

## Chapter 11

### Making Home in the Bakken Oil Patch (2018)

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If not for the dated photographs, the 1958 *Williston Report*'s treatment of housing could apply to the early twenty-first century Bakken boom. 1958 and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed the arrival of temporary workers who impacted the region's older communities even more than the rig counts or the barrels of oil sent to market. In both eras, the influx of a rapidly changing workforce produced high rents, limited housing options, and created a sense of social disruption.

During the Bakken's most recent boom, we led the North Dakota Man Camp Project. Like the authors of the *Williston Report*, we brought a multidisciplinary team to the Bakken oil patch (for a review of this project see Caraher, Weber, Kourelis, and Rothaus 2017; Caraher and Weber 2017; Caraher, Weber, and Rothaus 2016; Barkdull, Weber, and Geigle 2016). Our project focused on documenting the material and social lives of the workers living in the wide range of workforce housing sites across the region. The North Dakota Man Camp Project and the *Williston Report* both captured a moment in the dynamic space of the Bakken. Indeed, the rapid pace of change and the resulting housing crisis and social disruption appear to be a common feature to resource booms around the world (Ruddell and Ray, this volume). Booms can create collisions when they bring the needs and capital of the global center to rural peripheries (Caraher 2016), and when "outside" workers arrive in the region and interact with longer-term, more established residents. Despite these structural similarities, there are differences in terms of the

scope of the two Bakken booms, each involving distinct policy reactions and economic and political contexts. As a result, we located the twenty-first century Bakken boom within its particular historical context and framed our attention to workforce housing amid the growing concern for housing in the late modern world (Madden and Marcuse. 2016).

This chapter provides a critique of the 1958 *Report's* treatment of housing, a consideration of the emergent perspectives on workforce housing in the present, and an overview of our research of temporary workforce housing. It concludes with a consideration of how economic booms and busts manifest and accelerate changing ideals about domesticity and the political ramifications of these changes for community in the context of global capital.

### **Summary of the *Williston Report* with Special Attention to Housing**

The *Williston Report* provides an invaluable snapshot of the 1950s oil boom. It describes the scale of the boom, confronts the challenge of counting and documenting a mobile and temporary workforce and wrestles to measure the impact of social change. In the absence of consistent and high-resolution data, the authors of the *Williston Report* supplemented their study with interviews and more impressionistic readings of the situation. Our work follows similar patterns.

The *Williston Report* is very much a report, and it approached aspects of the 1950s oil boom largely on its own terms. There is little effort to locate the 1950s Bakken boom within the history of the state, the region, or larger conversations about extractive industries and the associated changes in the mobility of the American workforce in the postwar era. As the authors note, their report is a case study rather than a policy brief or an argument for understanding the broader causes and patterns of social change.

That being said, Campbell and his colleagues' observations are not without judgment. They assert that some of the housing in the Bakken, particularly around Tioga was, indeed, "substandard," including tar-paper shacks and structures rough enough to be thought of as "grain bins." Photos from the 1950s showed light-weight, closely-spaced buildings that could be moved two at a time with a farm truck (p. ##133–4). Interviews with one resident confirmed their unsuitability, noting, "How can they expect a man to live in something like that? I've come all the way from (a southern state) because of my job and I've never had to live in anything like this before" (p. ##135). These temporary houses were not the only solution to the housing boom: communities like Ray and Tioga also subdivided more substantial, existing structures to accommodate workers, and Williston and Tioga built new housing. Additionally, both then and now, as is common in boom areas around the globe, some oil companies provided mobile housing units to accommodate their employees in the oil patch, though this is generally done for more highly-skilled workers and management, with the rest of the workforce largely left to find their own way with limited options (Weaver 2010; Van Bueren 2002; Caraher 2016).

In the 1950s, the tight housing market caused by the boom motivated communities and developers to invest in housing, but, ironically, most of it was expensive and high quality, built to attract individuals with higher incomes who already enjoyed stable housing. As a result, new construction did little to alleviate the housing challenges facing workers who only intended to stay in the region temporarily or who did not enjoy high salaries or wages. Further aggravating the immediate situation, new construction motivated policy makers to limit the extent and impact of temporary housing, which further limited available choices for temporary residents. This dynamic has seemingly recurred in each subsequent boom in the Bakken.

