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Watsonville lures retired people —no 'rat race' here

By LANE WALLACE

Back in the mid-60s, people who retired to Watsonville had little choice but to live like the rest of the population — in apartments or single family homes — but that was soon to change.

As the 60's ended and the 70's began, the number of homes geared for retired people started increasing rapidly — and so did the desirability of Watsonville as a place to retire.

Between 1969 and now, the number of mobile homes in the city increased from about 50 to 627, and 600 homes were built at Bay and Pajaro Villages, the communities of small, single-family homes on the southeast side of town, where only people 45 and older can live.

Not all the people in the mobile home parks nor Bay or Pajaro Villages are retired, but about 80 to 85 percent are, according to unofficial estimates by residents.

"The environment attracts retired people like crazy," says Bob Ellenwood, city planning director. "Once they make

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the change (from a large city) they're willing to make the total life style change. Watsonville is devoid of the tremendous rat race."

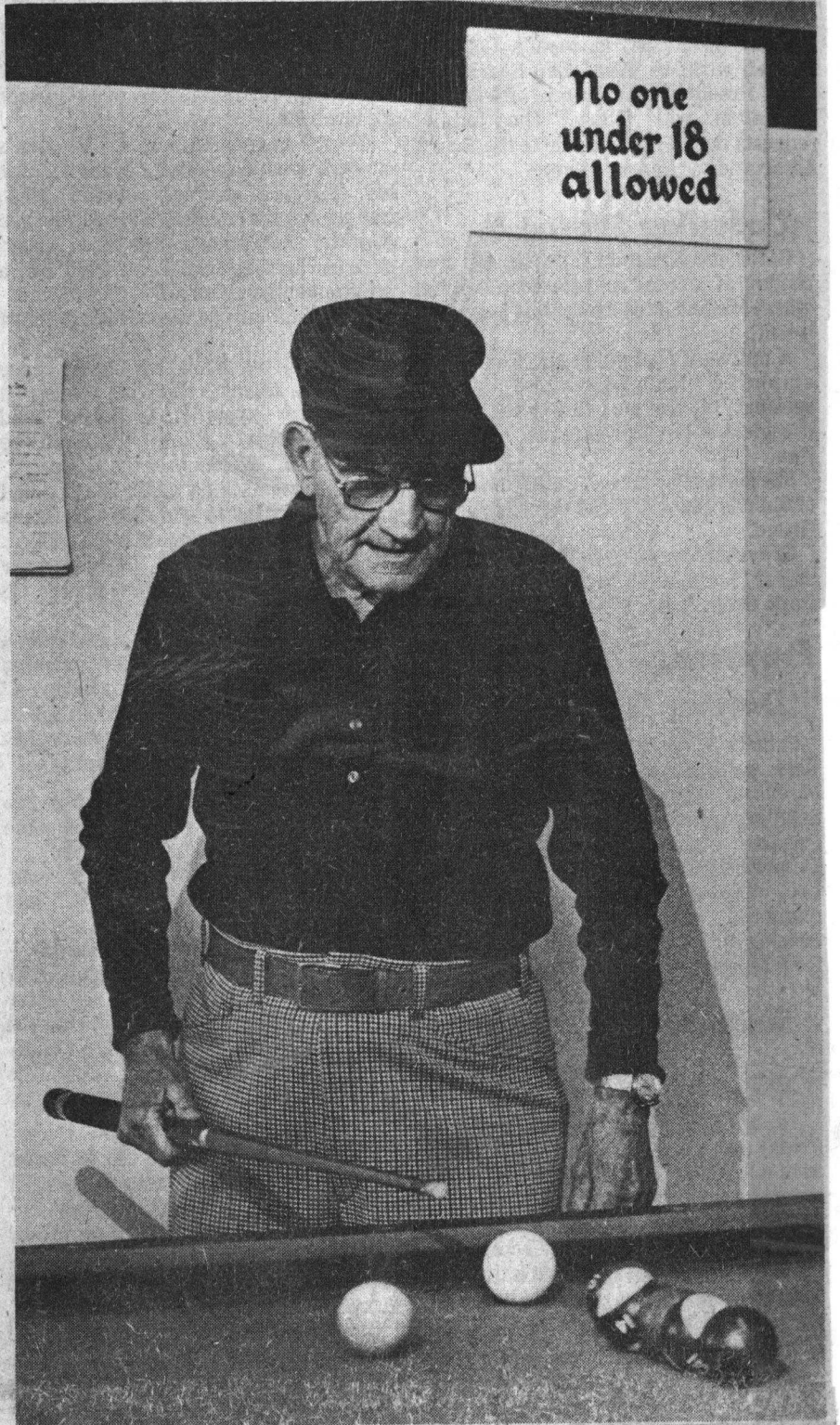
The city's 627 mobile homes are in four major parks — Monterey Vista (122), Rancho Cerritos (145), Meadows Mobile Manor (241) and Portola Heights (119).

