States of the Union

BRING US TO THIS HOVEL

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

KENT: Gracious my lord, hard by here
is a hovel;
Some friendship will it lend you 'gainst
the tempest....
LEAR: The art of our necessities is
strange....
Come, bring us to this hovel.
—*King Lear*, ACT III, SCENE 2

IT IS NOT surprising that younger Americans change their residences three times more frequently than do older Americans. In youth we turn outward, itching to spread our wings. In old age our bones demand more predictable consolations: the rose bush in the yard, the family photographs on the shelf, the dog at our feet. Our very walls take on new meaning. In the language of gerontology, we prefer to "age in place," and at times the preference shades into obstinacy. It is then that we may dig in for the duration, whatever the cost, and let no one persuade us to venture forth. We shall not be moved.

FISU. The Finns have a word for it—*fisu*—which means to "keep on going," or simply "guts." There are quite a few Finns in Houghton County, Michigan, where the elderly make up about 10,000 of the 40,000 residents. As in other parts of rural America, most of the county's aged (four of every five) own their dwellings, but these are mainly hovels that lend scant friendship against the tempest.

Houghton County is part of the state's northern peninsula, separating Lake Michigan from Lake Superior. Once it was rich in copper and lumber, but all the mines are shut down now and the logging isn't what it used to be. The old people there were never prosperous in any case, not even in their prime; and because the logging bosses they worked for commonly paid them in cash, their current Social Security benefits keep them poor. The housing reflects the poverty.

Michael Aten, a young man, has been living up there for six years, working for the local branch of an international caregiving organization called Friends of the Elderly. One of his responsibilities is to help people move out of their freezing backwoods shacks and into warm, subsidized "senior housing" available at modest rents in towns like Hancock and Laurium. It has not been easy.

I interviewed Aten last month, the day after Christmas. He had been cutting wood all day and delivering loads to those on his "Most-In-Need" list. "It's going to be tough this year," he said. "People are running out of wood before the winter's half over. We've had 150 inches of snow this month alone."

Yet none of Aten's clients seemed ready to move. "Rural people like their independence," he told me. "There was a man I knew—he must have been in his 90s—who actually had a stroke and still wouldn't leave his place. I found him one day chopping wood *on his knees*. He couldn't even stand up, but he refused to switch to an apartment in town where all he'd have to do for heat is flick the thermostat. I can't really blame him. He knew what he wanted."

Mayme Kemppainen is 76. The house she has lived in much of her life is falling down around her. Part of it caved in after the blizzard of 1981, when she had felt too weary to climb up and shovel the heavy snow off the roof. It took longer for the other side to go—it just seemed to rot away. Now Miss Kemppainen is confined with her dog and two cats to a single room, 10 feet by 12, where she does all her cooking, eating and sleeping. The facilities are not the best, but in Houghton County neither are they the worst. A kerosene space-heater works some of the time. Thanks to Aten's efforts, the house has both electricity and running water, though the water is not for drinking because the new well is shallow and sandy.

For potable water Miss Kemppainen must travel 12 miles to a public restroom, where she can fill up her six half-gallon milk jugs. She ties the plastic jugs together with string, for easier carrying to and from the bus. But ever since her arthritis got so bad that she had to start using a walker, transportation has been a problem. The bus won't stop for her any more because the walker slows her down and the driver is impatient. Now, when she runs out of drinking water she must wait for Aten or a neighbor to come by in a car.

Every winter Aten reminds Mayme Kemppainen that she doesn't have to endure the isolation, the temperamental kerosene stove, the sagging remnant of a house: She can move into the senior project at Laurium. All she has to do is

say the word. And each time she promises to do that, swearing this will be her very last winter in the woods. But then comes the thaw, and with it second thoughts. She remembers that the project does not allow pets other than caged birds. What will become of her dog and her cats if she moves to town? What will become of *her*, tucked away among all those strangers in a citified building? She can name people like herself, folks getting on in years, who tried that peculiar way of life and didn't last six months. Quicker than you'd think they packed up and went back to their little cabins. Too much noise, they said. Too many rules.

Well, maybe she won't go to Laurium just yet. Maybe she can tough it out just one more winter. *Fisu.*

A Little Piece of the United States. Thelma Poole was born in Sweden in 1891 and has lived in the same house in Minneapolis for more than half her years. It is a two-story, wooden-frame "fourplex," only a mile south of downtown, which she and her husband bought in 1938 for $2,700. The down payment took all their savings. "My husband was a chauffeur and a gardener for a very rich family," she told me. "We didn't have much money, but my husband was smart with his hands. He fixed our house just right."