The authors of the *Williston Report* hinted at an analysis that considered the social and political dynamics of housing, but, despite the changes taking place across the region, they shied from considering housing to be a genuine “social problem” (p. ##133). Instead, there was a tendency to acquiesce. Quotes from longer-term residents suggest a sense that something was wrong with the workers who seemingly *chose* to live in “substandard” temporary workforce housing. One Tioga resident commented that “I don’t see how anyone could rent” the available housing, suggesting that there was something wrong with the workers rather than the housing (p. ##133). Workforce housing was primarily seen as an individual problem and the responsibility of the workers. Rather than a social responsibility, temporary workforce housing became an inconvenience for longer-term residents to endure. In this regard, the 1958 *Report* echoed many of the sentiments expressed to members of the North Dakota Man Camp Project during our research. Housing remained “disturbing to the researcher” (p. ##131), but longtime residents only rarely articulated it as a problem for the workers. Whether the discussion was about RVs or modular crew camps, long-term residents tended to view them as necessary solutions, or even evils, to tolerate and eventually banish, rather than seeing the housing shortage as a social problem to be solved. The *Williston Report* demonstrates what is probably obvious for all who have experienced booms: housing and the resulting tensions between existing communities and new arrivals is a recurring, key dynamic of booms related to extractive industries.

### **Historiography of Short-term Housing and Home**

The *Williston Report* appeared at a transformative time for scholars considering new forms of American housing in the post-war era, particularly in the American West, and the report anticipated a twenty-first century global housing crisis emerging around the time of the Bakken

boom. John Bickerstaff Jackson's 1953 study of the "westward moving house" (Jackson 1953), and his late 1950s research on housing in the Four Corners area of the American southwest (Jackson 1960) recognized housing in the West as a distinct phenomenon adapted both to the identity of the owner and to the economic needs of a region. More recent studies on temporary worker housing during World War II (such as Foster 1980; Mitchell 2012), and on the rise of mobile homes and RVs as expressions of the tension between mobility and stability in the American suburbs (Jackson 1984; White 2001), likewise saw the middle of the twentieth century as a period during which housing and concepts of domesticity came to intersect with new materials, plans, and social roles (Berger 1961; Duncan and Duncan 2004). Set against this backdrop, Campbell and his colleagues' ambivalent attitude toward the housing problem in the 1950s Bakken likely reflected the significant changes taking place within American attitudes toward the house and domesticity during the same decade (see Hayden 1984 for the classic treatment of this period; Miller 2010).

Sixty years after the *Williston Report*, United Nations' experts warned of a global housing crisis largely driven by financial speculation (Johnstone 2017). The intense commodification of housing has increased the mobility of global capital in ways that have harmed the housing security of multiple populations. There has been a dramatic expansion of ad hoc housing around urban areas in the global south, worsened challenges associated with housing the growing number of refugees and migrants in the global north, and—as is the case in the Bakken—greater numbers of laborers engaged in precarious manufacturing jobs, construction projects, and other short-term ventures. Activists and scholars alike recognize that the housing needs of workers, migrants, refugees, and urban dwellers is a matter of social, economic, and environmental justice. Recent critiques have made clear, for example, that the *Williston Report's*

prescient observation that the tendency of developers to invest in high cost and high profit units at the expense of affordable housing, when multiplied across the global stage, has contributed to the global housing crisis (for example, Madden and Marcuse 2016).

Indeed, for those interested in the housing-related challenges of the twenty-first century, the 1958 *Williston Report* is almost uncannily relevant, even if it might strike the modern readers as calloused. For a start, the *Report*'s nonchalant assertion that in many cases housing problems represented more of a "personal" problem than a larger social one, forecast the tendency of many twenty-first century policy makers to turn a blind eye to the reality that temporary housing represents a compromise negotiated across a dramatic power imbalance. This imbalance separates workers and employers, shapes the attitude of the Bakken counties' longer-term residents, and colors prevailing attitudes of society at large. Attitudes toward domesticity favor home ownership, but the material, economic, and environmental limits present in the industrial wilderness of the Bakken, and the attitudes and policies promulgated by state and local communities, tend to marginalize temporary labor and limit their housing options. Workers, migrants, other marginalized groups find themselves in a social bind where status is tied to a preference for single-family, home ownership in an environment where that is largely not possible.

For their part, longtime residents often seek to alleviate the pressure of global and national financial capital that directly impacts their lives (increased housing costs, social disruption, etc.) by leveraging their access to local and regional political and social capital at the expense of temporary workers (for some of this see Olive, this volume). In this context and in this contest, the temporary housing in the Bakken and the conditions that produced it emerge as less than an exceptional response to an unexpected boom and more of a grim model for housing

the growing class of precarious workers in the twenty-first century. In other words, the “personal” problem of housing in the *Williston Report* masked deep issues that would come to the fore over the next sixty years.

### **North Dakota Man Camp Project’s Approach to Housing in the Bakken**

The NDMCP looked at workforce housing in the Bakken both directly and as a lens on shifting ideals about work and home. We considered the lives of temporary workers and longer-term residents, and how both negotiated the practical realities of housing, home, and community. We looked at the material and social aspects of various forms of workforce housing, and how the resulting constraints and opportunities shaped personal wellbeing amid the intersection of the private and the political. Over the course of five years, we developed a longitudinal sample of workforce housing sites in the Bakken that reflected a wide range of forms, practices, and experience in North Dakota’s Williams and McKenzie counties. The resulting archive consists of nearly 10,000 photographs, dozens of hours of video, and interviews with camp residents, managers, owners, as well as local officials in the Bakken.

