

State mobile home inspections 'go up in smoke'

(The following story was written as an assignment in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln School of Journalism depth reporting class. The author is a senior from Boise, Idaho.)

by Chris Harper

Sultry summer air gripped Arapahoe. The year's longest day—Sunday, June 21, 1970—lingered to its conclusion.

After a humid evening, Mr. and Ms. Lee Smith had gone to bed at 11:30 p.m. Their sons, Donald Missing, 13, and Robert Missing, 18, had left for their rooms in the Smith's mobile home coupled to the family's dwelling by a two-foot walkway.

After 20 minutes, the couple was awakened by Robert's screams. Smith grabbed his trousers and raced to the walkway, where he discovered that flames had engulfed the mobile home.

Robert stood in the trailer's hallway. Fire prevented his exit. He retreated to Donald's bedroom to aid his younger brother who apparently had been overcome by smoke.

Brothers die

Smith suffered minor burns as the flames rebuffed his rescue attempt. The Arapahoe Volunteer Fire Department responded to the alarm at 12:30 a.m., but when firemen arrived, the Smith's house and the mobile home had been severely damaged.

The Missing brothers died in the blaze. The fire's cause: defective wiring in a light fixture in the mobile home, according to the state fire marshal's office.

Two weeks later, Nebraska instituted a state minimum standard code for mobile homes. The code couldn't save the Missing youngsters and inspection procedures apparently have failed to curtail similar tragedies.

Lack of money, inadequate training of state inspectors and ineffective penalties have not only stalled fire safety efforts but may have led to an increase in both the number of fires and deaths in Nebraska's 13,000 mobile homes, according to several authorities. They say Nebraska's inspection program is inadequate and assert that mobile home testing programs in other states have cut both fires and deaths.

Homes' hazards

Are mobile homes a fire hazard in Nebraska? —Mobile home fires ranked seventh among 48 categories in both number (90) and damage (\$349,656) in Nebraska during 1971, according to the state fire marshal's office. The number of fires marks a 34.4 per cent increase over 1970 while the number of mobile homes increased 26.9 per cent. During the same period, the number of conventional homes increased slightly while the number of fires in these dwellings fell by 8.3 per cent.

—In 1971, the likelihood of death was 4.6 times greater in a mobile home fire (seven deaths in 90 fires) than conventional dwellings (15 deaths in 889 fires), according to the 1971 state fire marshal's report.

—The average loss of \$3,862 in a Nebraska mobile home fire in 1971 was 2.6 times the national average of \$1,460 damage in all mobile home fires, according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) of Boston, Mass., and the state fire marshal's office.

In 1969, the Legislature unanimously adopted the mobile home standard. The code was patterned after a national model standard developed by a group of organizations which included NFPA and the Mobile Home Manufacturers Association (MHMA) of Chantilly, Va.

The code establishes minimum requirements for construction, plumbing, electrical and heating systems for all mobile homes built after June 26, 1970. Violation is a misdemeanor with a maximum penalty of a \$100 fine.

Lack of funding

The State Department of Health is the only state inspector of the internal components of mobile homes, according to Fred Jolly, director of the Division of Environmental Sanitation.

The yearly allocation of \$1,800 by the Legislature is not enough to conduct adequate mobile home inspection program, Jolly said.

"We try to allocate our time...according to the funding given each program and, of course, mobile home funding comes in a low priority," he said. "Although we feel it should be one of our major programs, the time actually spent on mobile homes is just not what it should be."

Since 1970, one man has worked just one day a week to inspect mobile homes, Jolly said. In 1972, the inspector evaluated all of Nebraska's 16 mobile

home factories once, but was able to visit only 65 of Nebraska's 250 mobile home dealers, Jolly said.

"We fell well short," Jolly said. "Some of these factories should be visited two and three times a year and in most of our other inspection programs we like to visit three or four times."

The director added: "I think (mobile home inspection) should have a top priority with the growth in the number of mobile homes. The number of complaints that we receive every month is increasing, so emphasis should be put on it."

Construction defects

Two insurance men said mobile homes are more susceptible to fire than conventional dwellings. Many of the fires also can be attributed to construction defects and inadequate inspection may have helped cause the increase in mobile home fires in Nebraska, the claims adjuster said.

"Most of the (mobile home) fires can be attributed to malfunctioning of furnaces and heating. Mobile homes also are more susceptible to shorting in their electrical systems," according to Matt Byers, claims examiner for the Central National Insurance Co. of Omaha.

"With laxity in controls, the manufacturer might have a tendency to cheapen its standards in certain areas," he added.

Another insurance adjuster, Bill Inman of Allied Insurance Co. of Omaha, said he also questions the

home exits, furnaces and the addition of storm doors and windows have increased mobile home quality.

Low-cost housing

He said he doesn't believe the losses in Nebraska mobile home fires can be attributed to the units' construction.

The damages might "relate to the local fire fighting capabilities," Davenport said.

