Valley of Neglect

It wasn’t meant to be this way.

Nobody planned the rutted roads and collapsible houses. Nobody said “let’s put all the poor people in Irishtown and Davistown and not take care of it.”

That’s what happened, though.

Decades of neglect — by government, by landlords, by tenants — have turned what was a modest railroad community into what is, put bluntly, the worst pocket of poverty in Lexington.

For years, the story has been the same — lots of talk, little action. The weeds grow a little higher, the trash gets a little heavier, a few more houses are demolished, condemned, or continue to rot around the families living in them.

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With neglect in its past, uncertainty in its future, the valley slowly crumbles

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Landlords have been given most of the blame, letting the shotgun houses they rent — sometimes for more than $200 a month — fall into worse and worse stages of disrepair.

Today, nine of every 10 homes in Irivistown and Davistown are considered to be in “poor condition” or worse.

But there’s something more to the story of the valley’s decay than greedy landlords, uncaring tenants and just plain poverty.

It has cloaked the valley in a cloud of uncertainty, discouraged both public and private investment and left most of the approximately 1,000 residents wondering what future their neighborhood has, if any.

It’s the road that wasn’t — the Newtown Road bypass.

The road was proposed around 1950 as part of a loop that would enable motorists to get around downtown Lexington without going through it.

Residents protested strongly and so did the politicians who represented the area — the road would displace too many homes, they said.

Two different governors have nixed the road, but it is still strongly backed by the local administration.

“It’s like Lazarus,” says Joe Jasper, the urban county commissioner who represents the area. “It keeps rising from the dead.”

“That’s what has kept the people from upgrading their homes. It’s the unknown factor — for 30 years not knowing whether the road would come through. That’s what’s really hurt them.”

The road proposal has also kept the local government from spending any money on the area — local, state or federal.

“Other than a few parks improvements, we haven’t invested a penny down there,” says Ed Houlihan, urban county commissioner of parks, housing and community development.

“We have not been in a position to make any improvements,” said Gordon Garner, commissioner of sanitation and public works. “You don’t just go in and start spending money without any idea what’s going to be happening.”

Federal dollars — like those being spent renovating five “neighborhood strategy areas” in Lexington — also have been unavailable.

Neither Irivistown nor Davistown was included as neighborhood strategy areas — five areas chosen by the Urban County Council for federally-funded neighborhood improvements.

Why? Politics played a role, say some observers. But the valley was also missing something the other neighborhoods had — a plan.

In March or April, there will be a plan — several of them, in fact. A Dayton, Ohio, consulting firm is completing a $30,000 study that will outline alternatives for redeveloping the area — and ways to pay for it.

“We realized a couple of years ago that conditions were so deplorable down there that the first thing we should get into is the housing aspect,” said Mayor Jim Amato.

“I don’t think that we have done a sufficient job in the past several years — maybe the past decade,” Amato said. “We haven’t done as well as we should in distressed areas.”

City officials now hope they can reverse the trend of decay in the valley that can be traced back to the turn of the century.

The valley, once the site of ranches and factories, became one of Lexington’s earliest suburbs in the late 1800s when the railroad came through.

After 1900, though, the pace of development slowed. And when the railroad merchants moved out, most of the property was bought and managed by absentee landlords.

A new breed — actually an old one — took over the valley. Mountain people, eastern Kentuckians, who heard of opportunity, flocked to Lexington, leaving rural poverty behind.

More often than not, the opportunity eluded them, leaving them faced with a new reality — urban poverty.

They brought with them — and many still have today — a different set of values that is often hard for outsiders to understand.

“There is no appreciation of the culture of this community,” says the Rev. Larry Johnson, pastor of a Methodist mission in Davistown, formerly called Davis Bottoms.

“Outside people don’t realize these people have a culture of their own. People outside place a great importance on education, their career, success and moving up. Most people here don’t value those things at all.”

But they’ll drop anything for the family. It may not always look like it, but let there be a crisis and they’re all together.

“And they value their turf — even through they don’t own it,” Johnson added.

About 80 percent of the valley’s residents rent, often more than $200 for homes in bad enough shape to be ordered condemned and destroyed.

The homes line the rutted roads of the valley, a mile-long swath of perpetuating poverty, hidden from view by warehouses, railroad tracks and junkyards, but only three blocks from Lexington’s $42 million civic center.

There are no sidewalks, no curbs, in the valley, except along Manchester Street, the location of most of the industry in the area. The people are poor — 65 percent of those in Irivistown and half of those in Davistown receive some form of public assistance.

The level of unemployment is near 40 percent in Irivistown and Davistown. In Irivistown, more than 90 percent of the population is considered low or very low income. In Davis Bottoms that figure is 99 percent.

It’s not unusual for the cupboards to run bare, for medical needs to be neglected, for a 30-year-old to be unable to read or write.

You can see a chihuhua whose broken front legs grow back at opposite right angles after its master used popsicle sticks as splints.

You can see a naked 2-year-old boy sitting alone on a dirty kitchen floor, nibbling at still-rotten breaded fish patties, while his mother watches TV in another room.

But for every family that fits the poor-and-backwards stereotype there are probably two more that don’t. People who live in immaculately kept houses, who have worked a lifetime at minimum wage or less to raise a family.

Together, they’ve been watching their neighborhood crumble.

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About the section

The stories in this section were written by Leader reporter John Woestendiek, who spent a month investigating conditions in Irivistown and Davistown.

Woestendiek, 27, is a graduate of the University of North Carolina. He came to the Leader three years ago from the Arizona Daily Star in Tucson.

He has been assistant city editor and city editor for the newspaper.

Ron Garrison took the photographs in this section. Garrison, 28, has been with the Leader for seven years.

A graduate of the University of Kentucky, Garrison previously worked for the Commonwealth Journal in Somerset.

On the cover: Harry Powell, Sr. and his two-year-old brother, Jeffrey, in front of their home at 737 De Roode St.
Chester Garland passes time on his front porch.

Chester and Bertha Rose Garland are sitting in their favorite chairs around the wood stove watching Another World with the sound turned way up when a stranger knocks.

Bertha Rose answers and invites the stranger in. Chester, who’s hard of hearing, rises from his rocking chair, says “take a seat, take a seat,” and moves to another chair.

Chester wears a moth-eaten sweater and a pair of blue denim overalls (that don’t remember the last time they saw washday). There’s a spittoon on the floor and three metal pails spaced around the room that serve the same purpose.

Chester alternates between them, but the brown tobacco juice that leaves his mouth doesn’t hit its mark.

Bertha Rose wears paisley stretch pants and a checked flannel shirt.

The house smells like Lysol.

Chester's 86, Bertha Rose is 76. They've been married for 18 years. It’s the third marriage for both of them.

Both came to Lexington as children from the mountains of Eastern Kentucky — Chester from Clay County, Bertha Rose from Casey. Their parents came here to find work.

They brought some of the mountain culture with them to Lexington — and left some behind when they died. It’s here in the way the Garland talk, the way they think and the way they live. It’s in the two wood stoves — one in the living room/bedroom to warm yourself by, one in the kitchen to cook on.

