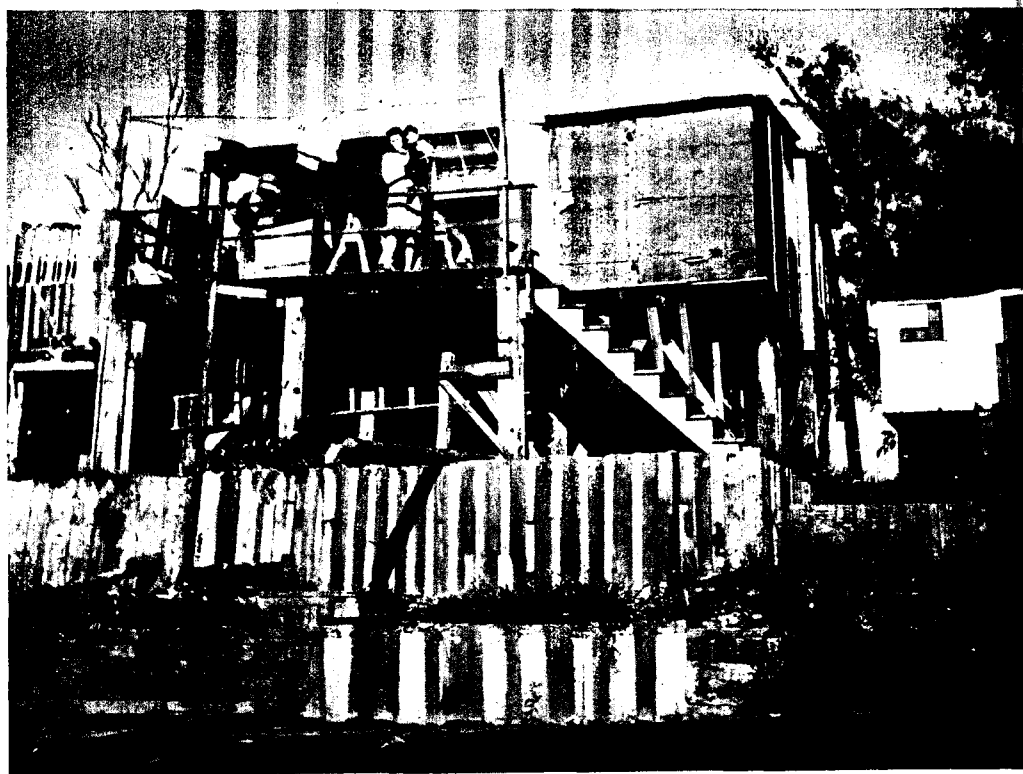


DIXIE'S DILEMMA

BY FRANK GERVASI

More than any other section of the country the South is ridden by disease- and crime-bearing slums. Even confirmed opponents of government subsidies agree that federal funds will be needed to eliminate them



On government-owned property between the Mississippi River and the railroad tracks, squatters have built these shanties. The land is free; tenants pay \$1 a year for water. Such dwellings are damp, unsanitary and rat-infested

One of the best answers to New Orleans' housing shortage is converted barracks at Camp Planche. Apartments, with large rooms, rent for \$38.50 to \$44.50



LIFE in a trailer can be fun for a week or a month on the open road. It's like yachting on land. Every night or so there are new scenes and people and experiences. But a trailer doesn't, as Mrs. Beulah Smith and tens of thousands of other G.I. wives have discovered, make an ideal permanent home. Deprive a trailer of its mobility and it loses its romance and glamor. Living in one is like living in a beached boat, unnatural and uncomfortable.

Mrs. Smith exploded with complaints when Jim Therrel, director of the Atlanta Housing Authority, arrived to inspect the 100 trailers parked in rows on the hot treeless flats between the railroad tracks and the powerhouse on the marshy outskirts of Georgia's capital. The trailers, propped on concrete pilings, constituted the sum total of Atlanta's Veterans' Emergency Housing Program. They provide shelter for a bare 100 G.I. families while 7,000 others wait.

"Honest, Mr. Therrel, my husband will leave me if we don't do something," Mrs. Smith said. "He's a big man, six foot two. He keeps bumping his head every time he straightens up in the place. His feet stick out of the bed and he can't sleep nights. He goes back to work at the gas station every morning more tired than when he came home."

"And there's no place I can hang a clothesline, Mr. Therrel. If I put our wash out on the lines in the regular laundry lot, somebody steals it. There's no place to store things. There's bedbugs and there's mosquitoes at night. And another thing. Some of the people here get drunk in the evenings and they run up and down naked, whoopin' and hollerin' like crazy until late. I can't raise our baby here, Mr. Therrel. Mary Jane is five. She understands things. I can't have her think that life's as bad as she sees it here. You've got to do something. You've got to put us in one of those apartments in the Project. . . ."

