

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RB-5
One Man's Opinion

846 Broadway-Lot #49
Saugus, Mass. 01906
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017



Dear Mr. Nolte:

Clifford Wilmath has been the publisher and editor of The Mobile Home and Trailer News for 27 years. In those years this Florida publication, with a current circulation of 30,000 and distribution in 41 states, has developed into the largest weekly mobile home newspaper in the country.

Cliff Wilmath is not a native Floridian, but then most people you meet in Florida aren't. They come from places like New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Michigan, Ohio, and Canada. Cliff, who is from Massachusetts, began his career as an editor and publisher in Quincy. For several years he worked as a reporter for Quincy's two daily newspapers. Bethlehem Steel approached him to edit The Dreadnaught, a factory paper, and he took the job. The first few issues of The Dreadnaught, Cliff remembers, was like confetti: they were lying around everywhere. It was obvious to him that few of the workers were interested in the

paper he was putting out.

He was concerned because he figured that if he didn't do something to get the paper off the floor and into some worker's hands his job would soon disappear. He thought about it for a while and came up with what proved to be just the right idea. He began asking different shop foremen for information, stories, gossip, and tidbits about people in their shop. The paper started doing much better, and soon he had all the copy he could use.

Within six months the paper wasn't lying around on the floor anymore, it was being read. Wilmath had been right in thinking that people wanted to read about themselves, their friends, and other workers.

He stayed with the job for a couple of years but decided he had had enough of New England's cold winters, so he packed his wife and two small children up and went to Florida.

They got to Miami in 1946. He tried to rent an apartment, but as soon as he mentioned the two small children he was told no deal. Then he looked around for a place to buy, but the places he liked cost \$20,000 and were smaller than the place he had sold in Quincy for \$6,500.

"I didn't really have much of a choice but to look for a trailer. I never owned one before, but it was the only inexpensive housing I could afford, so I looked at all 30 parks in the Miami area and picked what I thought was the best one. Trailers," he said, "weren't like they are today. In those days they were made of masonite and the big ones were 26 long and 8 wide. They sat on plots 35 ft. by 25 ft. Most of the trailer camps then didn't have paved roads, and almost none had toilets in the homes. You used to have to go to the neighborhood john.

"Once we settled I took a couple of jobs selling things, but I didn't like any of them. I thought of an idea for another paper. After visiting all 30 trailer parks I had realized that here was another group of people that no one gave a damn about. I decided to do a weekly on trailers.

"I contacted someone in each of the parks, had them promise to write about the people in their park, and we were on our way. The first issue was 8 pages. It took in \$250 and cost \$200 to produce.

"By the second year I began to realize certain things. First, the paper made money in the winter, but lost money during the summer when the "snowbirds" went home, so starting in the third year we published the paper from October-April. The paper was still not doing real well, and I decided that if it was to survive we would have to go out of Dade county, that there just wasn't enough interest in the county to support a weekly paper. I got a man up in Tampa to take care of the Northern part of the State, and since then the paper has grown.

"Three years ago we went back to publishing once a month in the summer. Two years ago we went back to twice a month, and this summer we may go back to once a week.

"We used to sell subscriptions at 25¢ a throw. We started with newspaper boys, but that is a thing of the past. Then we tried to send our paper in the mails, but that didn't work to the customers' satisfaction, so we've finally worked out distribution where we give the paper away."

"Does that mean," I asked, "that the paper's revenue is based on advertisement sales?"

"Yes," he said, "but if you look at most papers, the ones that survive are making their money on advertisements and not on subscriptions."

"Well," I asked, "do you think the paper's dependency on advertisement has effected the editorial policy?"

"Hell no," he said, "We have built up a reputation for saying what we believe and, I might add, printing both sides of an issue. Now there have been stories I have run and an advertiser has come in and told me if I kept it up he would cut the advertisement. Well I'm not going to let him or anyone else stop me from saying what I believe is right. So if I have to lose an advertiser, well that's how it goes. I'll give you an example of a stand that I took that wasn't very popular with the builders, but which I took because I believed in it. There was a lot of talk several years ago about setting construction standards. Some manufacturers were opposed to it but I thought it was a good idea and wrote so in this paper."

