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Mobile home dwellers brave winds

BY E.A. TORRIERO
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JACKSONVILLE, Ill. - Ida Larson's home is a "single-wide," 14 by 70 feet, bigger than most in the Northwood Mobile Home Park, tidier than many and, even though it was built in 1989, more stable against the winds.

Still, Larson, like most people in this gritty working-class park, has shuddered at recent news of hurricanes and tornadoes ripping apart manufactured houses in various parts of the country.

As residents in the Midwest's "Tornado Alley," they recall a twister in May 2004 that blew through Jacksonville's downtown, destroying several shops and just missing their park.

"If it would have hit us head-on instead, we'd all be dead," said Larson, 57, who lives on disability in Northwood on the outskirts of this small south-central Illinois city. "And watching the news (last) year, with all the destruction of trailers in this country, well, we're just damned scared."

Some 22 million people, about 8 percent of the U.S. population, live in mobile homes, housing experts estimate. Across the nation, they say, mobile home parks are burgeoning despite statistics showing they are up to 20 times more vulnerable in tornadoes.

"We don't see ourselves as what some people call `trailer trash,'" said Northwood resident Sharon Hadley.

"We're all good people just trying to make it like everyone else," said Hadley, who lives in a spartan mobile home here with her husband, David.

Hadley and several of her neighbors talked recently about life in their small subdivision, surroundings more meager than many Americans can imagine.

Hadley, a recovering crack cocaine addict, leads addiction-recovery groups in town with her husband, a reformed alcoholic who works at the local Ferris wheel manufacturing company. Their neighbors include Larson, who struggles with lupus and dreams of someday moving to be with a son in Seattle.

Across the street, David Palmer tends to a sick mother in a nearby hospital while working full time managing a cigarette store in town. His partner, Dan Lair, lives with him and works for a county road crew while often fretting about when the next tornado will arrive.

Nearby, Kari Knoth and her husband, Stuart, who works in the mailroom of the local newspaper, have accepted trailer life, having bought a mobile home a few years ago to replace an older version that was falling apart.

And a few mobile homes away, Jeff Carter pines for spring when he can again walk across the road and heckle the golfers on the course.

All are drawn to Northwood for a roof over their heads - one that costs them about half as much as what people pay in apartment rent a few streets away.

As in most mobile parks, a majority of residents own their homes but rent the land. Carter bought his unit, built in 1965, for just \$1,500. Most bought their homes used for between \$10,000 and \$30,000. They pay as much as \$200 a month for park space - a concrete slab, a few patches of grass and some services such as a communal garbage bin.

"We live here because this is what we can afford," Hadley said. "We know the risk of tornadoes. And it's the price we pay."

Nationally, mobile home manufacturers in good years build some 400,000 homes a year - about 30 percent of new single-

family housing. "Mobile homes are kind of unique to America," said Thomas Schmidlin, a geography professor at Kent State University in Ohio who has studied mobile homes and weather effects on them. "There is nowhere else in the world that has such an abundance of this kind of housing."

From pristine retirement communities in Florida and Arizona to abodes in Malibu overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the mobile home industry conveys images of emerging middle-class lifestyles. Several years back, the governor of Arkansas lived in a mobile home while the governor's mansion was being refurbished.

But while there is no typical mobile home park, experts say, few are upscale.

Day in and day out, people living in Northwood face struggles, fears and social dilemmas confronting mobile home dwellers across the country, including some 400,000 in Illinois. Outsiders often drive by mobile home parks, barely giving them a second glance.

"They are invisible to people who don't live there," said John Fraser Hart, a geography professor at the University of Minnesota who co-authored the book "The Unknown World of the Mobile Home."

On the edge of Jacksonville, a city of 19,000 people 37 miles west of Springfield, the few hundred residents of the Northwood community reflect what experts say are common elements of mobile home life.

Most homes are "single-wide" - just 14 to 18 feet wide and about 80 feet long. The homes sit on concrete blocks with pieces of wood wedged between the homes and the concrete.

Homes are almost within an arm's length of one another, and residents can peer into their neighbors' windows. There is little greenery at Northwood, save for some patches of grass.

In the spring when birds migrate, the roofs are covered with bird waste, residents say. Management has recently cut some treetops to mitigate nesting.

"That's when it is ugliest ... when the place is covered with bird poop," said tobacco store manager Palmer, who has lived in mobile homes most of his life, the last few years at Northwood.

While no one has done a survey, longtime Northwood residents say most of them earn \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year in blue-collar jobs. More than a handful live off Social Security benefits or are disabled, they say.

Northwood has no community center. Children play in the streets or between homes.

"Life is tough for many people here," Palmer said.

When spring arrives, Northwood residents brace for trouble from tornadoes. Across America, parks like Northwood sit near open fields where the land is cheap.

Many newer mobile homes in America are built to withstand winds around 100 mph. But most of the homes in Northwood are old and don't meet such standards.

County building inspectors make sure that when homes are moved into Northwood they are anchored properly. But there is rarely further inspection. Nor is there a check when the homes are resold. So residents worry that many older homes are not properly secured.

In May 2004, a tornado veered across Jacksonville, causing damage to trees and minimal harm to homes. The twister's path was less than a mile from Northwood.

Today, Northwood still has no shelters and no evacuation plan. State law does not require them.

When the next one approaches, residents can only hope they will be ready. Lair plans to rustle his partner Palmer out of their home with their two dogs in tow. He will bang on the door of his neighbors, the Knoths, who slept through the last tornado.

As for the Hadleys, they hope to run to a nearby ditch and pray. Larson will jump into her car and try to make it to the basement of a friend's house.

Later, the neighbors will check on each other. That is the richness of living in Northwood, residents say.

"We look out for one another whether you're a recovering alcoholic or poor or gay," Lair said. "As a gay person, I feel privileged to be accepted and live among people I accept. How more blessed can we be?"

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