Neither the *Williston Report* nor our own work ever offered precise counts of workers in relation to available housing. Both numbers were so rapidly fluctuating that such attempts were not practical, and such a count was simply outside the scope of our research focus. However, in the process of disseminating our findings we were often pressed for such data. Some illustrative, point-in-time estimates help to address this. In 2012, the North Dakota Petroleum Council estimated that the boom had created 65,000 jobs, with a state population of just over 700,000. At that same time, the Department of Commerce estimated the number of “available beds” in crew camps at just 15,119, suggesting that fewer than 25 percent of the new workers would have been

readily accommodated by temporary workforce housing. These figures also neglect those who came to the Bakken looking for work and housing but then left, usually due to the lack of affordable or available housing. Further, in consideration of the tension between the workers and the longtime residents, many of the camps dwarfed neighboring communities in terms of population. In terms of population alone, several of the worker settlements would have been counted among the state's twenty largest cities.

Like the *Williston Report*, we observed workers living in substandard, overpriced, and cramped housing vulnerable to the vagaries of North Dakota's weather, and we recognized the range of housing options as well as the ways workers modified their temporary accommodations to endure the seasons and to enhance their domestic lives. But we also strove to be more nuanced in capturing the changing conditions throughout the boom and the subsequent slowdown, and to monitor the changes brought on by the increased inventory of permanent housing, the decline in employment opportunities in the oil patch, and the policy-driven legal challenges to the provisional use permits under which many temporary man camps functioned.

The eventual decline in the number of jobs we observed parallels the observations made in the *Williston Report*. For instance, Tioga saw an easing of housing pressures with the completion of a gas plant and other regional projects in 1954 (p. ##116–17). We saw similar outcomes in Tioga and, perhaps most dramatically, in Watford City. The completion of major infrastructure projects (especially roads and pipelines), and the increase in housing inventory, alleviated some of the pressure on workforce housing, and we worked to capture the ways that the end of the most intense phases of booms tend to reveal and even highlight the underlying tensions and flows of capital that the earlier frenetic pace, optimism, and opportunism tend to obscure.

The issues of housing and home in the Bakken oil patch must also be considered in relation to the reality that many of the workers who lived in temporary housing were victims of the housing crisis and the “Great Recession” of 2008. There were some parallels with the earlier, nationwide, 1952 recession, and the acute, post-World War II housing shortage. But that is where the similarity mostly ends. The earlier period was one where lifetime employment with a single employer was relatively common. That was also the dawn of a burgeoning, suburban domesticity. In contrast, after 2008, many of the workers who came to the Bakken continued to pay mortgages on distant homes in other states, while others had left properties that were underwater hoping to start anew in the Bakken. These were workers who understood the likelihood of job insecurity and multiple, shifting employers over the course of a career. Indeed, many had weathered previous booms that shaped their attitudes toward housing and home. One woman, a veteran of the Alaska oil boom, warned in an interview in the fall of 2016, “Don’t count on the oil field ... when it’s good it’s great, but when it tanks, it affects an entire community.”<sup>1</sup> She described her and her husband’s experience:

When the oil tanked up there, and the oil went away, I lost my job, his overtime got cut. So our primary home ... we couldn’t afford the big mortgage on it anymore, so that got foreclosed on, and we had another little rental house that we sold at a huge loss.<sup>2</sup>

Near the end of the interview she wistfully hinted at the long-term nature of booms in extractive industries with a courageous sense of humor: “My dad has seen the oil field rise and fall a couple

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<sup>1</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 12\_3 October 28, 2016. The citations indicate interviews conducted by the North Dakota Man Camp Project, the Field Trip (FT) number during which the interview occurred, the randomly assigned number of the interview, and the date when it was conducted. While we have worked to obfuscate the identity of the interview subject, all individuals signed consent forms with the understanding that anonymity was not guaranteed. Those forms are on file with the authors.

<sup>2</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 12\_3 October 28, 2016.

times, and he kinda tried to warn us, but, you know, we said the oil field is so big, it's going to last forever!"<sup>3</sup>

Bakken observers have noted the hard reality that families exchanged the stability of a house for a trailer, mobile home, or room in a prefabricated man camp (see Briody 2017; Rao 2018). The juxtaposition of the subprime mortgage crisis and the challenges associated with workforce housing in the Bakken illustrate the changing nature of work and home in the twenty-first century world (e.g. Gold 2014).

### **Making Home in the North Dakota Oil Patch**

The *Williston Report* and our research both describe workers dismayed about the high cost and wretched quality of the housing available to them. We might assume that workers in the 1950s, like those we spoke with, struggled to develop domestic norms, worked to transform temporary housing into homelike spaces, and sought other ways to improve their situation. Regardless, our research focused on these dynamics to a much greater degree than did the 1958 report. To facilitate that focus, we utilized a three-level typology to describe the different forms of temporary workforce housing.