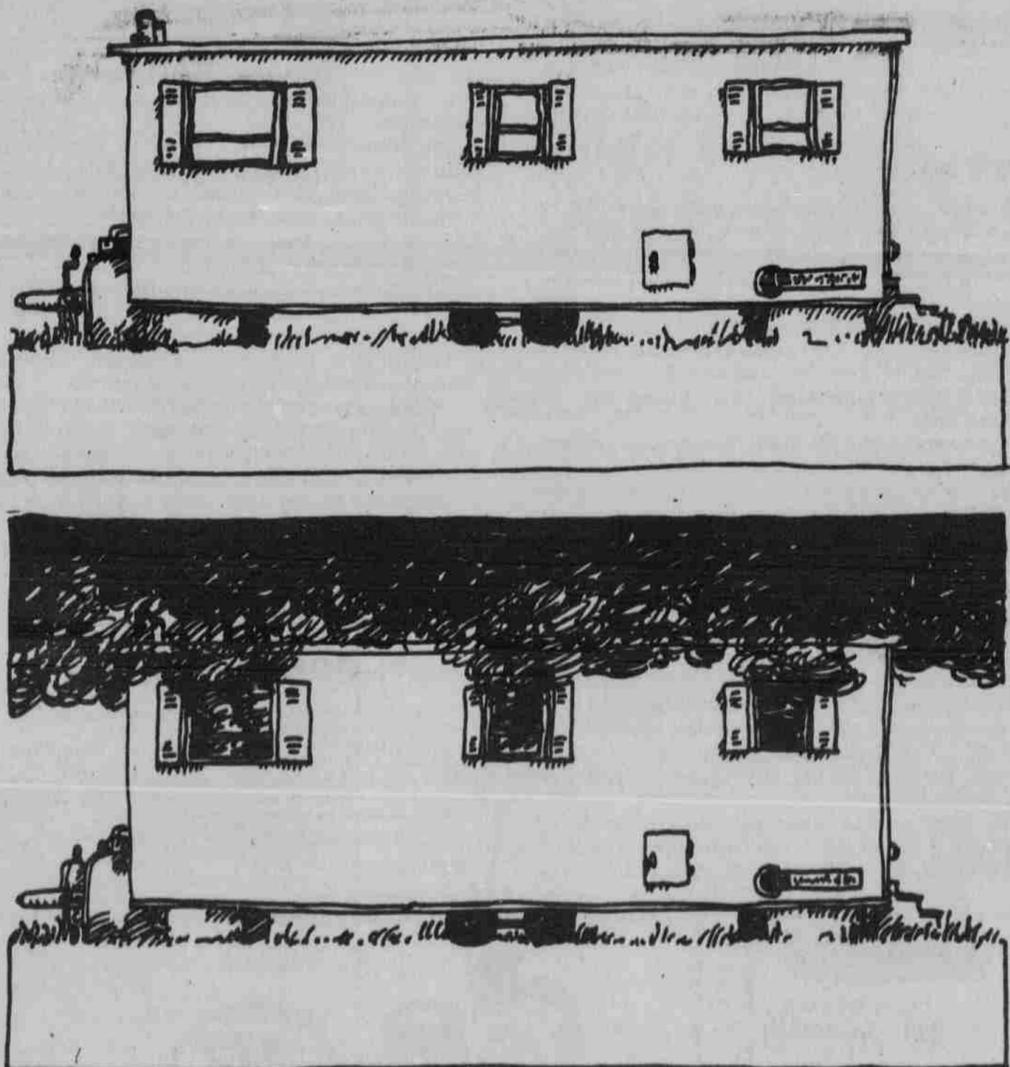
Gery Jewett, former inspector of Nebraska's mobile homes, echoed Davenport's comments.

"The entire industry is doing a good job in providing low-cost housing. Some veterans coming back from Vietnam, for instance, can't afford conventional housing," Jewett said.

The former inspector cited two problems with the mobile home program: money and ineffective penalties.

"Under no circumstances is the money enough," he said. "I was able to do an adequate job because the entire industry was sold on the idea. If it had been a hostile group, it would have been a difficult job."

The maximum fine of \$100 for a violation is "the same as every one of the health and safety laws—that's one weakness," Jewett said. "The State Department of Health has no jurisdiction. The department can only recommend to the county attorney to take proceedings against a manufacturer. For example, if you sent a case to the Douglas County attorney, he would probably laugh in your face."



fire safety of mobile homes.

"Most residential homes have shoetrack which is fireproof while most mobile homes only have wood paneling which is more flammable," Inman said. "Their heating vents aren't the greatest either. I would say that about 60 per cent of all mobile home fires are caused by furnace or electrical malfunctions."

An MHMA representative, Larry Davenport, disagreed. Davenport, MHMA vice president of public relations, said he believes improvements in mobile

Possible budget cuts

He added that no manufacturer or dealer had been fined under the law.

Since Jewett left the inspector's post Jan. 1, 1973, Jolly said the program had been integrated into the regular staff of the Division of Environmental Sanitation. Six sanitation experts comprise the division's personnel and the services of two sanitation engineers also are available, he said.

Continued on page 2