The Garlands are afraid of gas. They have electricity, a hot water heater and indoor plumbing. They speak of them as luxuries.

The house, occupants and all, could be plodded down on the side of the most remote eastern Kentucky mountain and look like it had been there forever. They’re mountain people. The only things missing are the mountains.

Instead it’s a heap of junked cars, trucks, buses and parts — part of the Harry Gordon Scrapyard — that rises 50 feet into the air in front of their home.

They pay $85 a month for the house on McKinley “chute,” a dirt road that extends past De Rode Street in Davistown and ends in front of their home.

The junkyard gets a little noisy sometimes as cars are stacked and unlabeled. So do the trains that rumble down the tracks about 20 yards away and 30 yards above their house.

They don’t complain. They like the house. “It isn’t worth $85, but it beats being outdoors,” says Chester. “Can’t find nothing nowadays that you don’t have to pay two prices for.”

They have always rented. “What good would it do to own any property? They just come along and tear your house down.”

The Garlands lost one home to urban renewal. Depending on what Newtown Pike proposal — if any — is approved, the new road could come dangerously close to their home.

At first, the Garlands think the visitor in Chester’s favorite chair is a census taker. When it’s explained again, they realize it’s a newspaper writer. They agree to talk even though they’ll never read the story. Neither knows how.

They survive off Social Security and food stamps. They don’t have a car. Chester pulls a wagon to the A&P about a mile away to stock up on groceries, mostly potatoes.

Chester estimates they spend about $140 a month — plus their allotment of food stamps — on rent, bills and food. “That barely leaves enough to pay the insurance man.”

But we always manage to have enough beets and potatoes. Everything else I can’t buy. No meat. Pork chops? Steaks? Uhh uhh. That’s for the rich man, not the poor man.

Link sausage is about the only meat in their diet, Bertha Rose says. It always bothered her stomach until “a colored lady down the street showed me how to squish the grease out of ’em.”

The volume on the television has been turned down. Guiding Light is on now. A bottle of Pepsi Bismal sits in front of the black-and-white TV set.

Bertha Rose points to the TV. “Some on there I like and some I don’t. The ones I don’t like I watch even though I don’t want to.”

They aren’t paying much attention to Guiding Light. But an advertisement for Minute Rice draws their attention.

“We bought some of that and she cooked it,” Chester says proudly.

Bertha Rose, unable to read package directions, figured out how to cook it from watching the advertisement.

“If they spoke their words more clearly you could learn how to cook things on the TV. They don’t talk clear enough.”

They have three TVs.

Chester says the family gets $27 a month in food stamps.

“Them stamps are mighty good help,” says Bertha Rose.

Chester pipes in. “I’m gonna tell you something and you can tell anybody you want. That’s the crookedest program in the world. I see people in Cadillacs who get them, but if you need it, they don’t give you enough to help you.”

“Shoot,” says Bertha Rose. “You can get $13 worth of groceries nowadays and you pack it all up in one paper sack.”

“We eat more knick-knacks than anything else,” says Chester. “Donuts and cakes and things like that.”

“There are five empty cans of Pringle’s potato chips in the living room.

Chester, who says he held “just about every job there is except coal mining and railroading,” runs most of the errands. Bertha Rose doesn’t leave the house much. “I ain’t got but one kidney and the doctor says I’m too old to be operated on. I take them Doan’s pills. I get out on the porch once in a while.”

“Hey, lazy,” says Bertha Rose. “He scared of rats, but roaches, he makes them fly.

“One time I was out there and he came runnin’ out of the kitchen and hid. Rat came runnin’ out after him.”

“They’re hateful things, those rats. They’ll get into bed with you and bite you.

That’s why I always have a cat in here. I put some D-Cons out for ’em, that’ll take care of ’em. And I try and keep the tops on the trash cans in the kitchen.”

The kitchen consists of a sink, table, wood cook stove and refrigerator. It slants to the right when you walk in and the far wall tilts at about a 110-degree angle instead of 90. Kind of makes you dizzy to look at.

The door on the wall, which leads to two more unheated rooms, has a strip on it to pull it open. Because of the slant, it slams shut by itself.

Back in the living room/bedroom Chester says, “I’m gonna live as long as the rich man lives. If the rich man eats, I’m gonna eat.

“That’s the only way I’d hurt anybody.”

“Get me real hungry and I’ll get mad enough. I’d go in with my gun and say, ‘Stand back boys; and let a man pass!’

Chester’s glasses, rubs his bald head and stubble of beard and launches a stream of tobacco juice toward one of the pails. Half goes in and half goes down the side.

“I’ve lived this long without starving,” he says. “I guess I won’t.”
Nine of every ten houses in poor condition, firm says

They have two young children. She takes care of them. He earns $20 a week. They live in an apartment in Irkstown.

The only heat comes from the stove on the kitchen floor.

The apartment is furnished sparsely, by the landlord — two tattered couches, a mattress, a refrigerator, a couple of tables.

There’s a half-inch gap between the bottom of the knobless front door and the ground.

Dozens of roaches roam the concrete floors and half-painted, two-tone walls.

To flush the toilet, you reach down through the water in the tank behind it and lift a stick.

It costs $25 a week — almost half of his income — which, over a year, translates to $238 a month.

The couple asked that their names not be used because they’re afraid they’ll be evicted.

Their fear is not uncommon. Neither is their situation.

According to a soon-to-be-released consultant’s study, 51.1 percent of the housing in Davistown and 96.3 percent in Irkstown have major deficiencies or are dilapidated.

There is one house the consultants considered “severe” in Irkstown, none in Davistown.

The consultants came up with those figures after looking at the exterior of the approximately 200 houses in the valley.

Had they gone inside, they could have seen worse.

On-again-off-again plumbing, cracking plaster walls, bare concrete floors, scores of roaches, missing bathtubs, sinks and heaters, inadequate electrical systems — most are just a few of the more common sights.

Most of the “shotgun” houses — so named because you could fire a gun through the front door and the bullet would go through every room and out the back — are the same ones built there in the 1800s.

They are long and narrow and packed tightly together. The average house is about 10 feet wide and 50 feet long, with one or two bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen.

The bathrooms are afterthoughts, attached to the rear of the homes over the years. Everyone has indoor plumbing, but everyone’s doesn’t work.

The houses have wooden foundations, or no foundations at all. The little remodeling that has been done has left an odd assortment of colors, building materials and construction techniques. Some landlords mix whatever paint they have left, which accounts for an occasional pink or aqua house.

Most are not properly insulated, and are equipped with ill-fitting windows and doors.

Many landlords are slow to make needed repairs. And often, even the repairs are inadequate.

Yet a vacant house or apartment in the valley — even for $55 or $65 a week — is almost impossible to find.

It’s puzzling — as the consultants studying the area noted in their report, a rough draft of which was obtained by The Leader.

“This situation is particularly disturbing in light of the fact that much of this high-priced housing is either dilapidated or has major deficiencies, while sound housing is available at the same cost elsewhere in Fayette County.”

