

Lakefront view, cloudy future

by Tech. Sgt. Mark Kinkade
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

Tech. Sgt. Ronnie Lang and his two sons have a good house. Three bedrooms, 1,100 square feet of living space and enough closet space to squirrel away a mountain of toys, racks of clothes and souvenirs from Lang's career — all within walking distance of a marina on one of the best recreational lakes in west Texas.

"It's some of the better housing I've seen," the 315th Training Wing administrative specialist said. "In fact, when

I first saw it, I didn't believe it was base housing."

Sergeant Lang lives about 15 minutes from Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas, in a subdivision of small duplex homes clumped about two blocks from Lake Nasworthy. The 200 government-leased homes are virtually indistinguishable from rows of similar ranch-style carport homes tucked neatly a few yards off a highway snaking through one of San Angelo's more affluent areas.

To many residents, the housing area is the best of civilian and military worlds: A close community of people with similar interests in a relatively crime-free part of town near recreation, shopping and other activities. The government pays the bills; the contractor takes care of the houses. It's a place where kids chase cicadas well into the night unafraid, and parents trust their neighbors.

"The kids love it," said Julia Horne, wife of an Air Force firefighting instructor and mother of three. "They can ride their bikes in the streets, and we know

things will be all right."

San Angelo is a small city of about 95,000 located roughly three hours north of San Antonio and three hours southwest of Dallas-Fort Worth in the heart of Texas' sheep and cattle country.

Long-time residents of the area like the low crime rate, the quiet atmosphere and the small-town vibe. The lead story on a recent news cast was a free concert by Willie Nelson, and sports reports revolve around the local high school and San Angelo State University football teams.

"To me, it's almost perfect," Sergeant Lang said. "I came from a smaller town, so this is sort of a step up. It's a good place for a family because you don't have all the stress and trouble that come with living in a city."

But it's not easy to find a place to live in the area. The town is small, and homes on the economy are scarce. Base housing is full.

The Nasworthy housing area has been the relief valve for 20 years. Residents live in what is essentially a civil-

ian community patrolled by civilian police, and protected by civilian fire departments. A small military security forces sub-station was built after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to give the residents additional peace of mind, said Jackie Allen, Goodfellow's housing office manager.

But those with homes in Nasworthy enjoy their stay. Families sit outside chatting with other families. Fathers carrying fishing poles walk from the lake with their sons as the Texas sun slides behind the low foothills in the west.

The 1,500-acre man-made lake is a prime weekend getaway for many San Angelo people who like to boat, swim

or fish in blue-green waters. Goodfellow maintains a recreation area within walking distance of the housing area, and many residents keep boats and other water craft in the local marina at a cut rate.

Summer evenings in the neighborhood hum with the sound of people laughing near hot grills filling the air with the smell of hamburgers and hot dogs. It's not unusual to see someone carrying a stringer of crappie or catfish from the lake, and cars towing boats are commonplace.

The down side? Residents still have to keep their lawns to military standards, and a trip to the shoppette for a gallon of milk means loading the kids

in the minivan and driving to town. Some residents would just as soon live on base.

"I feel better on base," Ms. Horne said. "Everything is closer, and you just feel safer behind the gates."

She and others may soon get their wish. The lease on the residential homes is due to expire soon, and the congressional act that created the housing program prohibits renewing.

In the early 1980s, the Defense Department faced a housing crisis. Base housing across the armed services was typically old and considered unsuitable for modern families. And there simply wasn't enough housing to accommodate all the families that wanted to live

Tech. Sgt. Ronnie Lang, his sons, Mark (left) and Brian, and dog, Mojoe, take a sunset stroll on the shores of Lake Nasworthy, near Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas. Nearly 20 years ago, Goodfellow became one of the first military bases to lease housing from civilian companies when the Air Force secured 200 homes near the lake for military families. The lease runs out in 2007, leaving the future of the housing area in doubt and families like the Langs wondering where they will live.





Staff Sgt. Scott Horne with his wife, Schavon, 4-year-old son, Gabriel, and 14-month-old daughter, Sidney, find refuge from the afternoon sun under a covered swing in their backyard while son, Roger, 6, and daughter, Bailey, 7, play on a trampoline. "The sense of community is really strong here," said Sergeant Horne, an airport firefighter rescue instructor with the 312th Training Squadron, whose home has become a frequent gathering spot for a broad mix of neighbors who enjoy group barbecues.

on base. At Goodfellow, for example, more than 400 families want to move on base, where there are only 96 enlisted units standing.

Leased housing was the solution. Basically, the Defense Department leases houses from civilian contractors who provide all maintenance. The homes are usually off-base. Goodfellow was one of the first bases to adopt the program.

"The [congressional action creating the leased housing program] provided for a 20-year lease, no more than that," Ms. Allen said. "No one considered what would happen when the lease ran out because they figured the government would have found a better way to address the housing issue."

The lease expires in 2007, and housing residents wonder what the future holds.

"I worry that we may not have a place to live," Sergeant Lang said.

In 2003, Goodfellow leadership pushed for construction money to build new homes on base. The result: The first phase of construction begins in 2005 on a new block of 127 houses on base. When complete, the three-phase construction program will yield enough housing for 406 military families.

After the lease ends, the Nasworthy housing area contractor will continue

to lease the houses to military families at the current market rate, which falls well within the basic housing allowance, Ms. Allen said.

"It's a market-driven economy," she said. "There's no guarantee rents will remain where they are. But in this market, we don't expect the prices to be prohibitive."

It's not the best solution, but it's one that will have to work.

"There's really nothing else to be done," she added. "We can't continue the program, and people need a place to live." ☺

Goodfellow AFB at a glance

Mission:

Training, training and more training. The 17th Training Wing is the host unit for several Defense Department training programs, including schools for firefighting, cryptology and intelligence career fields.

Location:

San Angelo, Texas, about 218 miles northwest of San Antonio and 229 miles southwest of Fort Worth.

Getting around:

By air: San Angelo's municipal airport offers commuter flights daily connecting to Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, Cleveland and Newark, N.J. By road: Three major highways surround the city. The city itself is relatively small, and traffic is usually light compared to major cities.

Population:

San Angelo: About 95,000. Goodfellow: About 2,500 full time. Large transient student population.

History:

San Angelo and the military have a long connection, dating back to Fort Concho, a post-Civil War encampment built on the banks of the Concho River. In World War II, San Angelo was host to Army Air Corps flight training. The base was named for 1st Lt. John J. Goodfellow Jr., a pilot killed in World War I.

Climate:

Temperatures can be in the 100s during summer months, but low humidity in the 10 to 20 percent range keeps the heat index down. Moderate winters with a few weeks of 30 to 40 degree temperatures are the norm.

Cost of living:

Mostly inexpensive. Housing costs, for example, are 21 percent below the national average.

Education:

Good public schools and San Angelo State University, known for agriculture programs. Howard College and Southern Illinois University also offer classes.

Recreation:

San Angelo is one of those "sportsman's paradise" type places. If you like hunting, fishing, water sports or just hiking in the desert, this is the place. The small city offers some diversions, including a host of nightclubs, concerts and other events. Weekend trips to San Antonio and Dallas/Fort Worth and day trips to Mexico are common.

More info: www.sanangelo.com; www.goodfellow.af.mil; www.afcrossroads.com/home.cfm.