The NDMCP started its research at the end of the most hectic phase of the oil boom during which the most ad hoc camps, which we categorized as informal Type 3 camps, emerged and dissipated across the region. These included sites like the infamous Williston Walmart parking lot camp, local city parks, and the sudden overcrowding of recreational camping sites across the region. The temporary shelter created in Williston's Concordia Lutheran church's basement by Rev. Jay Reinke (chronicled in the documentary *The Overnights*), represents a

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<sup>3</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 12\_3 October 28, 2016.

dramatic but not entirely unique variation on the kinds of spontaneous settlements that appeared in the earliest days of the boom (Briody 2017). These existed in the liminal space between official and unofficial policies, the vagaries of law enforcement attitudes, changing housing options, and local goodwill. The precarity of these camps seemed to create a greater degree of interdependence and even an ephemeral sense of community. But as administrative infrastructure and more formal forms of temporary housing slowly developed during the early chaos of the boom, uncertainty tipped against these camps and their number and visibility slowly dissipated.

More persistent than the Type 3 camps, Type 2 camps consisted largely of RVs arranged in lots with electrical and water hookups. These camps presented more conventional opportunities for homemaking and were both a major source of housing for many workers and a particular focus of our research (see Caraher et al. 2016). Occupants enhanced and expanded their living spaces through the construction of elaborate “mudrooms” which occasionally exceeded the size of the original units and could include bunks, living spaces, and additional storage. There were also outdoor improvements on the small lots including gardens and various features to delineate some semblance of private space. This making of outdoor living spaces was a consequence of the cramped, spatial limits of life in an RV; interestingly, the mudrooms also provided features of traditional suburban life. The construction of elaborate mudrooms expanded the useful space of the RV units but also allowed residents to demonstrate proficiency in building, and created an opportunity to formalize and personalize the entrance to their units. The Type 2 camps had a blurred, suburban look to them, with informal neighborhoods and some limited sense of community. These camps typically had investors from outside the region and local management who worked with residents and nearby communities to create rules that governed the extent to which residents could modify their units. Most importantly, despite the

often ramshackle appearance of some of these camps, they offered the closest alternative to late twentieth century, U.S. norms of domesticity.

Type 1 camps, often referred to as crew camps or lodges, offered modular, mobile housing typically managed by national or even global logistics companies. These were sometimes fenced in with security gates and prohibitions against alcohol, firearms, or guests. They generally accommodated workers from larger companies that reserved blocks of rooms for time-specific projects. Such workers tended to move through the region in shifts of three or four weeks of relatively constant work, followed by one or two weeks off. In general, these camps had more formal, on-site, management and security. While some offered the convenience of meals, these camps generally offered only minimal amenities akin to economy motels. They also restricted the opportunities to customize spaces. Most residents lived at these facilities for a limited number of weeks and then departed the camp for a week or two. Some took their paychecks and left for mini-vacations or cruises, while others returned home to domestic dynamics strained by the distance, work schedules outside of the norm of a forty-hour work week, and chores and other family tensions that had been waiting during their absence. Either way, when they returned to the camp, they were generally lodged in different rooms, with virtually no opportunity for customized spaces or any semblance of private domesticity. Our experience as temporary workers in the Bakken involved repeated stays in one of these camps, which provided a practical alternative to tracking down scarce and overpriced hotel rooms. We rarely stayed for more than one night, and we found them to be eminently convenient. However, the enforced, apolitical existence with little to no sense of continuity or community meant that these offered the least opportunity for human interaction. Type 1 camps offered the most

efficient, but the least human, way for temporary workers to be moved in and out of the Bakken like replaceable parts.

### **Man Camps and the Policy Realm**

The majority of policy makers seemed to share the view of E. Ward Koeser, president of the Tioga city commission in Williams County, who regarded “man-camps as being somewhat a necessary evil” (Klimasinska 2013). As such, the state’s general policy response was to rely on existing code, impose minimalist safety standards, utilize ad hoc efforts to limit the spread and longevity of man camps, and alter that course only when pressed. State policy makers tended to focus on short-term, financial considerations.

Despite clear distinctions from other forms of lodging, the most directly relevant policies connected either to motel and hotel regulations, or to mobile home and RV parks, and focused almost exclusively on “fire, life, and safety.”<sup>4</sup> The origin of policies governing temporary labor housing were coincident with the state’s earlier booms, though they were largely driven by federal responses to the development of mobile homes in the 1950s, and federal designations created by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the 1970s, rather than more specific efforts to control or enhance housing during the previous booms.