G. manganese McDowell has lived at 936 Valley St. for three years. She pays $65 a week in rent.

The front door won’t close, so her family — she and six kids — lean a pick-ax against it. The floor slopes and wallpaper is peeling from the walls.

“I can’t get anything else. Nobody will accept me with all these kids,” she says.

“The one thing I like about here is the big yard. I could never get used to being closed up in an apartment.

“And, in a way, I kind of like it here. I’ve lived here all my life.”

Most of the valley’s residents have been here a long time — an average of 23 years, according to a consultant’s study.

The average family has been in its current home for more than seven years.

Most of the houses — 83 percent — are rented. Many of them are overcrowded — more than one person to a room — 42.4 percent in Irkstown and 25 percent in Davistown.

The rent levels vary widely — but the average in Irkstown is $135 a month, in Davistown, it’s $80.

Monthly rent is frequently paid with a Social Security check. And almost always it is more than a quarter of a resident’s income — the maximum recommended amount to budget for rent.

Federal rent supplements, one way of easing the burden on low-income tenants, have been spurned by landlords.

No tenants receive Section 8 subsidies offered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Under the program landlords would not be allowed to rent houses that don’t meet housing codes, nor would they be able to charge unfair rents.

A home winterization program sponsored by Community Aid of Lexington Fayette County also has met with little support from landlords.

The Rev. Larry Johnson, pastor of the Nathaniel Mission in Davistown, is one of several people who have tried to persuade area landlords to take part in the program.

Even though it’s free, most landlords refuse.

“The landlord has to sign an agreement that he won’t raise the rent for one year. They don’t want to give up that power — even though it’s putting $1,000 worth of material into a house that costs $4,000,” Johnson said.

“Some people live in wind tunnels,”

“To these people — the landlords — owning a house is power. They don’t want to give up any of that. And any kind of subsidized improvements would probably mean more inspections, and they don’t want that.”

“If housing codes were enforced in Irkstown and Davistown, there wouldn’t be an Irkstown and Davistown,” said Johnson.

While housing inspectors may argue with that assessment, they can’t deny a history of laxity in the enforcing of housing codes in Irkstown and Davistown.

And they readily admit that, Please see HOUSES Next page
The houses are crumbling, only one considered ‘sound’

(Continued from Page 4) under the local code, they could close down some houses people now occupy in the valley.

While some residents say housing inspectors are too easy on the landlords, some landlords say they are too strict.

“We get it from both sides,” says Terry Aubrey with the Division of Housing Services. “We look bad either way we go.”

A widespread condemnation of the housing code has the valley would leave hundreds of people with no place to go and no way to get there.

That, coupled with the uncertainty surrounding a possible Newton Pike extension through the neighborhood, leaves housing inspectors in a difficult situation.

And the not-so-happy medium is to try and secure safe — if not decent — housing.

“We have to realize that it’s not good economics to spend $10,000-$15,000 rehabilitating when we know the state’s gonna buy it up and demolish it. By the same token we have to keep them safe.”

Some landlords don’t have the manpower to make all the repairs they need to; others simply refuse, according to the consultant’s report.

“As a result, housing inspectors are either forced to compromise with the property owners on improvements to be made or to take the landlord to court, an expensive, time-consuming and often fruitless effort.”

Things could be worse, Aubrey says. Up until last year they were worse; taking a landowner to court for housing code violations was difficult, and winning in court was even harder.

In April, 1979, though, a new housing code was adopted by the Urban County Council. One that gives inspectors a little more power, makes landlords easier to prosecute, and orders repairs to be made more quickly.

Still, Aubrey says, the inspectors try to find a comfortable ground between landlord and tenant.

“Rental property is a business and they’re just like any other business. They’re trying to keep overhead down.”

“You have to be sensitive. You can’t go in there like gangbusters, you gotta be flexible.”

Landlords are usually given 30 days to make ordered repairs. They are frequently granted extensions. Housing inspectors can also order immediate repairs (7 to 15 days) and emergency repairs to be done on the moment.

A landlord’s failure to comply can result in a fine of up to $250 and/or a jail term of up to 90 days.

Aubrey says court cases evolve out of about 9 percent of the orders issued by his division.

Fines result in about half of those cases, but are frequently probated on the condition that the repairs are made.

“We have our spats,” landlord Carl Gentry says of housing inspectors. “But I tell them, you want low income housing, if you push me, I have to hire more help. If I hire more help, the rent has to go up.”

“They have to understand my

side, too,” said Gentry, a retired firefighter who owns 10 homes in the valley.

Both Gentry and Alberta McMahan, the biggest landowner in Davistown, charge cheaper rents, from $75 to $135 a month, than Elam.

All three, like most low income landlords make their own repairs, sometimes with help from family or part-time laborers.

“Anything I find is wrong, I get right on it,” said Ms. McMahan. “These hands have worked all my life. There wasn’t a roof I wouldn’t get on.”

Inattention by landlords has been blamed for much of the valley’s decay — but, as the landlords point out, some tenants don’t do much to improve the area either.

“Like this house on Willard,” said Chris Downey, an employee of Elam’s. “We’ve been told to put a new screen on the back door. I’ve done that twice since August.”

“We do everything they (housing inspectors) put on the list, then they come back and add more to it,” said Elam. “You can’t win.”

Richard Flewelling, one of three counselors at Tenant Services, a non-profit organization that provides information and counseling to tenants and landlords sees four types of abuses in the area.

— Tenants who pay utility costs directly to a landlord without getting utility company receipts.

— Needed repairs not being made.

— Unreasonably high rents.

— Tenants handing over their Social Security checks — sometimes their only income — to the landlord who handles their finances.

The biggest problem down there is fear. Their first concern is a roof over their head. Complaining means risk, and a lot of people don’t want to take the risks.

“And any landlord can do anything he wants as long as the tenant lets him.”
The slumlord says he cares for the poor

McKinley Elam, slumlord, McKinley Elam, good samaritan.

Talk to a cross-section of his tenants and two characteristics emerge of the 85-year-old man who owns about one-fourth of the housing in the city.

Some depict him as the archetype of the villainous landlord, charging outrageous rents for substandard houses, neglecting the needs of his tenants and profiting from those who can least afford it.

Others say he is a decent man who tries to house the poor, but whose houses are ravaged by careless tenants — a man who will give you credit, rent to families with kids and take an old lady to the store for groceries.

Both descriptions contain shades of truth. But the real McKinley Elam probably is a little bit of both — a shrewd businessman with some genuine concern for the poor, a man who has made more money than he cares to admit and has more work than he can handle.

Elam, who walks with a waddle and knocks on tenants' doors with the crook of his cane, still collects rent and works on homes himself. His son, Robert, is in the business with him.

Elam claims he makes little money off his housing — that, more than anything else, is a labor of love.

"I think I'm helping a lot of people," he said. "I was raised in the mountains and I come up the hard way and I know what it is to be in need of stuff," he says.


Despite the contradictions, these facts on Elam's operation are clear.

