

VILLAGE VIEW

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When the Second World War came to an abrupt end in 1945, millions of GIs came home, married, and started families. The children born to them during the ensuing ten or fifteen years are today forming families of their own and, like their fathers and mothers before them, are finding affordable housing in short supply.

The reasons for the housing then were different from those of the present, but the effect was the same. In the early 40s, the country passed from a long period of economic depression into war-times, and little or no residential construction was undertaken in either era. During the Depression, money for building was secondary to money for food and enough clothing to keep decently covered. During the war, building material was consumed by the military.

All the country's industries were geared for war-production. Jeeps, trucks, and tanks were built in Detroit, not cars for civilians. Big factories and small ones were producing for the Pentagon, not for public consumption. Finding any sort of affordable housing was almost out of the question. Yet, the boys came home, babies were arriving at an unprecedented pace, and the scramble for shelter was epidemic throughout the nation. People lived in single rooms. Young couples moved in with their folks. Some couples doubled up. People with unused bedrooms rented them out. Basements in city apartment buildings were converted to living quarters. Old houses in suburban areas were broken up into tiny apartments to meet the demand for housing. The crunch eased only as the peacetime economy got rolling, and the home construction industry boomed to fill the need.

New suburbs sprang up around thickly populated urban areas like mushrooms after a spring rain. The Levittowns ate up thousands of acres of prime farmland around Philadelphia and New York City, setting a precedent for similar residential communities throughout the land. Whole towns and villages came into being over a period of months, offering Americans two-bedroom, one-bath homes, fully-equipped with stoves, refrigerators, and automatic washing machines; they were snapped up like sunflower seeds in chickadee feeders.

The story will be repeated, once inflation is controlled and interest rates come back down. The residential construction industry may be dormant, temporarily, but it's far from dead. It's just waiting.

Meanwhile, young people are waiting, too; only the most affluent and fortunate young couple can afford to buy a house in today's mortgage market. Only young people who have already secured the equity in homes purchased twenty to thirty years ago can pay cash and roll over the profit into new houses. Some are doing that, if they can find buyers capable of getting a mortgage and paying the interest rate on the borrowed money.

While they wait, ever-resourceful Americans, like generations before them, are finding interim solutions. Some old, as well as some new, social patterns are emerging. Some young couples are doubling up with another couple to rent one house. Since most young men and women are working these days, four incomes can combine to cover monthly rent and utility bills and leave enough for other expenses. All four enjoy better-than-average shelter and still find personal privacy in a three-bedroom, two-bath house, and share the common areas of kitchen, dining, and living rooms. The extra bedroom permits occasional weekend guests and may double as a sitting room when one couple entertains friends or family.

Older people, too, are resorting to similar techniques. Widows and widowers especially seek the safety and security

provided through communal living. They are reassured to have someone else in the house in case of sickness or other dangers. Ideally, each has one room where the door can be closed on sights and sounds of common rooms.

Adjustments must be made, of course, whatever the setup and whoever the participants. House-sharers must decide on a fair division of labor and expenses. While agreements may seem equitable in the planning stage, successful and satisfactory arrangements are achieved only if each person follows through in practice.

If the keeper of the bathrooms finds someone consistently tosses wet towels on the floor, leaves the toothpaste a twisted, oozing, uncapped mess on the sink, or scatters make-up and face powder in drifts over every surface, it won't be long before the keeper of the bath rebels.

If the dishwasher ends up clearing tables, scrubbing the kitchen floor where the cook has spilled grease, and scouring the stove after meals because pots are allowed to boil over, he or she will soon feel angry. That extra work wasn't part of the bargain.

If menus are pre-planned, the grocery shopper may need to substitute, occasionally, one vegetable for another. Perhaps there's a better buy in chicken than in pork chops. Co-habitants should expect such changes and accept them. Now and then, the best of cooks experiences a culinary failure; if not the general rule, these should be overlooked by the rest of the household.

Whoever is responsible for general cleaning may reasonably expect householders to pick up their personal belongings, put away books and magazines, and leave newspapers neatly stacked rather than scattered in windrows around an easy chair. Dirty dishes should be taken to the kitchen, rinsed and stacked for washing after the next meal. Apple cores, fruit parings, and cigar butts should not be left in ash trays for someone else to empty, nor should shoes or slippers, curlers or nail-care implements be left in public rooms. Each person participating in communal living can expect his or her private quarters will be inviolate. Entering another's room, except when invited, is bound to bring on heated confrontation.

What it all boils down to is common consideration for the other members of the "family." The lessons are soon learned and carefully practiced by successful house-sharers. Once learned, they stand the test of time. Many a marriage has

founded upon the rocks of unfair distribution of labor and responsibilities. Many a good family relationship is strained to the breaking point when a young couple move in with Mother and Dad, but fail to pull their own oars.

Doubling up can work, though. Doubling up can reduce living costs. Doubling up can mean a better living standard for everyone. But it works only when each person goes the extra mile, takes special care, makes a conscious effort to contribute just a little bit more than is required. That small extra in-put is the lubrication that makes the machinery work smoothly.

Could it work for you? Yes, if you choose your household wisely, are sure there's adequate space for and income from everyone, and establish the ground rules in advance. Discussions before anyone feels abused or put-upon are easier to conduct. Once someone feels angry or hurt, talking about it calmly is difficult. It's worth a try, even if all that ultimately comes of it is the lessons learned.

The economic pendulum will swing again in months ahead; the home construction industry will boom once more. In the meantime, Americans facing a housing shortage are following in the footsteps of their forebears. Earlier generations survived; so will this one.