

Headin' South  
The Texas Snowbirds

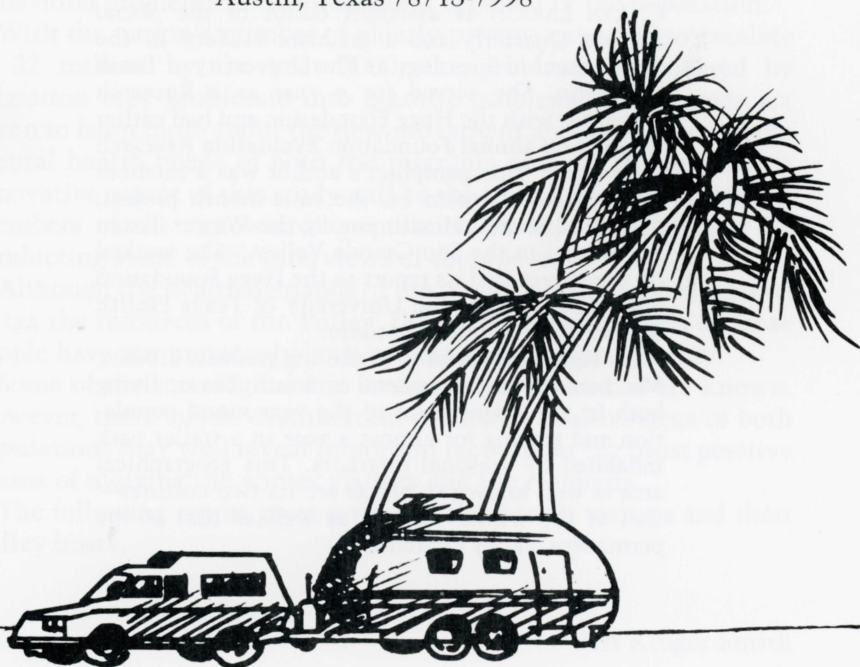


*Headin' South:*  
THE TEXAS SNOWBIRDS

by C. Lyn Larson

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For eight years prior to beginning graduate studies, Ms. Larson was a resident of South Texas, living both in the mainstream of the year-round population and staying for almost a year in a trailer park inhabited by seasonal migrants. This geographical area is well known to her as are its two cultures—that of the winter visitors as well as that of the permanent Valley citizens.

# Foreword

Winter in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas brings changes which are more personal than seasonal. Like other semitropical areas, the Texas Valley becomes a mecca for older people who want to escape the harsh climate of the north and east and live in relatively inexpensive comfort elsewhere.

These "snowbirds" migrate to Texas by the thousands, in their Airstreams and pickup trucks. A relatively new mobile population—over 200,000 strong—they demonstrate the ever-growing older population throughout the country and present new arenas for study. One such endeavor has been undertaken by The University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio as part of a border mental health project comparing various disorders in Mexican-American and Anglo persons. The Hogg Foundation for Mental Health has joined in the effort by making a small planning grant to help fund a study of a sample of the "snowbird" population to determine the extent of mental illness and the degree of mental health among these people. The entire investigation should, in the future, give significant comparative data from which important scientific conclusions can be drawn about the incidence and prevalence of emotional disturbances, mental illness, and related behavioral problems in this important segment of the population.

With the nation's number of elderly persons expected to escalate to 32 million by the year 2000, the problems engendered by migration may proliferate into gigantic problems unless steps are taken to learn more about the new movement and to understand the mental health needs of both the migrants and the residents. One innovative aspect of this study will be the training and utilization of members of the "snowbird" population to aid in the project by conducting some of the interviews of their peers.

Although the health demands of the winter population are known to tax the resources of the Valley, the mental health needs of those people have not previously been subject to scientific scrutiny.

Some of the sociological and interpersonal dilemmas are known. However, more subtle examination of mental health status of both populations may well reveal important facts about the most positive means of merging the winter visitors and the residents.

The following report gives a view of the winter visitors and their Valley hosts.

Bert Kruger Smith

# INTRODUCTION

In May of 1984, the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health hosted the fourth Robert Lee Sutherland seminar. Its theme was a positive look at elderly Texans. The opening session's agenda included a short film, produced and directed by Andrea Merrim, titled "Snowbirds." The film, which presents a brief look into the lives of the older winter visitors to South Texas, made a strong impression on Dr. Robert Leon, a member of the audience and chairman of the Psychiatry Department at The University of Texas Health Science Center (HSC) at San Antonio. Dr. Leon took his images of the "snowbirds" home to two sociologists, Dr. Harry Martin and Dr. Sue Keir Hoppe. Excited about the possibilities of learning more about the winter visitors to South Texas, the three submitted a proposal to the Hogg Foundation. Supported by a small grant, they began the "Survey of Winter Texans" study.

