

Features



Bonnie Trafelet/Courier-Journal

Rickey Holloway of Williamson looks over debris left by a fire in which three of his children perished last fall. Holloway said his landlord had promised him the larger trailer next door.

Rural poor pay painful price for indecent housing

By Teresa A. Parsons

Outside Vivian Parish's bedroom window, a climbing pink rosebush splashes color against the gray and dusty patchwork of her house, pieced together from bits of faded linoleum, carpet, tar paper and wood.

Inside, there is no plumbing. A covered pail serves as Parish's toilet. Every two or three days, she drives to a convenience store several miles down the road to fill plastic jugs with water for drinking and cooking and washing.

The house offers no heat, aside from the propane-gas stove and a kerosene heater, which gives Parish headaches, but keeps her from freezing in winter. The only insulation is provided by the plastic she tapes over doors and windows.

Parish doesn't live in some Third-World country or the rural South. She lives at the end of a dirt-lane just off Route 104 in Williamson, Wayne County.

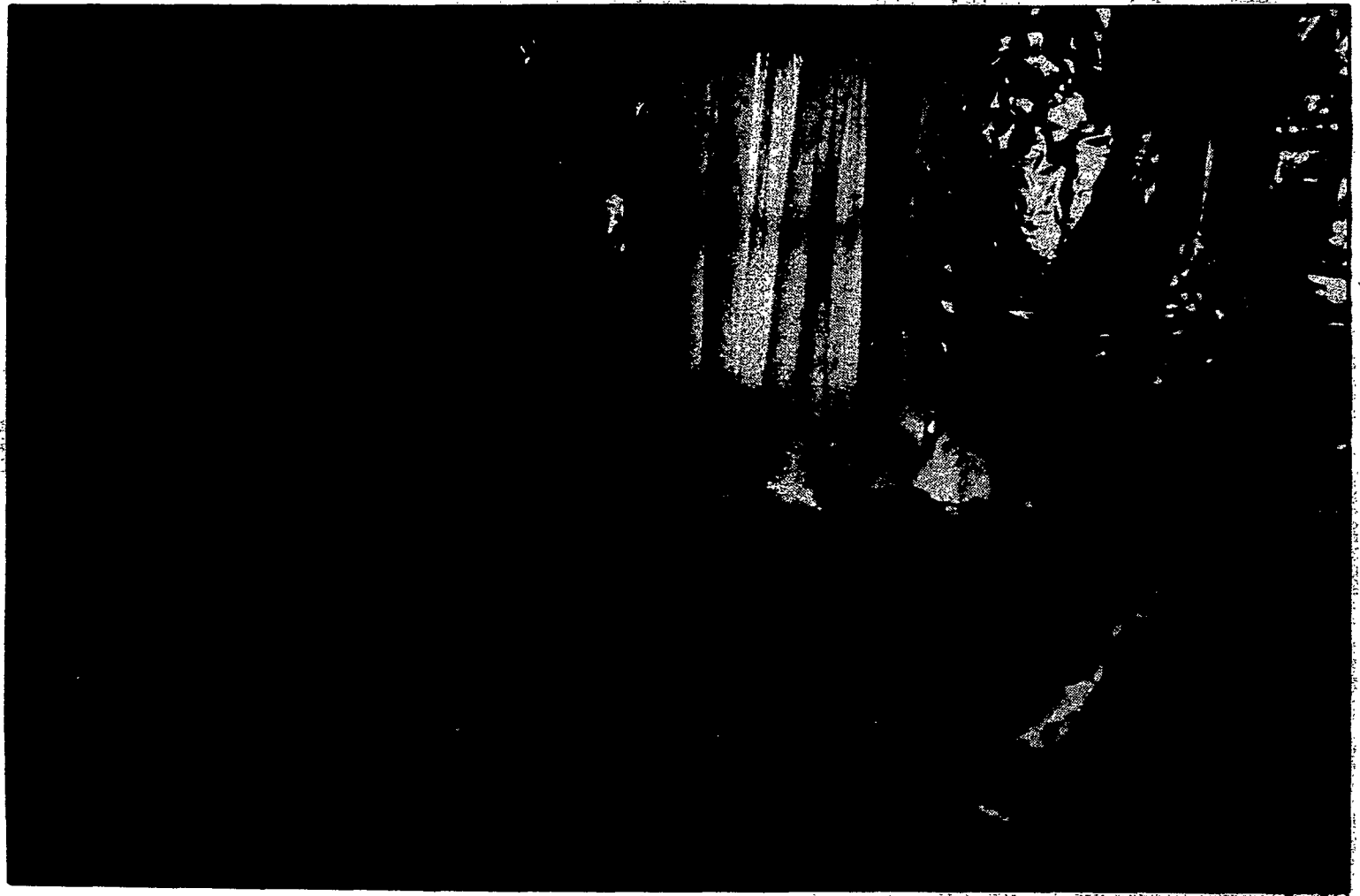
She moved to the three-room house nearly 10 years ago with her family. "I didn't want to move down here," she said, "but I had no choice."