— He is the most frequently complained-about landlord in the city and one of the most complained-about in Lexington.

— His rent prices are by far the highest charged in the city, as much as $65 a week, which is the equivalent to $280 a month over a year's time.

— Most of his houses are substandard.

— He has been slow to make necessary repairs.

The landlord interviewed about 20 current and past tenants of Elam's. Most asked that their names not be used — for fear of being evicted, or turned down if they ever have to rent from him again.

More than a foot of documents on Elam's housing code violations, on file in the Division of Housing Services, were examined, as well as his financial transactions in the area, which date back to the 1940s.

Elam has sold much of his property to some and neighbors — some of which has been sold back to him. They own more than 20 homes in the city. And no matter which Elam a family is renting from, they consider "Old Man Elam" their landlord.

Elam said he never planned to get into the rental business when he first bought land in the city — a dairy on Pine Street, then called Irish Street, in 1946.

But get into it he did.

A trace of deeds and mortgages in Elam's name showed his first residential purchase in the area was in 1953 — 244 Willard St. from Luther and Bertha Johnson for $1, and other considerations.

He bought more property — all in the city — sporadically over the next 20 years.

In the 1960s, his purchases increased — five lots in 1965, five more in 1966. By 1970, it was too soon. He had become the biggest landlord in the city.

Most of his deals were with families who owned a single home. Many times he bought from widows and from the estates of deceased residents.

Rarely did he pay more than $6,000 for a home in the city. On average, he paid about $4,000.

The documents showed the development of a virtual slum empire — a pattern of buying rundown houses, collecting high rents and, by investing little back into the area, letting them fall into disrepair.

"He buys them for nothing and puts nothing into them," said Doug Farmer, who also owns a rental house on Willard Street in the city.

"These are substandard houses because of guys like Elam. He could fix them up if he wanted to. He just comes by on the first of the month after the welfare checks come in. He treats these people like —

Almost everybody in the city — and some people from outside the city — has a McKinley Elam story. Some are based in fact; others have grown distorted over the years.

When one social worker went to Elam to complain about an elderly woman living with no heat, he replied, "Tell her to wear more clothes," according to the social worker.

In 1976, Elam bought a home for $4,000 from a widow who needed money to pay bills. The next day, he raised the rent and turned her out. She's been paying $140 a month ever since.

She doesn't think Elam took advantage of her. "He's a good man," she says.

Several residents say they've seen Elam tear down condemned signs posted on his property.

"That's a lie," Elam says. "There's one woman down there who I am the root of all this evil. She is also accused of burning trash. But it's not so.

"Things like that irate me. Somebody did take down a sign at 244 Willard, but we didn't do that — not me or any of my workers.

While several tenants speak highly of McKinley Elam, the man, almost all have complaints about McKinley Elam, the landlord.

"In the room where we slept, the windows were out and the snow would come in," said a 9-year-old girl whose family used to rent from Elam.

"When it rained it was like you was outside," said her mother.

Elam, meanwhile, says his rent prices are necessary to offset high overhead — namely, utility bills. He paid $8,000 in gas bills alone last month, an employee said.

Elam said tenants have caused the dilapidated conditions of many homes. "I've got some bad tenants and some bad ten- rentals," he said.

"I guess it's my fault for renting to 'em, but they got no place else to go."

"I'm not an angel," Elam said. "I just live and let live."

Time and neglect took their toll on the house at 107 Valley St.

Maggie Johnson, whose last home was demolished, has settled into her new place.

Her dog, Princess, is curled up next to the gas space heater. Her framed 8x10 picture of John F. Kennedy is on the mantle.

Maggie moved into the house on DeRood Street about two months ago.

The $85-a-month house in Daviess County isn't much, Maggie says, "but it's a damn sight better than the one she used to pay $162 a month for in the city."

Her old house, at 107 Valley St., was torn down after she moved out. Residents say the owner tied a rope around it and pulled it down with a truck.

Maggie says she's not surprised.

"I told the landlord, it needs to be torn down, because I seen you ain't gonna fix it. That house was in every kind of shape."

It had gas leaks, water leaks. One day the landlord came and took my hot water heater. He didn't say why."

Maggie got by without it. She burned wood in a grate to heat kettles of water for dishwashing and baths.

A check of records in the Division of Housing Services shows the house had a long history of problems, many of which were neglected by its owners, the Elam family. The first complaint on record came in 1976 from the Irvinis Neighborhood Association.

A subsequent inspection found more than a dozen violations, according to records in the Division of Housing Services. The landlord, then McKinley Elam, was ordered to make repairs.

Two years later, after the house was sold to David Elam, another inspection was made. Even more problems were found, some of them the same ones that were ordered to be fixed two years before.

They included: inadequate electrical outlets, inadequate electrical outlets, poor bathroom flooring, poor kitchen flooring, peeling ceilings and cracks in the walls, inadequate plumbing, bad roof covering, dangerously weak front porch supports and railings, inadequate screening, broken windows and heat.

Maggie had to nail boards across the windows to keep the cold out.

In February of 1980, inspectors found the house still without heat. They also found an unsafe fireplace, holes and cracks in the walls and floors, bad plumbing, bad windows and screens, a rotten porch, unstable stairs and inadequate roof.

More repairs were ordered. But inspections in June and August of 1980 showed few were made. There was still no heat.

As of August 23, housing services determined the house needed to be demolished. The cost of repairing, estimated at $25,000, exceeded its value, estimated at $10,000.

"So I moved over here," said Maggie.

"I put a stop to all those done. I had to do something. I stayed there that house would have come down on me."
The young, the old

Sally Hanley, 5, who lives on Willard Street in Irishtown, and Martha B. Huddleston, 89, a Davistown resident, reflect two sides of the valley — the very old and the very young.

Mrs. Huddleston’s husband died at age 109. She lives with her son, Bud. Her daughter lives two houses away from her. A grand-daughter and great grand-daughter live right next door. She moved to Lexington from Somerset as a young woman.

Good neighbors

Charlie Wilson, who’s lived in Davistown more than 40 years takes it easy on his front porch at 536 De-Roode St. with neighbor Stewart Boling of 507 De Roode St.

Above, four Irishtown children walk home after a day at school. In the background is the High Street viaduct, which splits Irishtown and Davistown.
Who gets the blame for the trash pile-up?

Several months ago — about the time an old woman disappeared from an inner-city nursing home — the people in Irshawn began to notice a smell. It lasted for several days.

"The people in the area smelled this odor. We didn't know what it was. Come to find out it was this old woman. Mercy, it even smelled after they took her body away," said Mildred McCullough, president of the Irshawn-Davistown Neighborhood Association.

The woman's body was found in a vacant lot behind Willard Street, in the weeds that grow waist-high around Irshawn, amid refuse that is strewn in vacant lots and fields alongside the railroad tracks. Almost any day stacks of old furniture, mattresses and appliances can be seen on the sides of the streets in Irshawn and Davistown.