In November 1984 the research team made its first fieldtrip to the Valley. They interviewed trailer park owners and managers, Winter Texans, representatives from the clergy and commerce, and Dr. Carl Rush who was the local expert on the Valley's winter tourists.

Eight trailer parks were randomly selected from the most current listings and directories in order to create the study sample. Then, between November 1984 and January 1985, three additional fieldtrips were needed to obtain cooperation from the eight parks and continue general information gathering activities. The research team spent a total of 19 days in the Valley doing fieldwork.

Based on the information gathered during the fieldtrips and using standard health and mental health measures, the survey instrument was designed. In two of the sample parks, the researchers got permission to give written questionnaires, and in six parks permission was granted to administer face-to-face interviews. Because of this, two versions of the instrument were created. Minor differences in the instruction sections caused the format of the two versions of the instrument to differ slightly but the questions, question order, and wording were exactly the same.

In February 1985, the questionnaires were distributed and the interviewing was carried out. In one park, volunteer Winter Texans served as interviewers, and in the other five parks middle-aged women conducted the interviews. Nearly 350 Winter Texans completed either a questionnaire or an interview. The results from

# INTRODUCTION

this study included considerable data on the mental health of Winter Texans. For the most part, however, such information will be reported in other publications.

The aim of this monograph is to describe the average Winter Texan without creating a stereotype. To create such a profile, the author brings together not only data from the HSC study but also information gathered through personally observing and participating in the activities of the Texas snowbirds. This material is integrated with the previous research conducted both in Texas and in other states to help round out the picture.

This article is not intended as a comprehensive survey of the Texas snowbirds. The important issues surrounding the impact Winter Texans have on the Rio Grande Valley—especially in terms of economics, service delivery, and cultural conflict—are hinted at in this report, but are not systematically or sociologically discussed. Therefore, any conclusions about the varied ways the Winter Texans affect the Valley and its people are left to the reader and to future researchers.

## *Headin' South:* THE TEXAS SNOWBIRDS

The first thing you notice are a few scattered palms. As you drive south through Texas, the signs of a tropical climate appear as far north as Austin or San Antonio. Traveling farther south you enter the Texas coastal plain where the landscape becomes flat and barren; cactus plants, scrubby mesquite and ebony trees flourish in this part of Texas. The palms, although more abundant, grow only near the watered lawns of the occasional farm and ranch houses.

Continuing south eventually leads you to what some people call the Magic Valley which lies along the Rio Grande at the tip of Texas and stands out like an oasis against the dry flat flood plain. Thousands of palm trees, bougainvillea, and oleanders frame the highways.

Depending upon the season, large fields of grapefruit, orange, lime, sorghum, cabbage, carrot, sweet pepper, tomato, onion, or other food crops fill in the landscape between the roads. Although it appears as a natural oasis, it is not. Its lushness is nurtured by irrigation from the Rio Grande. Most of the tropical plants are not indigenous; many were planted during the Roosevelt years in public works projects. Nevertheless, the beauty is striking, especially in comparison to the starkness of the surrounding coastal plain. This is the scene which greets the Valley visitor.

*...the only visitors who have a special name are those  
the local folks call snowbirds.*

A narrow stretch of green beginning at the southernmost tip of Texas, bordered on one side by Mexico—with its curio shops, restaurants, and cultural attractions—and bounded by the Gulf of Mexico to the East, the Valley has become a popular vacation and shopping spot. Indeed, tourism is one of the Valley's largest industries.

The tourists come from all over the world and from all walks of life. But the only visitors who have a special name are those the local folks call "snowbirds." These visitors are not the typical young family on a two-week South Padre Island vacation. Their nickname was born because they choose the winter rather than the summer for their Valley stays. And, because the overwhelming majority come from the North where the winters are cold and bitter, they have been likened in local jargon to the birds that also seek refuge from winter's wrath each year. Like the birds, they come for months at a time.

During the winter months, from October through April, travel trailers and mobile homes fill many of the Valley's citrus groves; sometimes orange trees and trailers exist side by side. The scene, in many ways, is not too different from winter garden areas in Arizona and Florida because, in addition to the large number of trailer parks, another feature stands out. Most of the Winter Texans are older. Many of them are also retired.