What Mrs. Smith wanted was an apartment in one of Atlanta's low-rent public-housing communities operated by the city's Housing Author-

ity. All of the trailerites wanted one and so did 12,000 other families, G.I. and civilian. There they'd have clean, verminproof, well-ventilated rooms with gas heaters and electric refrigerators and hot and cold running water, bathtubs and washtubs, lawns and trees and green back yards with private clotheslines.

But Atlanta, although the first city in the land to undertake large-scale slum clearance for the erection of low-income housing, has only eight public-housing communities with room for less than 5,000 families. The incomes of these families range from about \$500 to \$1,700 a year. They pay from \$11 to \$32 a month rent with gas, electricity and heat included. The low rents are made possible by federal subsidy.

Therrel, a tall and affable lawyer who devotes most of his time to the Housing Authority, listened patiently to Mrs. Smith and to other G.I. wives who gathered around him. He'd heard the complaints before.

"There are no vacancies right now," he told them. "You'll get the first ones that turn up. I know how hard it is to keep house in one of these boxes but I can't put somebody else out of one of our apartments just to let you come in. There's no place for them to go. . . ."

Mrs. Smith's eyes filled suddenly and her face went white under its freckled, sun-reddened skin.

"That's what you always say," she cried. "Why can't you put them out? What did they do during the war? They made big money in the war plants while my Herb risked his life for them—for fifty dollars a month."

"We've stood it long enough. When my husband came home we lived in a tent in some friends' back yard. We slept on the ground, Mr. Therrel. My baby got the flu. We took it, believe me. Well, let the civilians take it for a while. Throw 'em out and give us veterans' families a chance. They had it good all those years while we were wondering if we'd ever see our men alive again. Let us have it good now. . . ."

There was a lot more. Jim promised to do things about the bedbugs

New Orleans Negroes are angry over these one-room shacks which rent for \$7 a week furnished. Furniture is bed, dresser, chair; 11 houses use one toilet



and the clotheslines and the rambunctious neighbors. He moved on to visit other complainants in other trailers. The complaints were identical: not enough room, too few conveniences, noisy neighbors, family rifts and general unhappiness. All of the disgruntled trailerites wanted the civilians turned out of the public-housing apartments and few could or would understand that this was impossible.

Therrel's shoulders sagged as he turned away. He could clear the trailers of bedbugs with DDT, repair the screens, allow housewives to string clotheslines wherever they wished regardless of regulations or aesthetics and he could quiet disorderly neighbors. But he couldn't do anything about the disintegrating families and the unhappiness of overcrowded, uncomfortable, insecure people.

Time Will Cure Antagonism

Therrel wasn't particularly worried about the veterans' antagonism toward civilians. He, like other civic-minded Southerners, believed that in time it would subside. The veterans who insisted upon considering themselves a category apart with special privileges were, Therrel hoped, a minority.

"What worries us most here in the South," Therrel said, "is the unhappiness of what the social workers call the lower-income groups. Down here that means the bulk of our people. There's a widespread sense of insecurity. And much of it is due to the housing shortage."

It is Dixie, meaning those 11 states below the Mason-Dixon line and east of the Mississippi, is bursting at the seams with people. Nearly a third of the country's population is crowded into about a fifth of the nation's land area. Nowhere in the country is the housing shortage quite so acute. And no other region, due to a combination of circumstances largely but not completely beyond the South's control, is less able to do anything about it.

It takes money to build apartment houses and homes. The South, in spite of the growth of its bank account in the war years, hasn't got it.

Dixie contains almost a third of the nation's people but only from 12 to 15 per cent of its accumulated wealth.

The congenital poverty of the South is basically responsible for the scarcity and decrepitude of its housing. Individual incomes average 25 per cent less in the South than in the rest of the nation. Small incomes mean small houses. On the other hand, families are larger. Poverty means ignorance. Families are not planned in Mississippi or Louisiana; they just happen. As Southern families grow they usually crowd into what quarters already exist. A new home is a one- or two-room addition to the old one or, more often, merely a lean-to.

At no time in the past 75 years has the South built homes rapidly enough to accommodate its increasing population. This has been true throughout the nation. But Dixie's deficit of living space has grown progressively larger. By 1941 the South already had a severe housing shortage.

