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LEISURE AND RECREATION IN THE LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY IN TEXAS

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ABSTRACT

A survey of 5,906 visitors to the Rio Grande Valley--mature owners of recreational vehicles and other housing facilities--reveals useful insights into this subculture. Those tourists who return to the Valley over several years change their behavior in a predictable manner. This study also indicates an inchoate change among owners of RV parks and other facilities. The visitors used to be taken for granted, but competition for their patronage is emerging.

LEISURE AND RECREATION IN THE LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY IN TEXAS

More and more, Americans winter in the southernmost tip of Texas. Yet this trend has been virtually ignored in the literature. The purpose of this study is to analyze tourism-related characteristics of families, particularly owners of recreational vehicles, who sojourn in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The tourist season peaks in the four weeks starting in mid-January.

In 1984 the number of all boreal refugees, the so-called Winter Texans, approached 200,000. Their influx shapes many of the social and commercial operations in this predominantly Hispanic, agricultural, area. In turn, burgeoning local facilities tend to draw additional motorists to the Rio Grande Valley.

METHODOLOGY

A survey conducted by Dr. Carl H. Rush, Jr., Director of the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at Pan American University, provided data for this study. Personal interviews, secondary research, requests from local sponsors and others, and pretests were the input for a two-page questionnaire. An updated version of a survey that Dr. Rush has administered every year since 1975, the 1984 questionnaire was filled out by Winter Texans between January 15 and February 15.

Numerous locations in Cameron and Hidalgo counties served as collection stations for an approximation of a representative cross-section of these visitors. (No sampling frame exists.) Chamber of Commerce representatives from major cities in the Lower Rio Grande Valley visited recreational vehicle (RV) and mobile home (MH) parks in their area to distribute and retrieve questionnaires. They also collected responses from qualified visitors in Chamber offices. Students from Pan American University obtained additional self-administered questionnaires from Winter Texans. For this purpose some students manned booths at exhibitions. Some visited dances, picnics, and other social functions conducted by tourist clubs in several Valley cities.

Excluded from this survey are transients whose stay is very brief. This deliberate omission eliminates executives on business trips, excursionists at elegant hotels such as the South Padre Hilton Resort, first-time visitors who just arrived, and sundry passing guests. Also excluded are tourists from Mexico and other foreign countries except Canada.

Altogether, the volunteer workers obtained 5,906 usable questionnaires. Almost 5 out of 8 respondents own an RV. In over 95% of the cases, answers pertain to families of two or more persons, so that the statistics in this paper represent some 12,000 individuals. The writer conducted additional research and designed all cross-tabulations especially for this study.

Superficially, Winter Texans seem very much alike. After noting these similarities, this study delves into the visitors' distinctive activities, opinions, and interests that a tourist center like the Lower Rio Grande Valley must accommodate.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND PSYCHOGRAPHICS

The vital statistics of these transient residents are fairly homogeneous, but the present survey uncovered also many important differences in lifestyle. First, what do they have in common? Nearly all of these visitors are in their 60's or older, healthy, spry, mobile, and frugal.

These findings also pervade all prior surveys. In addition, they were confirmed in a separate study six years earlier (Guinn and Fisher 1978). The latter also found that 96% of the respondent Winter Texans were currently married, 97% enjoyed average to excellent health, 85% were retired, 76% were at least high school graduates. And they were satisfied. "These are the best years of my life". (Guinn 1980)

Winter Texans are ardent Valley-boosters. Their word-of-mouth has swelled the number of winter visitors. Promotion of the Rio Grande Valley as a tourist haven has been nominal. Nevertheless, from a trickle of venturesome pioneers three decades ago, the tide of visitors has risen every year, thanks to high rates of return and recommendations. Yet, one of four respondents notes that living arrangements "could be better." This rate (1 of 4) of complainers remains stable, even among those who keep coming back. Later analysis will resolve this paradox.

As noted, nearly all Winter Texans enjoy good health. Despite the visitors' advancing age and the Valley's abundant hospitals and other medical resources, the incidence of hospital use among Winter Texans is a low 6%.