Because of the gray hair, the northern accents, the trailers and mobile homes, and the seemingly carefree lifestyle, there appears to be much similarity among the Winter Texans. While it is true they are older Americans who choose to migrate to a warmer climate for the winter, the presumed sameness is superficial. They live in different types of residences in the Valley. They come from different places. Some are early retirees in their fifties while a few are over ninety. Some own property in the Valley and consider it a second home; others never settle anywhere. The latter have sold their



property and enjoy a freewheeling migratory lifestyle twelve months a year.

While migration among the elderly has received some attention by the social sciences (see Biggar, 1980; Flynn et al, 1985; Wiseman, 1980), the patterns which have been observed usually document permanent moves. Seasonal migration for leisure, on the other hand, is largely overlooked as a significant social phenomenon. Because the data are usually taken from the Census and the Current Population Surveys, which both ask for one's "usual place of residence," the seasonal migrant is not included (Sullivan and Stevens, 1982). The studies based on these data necessarily focus on the older American who chooses to make a permanent move.

A total of four journal articles addressing seasonal migration among the elderly was discovered in a 1985 review of the literature. One of these studies was conducted in the state of New York and examines migrants from the perspective of the sending state. Another was written in 1954, while the remaining two articles are reports of studies in Arizona. None focuses on Texas.

For eight winter seasons Dr. Carl Rush, who is affiliated with Pan American University at Edinburg, has administered a short survey questionnaire to the Winter Texans. The results of these surveys have made Rush the only expert for answering questions such as: "Who are the Winter Texans?" "Do they have permanent homes somewhere?" "Were they farmers, teachers, bank executives, or factory workers?" "Why did they choose the Valley as their winter home rather than the more well-known areas like Florida or Arizona?" "How do they spend their time in the Valley?" Even Rush does not have all the answers for these and other questions.



*Most of the Winter Texans seem to take a relatively direct route to the South.*

Some consistency exists among the meager research findings on the older seasonal migrant. The Valley's typical winter residents reflect the profile first described in "The Life of the Retired in a Trailer Park" (Hoyt, 1954). This study was conducted in the oldest park in Florida. Most of the park's residents, 73.7 percent, were retired. They were overwhelmingly Anglo and ranged in age from forty-one to ninety. Hoyt found that the residents were quite active and involved in a number of leisure activities such as bingo, shuffleboard, card playing, and socializing.

Hoyt also found that almost 75 percent of the park's residents came from the east north central states directly north of Florida. This same general migratory pattern holds true for Arizona, whose winter visitors also come from the states which are most directly north. Over half come from the north Pacific and the north central states (Sullivan and Stevens, 1982).

Like the pattern witnessed so long ago in Florida, most of the Winter Texans take a relatively direct route to the South. Rush's study revealed that most of the Valley's visitors come from the midwestern states. A quick poll of the patrons at a Valley cafe on a winter night might find people from Flint, Michigan; What Cheer, Iowa; Wynnewood, Oklahoma; Des Moines, Iowa; or Grand Island, Nebraska. Thirteen states, the primary senders, accounted for 83.2 percent of the Valley's Winter Texan population in 1984. Based on the results of Rush's latest study, those states in rank order were: 1) Iowa, 2) Minnesota, 3) Illinois, 4) Missouri, 5) Michigan, 6) Kansas, 7) Indiana, 8) Wisconsin, 9) Texas, 10) Oklahoma, 11) Ohio, 12) Nebraska, and 13) South Dakota (Rush, 1984c).

These seasonal migratory streams reflect those of the older permanent snow-to-sun mover. Florida is, and has been for many years, the number one receiving state for the long-term older mover, and its large retirement communities are well known. Historically, California is also a leader in attracting retired movers, but recently

its popularity has waned. Arizona and Texas have begun to draw large numbers of older immigrants. Texas is now the fourth ranked state in its share of older permanent movers (Flynn et al, 1985).

While these trends are well documented, the number of seasonal migrants is largely unknown. Carl Rush estimated that between 200,000 and 250,000 Winter Texans would visit the Valley during the 1984 winter season. He further speculated that their number would reach 500,000 within the next two to five years (Rush, 1984b). Florida, California, and Arizona are more popular among the older, permanent snow-to-sun migrants. The same is probably true for the seasonal visitors. If this is indeed the case, and if Rush's estimates are correct, there may be well over one million older seasonal migrants in the United States today.