It's partly because of the rapid turnover in tenants, partly because the city is slow to answer calls in the valley, residents and landlords say. "The government doesn't take care of its responsibilities — street sweeping, garbage and trash collection, broken sidewalks," says Joe Jasper, 2nd District Urban County Councilman who represents the area.

A report prepared for the Urban County Government agrees that the weeds are a significant problem. "The large amount of vacant land scattered throughout the area seems to have become an open invitation for the accumulation of trash and rubbish ranging from discarded household items to piles of scrap building materials to abandoned automobiles."

In a survey done by the consulting firm, weeds and trash were among the top complaints of residents. There are some lots that seem to draw junk," says Gordon Garner, urban county commissioner of sanitation and public works. "But most of it seems to generate from within the neighborhood."

Numerous junkyards also contribute to the neighborhood's trashy appearance. In Davistown, where junked autos form a mountain behind the row of houses on De Roode Street, much of the neighborhood, the Harry Gordon Scrap Metal Co., is the target of frequent complaints. "Anybody down here can tell you there are rats up there," said the Rev. Larry Johnson, pastor of the Nathaniel Mission located directly below the scrapyard.

He said cars are sometimes stacked 15-20 high. "A good healthy wind could blow them over. When they're stacking cars, parts have rolled down the hill. A fire could cause it to go down and through the churchyard."

He added, "Why should this community have to put up with this? No other community would allow a scrapyard in their back yard."

Some just learn to live with rats, mice, roaches

They are creatures of the night, roaming your home, living off what you left behind. Big and small, rats can be found in abundance in Irshawn and Davistown. They can also be found in the richest Lexington suburb, in the valley, they are part of life.

You can put out your D-Con and spray your Raid, but chances are you have to learn to live with them — a not-so-pleasant co-existence — because the money to get rid of them, once and for all, isn't there.

"I can see some looking through the holes in the wall at night," one Irshawn resident said of the repeat offenders. A federally funded rodent control program, in operation in Irshawn and Davistown for about a year, is making a dent in the rat population.

But roaches can be seen by the dozen in many homes in the valley — and it's not necessarily because the homes are dirty. "It's possible for anyone to get roaches," says Bob Jessee, section administrator for the local health department.

They can transmit several digestive diseases if they come in contact with food, including gas troitis, dysentery and diarrhea. Some landlords have refused to spray for roaches — and most residents consider it a luxury they can't afford.

In addition, with many of the houses located so closely together, they fear even if they do exterminate, it will only be temporary.

Neither rat bites nor diseases transmitted by rats have been reported in Lexington recently, said George White, supervisor for the health department's rodent control program.

Both Irshawn and Davistown have a high percentage of rat infestation, says White, but there has been a marked decrease in the population since the program started.

Garbage attracts the rats, but the rats themselves, overgrown with weeds and scattered with debris, and numerous auto scrap yards provide convenient shelters, White said.

The fires keep burning despite death of infant

During the winter, there are open flames in just about every house in Irshawn and Davistown. They are there to provide cheap heat, but once in a while — about four or five times a year — they do more than that.

Some of them turn into full-fledged fires, able to eat up a wooden shotgun house in a matter of minutes. And some of the fires kill people.

There's no more house at 228 Willard, just mounds of weeds and dirt — what the bulldozer left after shoving away the charred remains of Dorothy Horine's home.

Dorothy Horine remembers the day — Feb. 19, 1979. Some of her friends say she's never been the same since. There was no school that day because of snow. Five of her children were next door at her mother's house. Her 18-month-old son, Timothy, was in his playpen. Dorothy was sleeping.

The smoke woke her up. It was thick and black. She screamed for her son and ran to the living room. Smoke and flames forced her back. She ran out the side door and screamed for help.

Neighbors, relatives and friends tried to break down the back door and knock out windows. The fire was too fierce, though. When firefighters arrived, one was able to pull the baby from the burning house.

Timothy was taken to University Hospital but died the next day.

Dorothy, 29, rents another house now — two doors down from the old one, which was owned by McKinley Elam and rented to her for $200 a month.

Fire investigators ruled that a space heater started the fire, igniting a pile of clothes nearby. Timothy wasn't the first baby killed in a fire in Irshawn. It happened at least once before — about 10 years ago, when Mary and Lawrence Day lost their youngest son in a fire.

And it may happen again. Because the houses are old, the electrical systems are often deteriorating. Many can't meet the demands of modern appliances. And open flame heaters are used in almost every house in the two neighborhoods.

Fire Marshal Tom Parker says Irshawn doesn't face too much more of a fire risk than any other neighborhood in Lexington. He estimated that over the last 20 years the average Irshawn street has had one or two fires a year, while the average Lexington street has one about every two years.

In addition to the health hazards — unvented space heater poses, most gas space heaters put out an unguarded flame. Dogs and cats like to curl up next to them. Babies crawl around them. Clothes and other items are often laid dangerously close.

Often — when a family doesn't have a gas space heater, or if it doesn't put out enough heat by itself — kitchen stoves, ovens and burners, will be left on to provide heat. They, like any open flame, also pose a hazard.

Poor housekeeping and maintenance — on the part of some tenants and landlords — also contribute to the higher fire risk in the valley.
Medical care made available but some still go untreated

The people in the pews at Nathaniel Mission this Wednesday aren't here to pray. The woman over there to the right — the one whose left shoe is split down the seam to hold a foot twice the size it should be — is having her blood pressure taken. Chances are it's high.

The baby in the front pew — the one whose worried mother is picking the plastic milk bottle off the tile floor — has spots on his skin. Chances are it's only diaper rash.

The old woman walking in through the church doors — the one who looks like she's carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders — says she's just plain tired. Chances are she's anemic.

Wednesday is the day the doctor comes to Davistown. He leaves his profitable practice in the suburbs — where he deals with things like ulcers, colds and high blood pressure — and comes to the valley, where he faces things like anemia, colds and high blood pressure.

The health problems of the poor, with a few exceptions, aren't all that different from anybody else's.

But because their diets are poor, frequently heat their homes and live in low light in iron, because of their often poor hygiene and lack of medical education, and because they live with gas heaters that put out too many fumes and not enough heat, the poor are often more susceptible to illness.

You're more likely to get sick and less likely to get well in the valley.

"Everything is more prevalent here," says Jane Englebright, a registered nurse who does volunteer work at the mission as part of her training at the University of Kentucky.

"It's because there's higher stress. There's higher blood pressure. Statistically they are more at risk for almost every disease."

"The biggest problem is a lack of consistent medical care," says the Rev. Larry Johnson of the Nathaniel Mission, who helped organize the once-a-week free clinic.

"There are no regular checkups. There are a lot of infections. There are women who haven't heard of a pap smear."

Poor hygiene, scabies, infections, hypervitaminosis and anemia," says David Winkle, the doctor who proposed the program and devotes about one day a week to it.

Those, he says, are some of the problems of the poor. Most, he adds, are signs of people not taking care of themselves — often because they don't know how or can't afford to.

Diet, for example, are often lacking in nutrition, specifically iron. And that can lead to anemia, a low count of red blood cells that causes paleness and a lack of energy.