If she could choose, Parish would rent a studio apartment. But the 26-year-old has no job, and admits that her occasional attempts to obtain housing assistance from social services always seem to go up in the smoke of impatience. "It's all a bunch of red tape," she said. "I get frustrated, and when I get frustrated, I get mad, and I don't like to get upset. So ..."

Parish pays no rent — she told a woman who once tried to collect that the place wasn't worth anything. And despite its shortcomings, the house on Route 104 has become her home. "I got attached to this place when I first moved in," Parish recalled. "Now, if I only had plumbing, I would stay here the rest of my days."

Parish's living conditions are not unique in Wayne County, as Rickey Holloway can attest. Driving along Route 104, the 32-year-old Williamson resident noticed a woman crossing the road ahead with two young children. They carried plastic jugs to tote water from a convenience store to their home, which probably has no running water, he explained. More than a dozen people each week rely on the store's spigot for water, according to a clerk.

Several miles down the road, Holloway pointed out a cluster of dilapidated motel cabins situated just off Route 104 on Old Ridge Road. One occupant said she pays \$180 per month to live there with her two children, the rats and the cockroaches. "It's a shame," she



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Bridget Hilsinger sits in a house from which she and Otis Rosser have since been evicted. The couple claims their landlord reneged on an agreement allowing them to insulate the house in lieu of rent.

said.

Holloway knows that housing conditions in Wayne County are poor because he's been searching for ways to improve them since last fall, when he and his wife, Betty, lost three of their seven children in a trailer fire.

Memories of that October night — when the kerosene heater Betty Holloway was trying to refill burst into flames that killed eight-year-old Rickey Jr., six-year-old Stacey, and two-year-old Christopher — remain "a hard pill you don't get used to," Holloway said.

Nor have weeds and summer foliage managed to obscure the fire's visible scars — twisted wire, rusty hulks of appliances and charred piles of fabric that litter the lot on the

corner of King Street and Route 104, where all nine Holloways lived for more than a year in a two-bedroom trailer with a leaking roof and no heat.

A few yards away is a three-bedroom trailer with a large addition, which Holloway said he was promised when his family moved from Florida in August, 1986. But once the larger trailer, which boasted adequate plumbing and a working furnace, became vacant, he said, it was rented to someone else instead.

Now the trailer stands vacant, with a "For Rent" sign on the door.

Holloway's voice still shakes a little, describing how he and Betty tried to get their family out of the trailer and into another home. "We

went out every day looking," he recalled. Try as they might to appear presentable to prospective landlords, their clothes always reeked of kerosene fumes and dampness, he said.

But the Holloways' greatest disadvantage in the hunt for housing was the size of their family. "People don't want to rent if you have kids or pets," Rickey Holloway said. "Some people said to me after, 'I wish you told me I had a place you could have stayed.' Sometimes I think that's just an excuse."

Since the fire, the Holloways have lived in a Williamson apartment owned by St. Mary Our Lady of the Lake Church in Ontario. They have relied on their faith and on one another

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