The Valley's subtropical climate is conducive to an active life. Winter Texans tend to be agile and gregarious. They walk or ride on sightseeing excursions, play tennis, shuffleboard, and other games, bicycle or motorcycle in the countryside, attend parties, go fishing and camping, play golf, swim indoors or outdoors (in mid-winter!), participate in shopping trips or short visits to nearby Mexico, and pursue dozens of other diversions.

Winter Texans have an active--and interactive--lifestyle. The vast majority of the polled visitors say their main attraction to a particular park is its menu of recreational and social activities. Accordingly, recreational facilities abound. Many of them are sponsored by recreational vehicle parks. These provisions have become a competitive necessity. (Recently, parks have been overbuilt in the Valley.)

The sheer mass of winter tourists makes it worthwhile to accommodate just about any kind of preference. Dances, for example, range from ballroom to breakdancing. Sedentary visitors can watch dance performances varying from ballet to bolero. Organized water sports include sailing and surfing. Sea shells beckon "beachcombers" to search the shore. Others prefer fishing or hunting, or perhaps just observing exotic birds and other wildlife. Volunteer programs absorb the energy of some visitors.

Relics from as far back as the Coahuiltecan Indians, subsequent Spanish rule, Mexican sovereignty, the Republic of Texas, and the American Civil War interest many tourists. Among other cultural attractions catering to Winter Texans are museums, theater and symphony performances, exhibits, libraries, short courses, formal lectures, and more. Local baseball, football, and basketball games entertain the sports fans. Hobbyists indulge in arts and crafts shows and all kinds of specialized clubs. Information about these varied activities is freely available through many types of media.

Some 93% of the Winter Texans report watching the evenings news on television. Nearly everybody uses the only two locally plug-in receivable CBS and/or ABC stations. CBS is preferred 3:2. Also, nearly everybody reports listening to the radio. Given an immense number of broadcasters, 75% of the Winter Texans identified no radio station in particular.

Winter Texans are always on the move. Driving RVs and cars, they descend on the Valley from all 50 states and Canada. If they do not like a place, it is a simple matter to drive somewhere else. No doubt, this mobility helps account for the prevailing contentment and loyalty. Visitors who dislike the Valley can leave quickly. Those who enjoy it, stay--and probably return.

About one-fourth of these visitors hail from Iowa or Minnesota. The nearer the home state, the larger is the proportion of recreational vehicle owners. Among the leading states represented, RVers are most prominent among Texans, Oklahomans, Kansans, and Arkansans. Their stay in the Lower Rio Grande Valley is shorter than others. Tourists from more distant places (e.g., Canada, Minnesota, South Dakota, Wisconsin) are more apt to own a mobile home or park model. And they stay longer.

Virtually none of the Winter Texans were deterred by the area's climatical and economic misfortunes. A freeze had destroyed the citrus crop and set back agriculture for up to five years. Also, the devaluation of the Mexican peso and restrictions on dollar exchange virtually eliminated this other major source of revenue. But, thanks to the tourists, shopping facilities in the major cities have remained excellent. Both the number of stores and the variety of goods and services far surpass offerings in cities of similar size.

In the aggregate, these consumers are quite a boom to local retailers. But the expenditure of the typical two-person Winter Texan family is small. In 1984 the reported median was \$161 per week. This estimate may be on the low side. In any event, such chains as Gibson; K-Mart; Montgomery Ward; Penney; Sears Roebuck; T G & Y; and Wal-Mart dot the Valley. Luxurious southern emporia (e.g., Neimann-Marcus and Sakowitz) are prudently absent.

Yet one of five families does make at least one major purchase during its sojourn. Furniture and major appliances lead the list of local acquisitions. Other purchases include travel trailers, park models, and mobile homes; cars and trucks; and single houses. The vast majority of Winter Texans use a local bank. (Options are plentiful.) Friendly personnel and nearby locations are the main criteria.