They eat foods that are starchy and filling, canned foods and junk foods.

"It's hard to go in a home that has nothing but beans and rice and cheese and say you should have beef three times a week," said one nurse. "You've got to try and work around with what they can afford."

The way homes in the valley are heated is also a health hazard — in more ways than one.

Almost every family in Irishtown and Davistown heat its home with gas space heaters, gas kitchen stoves, or both. In addition to the fire hazards they create, the gas heaters also put out carbon monoxide. Very few are ventilated.

"These burn up air more rapidly than a controlled furnace," says Lexington Fire Marshal Tom Parker. "They reduce the level of oxygen and produce carbon monoxide — and if there's no venting it has nowhere to go but into the room. You need so many hours in fresh air to take care of the carbon monoxide. If not, it can eventually kill you."

And because the space heaters do not provide uniform heat throughout the home — it could be 85 degrees next to the stove and 55 in the bedroom — the dangers of respiratory illness are increased, said Winkle.

Babies and small children have also been severely burned — even set on fire — from getting too close to a space heater, hospital and health department officials say.

The Nathaniel Mission clinic for residents of both Irishtown and Davistown opened about the time a similar clinic at the Manchester Center closed. Three doctors take turns staffing the clinic and three nurses are also on duty, one of whom makes home visits.

About 25 patients come in a week, about half of them children.

Before the clinic opened, residents took their medical problems to the University Hospital's emergency room or to the local health department, both about a mile's walk from the neighborhoods.

"A lot of them didn't go at all before this was here," Johnson said. "And some still don't."

"It's fear," he said. "They don't want to know if something's wrong with them. They're especially afraid of going to the hospital. That's a sign that it's the end."

"I know one guy with skin cancer who will not come," he added.

With help from nurses making home visits, though, he said, "We've found several cases of advanced cancer which otherwise wouldn't have been detected."

The most frequently seen medical problem in the valley — like anywhere else — is high blood pressure.

"Their stress is different," Dr. Winkle said. "They're worried about the basic necessities."

"I just spent 30 minutes with a woman in tears," Ms. Englebright said. "She had some sort of bill for $10 that she couldn't pay. She kicked her husband out of the house and bought Thanksgiving dinner. It's the stress of not knowing where your next meal is coming from."

The elderly

Elderly still have to pinch pennies to make ends meet in the valley

Pattie Lunsford, 71, in white stockings, high heels, a white shirt and a white hat, is walking down the middle of De Roode Street with her cane-carrying friend Della Martin.

"We're going to have a little party tonight at my house," she says.

It's the usual Friday routine for Pattie, who is white, and Della, who is black — a free lunch at the Carver Community Center, TV in the afternoon, then crafts class at the Manchester Center.

The women are part of an unusually large percentage of elderly people who live in the valley, especially Davistown, where 17 percent of the population is over 60.

Both women were born, raised and plan to die in Davistown.

"It's hard to get around," Pattie says.

Pattie's $85-a-month house is crawling with roaches. Her two dogs, Snowball, who is black, and Queenie, who is white.

Neither woman has much money, and food often runs out in the Lunsford's home. "Sometimes we just eat whatever we can get a hold of," Pattie says.

"It could be worse," Pattie says.

Irishtown, a Wednesday afternoon:

"It's the insurance man," Opal Burton yells to her mother-in-law.

Aline Burton pushes her 78-year-old body up in the bed and sticks her hand down the front of her dress.

She pulls out a small gingham sack tied at the top with string. She opens it, removes a wad of folding money and hands it to Opal.

"You owe for five weeks," the insurance man says. "Seventy-three dollars and 40 cents." Opal counts the money, tells Aline she has $41.

"Well, pay the man," Aline says impatiently.

The insurance man counts out the change and leaves.

"He's crookeder than a dog's hind leg," Opal mutters after he shuts the knobless front door.

The insurance man probably wasn't crooked. But chances are the Burtons are paying for more insurance than they need, especially when they consider their limited income.

They get $40 a month in social security, $12 a month in food stamps.

They own their home. But after various payments — electricity and coal — they heat their home with — there's not much left at the end of the month.

"It's amazing," says Robert Conley with the state Department of Insurance. "But poor people like that will spend their last nickel and dime on insurance."

Mrs. Burton has been making weekly insurance payments for the past 13 years. The payments have varied from $14 to about $22.

She doesn't know how much the policy is for. Asked where the benefits from the policy would go, Mrs. Burton said, "They'd pay for her and her husband's burial."

"If we die we'd have to get put away," she said.

Aline says her doctors aren't sure what's wrong with her. All she knows is the energy she has used up — like when she flung enough pots and pans at her moonshining first husband to chase him away for good — is gone.

Like many other elderly or disabled residents of the valley, she spends most of her time in bed, just watching the days go by.
Loving it ... 'I'm not ashamed of where I live'

"The only time they're going to make me move is if they bulldoze me out," says Mildred McCullough, "is to build a new house. But I don't want to move."

If that confrontation ever occurs — building vs. Mildred — a lot of people around her will put their money on Mildred. "She's a fighter," says Urban County Councilman Joe Jasper, who, like other politicians representing the area, is well acquainted with the feisty president of the Irvingtown-Davistown Neighborhood Association.

A resident of Irvingtown since she was 7, Mildred has been president of the neighborhood association for about 13 years. "I'm trying to have a new one on the block. . . . I guess they elect me because they know I'll raise a whole lot of Cain."

She talks at length about the problems facing her neighborhood — problems she attributes mostly to absentee landlords, but also to poor maintenance and a lack of community involvement.

"Mildred is a person most people don't want to tangle with. One man, she says, even offered her $500 if she promised not to fight him in a neighborhood zoning case. She fought.

Mildred, 55, became involved politically about 15 years ago, prompted by "the going down of the neighborhood."

"Twenty years ago you'd see people shoveling snow, spreading salt, sweeping their walks. You'd see old people mopping their porches. You could see 'em with their paint buckets in the spring of the year, painting their houses, washing their windows."

"You don't see that any more. "But I don't blame them if — not if they're paying $200 a month rent."

"I've got memories about it. I raised my five children here. My main concern is for the old people, the people who have lived here years and years."

"When Harold (her husband, a retired painter) was working, I could have moved out — he made good money — but I didn't want to." It's home — and she wants to see it stay that way.

"She's a staunch opponent of the Newtown Pike extension. "As long as I'm here, I'll fight it."

And despite only a ninth-grade education, Mildred has become versed enough in politics to carry considerable clout for a poor person.

"Everything nowadays is politics," she says. "If you don't know nobody at city hall or Frankfort, you're hurting."

Mildred can get out the vote — and the politicians know it. As a worker in the West Main precinct, with 500 registered voters, she says she has always carried it for Jasper, state Rep. William G. Kenton and Sen. Michael Moloney.

Despite her name and temperament, Mildred has no Irish blood — few in Irvingtown do nowadays. Her ancestry is part German, part Cherokee Indian.