Her husband died in 1978: "I miss him terrible. Nothing seems to matter any more. All I cared for was ... was ... I can't think of the word. It's something like 'togetherness' but that's not it."

I came to Mrs. Poole's house one wintery afternoon at the suggestion of Julie Gamber, a young woman who works for the Minneapolis chapter of Friends of the Elderly. "It's not a pleasant place to spend time in," she had warned. "This lady stays forever in one room. She never goes out. The other three apartments are empty, so it's not as if she gets any rent money. A few months ago a woman on welfare moved into some of the rooms downstairs. She didn't pay rent, she just squatted there with her children and her boyfriend. They played music all day and all night—the kind that thumps. It drove Thelma bats. When you're very old, you're helpless. People can invade your space and do anything they please. The city finally got them out of there, so now the place is empty again except for Thelma upstairs. I'll take you there."

The front door is unlocked. We walk up the groaning staircase and enter a shadowy room that smells of stale food and urine. My feet find trash with every step—twisted cans, plastic dishes, crushed paper bags. Accidentally I kick something that is large and round, and it rolls across the floor. It is an empty bird cage.

"I used to have canaries." The voice is Scandinavian and husky. "Oh, what music they made! Not like those tenants and *their* music. That wasn't music at all—just crazy crazy sounds."

Thelma Poole is lying beneath blankets on a bed in the far corner, her white head resting on a dingy pillow. "You are a tall one," she says to me, extending a skeletal hand in greeting. She must have been a beautiful young woman. Even now her large eyes hold me. They are a deep blue.

Julie says, "Thelma, this gentleman is writing a book. He wants to know how you are getting along in your house."

"Getting along? Well, you see me here. It is a good house. When we bought it, it was just a ramshackle. I said to my husband, 'This house looks like an old pirate's nest, but to us it's a palace.' My friends, oh, how they made fun of it. They wanted to know how in the world we could buy such an old ramshackle. But later they kept quiet. *They* didn't have anything, you see, and we had this house, a little piece of the United States, and when I woke up I could step out on my own little lot."

Mrs. Poole no longer steps out. The doors to her kitchen and bedroom seem permanently shut, and the room we are in, the living room, is indeed the one where she does all her living. For food she depends on Meals-on-Wheels, which delivers two meals each weekday. She does not eat on weekends. Her monthly Social Security check is mailed directly to the bank where she has a checking and savings account, as are her fuel and tax bills. Mrs. Poole is not much bother to the rest of us. She has outlived all her close relatives; she has no telephone. People from Friends of the Elderly and other agencies look in on her from time to time, but beyond cheering her up and making her comfortable, there seems little they can do.

The house, meanwhile, is slowly reverting to its ramshackle state. There are leaks in the pipes and holes in the plaster. Minnesota storms have cracked several windows and torn away some of the roofing as well as many of the gutters. Nothing gets repaired. One sees a reverse symbiosis at work here: House and owner are simultaneously deteriorating, growing less and less capable of protecting each other. This is not an uncommon condition in America. Among persons 75 years old and older, some 70 per cent still reside in their own homes and nearly half the owners have incomes below the poverty line. In tabulations made during the late 1970s, about one-quarter of such dwellings were found to have "persistent deficiencies" like leaks, unvented room heaters and lack of adequate plumbing or electrical wiring. Deficiency rates in rural areas reached 35 per cent.

We lack the programs and institutions needed to help these determined homeowners age gracefully in place. Even in Thelma Poole's case, where helpful measures seem obvious, none has been taken. Surely tenants could be found for the vacant apartments; surely portions of their rent could be paid in services—in home maintenance work, for instance, and in home care for Mrs. Poole. Such a plan does not appear farfetched, yet it would require initiatives and arrangements for which no agency, not even Friends of the Elderly, is prepared to take responsibility.

So Mrs. Poole remains trapped in her own cage. Her alternative—the main option society has granted her—is to pack up and surrender body and soul to a nursing home. It is a recourse I hint as we take leave. Wouldn't she receive better care, I ask, in a different kind of place?

The question seems to perplex Mrs. Poole. "Why should I want to leave my house?" she finally responds. "No, I think I die here."