Quite a few visitors own property in the Valley. Most of these permanent assets are mobile homes, some Winter Texans are entrepreneurs who operate a recreational vehicle parking lot. A small majority of Winter Texans maintain a park model, travel trailer, or single house of their own.

DIVERSITY IN HOUSING ARRANGEMENTS

More than six out of 10 respondents travelled to the Valley in their own recreational vehicle (RV). Another two own a mobile home (MH). The rest splinter into many other types of housing arrangements, as shown in Figure 1.

In contrast to the MH owners, many RVers are new to the Valley. Their choice of park relies relatively more heavily on recommendations from friends, price, and availability. Although a park's social activities and recreational facilities, location and appearance, and management are more decisive for RVers, the importance of these leading criteria is greater yet for the MH owners.

Also, the RVers are somewhat less satisfied with housing arrangements than the latter. Nevertheless, more than three-quarters of the RVers announce that they would stay in the same park if they returned to the Valley. Many do come back. Apparently, Winter Texans will tolerate some inconvenience if a place offers good fellowship and recreational facilities. Assuming this interpretation is valid, dominance of social opportunities over comfort in their scale of values resolves the paradox mentioned earlier: one out of four RVers who have returned to the Valley seven times do so even though housing arrangements do not entirely satisfy them. A closer look at this core of returnees follows.

THE CORE

Six out of seven polled Winter Texans had visited the Lower Rio Grande Valley before. With every additional trip, this core evinces increasing commitment to the Valley. Successive returnees come earlier and leave later. In statistical terms, this correlation is perfect.

See Figure 2, which shows a greater proportion of RVers who arrive early (October), and obversely, a declining proportion who arrive late (January), as the number of visits rises. The same pattern obtains for departure, which they steadily push forward from February to April. As a result, RVrs' median length of stay in the Rio Grande Valley lengthens from 12 weeks on their first trip to 18 after seven or more return visits. Meantime, intention to come back rises from 52% to 89%, despite substantial lingering dissatisfaction, mentioned above.

Aside from perceived deficiencies of some parks, complaints about institutional shortcomings are few. Only a small minority of returnees indicate a need for better recreational facilities, notably golf, fishing, and bingo. Another complaint pertains to the high cost of a telephone installation.

Perceived friendliness on the part of the permanent residents contributes importantly to making a repeat visit enjoyable. Many returnees say that Valley inhabitants do more now than formerly to make Winter Texans feel welcome. Polled after retailers had lost most business from Mexicans, six out of 10 returnees were of the opinion that Valley merchants focused their efforts more on them.

As RV families return often to the Valley, they become more likely to make a major purchase. First, they upgrade their RV. The last step is permanent residence in the Valley. Another ascending function of number of visits is subscription to a local newspaper. Selecting a local bank just for the cash-checking privilege gives way to choosing one whose personnel are friendly.

Hospitalization, too, correlates with number of visits. It rises steadily from 3% for newcomers to 10% after more than 10 returns. Presumably, this pattern reflects advancing age.

Perhaps the most overt manifestation of commitment is the change from an RV to an MH. Whereas among first-timers, 76% own an RV and only 3% an MH, by the seventh return the split becomes 41% to 37%. Figure 3 shows this trend toward more permanent arrangements.

Among the core of Valley-loyalists, owners of a MH are truly the "hard core." A whopping 97% of the MH owners declare they plan to return! And some 93% expect to stay in the same place (even though 20% are not entirely satisfied). *Ceteris paribus*, MH owners are the first into, and the last out of, the Valley.

Another evidence of commitment to the Valley is ownership of real estate. Less than 6% of the RVers own local property, but most of the MH families do.

Interestingly, the "All Other" grouping--Winter Texans who are neither RV nor MH owners--remains stable at near 20%, regardless of number of visits. See Figure 3. Evidently, many vacationing motorists are free spirits who want to keep their options open.

This interpretation is buttressed by analyzing the multiple reasons given by the minority of Winter Texans who say that they do not plan another trip to the Valley. About one-half of these dissenters note they want to explore other places. This indication of wanderlust is equally strong in every return-visits class, no matter how often it sojourned in the Valley.