"Her parents were strict on her when she was a child. "When dark time came we had to be in the house. We had our chores to do and we did them."

When she was 14 she lied about her age and got a job canning green beans and tomatoes for 75 cents an hour at the federal "narcotic farm," where her mother also worked.

She recently resigned from her job at Manchester Center and is now director of Pyramid Park in Irvingtown.

While she loves her neighborhood, she doesn't like what she sees happening to it.

"It is the city had put a little pressure on some of these landlords. A long, long time ago, this place wouldn't look like it looks now."

"There sits the civic center down there. And Lexington is supposed to be a pretty city. But when they go over the viaduct and look down and see this . . . "if everybody did their fair share, it could be a better community.

Meanwhile, she says, living in Irvingtown is nothing to be ashamed of. "I've always told my kids that they're as good as anybody. Don't never lose your pride."

Leaving it ... 'This bottom is no place to raise a kid'

Sissy Wallace wants out.

She wants to pack up her furniture, her stereo and her two children and leave the place her daughter, herself and her mother were born — Davis Bottoms, now known as Davistown.

"This bottom is no place to raise a kid," she says.

Sissy, 25, saw it when she was growing up — the pot smoking, the paint stealing, the fighting.

She tried to make it better for her kids, 6-year-old Lisa and 8-year-old Jesse, whose nickname is Buster.

"Every penny I get to keep, I just bought other clothes for clothes — division because I remember many a day I went to school with rags on. It really hurt me."

Things weren't easy. The family moved around a lot. She separated from her husband.

They were about to get together again when he was shot in the back and killed in the Kentucky bar where he worked as a bartender.

She married again. Her second husband was arrested on a theft charge and put in an Indiana prison.

Then Buster got into trouble.

That's when Sissy made up her mind — once and for all — that September day in juvenile court when she faced having her son taken away from her.

With his face scrubbed clean and his hair slicked back, Buster's pale-faced face looked as though the Beaver's as he sat quietly on the wooden courtroom bench and waited for the judge to call his name.

He was charged with burglary, third degree, and his brown shoes didn't quite reach the floor.

"Jesse Parks," the voice came from a man sitting high above in a black robe. "You're 8 years old, is that right Jesse?"

Jesse didn't answer.

"Is that right, son?" he mumbled.

"You're challenged with breaking and entering the Cross Keys YWCA. You're starting awful young, boy. Awful young."

He sat a trial date, and decided to let Buster return home with his mother.

"If you run away again, if you even miss school again, I'm going to put you down here in this building. "The judge pointed behind him. "That's where the jail is. Jesse nodded.

Buster had run away with two neighborhood boys. They were gone for two days, finally found by police when they set off a burglar alarm while entering the Cross Keys YWCA to get warm.

"Everybody down here gets in trouble by the time they're 10 years old," her mother says. "I don't know why."

After the incident with Buster, Sissy spent days trying to find an affordable apartment away from the valley. She couldn't.

She also sat down with Buster for a talk.

"What are you unhappy about?" she asked.

Buster cried.

"Don't cry. You're a big boy and we can sit here and talk."

Buster wiped his nose. He said he hated his home, his neighborhood, his school.

"Well, do you want to live with me? "I love you. I want to live with you."

He hasn't got into trouble since, but Sissy isn't taking any chances.

In April, she's leaving the valley — taking her son and daughter back to Eastern Kentucky, where her parents' parents came from.
Consultants planning for a brighter future

What needs to be done is to take a damn bulldozer and level it.
— A former landowner
The horizon is unlimited.
— Mayor Jim Amato

The real future of the valley probably falls somewhere between those extremes — it won’t be leveled, but there are limits to its renewal.

By summer of next year, residents should have an idea of what will be happening — ending the 30 years of uncertainty that has shaped the valley into Lexington’s most neglected slum.

By March or April, Woolpert Consultants of Dayton, Ohio, should have completed a set of alternatives for the redevelopment of Irthtown, Davistown and two adjacent neighborhoods, Woodward Heights and South Hill.

They will begin meeting with residents and city officials, presenting their plans and hoping one of their alternatives receives widespread support.

“I predict some real knockdown, drag-outs,” said Ed Houlihan, commissioner of parks, housing and community development.

If all goes smoothly, a plan could be adopted by summer, he added.

Methods of financing the improvements, which will also be suggested by the consultants, will then be sought.

And probably some time in 1982, the valley’s redevelopment will move out of the pencil-and-paper stage and into the hammer-and-nail stage.

Probably the most significant decision the consultants will make is zoning — which areas will be residential, which will be industrial.

How the land is zoned will play a big role in how much it’s worth, industrially, the land will be expensive. Residually, it won’t be worth much — at least not initially.

“There are a bunch of people down there who have bought this land up and think they are going to get rich if it’s zoned industrial,” said Houlihan.

Most of Irthtown received residential zoning in 1970, after the neighborhood association presented petitions to the planning commission. Most of Davistown is still zoned industrial.

One city planner says he expects to see Irthtown maintain its residential character. In Davistown, though, there are fewer people living farther apart and where the Newtown Pike extension is planned, industrialization is more likely.

Residents of the valley have told consultants they are opposed to public housing projects and apartment complexes.

A mix of housing is more likely — duplexes, townhouses, single family homes. A small neighborhood shopping center has also been mentioned.

“Now we’re trying to determine a direction,” said Commissioner Joe Jasper.

The consultants have spent most of their time so far identifying problems, they’ve also seen some opportunities.

The amount of vacant land in the valley, for example, is considered a plus because it allows room for redevelopment.

A solid neighborhood association and a strong neighborhood identity is also conducive, the consultants say, to neighborhood development.

Consultants, city officials and residents agree that something needs to be done. One of the consultants called the area the most blighted slum he has seen in the southeast, Mayor James Amato said.

“We went such a long time without any attention to that area,” said Amato.

“We have been studied done before, but never plans. Now we are going to do something with them.”

Lexington Mayor Jim Amato

Commissioner Ed Houlihan

Newtown Pike extension still on drawing boards

They call it “Scheme I.”

It’s the state-accepted route of the Newtow Pike extension — the way they’ll build it, if and when they build it.

Proposed 30 years ago as a bypass around downtown Lexington, the plan is alive and well and living in Frankfort.

“The road is still on our transportation improvement program list and it’s on a list of some kind in Frankfort. But there’s nothing moving in either direction,” said Mayor James Amato.

“It’s still on hold,” said Jim Clark, spokesman for the state department of transportation. Clark said the Newtown Pike extension is one of thousands of state projects Secretary of Transportation Frank Metts is reviewing.

Clark said the extension may or may not be included in the transportation plan Metts is expected to announce next week.

Most observers feel that because of the economy the road is at least 10 years away — even if it is taken off the back burner where former Gov. Julian Carroll placed it.

“I think it always should be at least someday available to the community,” said Amato, one of the road’s strongest backers.

For planning purposes, the consultants are drawing the extension on their maps.

“Anybody working with it would be foolish not to consider the future impact of the road,” Amato said.