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are retired—the Winter Texans  
claimed diverse occupations.*

The Valley visitors, according to the HSC survey, range in age from 50 to 90 years. The average age is 67. About 90 percent are married and, on the average, these couples have been married 40 years. A few have attended college or have earned a bachelor's or advanced degree. Around half have graduated from high school, but a sizeable number did not complete high school.

Sullivan and Stevens (1982) found in Arizona—as did Hoyt (1954) in Florida—that winter visitors there are overwhelmingly Anglo Americans. The Rush studies have not asked questions about ethnicity, but observation indicates that the Valley's winter tourists are almost all Anglo.

Before retirement—and about 90 percent are retired—the Winter Texans claimed diverse occupations. For example, in the HSC survey there were railroad foremen and depot agents, homemakers,

truck drivers, secretaries, construction workers, teachers, electricians, farmers, nurses, sales managers, a mail carrier, a telephone operator, and a toy factory worker. Approximately 20 percent of the men listed farming as their main occupation. Another 40 percent worked as craftsmen and laborers. The women were more likely to be employed in clerical, sales, or managerial occupations, and about 20 percent described themselves as housewives.

The general occupational status of this group of Winter Texans and observations made by Rush (1984a, 1984b) suggest that the winter tourists who choose Texas are probably less well off than their Arizona and California counterparts. Visitors who first tried one of these latter states before deciding on South Texas say the Valley is much less expensive. One advantage they often mention is the Valley's proximity to Mexico. It is not unusual to see the sidewalks filled with older American shoppers in the Mexican towns directly across the Rio Grande. Many items are less expensive in Mexico than in the United States. Some of the Winter Texans' favorite purchases include produce, sugar, coffee, tobacco, cookies, crackers, and liquor.

Although no data have been collected about religious preference, some members of the Valley's clergy say that the majority of the winter visitors are Lutheran. This view is based in part on the fact that the main sending states have relatively high proportions of Lutherans and also on the large numbers of Winter Texan church attenders. For example, one Lutheran church with about 200 regular members offers one morning service for the greater part of the year, yet three services are required each week during the winter to meet the needs of 2500 worshipers. And according to the pastor, this doesn't accurately measure the numbers because many tourists attend services within the parks or don't attend at all. He reports many calls from hospitals and funeral homes asking him to help meet the needs of Winter Texans who never attend his church.

*One of the most common reasons for becoming a Winter Texan is the cold weather back home.*

Winter Texans generally spend about 6 or 7 months a year at their homes in the North. Almost 84 percent own their homes and have lived there an average of 38 years.

For these winter travelers, the season begins when they leave home in the early fall or as late as November or December. They usually remain south until early spring. An average Valley stay is about four months (Rush, 1984c). Many park owners and managers say the country's weather patterns are reflected in arrival and departure dates. Visitors from the farthest north—the colder climates—are usually among the first to arrive and the last to leave.

In the HSC survey one of the most common reasons offered for becoming a seasonal migrant was the cold weather back home. Hoyt (1954) and Sullivan and Stevens (1982) found climate to be an important factor influencing the yearly trek among winter visitors to Florida and Arizona.

The HSC survey further asked why the Winter Texans preferred seasonal migration to permanent settlement in the Valley. It is hardly surprising that one of the most common responses for the decision to go home was that the Valley "is too hot in the summer." Another reason also figured into this decision: "family and loved ones are still up North." And while other reasons were given, it was these two—the summer heat and family back home—that were mentioned by almost all the HSC respondents.

*...many Winter Texans refer  
to "RVs" when speaking of their trailers  
and to themselves as "RVers."*

Winter Texans make the trip south by various modes of transportation. Those who have a permanently parked trailer or mobile home usually travel by car, but a few take planes or buses. Most come in their recreational vehicles, or RVs.

According to several dealers in Austin, Texas, the strict definition of a recreational vehicle refers to self-contained motor homes like Winnebagos. On the other hand, many Winter Texans refer to "RVs" when speaking of their travel trailers and many even refer to themselves as "RVers." Travel trailers are usually not more than 35 feet long and can be towed with an ordinary pickup truck or van. The advantage of both kinds of recreational vehicles is that they are easy to move and can be parked almost anywhere.

Often the winter visitors tow a "fifth wheel," or small economy car, behind the RV. Bringing a fifth wheel is becoming more and more popular among the winter visitors. On fixed incomes in an inflated economy, they find that an economical car is a sound alternative to a heavy, gas-guzzling pickup.