Another reason for nonreturn is advancing age. The percentage of tourists pointing to old age or ill health as a contributing factor for planning no return rises from 1% among initial visitors to 46% after 10 or more trips. In the last group, nearly all are in their 70's or older.

Over the same sequence, from one to 10 or more visits, the percentage of "Undecided" about returning drops steadily (from 21% to 2%). The average is 8%. Clearly, the vast majority plan their vacation at least one year ahead.

APPLICATIONS TO MARKETING STRATEGY

Organizations interested in promoting the Lower Rio Grande Valley's tourist services can use the foregoing information in strategy formulation. A formal marketing effort is urgent because present word-of-mouth no longer generates the number of newcomers necessary by the present research.

Evidently, the potential market is huge and growing. The segment to be targeted is the so-called "empty nest" family, upper-lower to lower-middle class, pensioners living in the northern part of this continent, and mobile. This portion of the U.S. population is soaring.

Detailed data, omitted from the foregoing presentation, identify the summer home locations of the visitors. Thus a marketer could pinpoint which northern counties contribute many and which contribute few tourists, and individualize promotions accordingly. Knowledge of whom to target and where they live is an excellent basis for a marketing campaign.

Further, the names of loyal returnees are known. Presumably, many of these loyalists would be willing to cooperate in a marketing effort for the Valley. In their home areas they could give testimonials. Thus, spontaneous grapevine could be supplemented with directed endorsements. The very high proportion of return visitors is perhaps the most convincing evidence that the Lower Rio Grande Valley is a desirable tourist spot for some segments of the population.

This survey has concentrated on the target market. It tells nothing about the Valley's competition and offers few insights about suitable marketing mixes. In general, visitors express satisfaction with available services. Persistent criticism of some accommodations does not appear to deter return. An agenda for additional research should include identification of the prospective travelers' media usage at home, alternative winter resorts, and determinative types, quality, and cost of services.

This survey also yields valuable information to owners of parks. Recent overbuilding is, for the first time, giving many Winter Texans a choice of where they rent. Although in the past, unsatisfactory facilities have not kept the northerners away from the Valley, the perceived quality of accommodations is apt to determine their selection of a park in the future. Hence, it behooves competing landlords to heed what their tenants want and to strive to provide these services at a profit.

CONCLUSIONS

Every winter the subtropical weather in the southernmost spike of Texas draws an increasing number of elderly tourists. Most of them come in recreational vehicles.

The impact of these Winter Texans on the local ambience and infrastructure is substantial. In the aggregate their expenditures are large, even though each individual family's budget is modest.

The best potential for trading-up seems to lie in attracting more visitors from distant northern states and Canada. Reconciled to travelling a long distance, many of these tourists use a mobile home or park model. To escape the frigid weather at home, they arrive early and leave late. During their stay in the Lower Rio Grande Valley they make some major outlays for personal belongings or real estate. Targeting the most obvious--RVers in Texas and neighboring states--would be a mistake. The economically most desirable guests are from the far north.

The latter also are more apt to return. Thus they overlap somewhat with the much larger segment of tourists who keep coming back as long as they are physically able to do so. The Valley-loyalists are the core who perpetuate the area's popularity by word-of-mouth.

Local merchants and governments have left tourism to sprout without significant organized promotion or direction. But they strive to accommodate the Winter Texans who do come. Maybe they should try harder. As noted, the far northern states offer superior potential. Promotion in the cold region may be worthwhile.

But perhaps the first order of business should be a more effective attempt to satisfy tourists' local housing wants. Many one-time and frequent visitors feel that arrangements could be better. Sought improvements include better swimming facilities, additional organized tours, and more exercise classes. Yet park owners seem to have ignored these complaints and Winter Texans have kept returning anyway. But with park facilities recently overbuilt, shrewd operators will be less complacent.

