

Letter-To-Lucy

Dear Lucy:

What's all the furor about a housing shortage on Cape Cod? Over the past decade, with the exception of the little recession in '74 and '75, all we've seen is development after development of new homes going up. Of course they bring more and more people to live on the Cape, but a housing shortage there is not. Look at the real estate ads.

We hear how tough it is for young people to afford a home of their own, yet a lot of young singles leave their parent's houses and move into houses or apartments. Two gals share a two-bedroom house but are appalled when expected to pay \$300 a month, plus utilities, for rent. Or two guys. Or a guy and a gal.

And if they can swing it, well and good, but when a lot of them do it, it takes houses off the market. If those single people lived at home with their folks, they'd not only save money but the rents would come down to a more reasonable level, and perhaps welfare families wouldn't be out on the street hunting for housing. If they weren't ousted from winter rentals, or if they could find year-round rentals, the welfare department wouldn't have to pay summer seasonal prices to put them up in motels. We pay for that, after all.

For reasons obvious to anyone who's once been eighteen or twenty years old, young singles don't want to live at home; they want freedom. There's nothing wrong with that, and may, in fact, provide them valuable experience. They could conceivably learn some economic realities as well as other less-than-pleasant facts of life.

Aside from the merits of education, however, when there's a housing shortage and homes for welfare mothers and their children are unavailable, even at the relatively high prices such families can pay with the help of rent subsidies from the state and federal funding programs, youthful singles should be encouraged to live at home.

There's nothing new about youth's desire for emancipation. It's a natural as the other "phases" people go through in the process of maturation. What's new is the level at which some of these fledglings fleeing the nest expect to live.

Not long ago such new entrants into the labor force took rooms at the "Y" or shared an efficiency apartment with one bath and a two-burner stove. Now they aspire to two-bedroom houses that could shelter a small welfare family.

I've vivid memories of the first room I rented while trying my own wings. On the third floor of a row of brownstones facing a city street, it was little more than a windowed closet. The bathroom was in the hall and shared with everyone living on the floor.

The room contained a narrow bed, a wardrobe closet, a small bureau, one wooden straight chair, a two-burner stove and a lock on the door. When I wanted to move the bed, I had to up-end it, rotate it, and set it down again.

Like it? Of course I didn't like it. It was so small and crowded I had to go into the hall to change my mind. It was all I could afford; scratching together the minuscule rent of \$4 a week was a struggle even though I could buy a good lunch for 28 cents at a nearby cafeteria. But then my paycheck was \$15 a week.

Comparing those prices with what today's dollars buy is senseless. Gasoline sold for 11 cents a gallon if you had a car to put it in which I did not. Similar accommodations (if they weren't condemned for human habitation) would doubtless now rent for \$30 a week.

Lunches similar to those I consumed would easily cost \$3.

What did I get for lunch for 28 cents? One plate of baked beans with two hot dogs, a salad consisting of a leaf of lettuce bedding a half canned peach topped with a scoop of cottage cheese, a pint of milk, and a baked custard.

How, you may wonder, can I possibly remember? Easier than you might imagine. I had the same lunch every day for two years. If you ate the same meal that often for that long, you'd remember it, too, just as you'd never forget that horrid hall bedroom with the sooty streaks on the wall around the window casing where the wind blew in the city's dirt.

And why did I live and eat like that for two years? To prove I could make it on my own. For what other reason would an otherwise sensible person endure that for two years? There has to be motivation.

If there's a housing shortage on the Cape that makes itself felt each year at the start of the summer season, it's because low-income people have lived in "winter rentals" since last Labor Day. It comes as no surprise to tenants when they're forced out each May.

The answer isn't putting these people in motels for the summer and feeding them in restaurants three meals a day. That's not only expensive and short-sighted, it's a criminal waste of taxpayer's money. Subsidized public housing pays off for insurance companies who've invested in them. Better still, Farmer's Home Loan mortgages, even if paid by welfare, would give welfare families permanent housing, a sense of ownership, personal pride.

Instead, they're on the street and turn, in desperation, to community action agencies. These are another rip-off. Employees of these agencies exploit the helpless, get their names in the papers, are provided with a "cause" and a reason for their own existence. Taxpayers get nicked for their salaries, too, you know.

The welfare department is castigated for failure to meet needs of families in crisis; headlines blare about homeless children; everyone has a field day except the welfare families. Their "rights" are defended.

No one seems to consider the fact that the welfare department is a state-wide public agency and when a family accepts welfare it comes under the jurisdiction of the state government. If housing is available in some part of the state and not in another, a welfare family doesn't have to accept it, but the state has fulfilled its obligation to find and offer shelter. It has met the requirements; the option to reject housing in another location belongs to the family in question.

It's doubtful if a real housing shortage does exist on the Cape, and it's a pretty good bet that the economic picture will change that situation if there actually is one. New housing being built to sell will be up for rent in short order if present trends continue. Singles will be moving back home with Mom and Dad. A lot of newcomers to Cape Cod will be returning to wherever they came from because jobs will soon be scarce.

The people I sympathize with are the welfare families who are but pawns of the system and the social agencies. Living in a motel room with three or four kids all summer may sound like lots of fun, but if you honestly think it's a piece of cake, then you've never spent a week shut up in one room with a bunch of young ones.

Think that over carefully.

Love,
OLIVER