The major policy revisions during the twenty-first century boom clarified the definition of temporary work camp housing and set five-year time limits with the requirement that owners remove the housing and “all related above-grade and below-grade infrastructure within one hundred twenty days after the temporary work camp housing is vacated” (NDCC 54-21.3-02.8 and 54-21.3-04.3). By 2014, many camps had already outlived the five-year limit, and by

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<sup>4</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 10\_8 August 1, 2015.

September of that year, headlines in the *Williston Herald* announced, “Companies facing millions in fines for temporary housing,” with twenty-nine separate housing units approaching locally imposed expiration dates (Bell 2014; Barkdull et al. 2016).

Highly-impacted communities in the heart of the oil boom tried to regulate man camp proliferation, especially in response to overwhelmed infrastructure. For instance, local waste treatment facilities were only able to accommodate so many new toilets flushing into the system. State officials noted marked improvements in the ability of local governments to plan and control these developments, but, despite being awash in oil revenue, the state generally avoided direct assistance leaving local governmental entities mostly on their own. As described by one long-term state official, “there was no state funding for any of this. The counties and cities came up with their own money to put their own inspection departments in place.”<sup>5</sup> Communities such as Watford City, caught in the crosshairs of some of the boom’s busiest activity and traffic, had no planning department through the first years of the boom. The speed with which local entities were able to develop local ordinances and administrative staffing and support for inspection and enforcement varied greatly. With generally insufficient funding and policy support—and a lack of housing for newly hired bureaucrats!—local and state officials developed new collaborations and communicated with one another in novel ways to deal with the explosion of temporary labor housing.

State officials, acutely aware of the challenges, largely had their hands tied in terms of providing assistance. As noted by one official, “When this first hit there were a lot of problems because a lot of cities and counties had no oversight and no local building codes.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview *Admin Interviews* March 21, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview *Admin Interviews* March 21, 2014.

The typology developed by the North Dakota Man Camp Project, juxtaposed with the framework of policies regulating temporary workforce housing, suggest insufficient state support of local communities. The unfortunate results included overcrowding, price-gouging, dismal living conditions, and attendant social problems that persist in North Dakota's oil patch. In the face of such realities, North Dakota Governor Jack Dalrymple announced with his second biennial "no growth" budget that despite the state having "the nation's strongest economy," government needed to "become more creative and more efficient" (Smith 2014). Almost inexplicably, amid the rapid growth there were calls for austerity, especially in relation to government oversight.

"What can you do?" is a familiar question uttered by both the longtime and newer community residents and government officials when asked about boom-related housing challenges. This oft-repeated question, once unpacked, reveals assumptions nested within the larger cultural, socioeconomic, and political contexts of North Dakota's oil patch that privilege market forces as the best possible means of addressing human wellbeing (for example, Abromovitz 2012). And yet, the growing power of global corporate capital increases the difficulty of addressing local issues of social and economic justice when other countervailing forces (such as the governor or the state legislature) cannot or will not act (for example, Sewpaul 2013).

A series of constraints and influences shaped the availability and character of housing during the twenty-first century Bakken boom. A growing apprehension about the informal Type 3 camps led to stricter enforcement of existing ordinances governing casual sleeping in parks. The Williston Walmart, for example, abandoned their support for an informal, chainwide policy that allowed travelers with RVs to stay overnight in their parking lots after public pressure and a

spate of police calls (Woods and Brooks 2012). Local camping sites, for visitors to the Theodore Roosevelt National Park or Lake Sakakawea, enforced maximum stays to manage the influx of workers using these sites for housing (see Briody 2017).

Despite the contingency of these sites, it is clear that they played an important role in both housing and creating spaces for community among new arrivals to the region. In 2012, we visited a small Type 3 camp that had accommodated a group of carpenters from Idaho working on a nearby construction site along with some other new arrivals to the Bakken. This group arranged their RVs and tents around a common space, socialized, shared meals and chores, and even helped those who had not found work. As one resident put it: “We’re like brothers, like a family.” Despite this sense of family, she also admitted, “the living conditions are terrible here. Like people are shitting behind, in the trees, past the trees right there. There’s flies everywhere ... It’s fricking terrible living conditions.”<sup>7</sup> When another resident of the same camp was asked how he survived living in a shelter belt while looking for work, he responded, “Well that’s where the camaraderie thing comes in—every night we sit around the fire and joke and carry on, do stuff. They’ve got these little air pistols and they’re all the time shooting each other. A lot of these guys are young and ... full of it ... But that’s what breaks the monotony, you know? Because we have each other.”<sup>8</sup> In our experience as researchers, the Type 3 camps, had the greatest sense of community, but the least comfortable living environment and very little stability.

A few months later we returned to discover that the RVs and tents of the camp had been removed leaving behind only fresh tire tracks from a tractor in the snow and a full cooler of beer.

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<sup>7</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 1\_21 August 9, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 1\_12 August 8, 2012.

