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CHARLIE BLACKWELL'S VISION

BURNET, Texas -- It was a chance meeting. My wife and I were taking the back roads from Austin to Dallas, trying to avoid the traffic of Interstate 35. Then, in tiny Burnet, we saw Lone Star, a small RV lot jam-packed with nearly a dozen park models.

If you don't know what a park model is, don't feel bad. My wife hadn't seen one before. She had been giving me strange looks for years, wondering what I could find attractive about any RV and why I thought they were so interesting.

So I stopped. And Charlie Blackwell showed her.

When we left she was a convert, imagining all the different places they could be put and ways they could be used.

Blackwell is the owner of Lone Star, a small dealership for park models. He's also a man with a vision, but we'll talk about that later. Right now what you need to know is that a park model is a very different kind of RV.

It isn't a trailer, so it doesn't look like a large refrigerator on wheels, or (if it's an Air Stream) an aluminum egg. It isn't a "fifth wheel," an RV with a large forward section and a front pivot point that sits in the middle of a truck bed. Some of those have a strong resemblance to Shamu. And it isn't a motor home, a vehicle that combines the drive power of a bus and provides the same living space. Many people prefer motor homes because one person can be making lunch or dinner while the other drives.

No, a park model is a small manufactured home. They are delivered on wheels, like mobile homes, and when they are put on a site, the wheels are removed and they seldom move. What makes them RVs is that none have more than 399 square feet of floor space.

I think they're really cute, perfect little stand-alone one-bedroom apartments. In Florida, you'll find them sided with the pale pastels of that state -- rose, yellow and green. In Texas and New Mexico, many are sided in cedar, with green and blue metal roofs, like mountain hideaways. In Arizona, most are white because the sun would turn them white anyway. (To see what they look like and their interior layouts, check the URLs at the end of this column.)

Blackwell sells and delivers park models to RV parks all around Hill Country. He also sells them to people who want to add a guesthouse to a ranch or country

property. Now 62 and a former computer and electronics worker, Blackwell's "recreational residences" sell for as little as \$16,000 for a bare-bones hunting cabin to as much as \$53,000 for a lodge with loft. The typical price is somewhere in the \$30s.

Travel to RV parks anywhere in the country and you will see an interesting phenomenon. The closer you get to a "destination park" -- a park that isn't a way station for traveling RVs -- the greater the proportion of park models in the park. Indeed, many park owners encourage park models because it provides a steady, non-seasonal revenue stream.

Anyone who wants a weekend getaway house but lacks, say, the funds to buy one of Ken Lay's million-dollar houses in Aspen, can have a second home for \$200-a-month rent in an RV park and the price of a near-luxury car. Buy one used for \$10,000 or \$15,000, and you have the least expensive primary housing in the United States.

Which brings me to Charlie Blackwell's vision and how he shared it with me.

When I went back to visit with him, I learned that he owns a 13-acre parcel very close to Lake Buchanan. It is a lovely piece of land, strewn with large boulders, centering on a man-made pond covered with live oaks.

He wants to develop it into a unique RV park. A born-again Christian, Blackwell knows that many ministers suffer burnout from the demands of ministering. Others have personal upheavals. Whatever the cause, he would like to build a park and provide short-term sanctuary and renewal for ministers, as well as vacation residences for others. "We've wanted to do a retreat ministry, and I've had a vision of a park-like setting on my mind for 11 years. It suddenly clicked after seeing park models," Blackwell said.

"My vision is a gated park model village with a clubhouse. I'm particularly interested in having irregular (sized) lots so we can cluster them around the boulders and live oaks."

Will it happen?

I don't know. Neither does Blackwell, but he's working toward it.

What's most important is that Charlie Blackwell isn't alone. I haven't had a chance to go yet, but readers tell me to visit Livingston, Texas, where I will find a hotbed of RV living and an association called "The Escapees." Check their Web site, and you'll immediately see a lot of variations on how to live in RVs, with many people seeking permanent locations and a more intimate community than they have found in traditional housing.

ON THE WEB

- Lone Star Recreational Residences: www.lonestarparkmodels.com
- Breckenridge Park Models (a manufacturer): www.breckenridgeparkmodels.com
- Dutch Park Homes (a manufacturer): www.dutchpark.com
- Cavco Park Models (a manufacturer): www.cavco.com/parkmodel/default.asp
- The Escapees Association: www.escapees.com

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