Mr. Wilmath has also printed sides of issues with which he may not agree or that a majority of his advertisers might not endorse. An example is the issue of closed parks. Mr. Wilmath published a story on October 28, 1972 in favor of closed parks. Three weeks later he published the following piece in opposition to closed parks.

Legislation Needed on 'Closed Park

By ED MITENIUS

Virtually all independent or "street" dealers of mobile homes feel that "closed parks," where you must buy from the park in order to rent or buy its lot, are a disservice to the consumer, ethically wrong, and will lead to an eventual deterioration of an industry that has served the American public well!

We also believe "closing" is unnecessary — simply a product of greed!

A "DISSERVICE" to the consumer? Absolutely, in two major respects:

As in any unregulated monopoly, prices (read "profits") can skyrocket. If a prospect is "sold" on a certain deluxe park, or only such locations are available, he is at the mercy of the park requiring purchase from themselves. Reports show overcharges up to \$2000 per "set-up", compared with pricing of similar mobile

In our Oct. 28 edition, we published a story in which Jim Key, director of sales for Everglades Lakes Mobile Home Community, defended the closed park policy maintained by a number of new mobile home parks in Florida.

Strongly disagreeing with Key's position is Ed Mitenius, owner of Ed Mitenius Mobile Homes in Tavares. Mitenius is a 24-year veteran of the mobile home industry. He has been an

independent mobile home dealer for 14 years, 11 of which have been spent in Central Florida. He is treasurer and a past president of the Lakes & Hills Chapter, Florida Mobile Home and Recreational Vehicle Assn.

In accordance with our policy of presenting both sides of controversial questions, we are pleased to provide space for Mr. Mitenius's views and we welcome those of other readers on the subject.

homes, aluminum additions, etc., from independent local sources!

This is the one basic reason behind "closed parks" — profits. We think it's restraint of trade in an insidious form, and it is the subject of Federal Trade Commission investigation (which, however, may take years to culminate).

"Entrance fees" (paid by a dealer to a park, for admission) place a park in a similar

category, and, of course, must be passed on to the buyer.

At the same time, the consumer is denied our traditional "freedom of choice". Instead of hundreds of brands and dozens of firms from which to shop, he is limited to one firm, and what they sell.

Incidentally, just a little basic knowledge of competition and "human nature" tell us there is no assurance of better quality, or warranty performance, from the park-dealer!

Perhaps a man should have the right to sell his land under whatever conditions he can obtain . . . perhaps not. But if a park rents land, for installation of the tenant's owned mobile home, why should the tenant be forced to buy that mobile home from the site-landlord?

"Deterioration of the industry" may sound like a plaintive "viewing with

alarm". But consider these likely results, if "street dealers" are wiped out (as widely considered inevitable in Florida, at least, if closed parks persist):

1. No one to display, sell, deliver and service the many, many sites — and private lots and farms — which are not in a currently-selling park.

2. No parts, no service, after the selling park is full. Some may maintain such departments, but has any owner obtained parts or service from a park other than where he lives? Service firms exist, but at least in thinly-populated areas such as our Lake County a worthwhile volume is hard to maintain, so their prospects are nebulous.

3. No place to "trade in" There may be little need for another five years, but we have been taking in 10 to 15-year-old mobile homes

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Greed Seen Reason For 'Closed Parks'

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without axles, whose original owners never expected them to leave their "owned" lots. Trading will continue — if "street dealers" continue — where owners will not sacrifice the location that has become "home". Of course a need for these trade-ins will continue in some areas, too, primarily as vacation homes.

4. Less genuine long-term interest in the industry. "Closed parks" are usually the product of land developers, whose basic interest is filling the spaces and moving to another development — probably in a different section.