All indications suggested that law enforcement or a local landowner removed this camp without much advance notice. By 2014, most cities in the oil patch had enacted, or were more actively enforcing, ordinances limiting the number of RVs on private property within city limits. Rev. Reinke's shelter at Concordia Lutheran Church finally closed when pressure from local residents forced the city to act (Briody 2017; *The Overnighters*).

Type 2 camps built to accommodate RVs in individual lots have continued to house temporary workers in the region months and years after the apparent bust. Despite their sometimes scrappy appearance, these camps attracted national investors with modest upfront costs, limited staffing expenses, and the opportunity to charge high rents. Ideally, once built, these camps required only limited maintenance, but frozen water and sewage pipes in the winter, the need to add amenities like the internet to stave off competition or playgrounds to address state requirements, and costly updates to sewage and water systems (sometimes accompanied by lawsuits against the builders or previous owners) all suggest that these camps may have had more ongoing costs than owners had anticipated.

One camp owner on the eastern edge of the patch just off Route 2, who had a background in finance and construction, told us that a group of "finance" investors had asked him to get involved because of the trouble that they had been experiencing with contractors. This was a common problem throughout the state at the height of the boom due to the shortage of tradespeople, especially in relation to all the available work. He had arrived in 2012 near the peak of the boom, but noted, "the park's never made money ... here's what happened: the park was built incorrectly to begin with." As a result, "we're working with the state, we're putting in new water lines throughout the whole park ... we're in a litigation issue with the sub [contractor]

...”<sup>9</sup> The camp had fewer residents during each of our subsequent visits. From a peak of nearly one hundred, by April 2018, only two renters had been there through the winter. One had visible water connection problems.

Type 2 camps sprung up along the major thoroughfares and around the major intersections in the Bakken. Like the 1950s boom, the course between Route 2 and the city of Tioga, and then extending through the northern approach to Williston on Route 85, was a busy stretch for temporary workforce housing. Distinct from the 1950s boom, in the more recent boom Watford City also witnessed a significant influx of workers, accommodated through a halo of RV parks extending along the city’s western and southern sides. Watford City hosted a variety of camp types ranging from the unique, massive indoor RV park, which offers climate-controlled stalls for individual RVs, to a series of smaller camps lining the slopes of the rolling landscape. In 2016, a tornado ripped through one of these RV parks, demonstrating the fragility of these light-weight aluminum and fiberglass boxes designed more for easy transport than persistent, multi-season habitation.

In interviews with residents of these camps at the height of the boom, we often heard about the sense of community and the freedom available in Type 2 camps, especially in contrast to the institutional style Type 1 camps. One camp owner described the Type 1 camps as “just the same thing over and over ... there’s no community about it. ’Cause you’re in there, it’s like this big system. [laughs] you come in, you eat, they take everything from you, you shower, you’re gone.”<sup>10</sup> In contrast, another owner described his Type 2 camp as promoting “families, dogs, kids. So, it’s temporary housing, but some of these people bring their families for the summer,

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<sup>9</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 10\_1 July 31, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 10\_1 July 31, 2015.

and [the families] go back for the winter, but they'll stay here."<sup>11</sup> The degree of community is debatable, though fears about crime in these camps were, in our experience, greatly exaggerated. The lived experience existed somewhere between the hysteria about crime and the hyperbole about community (but see Berg-Burin, this volume; Ruddell and Ray, this volume).

Many had what we playfully called by the neologism "Bakktimism," which referred to the persistent optimism expressed by residents of the Bakken. Despite the dangers and demands of the work, fluctuations in oil prices, the high cost of rent, the dust and heat in the summer, the frozen pipes, snow, and cutting wind of the winter, and the mud of the springtime thaw, residents of Type 2 camps almost universally remained positive about their situation. Maya Rao recently offered the Gramscian observation (Rao 2018) that this optimism represents faith in the long-term power of capitalism and hard work to reward short-term risk and discomfort. One particularly illustrative form of Bakktimism emerged in a conversation with a man who operated a salvage yard that bought and sold RVs and RV parts. When asked if he might make North Dakota his "permanent" home, he replied, "Well, I'm 62 years old, I'm going to do my best to maybe put in another five years ... I hope to ride it out, there's a millionaire dream here, there's great possibilities."<sup>12</sup> He was living in one of the most marginal camps we ever visited, but his story was more common than eccentric and captured a common sentiment.

Many camp owners shared this confidence. While some made back their initial investments in the first year or so, the persistence of these camps demonstrates an ongoing willingness, as the boom retreated, to operate the camps with significantly lower rents and lower

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<sup>11</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 4\_6 August 21, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 4\_7 August 22, 2013.

occupancy. However, the receding boom also led others to close their camps, usually because of changing local policies or growing competition from hotels and apartments.