They were not asked to make a recommendation on the Newtown Pike Extension, Amato said.

Homes would be displaced by the road — mostly in Davistown, according to Scheme I of the extension.

The extension itself wouldn’t take more than 10 homes, most of them along Combs St. But a companion project — expanding Lexington Pike — would take away any longer.

De Roege Street so it would also connect to Broadway would take several more.

And one other planned transportation project could also have an impact on the area — the South Broadway railroad crossing.

The crossing, now the site of frequent traffic snarls when trains come through, would be changed to an overpass or underpass. The specific plan has not been announced.

However, Amato said, “The design I recommend will have a most minimal effect, if any.”

The proposal

The current Newtown Pike extension proposal shows the road being built along the railroad tracks that run vertically down the center of the map.

The extension would pick up where Newtown Pike now ends on West Main Street, then follow the railroad tracks across Muncie Street and along what is now Cox St.

It would follow the tracks along Combs Street all the way to South Broadway.

Federal money will be the key to starting neighborhood’s revitalization

The road to revitalizing Irthtown and Davistown will be like the roads in Irthtown and Davistown — bumpy.

And the biggest bump of all will be money.

“None of this can happen without federal funding,” says Ed Houlihan, urban county commissioner of Parks, Housing and Community Development.

With a neighborhood plan for the valley, the area should be able to qualify for various federal programs. But how much federal money will be available under the Reagan administration is uncertain.

“The conservative aura of his campaign, there is a threat of ending some of the programs they term the social or welfare type. I hope that’s not the case,” said Mayor Jim Amato.

The segregation in the valley — no blacks live in Irthtown — could also hinder the flow of federal money into the area.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, for example, has denied Lexington public housing sites because the areas proposed were not racially mixed. And other federal programs carry integration requirements.

Landlords, who own 80 percent of the housing units in the valley, could also pose an obstacle.

Some may not be willing to go along with new programs. Some could hold out for industrial prices — even if the land is zoned residential.

“I fully foresee condemnation of property,” Houlihan said.

And housing alone won’t solve the neighborhood’s problems.

“The key is the public improvements that go along with it,” Houlihan added.

“Streets and sewers would have to be improved before and in conjunction with home improvements and new homes.”
Life is simple, but not always easy, for the Rankin family

The picture is one of about 30 on the walls and shelves of Roy and Becky Rankin’s living room. It shows Roy and Becky about 10 years ago with two daughters, Wanda and Pam, in front of them. "That was supposed to be the family portrait," says Becky, 34.

It didn’t work out that way. Melinda, 7, is cutting her sister’s homework into round shapes, using roll-on deodorant as glue to stick them together and make a snowman.

Rebecca, 6, is helping or hindering Melinda, depending on whether you’re Rebecca or Melinda.

Roy, 14 months, is sticking his finger into the mouth of his identical twin brother, Raleigh.

All of them — six kids, two parents, three poodles and a visiting sister — live in a one-bedroom house at 252 Perry St.

"Mom," Wanda, 18, calls, "Melinda’s wasting that deodorant."

"It sticks," Melinda says in her defense.

The mother rules, and the case is closed. Melinda, looking guilty, says, "I’m sorry." Then she smiles: "No harm."

She switches from deodorant to cologne and continues her work.

Life is simple, but not always easy for the Rankin family. They are buying the house on easy payments — $58 a month, the same price they’ve paid in rent for the last six years.

Father Roy makes good money — he takes home $270 a week hauling tobacco, but the job is seasonal.

And when the job ends in March, usually after about six months, the trouble begins. Roy looks for other work, but can’t always find it.

The family applies for food stamps each year, but there are a lot of beans and potatoes during the lull before the benefits start.

Two years ago, for instance, it took three months for the food stamps to start. Then they got $1.02 worth — all at once.

Wanda has worked for the last two months at Dunkin Donuts, and that helps. She brings home $194 every two weeks, much of which is going toward presents to make this Christmas a little happier.

"If it weren’t for Wanda, I don’t know how we’d make out," her mother says. "We always manage someways, though."

Visits to the doctor are usually free — the babies can go to the Health Service, the older kids can go to the free clinic at Nathaniel Mission.

But when Becky applies for any federal benefits, she only needs food stamps — the answer is: "Sorry, your husband makes too much money."

It makes her mad, she said. She’s seen unmarried mothers supporting live-in boyfriends with welfare checks. And she’s seen women who have babies only for the additional welfare checks another man means.

"There was a 22-year-old woman with eight kids. She made enough money to move to the big end of town.

"But you take a working man with a family and you can’t get it," she said. "If I was out there having a baby every nine months, they’d give me all I want."

To say the Rankin family is strict on their kids is probably an understatement. Eighteen-year-old Wanda was allowed to go on her first date just this month. A movie. And she had to take her 16-year-old sister along.

Any other courting is to be done in the house, which the mother never leaves for more than an hour at a time. And if one of the girls goes to the store and is gone for more than 15 minutes, Becky goes out after her.

It’s necessary, Becky says, because Kershawtown has become a rougher place in recent years.

It’s not unusual to see kids openly huffing paint or smoking dope. "It’s not like it used to be."

"There’s no law down here. I think they (police) are scared to come down here."

So she keeps a tight rein on her kids and hopes they don’t "run with the wrong crowds."

"Someday they’ll thank me for it," Becky says.

Becky wasn’t expecting twins when she went into the hospital four months ago.

Economically, it may have been a blow to the family, but you can’t detect it.

Though Roy and Raleigh are whirring through the house like twin tornadoes, leaving paths of debris in their trails, you get the feeling that there’s nowhere else Becky, even after four kids, would rather be.

Roy, or Ral, has one of the plastic donuts that you stack on a wooden pole. He’s using it to hang on the newest poohie in the family.

The dog — it hasn’t been named yet — yelps and crawls under a table. Roy, or Ral, follows.

Roy and Raleigh, and the succession of kids that preceded them, have kept Becky’s hands full. She tried working once — for six months, but didn’t like the feeling of leaving the kids with a babysitter.

Having six kids means you don’t get out much. Becky doesn’t remember the last movie she saw. It was about 12 years ago at the drive-in.

A family outing usually means a visit to the K mart or, once in a while, professional wrestling at Rupp Arena.

Their plastic Christmas tree stands in a corner of the living room, next to the couch that folds out to sleep half the family. Roy’s visiting sister sleeps in a chair or on the floor. A Santa Claus poster fills up the whole front door.

Becky Rankin has moved out of Kershawtown — three times.

"I thought I’d like to get out of here, but then I’d get homesick and come back."

Pam and Wanda want to get married and raise their families here. "I know everybody here. Anywhere else wouldn’t be my kind of people," Pam says.

With talk of the Newtown Pike extension and urban renewal, they’ve held off putting new siding on the house, which they admit is not in the greatest shape.

And they admit their neighborhood could use some work, too.

"Some people talk to you like you ought to be ashamed of it. They say, ‘Are you still living down there?’"

"Well, I’m not a bit ashamed," Becky said. "It’s not where you live, it’s who you are."