The war, with its inflow of workers from other regions, the almost total cessation of home building and the continued growth of the population, made this existing shortage much more acute. Today those who came to make shells, ships, airplanes and uniforms give few signs of returning home. Atlanta, a city of only 442,000 before the war, now has a population of 525,000. New Orleans has grown from 400,000 to 600,000, and the populations of other Southern cities have grown proportionately.

Much of the increase is due to the shift of farm boys to the cities. They've returned from the war, have married and have begun families. They won't take themselves, their wives and children back to bathless lean-tos, straw heaps for beds and outdoor privies. They discovered soap and water, innerspring mattresses and flush toilets in the world beyond Tobacco Road. Moreover the "homes" they came from are collapsing from old age and disrepair. New brothers and sisters were born while the G.I.s were away and there wouldn't be room for them even if they did go back.

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Former slave quarters at Fort San Juan, New Orleans, were converted in July, 1944, into the attractive four-room apartments shown above. However, these are definitely not homes for the poor people, as the rent is \$75 a month

Atlanta was one of the first cities to create slum-clearing housing projects, yet the job is incomplete; thousands of families still have "homes" like this



Atlanta's John Hope Homes present a graphic contrast in Negro housing. At left are the neat homes of the project; at right the squalid slums they replaced





THE MAN WHO KNEW GREER GARSON

LUCKILY for my work, the weathered cottage I leased from the Knights was tucked behind the humped shoulder of California coast that jutted into the sea, and was protected, symbolically at least, by a flimsy picket fence. I expected to receive some of the beach crowd: a trickling overflow of sun-burned, hand-holding pairs hunting a secluded spot for their blankets, Como records, and romance; slightly overcome, elderly couples wearily searching for quiet; and, of course, the tireless beach urchins who scampered about as carelessly as the gulls rode the wind above them and shouted at one another as early, as ceaselessly, and in voices just as shrill and raucous.

So it could have been a pleasant summer; the first two weeks proved that. Some order appeared in the second draft of my novel. I renewed old acquaintances and, in that haphazard manner of beach life, made new ones. I met Dorothy and fell a little bit in love. But at the end of the second week I met Grant Tomkins III.

That afternoon I was sprawled on the veranda, wishing absently that I could afford, and find, better quarters and more palatable whisky. The sun was still bright and far from the horizon but much of the warmth had gone from it. The crowds were shaking their sand-gritted blankets and gathering their paraphernalia. Kids made frenzied last-minute dashes into the chilling surf. The rap on the screened door startled me.

"Good afternoon."

The sun was at his back so I saw only a long, thin shape against the screen. Those two words of greeting marked the voice as a mixture of Oxonian and Hollywood-and-Vine English, deepened by what sounded like a sinus condition but what I guessed was intended to be proper resonance.

"Good afternoon," I said.

"I wonder if I may come in?"

Annoyed that I should have to be reminded of simple manners, I jumped to my feet. "I'm sorry. Certainly."

He closed the door gently behind him. "My name is Grant Tomkins," he said, dangling his right hand. "I live down the beach a piece."

TOMKINS was like a strip of cured bacon. In the faded knee-length shorts his legs were stringy and fleshless as those of an old man, although he could not have passed 35. His too-long hair was watered into place, his browned skin was flaked and dried by the sun. Small pale eyes rested but briefly on me then hurried on to inventory the veranda.

"I hate to make my first visit a begging one," he smiled, looking back at me. "But my ice chest is on the blink. I thought perhaps you would allow me to put these in yours." He held out a box of strawberries.

"Surely," I took them.

"The Ronnie Colmans half promised to drop over," he explained. "I wanted the berries chilled."

"I'm going out later," I apologized. "What time will you want them?"

"Oh, in an hour or so. If you knew Ronnie as I do, you would know why I haven't the courage to serve him warm berries. If I'm not here by seven don't wait. If they can't make it I shan't come back at all."

He might have been telling his man not to wait up for him.

"It is quite a drive from the Colmans," he went on. "So I might meet them someplace. You never know."

"I shall be here until seven," I promised. "Won't you sit down?"

He looked over the porch chairs rather carefully. "Only for a moment," he said, falling into the one I had occupied. "I want to get a wire off to Ethel to tell her how delighted I am about Annie Get Your Gun. Should have done it long ago. Ethel Merman, you know."

"Yes," I said. "I've heard it is a good show."

My adjective was insufficient. "It is superb! I'm raging that I couldn't make the opening. She sent a note chiding me for missing it."

"Would you like a drink?"

"Thanks, no. I really have to scoot. The Colmans might be early. They promised to bring Greer along if they could; and I want to be there when they arrive. People always cluster around them, you know."

"I dare say."

"But they are wonderful sports. Greer laughs and makes jokes about it. Greer Garson," he added distinctly, rising.

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