

Western Kentucky University

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Veterans' Village

by Lynn Niedermeier

Late in 1945, American college and university administrators were nervous. A tide of ex-servicemen, armed with benefits guaranteed under the G. I. Bill, were clamoring to begin or resume their education. At Western Kentucky State Teachers College (now WKU), President Paul Garrett received letters from young men still thinking like soldiers. "What date do I report, to whom, & where? Also, what papers must I bring?" asked a pre-dentistry hopeful. A former POW inquired about "what courses I can take and the length of time it will take to complete them. Also what plan you have concerning the tuition and room & board."¹

Faced with a housing shortage in Bowling Green and no dormitory space for either single or married men, Garrett had one option: join in the scramble to borrow a variety of portable structures located at military bases and defense plants throughout the country, now surplus and available for emergency housing. WKU's "Veterans' Village" was the result.

Shortages of student accommodations at WKU had occurred before. After World War I, the college constructed seventy-six small houses on campus—a little settlement quickly dubbed "Cherryton" after then-president Henry Hardin Cherry—and leased them to students.² During World War II the government had become the nation's principal builder, but of 100,000 federally financed units built to house defense workers, less than 1,500 were considered "permanent." The rest were barracks, trailers and rather flimsy prefabricated dwellings. President Garrett, nevertheless, needed them badly. In October 1945 he wrote the Federal Public Housing Agency (FPHA) asking for fifty "knock-down houses" but the agency, overwhelmed with applications, managed to deliver only thirty-three 13-by-30-foot structures from a defense plant in Charlestown, Indiana.³

Garrett persisted, procuring nine double trailers from a war housing project in Willow Run, Michigan and thirty single trailers from the nuclear facility in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. They arrived at the expanding site on Seventeenth Street (now Regents Avenue) between Russellville Road (now Avenue of Champions) and Normal Drive. Still, WKU needed more. Enrollment for the 1946 spring quarter, only 535 a year earlier, had rocketed to 966, of which 40 percent were ex-servicemen.⁴ Expecting 1,275 students in the fall, Garrett stepped up competition with other colleges, not only for housing but for furnishings, bedding and appliances—the allocation of which, he complained to

¹ William A. Chaffins to Paul Garrett, 8 August 1946; Warren R. Dockins to Paul Garrett, 28 December 1945, Paul L. Garrett Papers, Prospective Students C-D File, 1946, University Archives, Western Kentucky University.

² *College Heights Herald*, 21 March 1947.

³ Paul Garrett to National Housing Agency, 17 October 1945, FPHA Prefabricated Houses 1945-48 File; Contract for Bailment, 10 November 1945, KY-15116 (33 Houses File), Amendment and Supplement to Contract for Bailment, KY-15116 (9 Double Trailers File), Garrett Papers.

⁴ Paul Garrett to FPHA, 17 April 1946, FPHA Correspondence 1945-48 File, Garrett Papers.

Congressman Earle Clements, depended not upon enrollment figures but upon “who howles [sic] the loudest.”⁵

That summer, thirteen prefabricated structures from Mississippi’s Camp McCain arrived at Veterans’ Village, where they were divided into fifty one- and two-bedroom apartments. Ten 20-by-48-foot army barracks arrived from Marion, Ohio to house sixteen veterans apiece. In fall 1946, as enrollment topped 1,430, Garrett applied for ten more “quonset huts” and, despite his appeal to the FPHA to “squeeze out a few more,” got only three from California.⁶

Working through an array of federal project reports, bailment contracts and regulations, Garrett strove to provide bearable living conditions for veterans and their families. Letters and wires flew between WKU and the FPHA when the new apartment roofs leaked, when only forty-five of fifty ice boxes arrived, and even when a shipment of 1,245 blankets was one short.⁷ Accommodation in the thirty single trailers—which arrived in considerable disrepair, lacked adequate heat, and depended upon communal laundry, hot water and toilet facilities—proved so dismal that Garrett was reluctant to charge the FPHA-mandated rent of \$26 per month.⁸ He created small study halls in five barracks and converted the other five into apartments for married veterans, an improvisation requiring explanation to the statistically minded FPHA. When Mrs. Garrett and WKU’s Faculty Wives Club opened a day care center in one of the barracks, the FPHA notified Garrett that “the structure being used as a nursery is being put to unauthorized use.”⁹ With over one hundred children now living in Veterans’ Village, Garrett edgily replied that “it was better to deprive two families of a place to live in order to make living conditions somewhat better for those who are here. The need for a place for the numerous babies to be kept during the day with resultant increased freedom for the mothers in turn is self-evident.”¹⁰

Garrett must have prevailed, for in November 1948 the *College Heights Herald* reported on the Veterans’ Village Council, a governing body of residents which met each month at the nursery. WKU’s enrollment that fall had peaked at just over two thousand students, and the Village had shed its temporary character to become a campus fixture.

Garrett quickly took advantage of a federal law enacted in June 1948 to acquire outright ownership of the prefabricated houses, barracks, trailers and apartments. Although the barracks fell to the auctioneer in 1957, Veterans’ Village, originally created to house

⁵ Paul Garrett to Earle C. Clements, 25 July 1946, FPHA Correspondence, 1945-48 File, Garrett Papers.

⁶ Paul Garrett to FPHA, 1 November 1946, FPHA Prefabricated Houses 1945-48 File; Authorization to Proceed, 4 November 1946, KY-VN-15163 (10 Barracks File), Garrett Papers.

⁷ Paul Garrett to FPHA, 11 April 1947; Paul Garrett to Frank Meritt, 22 April 1947, FPHA Correspondence 1945-48 File, Garrett Papers; Paul Garrett to FPHA, 27 August 1946, FPHA Prefabricated Houses 1945-48 File, Garrett Papers.

⁸ FPHA to Paul Garrett, 10 April 1946; Paul Garrett to FPHA, 28 May 1946, KY-V-15127 (30 Trailers File), Garrett Papers.

⁹ FPHA to Paul Garrett, 9 April 1948, 10 Barracks File, Garrett Papers.

¹⁰ *Courier-Journal*, 1 June 1947; Paul Garrett to FPHA, 26 April 1948, 10 Barracks File, Garrett Papers.

1940s-style “non-traditional” students, remained the principal housing facility for married students and did not disappear completely until 1976.¹¹

From parking lots to computer labs, from intramural sports facilities to telephone registration, WKU’s campus still changes to serve the character of its student body. In its scope and urgency, however, the establishment of Veterans’ Village was perhaps the greatest effort to accommodate a unique constituency—one striving to make up time lost from youth, but also bearing adult responsibilities. For these students, life there could be rugged—cramped, chilly and lacking in privacy—but Veterans’ Village was a microcosm of the postwar “return to normalcy,” where one resident declared he had found “160 square feet of heaven.”¹²



Veterans’ Village at WKU was a collection of trailers, barracks and prefabricated dwellings originally built for defense workers.
(University Archives)

¹¹ *Park City Daily News*, 13 August 1976.

¹² *College Heights Herald*, 15 March 1946.