Better "service" under such conditions? Hardly, on the average, when you consider that the independent dealer expects to stay in one spot and serve repeat and referred customers, like your local furniture store or auto dealer.

There are two answers we suggest for this serious problem for consumers and dealers:

First is an "oft-hoped but seldom-seen" cessation of "greed". We find that a park which limits "set-ups" of model homes to its own will normally net 90% of sales into the park (assuming prices are no more than a little above "competitive").

Letting that other 10% go to independent dealers — and the park can realistically and ethically require various "standards" — would preserve the consumer's freedom of choice, assure the con-

sumer that he is not being gouged, and continue to build a good image for mobile homes (while it helps preserve enough dealers to fill the "need").

If we build or buy a park (and we are now looking for a nearby location), this is a public promise that it will be operated thus!

But private pleas to park-dealers with whom we actually work on association activities has brought no relief in this direction, so we reluctantly conclude that state legislation — and we hate to see more — is the only solution.

Therefore, we ask support of a Florida law outlawing "closed parks" by a strong request to your state legislators.

The subject is controversial. Our conversation with some association leaders has brought much negative reaction. Such a law "rocks the boat" for the more-numerous park members of the industry association. Members of the big owners' association are no longer affected, and their leaders want to cooperate with the industry group.

But a real need exists, for the many thousands of future mobile home-owners, as well as dealers.

We urge that anyone agreeing with this viewpoint also drop a note to this paper, for forwarding to this writer (and compilation for the Legislature).

Let's not give up any more freedoms!

"All Florida's Only Mobile Home Weekly"

The format of the paper hasn't changed much in all these years but it has grown in size and is now usually between 60-70 pages. The front page of the paper is crowded with news about the mobile home industry, legislation, programs and personalities. The rest of the paper is almost evenly divided between advertisements and news from local parks. Near the front of the paper there is a page which includes the weekly editorial and a special column called "under the trailer top" which carries Mr. Wilmath's byline.

Mr. Wilmath is not a man without deep concerns when it comes to issues involving mobile homes and mobile home parks. One cannot read the last six months of the paper without noticing how incensed he has become over what he considers the biased CBS show on mobile homes broadcast on Sunday, March 5, 1972. For several weeks after the show Wilmath led a vigorous campaign to correct what he considered glaring biases in the show. He had been present at one interview conducted by CBS's Morley Safer which he considered "an incredible hatchet job." He wrote to the FCC and members of both houses of Congress. When I talked with him he was still seething about the show, which he felt besmirched the fine reputation of mobile home parks.

In the March 18, 1972 issue Wilmath quotes a letter he wrote to Dean Burch, chairman of the FCC:

"I have had calls and letters from outraged readers throughout the country... Their feeling, which I share, is that this program abridged their right to fair treatment at the hands of those individuals and companies granted the privilege of using the air waves that belong to the public.

It would seem to me that in fairness to the innocent victims of the scurrilous attack, the perpetrators of the insult should be made to deliver a public apology, and that you should order them to grant equal time on the same program for a rebuttal which shows the facts as they are, not as they have been twisted...."

In the next several issues Mr. Wilmath continued his campaign. He and others went to Washington to contact members of Congress and to talk with FCC officials.

On April 1st Wilmath printed a letter by a Miami lawyer, Alvin E. Entin, who thought the program was fair and reasonable. Mr. Wilmath printed Mr. Entin's letter and his own reply under the heading:

We 'Amused' Miami Lawyer

He Disagrees With Us On TV Show

Ed. Note: We would like to thank the hundreds of readers who have mailed us copies of letters they sent to FCC Chairman Dean Burch, CBS News President Richard S. Salant and to the sponsors of the March 5th "60 Minutes" TV Show, expressing indignation at the way the subject was handled.

To date, we have received two letters which took the opposite view. One was anonymous and was thrown away because we have little regard for those who don't have the courage to sign their name.