Recreational vehicles are the Winter Texans' overwhelming choice in movable residences. The HSC survey found that about 75 percent of the visitors were living in travel trailers and motor homes, and all but a few people owned their vehicles.

Perhaps one reason for the popularity of RVs is that most winter visitors enjoy the travel itself. They say they enjoy the "camping." Often they take a leisurely trip to the Valley with frequent stops along the way at lakes, trailer campsites, or state and federal parks. For example, one couple from Illinois makes a weeklong stop each way at the Lake of the Cherokees in Oklahoma. Many even call the Valley parks "camps" and refer to their lifestyle as "camping all winter."

The HSC survey found that 66 percent of the respondents felt the journey last year was "very enjoyable," almost 21 percent claimed it

was "somewhat enjoyable," and only about 13 percent experienced a "not too enjoyable" trip. The women tend to rate the trips a little higher than the men—perhaps because the men do more of the driving.

The mobile dwellings vary in size, shape, color, and price. Mobile homes are larger and more expensive than recreational vehicles. The obvious advantage is additional room. The disadvantage is that they tend to be relatively immobile. They must be professionally moved by large trucks.

In recent years a new type, the park model, has become popular. Park models are between recreational vehicles and mobile homes in size. The advantage of a park model is that when parked, the sides can be pulled out from the living room or bedroom area to gain an additional eight to ten feet in width. With the sides pushed back in, it can be towed with an ordinary three-quarter-ton pickup truck.

*Valley trailer parks vary in size, age, layout, security, facilities, and organized activities.*

Most parks in the Valley aim to attract either mobile homes or the smaller trailers and recreational vehicles. There are probably many reasons for this tendency to cluster, and the trend may reflect much more than a particular park owner's preference. One of the Arizona studies claims the RVers there believe the "mobile home residents are staid and condescending toward them." The authors report that the mobile home owners do look "askance" at the RV lifestyle and regard the "activity and socializing of travel trailer residents as frantic and not selective" (Sullivan and Stevens, 1982:174).

Carl Rush suggests that these attitudes exist in the Valley, too. He observes that the mobile home dwellers tend to see the "RVers as fly-by-nights" and the RVers in turn believe "the mobile home residents receive special treatment from the park owners and managers" (Rush, 1984b).

These attitudes may be tied to social stratification resulting from basic socioeconomic differences among the winter tourists. In Arizona, Sullivan and Stevens found that the mobile home dwellers were in better financial condition, had better educations, and were in relatively poorer health (1982). While this has not been studied in the Valley, it is likely the case there, too.

Such biased attitudes may intensify as the structure of the Valley's mobile park industry becomes more complex. For example, one new trend is to build communities based on what is called the universal lot. These lots are for sale, not for rent, and are designed to accommodate any type of mobile residence or a small permanent patio home. If the reported biases and prejudices exist between dwellers of differing kinds of residences, then new fissures may appear as the universal lot communities begin to fill with mixed dwelling types.

The universal lot community is not the norm, and an average Valley park is almost impossible to describe because of variations in park size, age, layout, cost, security, facilities, and organized activities. A closer look at three different Valley parks can serve to illustrate the diversity.

One small park with about 75 trailer pads is not landscaped, and the drives between the trailers are dirt. This park is strictly an RV park; the park manager's older mobile home tucked away in a back corner is the only exception. The recreation hall is the park owner's converted garage. Even without the frills, the rec hall is always full of people. And for that matter, so is the park, perhaps because many of the residents have been coming for years. The low rental fee makes this park especially appealing. Many residents say they "don't mind not having a fancy rec hall, shuffleboard courts, and swimming pools." Everyone seems to have a friend to visit in another park if, for example, the "shuffleboard urge" hits. A main attraction which brings them back every year is their relationships with one another. They have become a group and treasure their winter friends.



A second park boasts lots for sale and not for rent. It is well designed and beautifully landscaped. The curving concrete streets winding through the park bear names like Sleepy Valley, Las Palmas, and Sand Dollar Drive. There are some recreational vehicles in the park, but most of the dwellings are mobile homes or park models. Even the RVs are left in the park all year. Most of the residences have lawns, flowers, and small gardens. Many have permanent porches, patios, sundecks and garages. This park has no paid manager; it is run by a committee of residents. All major decisions are made in parkwide meetings, so all residents have the opportunity to participate in the collective life of the park.