The range of optimism among owners and on-site managers also reflected their varying commitments to the neighboring communities. Some were deeply involved in local affairs and lived locally, while the majority lived outside the region. One park owner who had moved to the Bakken from Oregon and built his business a few miles south of Watford City stated:

We are North Dakotans. We are licensed. My corporation is licensed. My cars are. We moved. My kids started businesses here. We're part of the community ... [W]e broke an acre off here and an acre for my partner, and this is our home ... We vote. We've been to the planning meetings.<sup>13</sup>

Camp owners and, more importantly, managers, also expressed a wide range of attitudes toward the conditions in their camps. Some, for example, took pride in the cleanliness of their facilities, emphasized the family friendly atmosphere, and paid careful attention to infrastructure and upkeep. A manager of a large RV park outside of Williston remarked,

It's our community. It's not an RV park. When you asked me what it is, it's Williston Fox Run. I did not say it's an RV camp because that's not what we want here. If you notice, our lots for these RVs and trailers are quite large so that they do have a little piece of home for a yard, for whatever they need. Our lot sizes are 30 by 90 feet. You can go to other places and they are 20x40. It's almost 3 times the size.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 4\_6 August 21, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 1\_2 August 10, 2012.

Other camps appeared to take a more laissez-faire approach with certain camps garnering the reputation for drug use, prostitution, and other illegal and undesirable activities.

As policies toward RV parks changed at the municipal level, camp managers tried to enforce the rules, but the dynamic character of the boom made solutions difficult. As a manager of a camp near Ross observed, “There was no one here to train me on everything, so I’ve had to learn all myself.”<sup>15</sup> Camp managers sought to address the rules, but there was only ever limited support or enforcement from state and county workers overwhelmed by the increased workload and the changing policy environment. Indeed, as late as 2011, according to the executive director of the county’s Job Development Authority, “McKenzie County had no land use plan or planning and zoning.”<sup>16</sup> And even once policies were established, efforts to place inspectors in the field ran up against the same challenges impacting healthcare workers, law enforcement, educators, etc.: as counties developed the necessary social infrastructure to ramp up enforcement, they ironically ran up against the housing shortage.

Specific rules and regulations, much less policies, remain murky on the ground. Williston, for example, enacted ordinances limiting the size and function of mudrooms in RV parks within city limits. In 2012, a camp manager said, “We do check [mudrooms] out and make sure they meet the fire code and that they’re not built shoddily, so that if the wind comes up 80 mph, it’s not going to blow away. That’s what we do.”<sup>17</sup> A year later, they required that residents limit their mudrooms to twelve-by-eight feet.<sup>18</sup> Another camp manager claimed that mudrooms could be any size as long as they maintained a ten-foot clearance between the buildings.<sup>19</sup> In

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<sup>15</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 10\_7 July 31, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 5\_1 August 11, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT1\_2 August 10, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 4\_2 August 22, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 7\_4 December, 2014.

other words, just as a camp's policies work only as well as the ability of the manager to enforce them, this same thing extends to the state, county, and city laws.

The fate of Type 1 camps during the receding boom was reported on a nearly weekly basis in 2015 and 2016 as the city of Williston expanded their extraterritorial jurisdiction to include land on which several man camps operated. In response to Williston's requirement that all man camps close by September 1, 2017, Target Logistics, one of the largest man camp operators in the region, sued the City of Williston to prevent having to shut down their large facility at the northern edge of the city. Other Type 1 facilities around Williston and Tioga unsuccessfully requested that their sites be rezoned as hotels. Most of these larger facilities have since closed. The actual physical removal of these Type 1 man camps is a particularly significant aspect of temporary workforce housing during a boom. The units themselves can be removed by a truck and are sometimes sold individually to buyers who pay for removal and transportation. However, the land where they stood will require significant reclamation work to approach pre-camp condition. Since most of the land was leased from local farmers, there is significant tension between out-of-state investors, their local managers, and the landowners. At a camp outside of Alexander, North Dakota, a Type 1 camp removed their units, but left the farmer with electrical, sewage, and water pipes below the ground and a thick level of gravel and dirt. As the camp failed, the farmer stopped being paid and lamented that land would never again be farmable. Elsewhere, a land owner took a camp owner to court after he tried to sell 110 acres of the farmer's land: "I gave them a long-term lease which I shouldn't have done. Then I found out they were trying to sell this 110 acres out from underneath me and I got pissed off and took them to court ... And [now] the only ones making money is the lawyers."<sup>20</sup> Temporary housing may

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<sup>20</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 12\_2 October 28, 2016.

have been a “necessary evil” to address the housing crisis, but the failure to create more effective policies, the insufficient funding, and the lack of enforcement has meant ill effects persisting long after the boom times.