The other came from Alvin E. Entin, a Miami attorney. Because Mr. Entin sent copies of his letter to Messrs. Burch, Salant and the sponsors and challenged us to refute his statements, we are running his letter and our reply in full.

Dear Sir:

I am in receipt of a copy of your news paper of March 18, 1972. I am both appalled and amused at your righteous indignation leveled at CBS for their presentation on Mobile Homes shown on "60 Minutes". You attempted to portray this program as a smear on those people who have chosen mobile home living is patently absurd. The show, as you are truly aware, attacked not the intelligent people who live in mobile homes, but those unscrupulous manufacturers, dealers, and park owners who exploit them.

In refutation to your mass of innuendoes, I challenge you to rebut the following truths;

(1) That prior to the enlightened action of the

Florida Legislature mobile home tenants without leases lived at the whim of their landlords.

(2) That extra charges are made by landlords for washing machines, children and pets.

(3) That mobile home park operators in Dade and Broward County promise tenants a world of amenities, yet deliver only dross.

(4) That the construction of mobile homes is still substandard.

(5) That untreated plywood is used in the construction of mobile homes and is placed as cabinetry over open flame gas ovens.

(6) That unscrupulous park owners require mobile home tenants to buy and purchase equipment only from a

park owner's preferred list.

Lastly, I am unimpressed by the comments of your so called mobile home industry leaders. It is understood by mobile home owners that the leaders whom you have quoted represent only one segment of the mobile home industry in Florida. Messrs Brown, Martin and Taylor are solely industry oriented.

Their indignation is reminiscent of that of a small boy being caught with his hands in the cookie jar. Your sampling of tenant leadership is certainly incomplete. I should have liked to have seen comments from Robert Burlow of the Dade County Mobile Home Owners Civic Association, John Adams of the Florida Coalition of Mobile Home Owners and Timothy Mulroy of Mobilcare. I don't think these people viewed the telecast as did your correspondents.

Thanking you in advance for your attention to this letter, I remain,

Very truly yours,
ALVIN E. ENTIN

Dear Mr. Entin.

This will acknowledge receipt of your letter of March 16th. While I am glad to learn that our reaction to the "60 Minutes" TV program of March 5th provided you with some amusement, I can assure you that the majority of the mobile home owners of Florida were not amused at all. As a matter of fact, a flood of mail started to the sponsors and others responsible for the show as soon as our paper reached subscribers. I am confident there will be some reaction from CBS.

The challenge that you issued for me to rebut your six "truths" is taken up with relish.

In reply to your first "truth", I have no evidence that the great majority of the 400,000 mobile home owners in Florida were unhappy prior to the passage of recent legislation affecting landlord-tenant relations. If, as you say, these people lived "at the whim of their landlords", they appear to be very happy doing so.

Your second "truth" is that extra charges are made by landlords for washing machines, children and pets. I am aware that some landlords do make these charges, but since this is a matter of park policy, I see nothing wrong with it. If a prospective tenant doesn't wish to live in a park where these charges are made, he has the all-American option of living somewhere else. I also happen to believe that the owner of the business has the right to determine its policies.

Your third "truth" is an unsubstantiated generality that does the same kind of hatchet job on 95% of the legitimate park operators in Dade and Broward Counties that the "60 Minutes" show did on the entire mobile home industry.

I am not aware that you have any qualifications to judge the merit of the construction standards of mobile homes as outlined in your fourth and fifth "truths". The existing standards for mobile home construction were set by true experts in each field who have no connection whatever with the mobile home industry. I am more inclined to accept their valuation than yours.

Your last point is again a generalization which, with one sweeping stroke, paints a false image of the great majority of the mobile home park owners in this area.

I regret that you were not impressed by the comments of the leaders of the mobile home industry in our March 18th issue.

Of the three men you identify as tenant leaders, only Robert Burlow and his organization were known to me prior to receiving your letter. I have since checked on the Florida Coalition of Mobile Home Owners and Mobilcare. We will have more to say on these two organizations in subsequent issues, but I think in fairness to the people who received copies of your letter to me you should have identified yourself as attorney for these two profit-making groups.