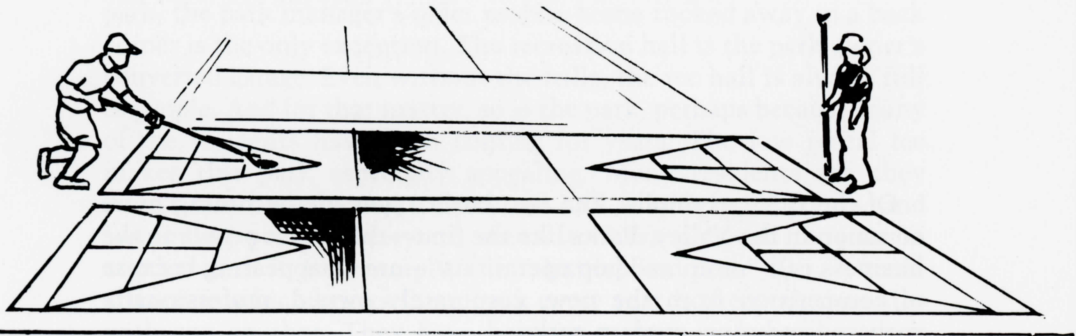
The third park, recently opened, has well over 500 trailer spaces. It is run by professional managers who themselves are a couple from the North. There is a swimming pool, a shuffleboard court area, a large recreation hall, a laundry, a pool hall, and one of the largest dance floors in the Valley. It is not surprising that the residents of this park say that dancing is the main way they spend much of their time while in the Valley; they call the Valley a "dancing paradise." Rent is a little higher than average, but residents say the facilities are worth the extra money they spend.

Of the three examples, the two latter types are becoming more common in the Valley. Parks like the first—those that people in the business call "mom and pop operations"—are disappearing because of competition from the new, corporately owned, professionally managed and more modern parks.

Winter Texans often choose a particular park because there are other people from the home state there. Carl Rush has found that they congregate in what he calls "state enclaves." In other words, people from Wisconsin tend to stay near others from Wisconsin. This is especially evident in the two Valley counties, Cameron and Hidalgo, which attract the largest number of winter visitors. Hidalgo, the northernmost of the two counties, includes the cities of Edinburg, McAllen, Mission, Pharr, and San Juan. It draws visitors from Iowa, Minnesota, and Ohio. Cameron County, often called the lower Valley, includes Brownsville, Harlingen, and the coastal towns of Port Isabel and South Padre Island. Visitors from Missouri, Wisconsin, and northern Texas prefer this southern section of the Valley (Rush, 1984c).

Home state enclaves, however, are not the sole basis for choosing a location for the winter home. The rules and regulations by which the residents must abide also vary a great deal. Some parks are closed to children or permit no pets. Others prohibit alcohol or allow it only during dances and musical jam sessions. These are important considerations to the Winter Texans.

Some of them invite their grandchildren to visit during school holidays. Others refuse to leave the family dog at home. Still other winter visitors claim they not only chose their park but also chose Texas because "it is known for its cocktail party circuit" and "bring-your-own" parties. The HSC study indicates that a little over 66 percent of those in the sample had at least one drink in the preceding six months.



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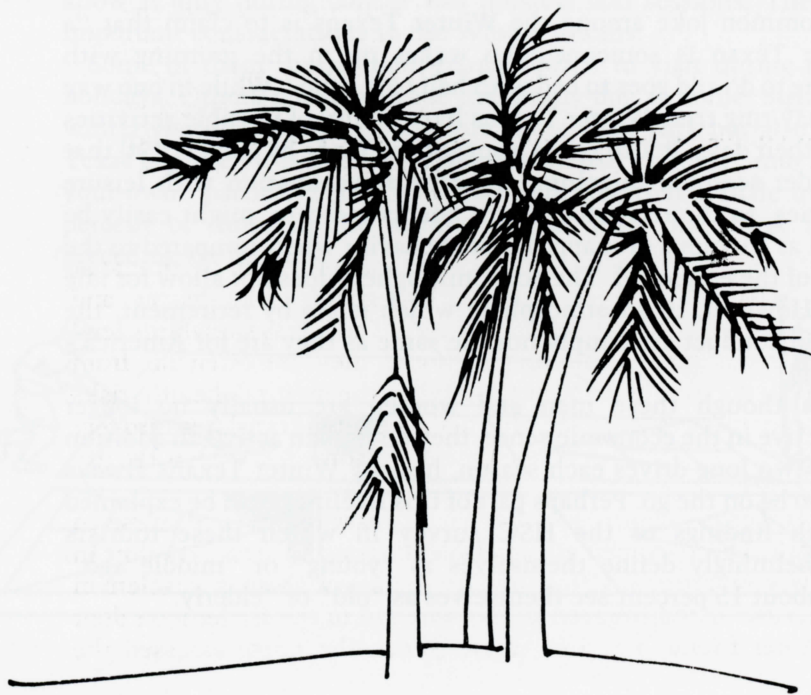
Organized recreational activities are also important in choosing a park. A look at the rec hall bulletin board in most parks shows a full day of activities. For example, the morning may include an exercise class, a group bicycle ride or a walk, and a blood pressure clinic. The afternoon might offer a bridge or shuffleboard tournament, a crafts class, and swimming lessons. Then in the evening the resident can choose between Bible study, a pancake supper, a cocktail hour, or a square dance. One common way the winter tourists spend their time, according to the HSC survey, is participating in rec hall or park activities.