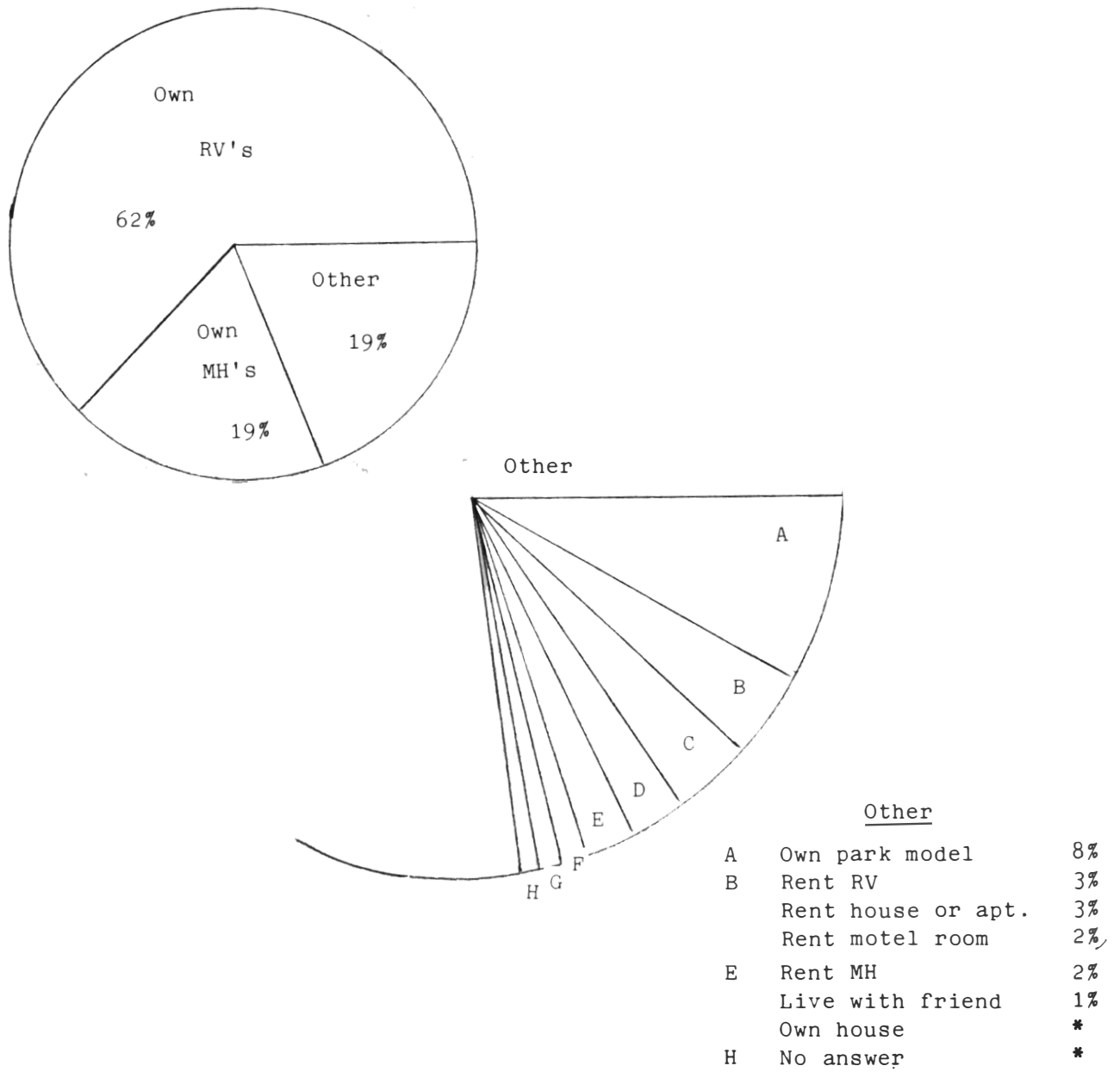
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Note