We did quote John Johnston in our March 18th issue and we consider him very representative of tenants, since his organization has 35,000 members on a statewide basis. As nearly as I have been able to determine, the combined total membership of all three organizations which you mentioned in your letter would amount to only a fraction of the Federation enrollment.

Sincerely yours,
CLIFF WILMATH
Editor & Publisher

Wilmath mentioned that over the years he has been in many of the battles regarding mobile home legislation. When he came to Florida in 1946 trailers were, according to him, neither "fish nor fowl". The state attorney general wanted them all classified as trailers, and didn't care whether people used them for living or carrying bananas. The attorney general wanted to charge a license fee based on weight, so that a person with a 25-foot trailer had to pay between \$75-\$100. Wilmath fought for state legislation to separate the kind of trailers people lived in from commercial trailers. In 1947 trailers were defined as motor vehicles and charged a flat \$10 fee.

This taxing system stayed the same until the tax collector in St. Augustine tried to tax mobile homes as personal property. The mobile home dwellers brought a class action suit to stop the tax assessor. Much to everyone's surprise, the judge ruled in favor of the tax assessor, and the state Supreme Court upheld the decision.

Once again Mr. Wilmath and others concerned about the continued growth and development of mobile homes in Florida led a campaign to do away with this new taxation program. This time they chose the route of an amendment to the State Constitution, so that mobile homes would be classified as motor vehicles for tax purposes rather than as personal property. Mr. Wilmath traveled throughout the state, and appeared on numerous radio and TV programs in support of this amendment, and when the public finally voted in a referendum the amendment carried by less than 17,000 votes out of almost one million cast.

Mr. Wilmath thinks the biggest changes in mobile homes came in 1954 when they began manufacturing the first 10-foot wides. Beginning with the ten wides all the amenities associated with apartments began to be offered in mobile homes. Manufacturers began putting in toilets and kitchen utilities. At first the design and standards left something to be desired, but when companies like GE and Westinghouse began to realize the potential market for their products in mobile homes, the mobile home started taking on a new appearance.

Over time, mobile homes were becoming a refined way of life, and a real possibility for the average working man. "Now you know," Wilmath said, "not only are there 12 wides, but double and triple wides. They keep making them better and better.

"Anyway, what I thought would be the next big breakthrough was the development of condominium parks. In 1955 he offered 1350 lots in Trailer Estates of Braden for sale. Well, I was surprised when the places didn't sell immediately. The other park owners, the renters, resented the development, and people were afraid, I guess, of buying ten feet of swampland. It took Sid five years to develop the park.

"Even then I would have bet you that condominium parks would be the wave of the future, that they would dominate the market. They never have. In Florida, they haven't accounted for more than 10% of the market.

"Aside from the question of condominium or rental, it has been the character of the parks which has kept changing. Right after WWII it was mostly young families, but park owners started finding that these young families and their children were a nuisance. Slowly a movement began for adults only. Retirees love their peace and quiet. Little feet don't do a damn thing for them anymore. So the parks changed from ex-GIs to Mama and Papa from Michigan who had just sold their family home and wanted to retire.

"For years and years this was the development. Developers found parks for adults only more profitable and less trouble. But some years back they began to find that communities where there were only older people had trouble sustaining themselves. Then you began having your mixed parks, parks where there were adult sections and family sections. But most park people think this is not ideal, and the ideal seems to be either a family park or an adult park. Right now there are many more adult parks in the state than family parks, but family parks are starting to develop."

I switched the conversation to current problems by asking Wilmath what he thought some of the most pressing problems concerning mobile homes were.

"Of course," Wilmath said, "everyone is aware of the problems of zoning, but zoning is closely tied to the problem of land cost. What happens is what I call leapfrogging. Mobile home parks will keep moving out to the boondoggles. Twenty years ago you could buy land cheap near a city and develop it into a park. A developer can't afford to turn that land into mobile homes anymore, so the parks keep moving further and further out.