In addition, there are about 450 mobile homes outside Watsonville but within three miles of the city limits, estimated Jim Washington of the city planning department.

The influx of mobile home parks is not unique to Watsonville. "It was a statewide phenomena," Ellenwood says.

But Bay and Pajaro Villages are unique — they're the only tracts of conventional homes in Santa Cruz County geared for older adults.

Bay Village, which now has 350 homes, was started in 1969 by John McAbery, a Salinas builder. Plans for another 180 units, to be built in the next three years, have been approved by the city council. The Village is on the east side of town, about a quarter mile from the Pajaro River.



Harold Owen enjoys pool game at Pajaro Village

Pajaro Village, which sits between the Pajaro River and Bay Village, was started in 1972, with the last of 247 units completed two years ago. Charles Beattie of Envar Communities developed the project.

The concept of the two villages are nearly identical — small, two-bedroom homes, with small yards (most lots are in the 4000 to 4500 square foot range) and the rule against anybody younger than 45 — although there are plenty of visits from grandchildren.

Pajaro Village has a clubhouse, with a swimming pool, shuffleboard, billiards and meeting rooms, but there are no such facilities at Bay Village.

When residents of Bay and Pajaro Villages and the mobile home parks talk about why they came to Watsonville, four reasons seem to pop up often — the climate, small-town environment, the city's central location to various points in the San Francisco and Monterey Bay areas, and the idea of an adult community.

John Llewellyn, a Pajaro Village resident since 1977, had every intention of staying in his home in San Jose — until he and his wife had their fill of the increasing traffic congestion and smog there.

"We spent three or four years looking at retirement communities in northern California," he says. "The weather was one of the deciding factors when we chose Watsonville. It's ideal, providing you like it a little bit cool once in a while."

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Rune Rydell, president of the Pajaro Village Neighborhood Association, and Bill Gray, past president, both looked for homes on the Monterey Peninsula before deciding on Watsonville.

"We couldn't find good housing on the Monterey Peninsula," Gray said. Rydell voiced similar feelings, saying prices were too high in Carmel Valley.

Two years ago, new homes in Pajaro Village were selling for about \$40,000. Now, some are going in the \$60,000 price bracket.

Directors of the Pajaro Village Neighborhood Association agree that home ownership is a hedge against inflation and one of the attractions of the Village. (In mobile homes, residents own their coaches, but pay space rental.)

"You own it. Your taxes won't go up unless everybody else's do, too," says Marguerite Davidson, who lived in a conventional home near Pinto Lake before moving to Pajaro Village.

While the value of their homes has gone up, Pajaro Village residents are concerned about inflation.

"People are complaining about the cost of living," Rydell said. "It's an item of concern, and it's very much a problem if people are on Social Security."

Marie Chrisman, another director,

said residents are concerned about the \$5 monthly clubhouse dues. "They don't want them to go up," she said.

J.H. "Rip" Wiedmer, who lives at Pinto Lake Mobile Estates, just outside the city limits on Green Valley Road, found the money he and his wife, Pearl, had set aside for retirement four years ago wasn't buying as much as they had anticipated.

So last fall, Wiedmer went back to work part-time, selling real estate (mostly mobile home parks) for Ponderosa Realty.

The extra money isn't necessary for Wiedmer to meet living expenses, but Wiedmer says it comes in handy "if you want a few extras."

Wiedmer, who has been active in the Golden State Mobile Home Owners League, found that other retired people are concerned about inflation.

"Some people who retired a few years ago are in pretty bad straits," he said. The League is planning a petition drive to put a rent stabilization measure on the statewide ballot. The measure would cover all rental housing, not just mobile homes.

Wiedmer says he has no qualms with rents being increased to pay for park improvements, "but a lot of parks in California have raised the rent as much as 20 percent without spending a dime on improvements."

Such increases are usually made by absentee landlords, Wiedmer said. However, he noted that doesn't mean all absentee landlords are jacking up rents.

"There's no more bad landlords than there are bad tenants," he said.

There's a wide range in price for new mobile homes, usually from \$10,000 to \$40,000, Wiedmer said.

Mobile homes appreciate at between 10 and 15 percent per year, said Sharon Begley of Vista Mobile Home Sales and Service on Freedom Boulevard.

In the Watsonville area, the average space rental is about \$135, she said. The top figure is \$185 at Portola Heights, she noted.

The 627 mobile homes now comprise about 7 percent of the city's housing, while the 600 new homes at Bay and Pajaro Village make up another 9 percent.

Bob Ellenwood, city planning director, expects to see more housing for retired people, but says, "I don't think you'll see another Bay or Pajaro Village type development." (Bay Village's application to open its next 180 homes to people of all ages was rejected by the City Council.)

"I think future housing projects for retired people will be more directed toward rental projects," Ellenwood said. "There will be more condominiums and garden apartments. One of the reasons is that we're running out of land."