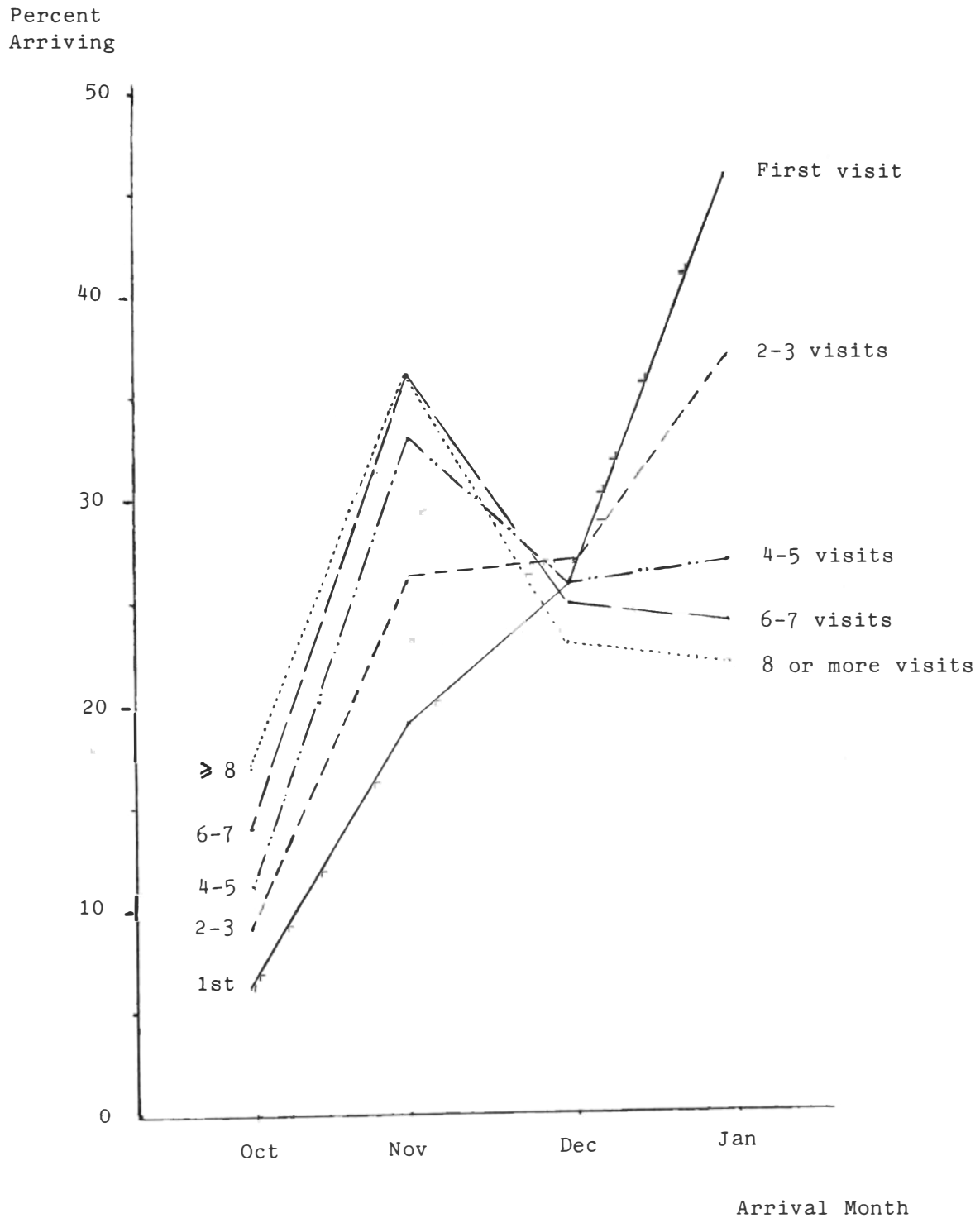
The author thanks Dr. Carl H. Rush, Jr., Director of the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at Pan American University, for data and suggestions that were used in this study.

