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As her guys bounce around the gravel corner in trucks dragging oversize dollies, Kathie finishes off her coffee in three gulps. "This coffee's damn strong, but not strong enough for a day like this."

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A day like this is happening only because of a little-noticed oddity of America's laws on mobile homes, a system that offers this group of people the least protection of anyone else in housing. In Louisiana, for example, landlords can evict mobile home renters in as little as five days, and while the time periods are greater in some other states, nearly all of the nation's 20 million mobile home dwellers are in a similarly precarious situation. In some cases, states afford a mobile home resident no more legal rights than a car owner, leaving them in a strange semantic limbo that puts them on the outskirts of mainstream property law. Ask an expert in the field and you discover that almost no one has expertise in or even knows much about mobile home law — property-law textbooks devote only a page or a mention to mobile homes.

All of this is complicated by the fact that the world of mobile home living is topsy-turvier than the average landlord-tenant situation. Pine Haven residents, like nearly half the mobile home residents in America today, **own their home**, but not the land beneath it. They rent the land on which the home sits — the same way you'd rent a parking spot. That's why their landlord owed them only five days prior to kicking them out.

It's obvious, when you think about it, that we just haven't bothered to fix the pesky little language that comprises the law. That's what one discerning legalist once wrote, when she said: "The term 'mobile home' is somewhat misleading." Because? "Because the cost of moving one is often a significant fraction of the value of the mobile home itself." That was Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

That steep cost is certainly the case for Tasha Thompson and her partner, John. The day of the move, they huddle in old chairs around a bonfire of new plywood, keeping an eye on the children playing in a patch of sand. Tasha makes phone calls about potential lots to move to. Moving the trailer will cost 34 times their monthly rent. If they can wait for their tax refund, they can pull it off. But last month, before they got word of the eviction, they took out a note on a new car for their family of six.

They didn't, in part because this has become a **forgotten sector of housing** in a host of ways. Though mobile homes make up as much as a quarter of housing in regions like the southeast, they're "still outside the mainstream, legally, financially," says Doug Ryan, the director of affordable housing initiatives for the Corporation for Enterprise Development, a D.C.-based nonprofit working on low-income issues. You won't find many real estate agents putting out a shingle specializing in mobile home sales or rentals. Nor, if you type in an address on Zillow.com, will you find many sales records. Today the structures themselves are a reflection of this afterthought approach. While housing codes have been common in some cities for more than a century, the first construction standards for mobile homes were put in place by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development only in 1976. Homes built before then — and still standing now — can have sagging roofs, poor insulation and wiring that are a fireman's nightmare.

But that's part of the headache. When they first arrived on the scene on a large scale, mobile homes were generally viewed as cars, meaning personal property. And many states like Louisiana treat mobile homes in the same way, offering only "lemon laws" — those consumer-protection statutes meant to help you if your car or TV turns out to be faulty. Not exactly homeowners insurance. That bit of legal minutia has "hundreds of implications," notes Carolyn Carter, the director of advocacy for the National Consumer Law Center, "from tax laws to spousal rights to who gets your home when you die." And though a **Uniform Manufactured Housing Act** that might clarify some of those muddy waters has been drafted, no state has adopted it.



Source: Charlotte Buchen/OZY

From an owner's perspective, of course, the laws are not their doing; these folks are simply trying to maintain a property or capitalize on its rising value, and public policy dictates that the owner should be able to change the use of any land. Here in Pine Haven, the property's longtime landlord decided to sell his property — for \$600,000, to a couple from outside Baton Rouge, who own a restaurant in the area. The Zillow listing for the park sizzled with big promises: "Investors, take note of this property. It will not last long on the market." Jeffrey Carrier, the lawyer for the new owners, declines to comment beyond saying, "They have a different plan for the land."

As for the tenants' rights, even sympathetic lawyers say the renters have little alternative but to leave. There is "no defense," says Mark Judson, executive director of the Southwest Louisiana Law Center in Lake Charles. Still, he thinks the Louisiana notice period is a bit stiff. "Even wealthy people would have a hard time moving in 30 days. And here they're getting 10."

To an outsider, Pine Haven looks like no more than a spit of cleared pine forest on the side of a road, just past a Winn-Dixie. On the day we are there — technically just hours before bulldozers are scheduled to arrive — a colorful cast of characters is trying to deal with the uprooting in a variety of ways. Young ex-meth-head Lee shouts and cusses to anyone who'll listen, wearing a neon-green shirt that glows against a threatening sky. Nearby Miss Ramona, chain-smoking with thin, shaky hands, is crying. "These people got nowhere to go," she says in a cracking drawl, as children play in the area. "These ain't just trailers, these are homes."

Kathie takes out a cigarette and uses the porch bonfire to light it. Her hope is for more time. "My gut tells me he's bulldogging," she says about the landlords, who have not arrived. She figures Pine Haveners have one more day, which isn't much comfort as the navy-blue clouds give way to a downpour, extinguishing the community's last bonfire.

Evictions like these would be the exception, not the rule or becoming more common; see download reply to Ozy Media.

Evictions like these are quietly becoming more common across the country, as the nation's slow but steady recovery in real estate makes its way deeper and deeper into rural outposts. In the case of Lake Charles, we are in the heart of petrochemical country, a place that's on the rise. As Lake Charles Mayor Randy Roach says, a bit boastfully, "This region is about to experience a once-in-a-lifetime boom." It's true: Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, for natural gas in nearby Texas has brought \$70 billion in investment to the area. And with the cash comes 25,000 new workers — many of them better paid and higher-skilled than Pine Haven's residents — all of whom need a place to stay, and have at least a bit of disposable income from the lucrative industry. That's why sociologists who specialize in the topic, like Mary-Esther Sullivan at the University of Texas, have found that while housing slumps protect mobile home communities from speculation and sale, boom times are bad news if you're living in a land-lease park like Pine Haven.

MOBILE-HOME EVICTIONS.

Video by *Charlotte Buchen*.

This story is Part 1 of OZY's weeklong series Trailer Park Nation. Check back for the next six pieces over the rest of the week.

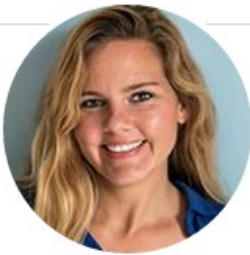
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Based in Brazil, Shannon is Ozy's Latin American correspondent and legal voice. In her many lives, she's taught elementary school in Harlem, managed a hotel in Italy, and researched forests in Brazil. A University of Texas law grad raised in Louisiana, she prefers cowboy boots over heels, and hot sauce over everything.

(MHPronews Editor's Note: *The arrow above is one of several errors or story slants that arguably create false or misleading impressions about manufactured home living. The commentary and other downloadable suggestions to correct this tale story by Ozy Media are linked below.)*

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