"What may prove to be a more important problem," Wilmath continued, "is what happens when Standard Oil-as a developer-makes an attractive offer to the mobile home park owner who bought his land twenty years ago. What is he to do, and what are his responsibilities toward his mobile home tenants?"

"I know of a couple of cases where this actually occurred. In Clearwater a developer wanted to buy some land which included a mobile home park to build a shopping center. People from the park came to a meeting held by the developer and asked what was going to happen to them. The developer wanted the land badly and didn't want publicity about old retirees being evicted, so he promised to pay to have the people relocated into other parks.

"In another park-Jensen park- the owner told his tenants that he had been offered a million dollars by a developer. He went on to tell them that he was willing to sell the land to the tenants if they could raise an equivalent amount. The tenants decided to buy the land and actually raised over one million dollars.

"These are just two isolated examples," Wilmath said. "It will, I believe, be a serious question in the future."

I changed the subject once more. I asked Mr. Wilmath why he thought there were almost no black families in mobile home parks.

"Well," he said, "people want to live with their own kind. There really hasn't been that much trouble down here. The local NAACP has threatened to bring a case a couple of times but nothing has come of it. To tell you the truth, I don't think that many black people want to live in mobile homes. I have the feeling they think it's inferior housing."

He continued, "I do know of two situations, one in Arizona, the other in California, where a black family moved into a park. About three years ago in Tuscon, Arizona a black GI and his family wanted to move into a park. He was refused at all the parks. OEO or some other government agency threatened to do something so the park owners got together and drew straws for who would take the family. Everyone agreed to make up the losses suffered by the owner who pulled the short straw. Anyway, the GI moved into the park and everyone else in the park moved out. The other owners wouldn't make up for such heavy losses and the park owner had to close up.

"The same thing happened in California. The problem is that people in mobile home parks are living in close quarters, and, whether we like it or not, people in tight spots don't want to live black and white together in spite of what the government says. And the park owner is conducting a business, and he doesn't want to jeopardize it no matter what his personal feelings are.

"And as I said before I don't really think black people want to live in mobile homes."

Mr. Wilmath's approach to reporting on mobile homes is best summarized in the following editorial from the October 11, 1972 issue of The Mobile Home and Trailer News.

Keep It In Context

With the controversy over the "60 Minutes" television blast still raging, word reaches us that the subject of mobile homes has now come to the attention of Ralph Nader, the self-styled consumer advocate.

Mr. Nader says that over 500 complaints about mobile homes have been received at his office. He considers that reason enough to launch an investigation, he says.

At this point, he hasn't made up his mind whether to issue a report or to continue the investigation, which apparently has already been started.

It seems to us that Mr. Nader's own figures tell a story. Last year, the mobile home industry turned out approximately 500,000 units. If Mr. Nader received complaints from 500 buyers, this means that one-tenth of one percent of the people who bought mobile homes last year are unhappy. Conversely, it means that 499,500 families are pleased with their purchases.

We are confident that every responsible mobile home manufacturer in the United States makes every effort to build a product that will be trouble free and as a result, complaint free. Unfortunately, this is a difficult goal to attain and some of the largest industrial companies in the world will occasionally manufacture a product that is below their usual standard.

As far as we know, Mr. Nader's organization has never issued a complimentary report about any product it has investigated. It is to be expected, therefore, that if a report on mobile homes is made public, its findings will be highly critical.

We have no quarrel with the type of report issued by Mr. Nader, nor do we question his right to make it.

We just hope that if and when a Nader report on mobile homes is forthcoming that it will be made clear that the complaints came from only one-tenth of one percent of the people who bought mobile homes in the United States last year.

The mobile home industry is not beyond criticism and perhaps some of it is well deserved. As long as the public is advised of the true ratio between satisfied customers and those who aren't, we'll have no complaints.