Figure 1
Housing Arrangements of Winter Texans



RV Recreational Vehicle
MH Mobile Home

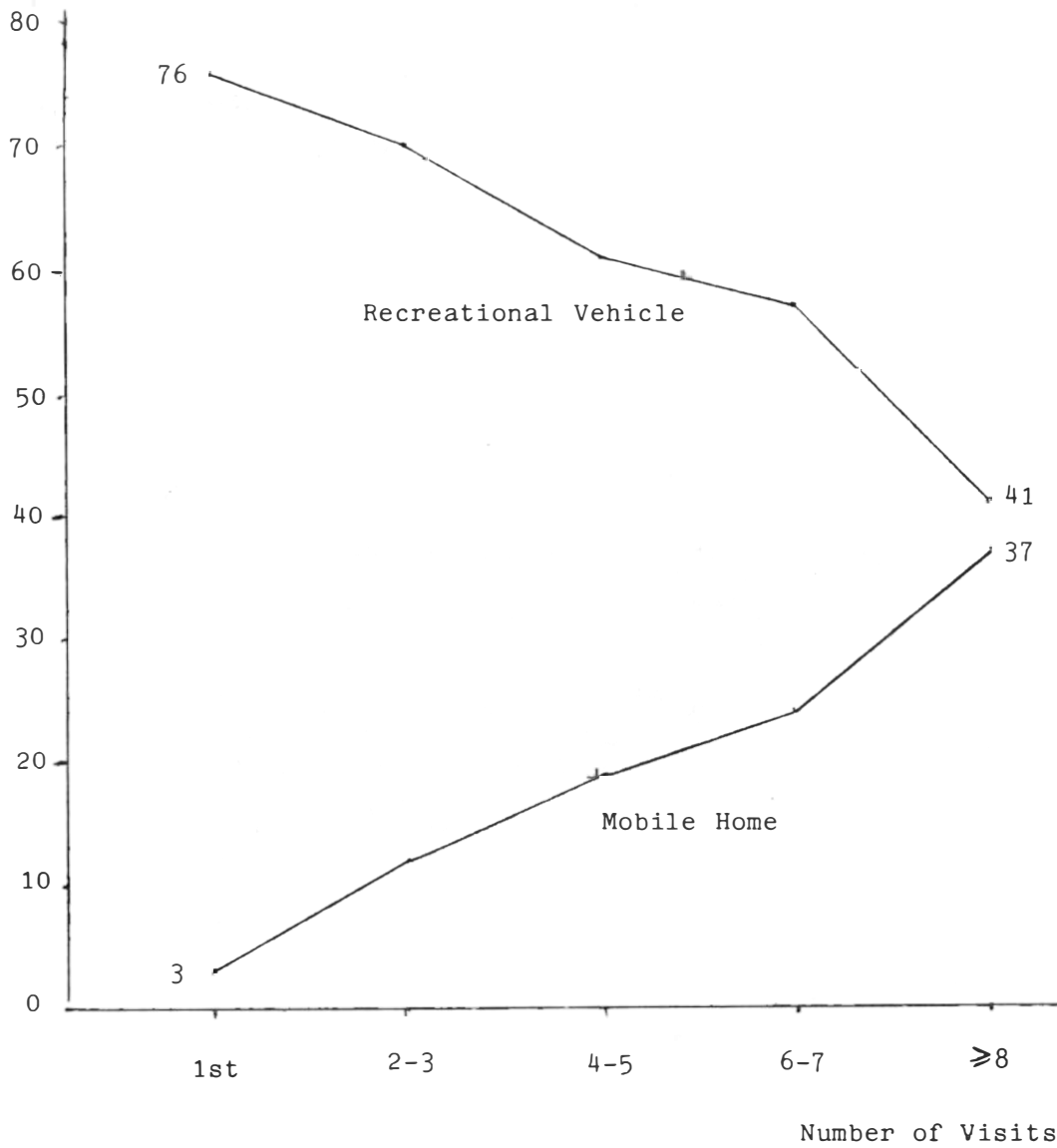
Figure 2
 RV Owners
 Month of Arrival by Number of Visits



RV = Recreational Vehicle

Figure 3
As Number of Visits Increases,
RV Use Declines and MH Use Rises

Proportion
Using RV or MH



RV = Recreational Vehicle

MH = Mobile Home