### **Visions of Home after the Boom**

Compared to 2012, housing and related infrastructure in the Bakken region looked very different by 2018. Like in the 1950s, the Bakken boom introduced a ring of new housing to Williston. By 2018, Watford City was surrounded with subdivisions, a new high school, and a four-lane road routing traffic around downtown. On the one hand, these new developments demonstrate that Bakken communities continue to value permanent housing with the benefits of increased tax revenue and a greater sense of community and stability. In many ways, the interest of workers and the Bakken communities intersect in their shared desire for a sense of home. On the other hand, it remains unclear whether residents of these new homes and apartments will stay in Watford City as the workforce needs of the Bakken oil patch ebb and flow with the price of oil, the requirements of drilling and fracking oil wells, and the lure of opportunity elsewhere. The Bakken landscape changes daily by the ongoing removal of Type 1 camps, the gravel scars on the landscape, and the obvious decline in boom and bustle as oil companies shift resources in workforce and capital elsewhere. The role of outside capital in funding the boom, creating temporary housing, and new development remains obvious as well. It remains to be seen whether the post-boom landscape will inform future policies and serve as a reminder of the speed of twenty-first century capital and the vagaries of home in the global economy.

A new subdivision east of Watford City provides a hint. In the spring of 2018, the driveways and front lawns were already filled with work trucks beneath banners advertising units

with four bedrooms and four baths. Rather than family housing, this arrangement would accommodate the same temporary workers as the man camps they replaced. Despite bucolic names suggesting suburban domesticity, the frequent architectural references to shipping containers, including corrugated siding and narrow dimensions, do little to hide the likely transient reality. Ironically, the struggles for domesticity represented by decorated mudrooms and desperately planted gardens in the Type 2 camps, gave way to an implicit temporary character that shaped much of the “permanent” housing in the same region.

### **The NDMCP, the 1958 *Report*, and Other Contemporary Bakken Research**

There are certainly commonalities between the housing related issues described in the *Williston Report* and our own observations. Perhaps even more surprisingly, there are echoes from North Dakota’s earliest extractive industry boom periods, namely the original agricultural booms that brought large numbers of European immigrants who similarly struggled with the tension between recreating the domesticity they had known and the needs for temporary workforce housing exemplified by the Bonanza farms. Like the Type 1 lodges of the boom we studied, some of the “permanent” housing that was built during the late 1800s and early 1900s was packed up and shipped off to the next boom (as was the case with the Sears kit houses from that period). Also, then as now, there were abandonment processes as technological advances in agriculture meant diminished workforce needs, leaving the elements to slowly erode the physical remnants of communities.

More poignantly, our work is distinct from the *Williston Report* in its consideration of both a more global and historic context. After an initial attempt to simply consider the role of man camps in relation to the current, short-lived oil boom, we struggled to see what the camps

might reveal about housing temporary workers in relation to extractive industry booms. Then, as we engaged that work, we came to understand that the phenomenon we were studying might be even more broadly generalizable. We came to see the impact of global neoliberal policies, and the accompanying market for a “just-in-time” workforce. One result is that housing, to a greater degree than has previously been the case, has become a disposable commodity, intentionally serving global capital rather than individuals, families, or communities. One consequence of that economic dynamic is the surrender of political capacity. While interview respondents often concentrated on the tension between the longtime residents of the host communities and the workers living in temporary housing, we came to see the manner by which both “sides” received only limited benefit from the boom, especially in contrast to the great wealth transferred to outside investors, many of whom rarely or never set foot in North Dakota.

Our contribution to Bakken research is that we did not view the workers (and their families!) as feral intruders. Instead, we demonstrate that both the new workers and the longer-term residents were caught in a global struggle outside their control. Instead of seeing mercenary workers in conflict with “genuine,” “native” North Dakotans, we saw both groups struggling to exercise their limited agency to either hold on to, or to create and engage, a sense of home and community amid the hectic, even chaotic environment of an oil boom. The decision-making processes impacting their lives was determined less by local and state policy makers, and more by neoliberal policies and the influence of global capital.

Oil booms can simultaneously be a blessing and a curse. Having lost population for decades, many towns in western North Dakota had struggled to keep grocery stores open, let alone schools or medical services. In contrast, Brad Bekkedahl, a Williston City Commissioner declared, “This is a time of opportunity. It’s a time of growth. And it’s a time of amazing

prosperity and wealth coming into our community” (Holeywell 2011). Others simultaneously lamented the challenges brought about by the market-fueled, locally inflationary economy. Dennis Lindahl, a city councilman in Stanley noted that “merchants are able to charge an increased rate. Folks in town sometimes get a little upset from supporting the industry while not receiving benefits.”<sup>21</sup> And clearly, even for oil boom boosters like Bekkedahl, the market does not have all the answers. In the fall of 2014, Bekkedahl, as a Republican candidate for state senate, was supportive of a change in the state’s oil production tax to address Williston’s projected need of more than \$1 billion in infrastructure needs by 2020. But, of all the economic struggles and challenges, the nexus issue in the oil patch continues to be housing—part of a global crisis that continues to be framed primarily as a local problem.

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<sup>21</sup> NDMCP Personal Interview FT 12\_2 October 28, 2016.

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