "Mobile Home Flap," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 11, 1971, pp. A-B.

⁸In California the mobilehome is classified as a vehicle movable over public roads, therefore, it is taxed by the State Department of Motor Vehicles which allows an 85 per cent depreciation over an eighteen year period.

⁹Derived from statistical data supplied by Bob Gaiser, Butte County Planning Commission, Oroville, April, 1975.

¹⁰M.B. Neace, "A Profile of the Mobile Home Market and the Industry it Supports," *Atlanta Economic Review*, XX (August, 1970), p. 15.

¹¹Statement made in interview with a Paradise mobilehome park manager whose fifty space park contained only thirteen men out of sixty-two retired persons.

¹²Butte County Ordinance 929, "Regulations for a 'MHP' (Mobile Home Park) District," Oroville, 1967.

¹³C.B. Dole, "Mobilehome Pioneer Sees High-Rise Parks," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 16, 1971, p. 9.