A common joke among the Winter Texans is to claim that "a Winter Texan is someone who wakes up in the morning with nothing to do and goes to bed with half of it done." While in one way this may ring true, Winter Texans have plenty of possible activities to fill their days. It also raises a suggestion made by Hoyt (1954) that the older seasonal migrant's apparent preoccupation with leisure activities, as the rec hall bulletin boards indicate, might easily be judged as frivolous or inappropriate behavior when compared to the world of the employed. The economic sphere does not allow for idle time. However, in an atmosphere which is set by retirement, the codes of conduct are simply not the same as they are for America's workers.

Even though these men and women are usually no longer productive in the economic sense, they do remain active. In addition to the two long drives each season, healthy Winter Texans always seem to be on the go. Perhaps part of this liveliness can be explained through findings of the HSC survey in which these tourists overwhelmingly define themselves as "young" or "middle age." Only about 15 percent see themselves as "old" or "elderly."

*“...if I can't be with my family back home,  
I'll be with my Valley family.”*

The potential for companionship is the foundation of the Winter Texan community and its active lifestyle. Virtually everyone responding to the HSC survey mentioned friends in one context or another. They choose their park because friends are there, they list visiting or dining out with friends as a favorite way to spend time, and many say their winter friends are, along with the weather, an important factor in their decision to come back to the Valley. Winter Texans say the parks provide “ready-made friends,” and some claim they are closer to their winter friends than to friends back home. One HSC respondent said, “I like the weather and if I can't be with my family back home, I'll be with my Valley family.”



The story of the Millers, a couple from Michigan, serves as an example of the friendships which develop among winter visitors.

The Millers have been traveling to South Texas for about a decade. In the early years they were quite active. Some of their favorite pastimes included shelling on the beach at South Padre Island, picking citrus from the groves, and playing shuffleboard. Some years ago they met the Olsens, who lived in the same park and shared the same interests. They learned that their home towns were only forty miles apart though they had never met. The four became fast friends. After several years of exciting wintering and growing friendship, both of the Millers fell ill.

Both couples still winter in the Valley, but the Millers are no longer physically able to drive. Today, they ride with the Olsens. And during the summer, the Olsens make the forty-mile drive across the Michigan countryside once a week. They go to look in on their friends, bringing groceries and companionship. If the four are asked what they like most about being Winter Texans they will say, "friends."

The parks also offer a sense of security that often can't be found at home. In addition to the obvious safeguards, like fences and restricted entry, there are people close by. The Texas snowbirds tend to come from rural areas, and at home they are often far from neighbors, doctors, and hospitals. With the natural health risks accompanying advancing age, this distance often translates into fear and isolation. In the park, there is usually someone within twenty or thirty feet.

Winter Texans claim that there is at least one retired nurse in every park. These women are available for assistance and comfort in emergency situations. Often told is the story about a gentleman who became ill and frightened. His wife ran to the trailer next door and got her friend, a retired nurse. When the nurse assessed the

man's condition she realized that he only had indigestion. The chuckles at the end of the tale reflect the comfort winter visitors feel in having someone so close.

Some parks have other informal health care systems. Committees, usually run by retired nurses, regularly offer blood pressure clinics. There is also one Valley doctor who has converted a van into a mobile office and travels to different parks. The Winter Texans applaud his accessibility.

*Not all Winter Texans are healthy,  
happy couples.*

The picture presented so far depicts a considerably healthy, over-60 couple who travel from their rural midwestern home every winter to spend a few months socializing, exercising, and playing in the Valley. But a generalization of any group overlooks the exceptions. Not all Winter Texans are healthy, happy couples.

The scope of health problems among the Winter Texans is typical of advancing age. Hypertension is the most frequent ailment according to the HSC survey, and heart, digestive, and respiratory problems are also common. On the whole, however, 75 percent of the tourists described their health as "excellent" or "good," and only 20 percent saw their health as "fair." The remainder described their health as "poor" or "very poor."

Almost one in ten persons included in the HSC study was single—and almost invariably, that person was widowed. As in the general population, most elderly singles are widowed females. Of course there are a few widowers among the Winter Texans, and these men consider the Valley a virtual paradise. One widower explained that from his perspective the situation is great because he “pals around with so many vivacious gals.” And a vivacious lot these women seem to be. Many of them continue to make the long annual journey alone after their husbands are gone. There is even a nationwide RV club called “Loners on Wheels;” most of its members are females. It is also not unusual for two women to travel and spend the winter together.

For example, two women who share a large RV in one of the Mission parks have been friends since their husbands were alive. They met while “snowbirding” in the Valley. One of the women lives in Illinois, the other in Texas. Perhaps as luck would have it, the one in Illinois is the younger and healthier. Each year she leaves home in her pickup with the trailer in tow. It takes her several days to reach Texas but she has friends to stay with along the way. When she arrives at her friend’s home they relax and visit a few days and then take off to the Valley for a winter full of fishing, shelling at South Padre, and socializing.



*“...the differences between Winter Texans  
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like day and night.”*

The Rio Grande Valley is much more than a vacation spot for the elderly. Its permanent population numbers about 500,000. Cameron and Hidalgo counties—measured by per capita income—are among the poorest in the nation. Most Valley residents are of Mexican heritage. Many are bilingual in English and Spanish, and some, especially the older residents, are monolingual in Spanish. Except for the retailer-customer relationship, there is very little the winter visitors and the Valley's inhabitants have in common.

Carl Rush says that “the differences between the Winter Texans and the local population are like day and night. The winter tourists come down here, and from a social point of view they may as well not have left Iowa because all they want to do is associate with other Iowans. They don't touch lives with the Hispanic locals at all. They live in two different worlds, and they meet only across the counter or on the highways” (Rush, 1984a).

The two worlds are created and sustained by the self-containment of the trailer park communities. And there are ambivalent feelings toward the Winter Texans from year-round Valley residents.

On the one hand is the large economic influence of the visitors. Commerce and tourism from Mexico once made a stable contribution to the Valley's economy as did the large citrus industry. But in the face of an unstable peso and two devastating recent winter freezes, the Winter Texans' expenditures have become especially crucial to the Valley's economy. The Director of one Valley Chamber of Commerce estimates that Winter Texans spent 300 million dollars in the Valley in 1983 (Benavides, 1984). Rush says that ninety percent of the advertising budgets earmarked for attracting tourists are now aimed toward Winter Texans rather than Mexicans (1984b).



The added source of revenue, on the other hand, is not without problems. With the additional patrons, stores are crowded during the winter. Grocery check-out and bank lines are inconveniently long. The highways are clogged by older people who sometimes don't hear or see too well anymore. The cafes, restaurants, and especially the cafeterias are almost always overcrowded during the winter. And many Valley residents complain, sometimes bitterly.

Business is not the only way Winter Texans crowd the Valley. They also use social and health services. The impact of Winter Texans on the Valley's health care resources is largely undocumented. It is known, however, that the local hospitals—which operate for most of the year at 75 or 80 percent capacity—may be as much as 120 percent full during the winters (Rush, 1984b). This means that many patients literally inhabit the hallways.

On one level it is not hard to see the year-round residents' ambivalence toward the winter visitors. But, this is viewing the Winter Texans only as a group. While they do tax the Valley's



developing tourist infrastructure through sheer numbers, as individuals they are usually friendly, adventure-loving older Americans.

Age brings experience and wisdom. To sit and listen to a Winter Texan's stories and tales is usually quite delightful. The hard part is knowing that for some, this will be the last Valley winter. Park managers and owners say the most difficult part of the job is watching the Winter Texans pass away. Each year a few old friends don't return. At the same time, however, as their numbers continue to increase, veteran Winter Texans will welcome and initiate newcomers into the world of snowbirding.



This monograph is dedicated to one Winter Texan who will not be back.  
Jim Lamar died in the spring of 1985 at the age of 92.

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