



By **Tim Craig**

Photos by **Ryan Dorgan**

After working all day building multimillion-dollar lodges for wealthy retirees and second-home owners, it was never that easy for construction worker Milton Powell to return home to his 32-foot trailer.

But for more than two decades, Powell managed to enjoy his piece of paradise at the Hoback RV Park in Wyoming's Teton County, which is made up of ski towns and national parkland.



Milton Powell, 64, relaxes after work in his trailer at the Hoback RV Park in Hoback, Wyo., where he has lived for 22 years.

Powell paid about \$650 per month to park his trailer on a lot that backs up to the Snake River, allowing him to sit in his backyard and watch deer, elk, eagles and a family of marmots splash around some of America's most gorgeous scenery. Hummingbirds returned to his feeder each spring, and mountain lion paw prints sometimes dotted the bed of his truck.

With an affable and humble group of neighbors around, Powell knew he had friends with whom he could grab a beer or swap advice on how best to rough it through icy Wyoming winters.

A few weeks ago, however, Powell and two dozen tenants in the park received a cruel year-end surprise. They were being evicted in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, pushed out into a county with few options for affordable living.

"Sounds like we've all got to scatter out into the four winds," said Powell, 64. "Some of us will probably have to leave the state."





TOP: Powell, center, surveys a job site with two of his co-workers in Wilson, Wyo. He works as an excavator operator. ABOVE LEFT: Powell comes across his father's Air Force toolbox while packing up the belongings in his trailer. ABOVE RIGHT: He operates an excavator at a job site in Wilson.

The saga facing the residents of the Hoback RV Park — which residents say is the last public community for recreational vehicles in Teton County — has become a major source of controversy in northwestern Wyoming amid a bitter battle between tenants and the property owner.

Powell, who has parked his trailer there since 1998, says the property owner, Crowley Capital, is shutting down the park in hopes of redeveloping it to take advantage of Teton County's booming real estate market.

According to local real estate agents, property values continue to skyrocket in Teton County as the affluent flee both coasts, a trend that has only accelerated this year during the pandemic. David Viehman, a real estate agent who writes the Jackson Hole Report newsletter, said there has been \$2.3 billion in real estate sales in Teton County so far this year, with another \$600 million worth of properties under contract. The booming market shatters the previous record of \$1.6 billion in sales in 2007.

The median price for single-family houses stands at just under \$5 million, said Viehman, who works for the real estate firm Engel & Völkers.

“Supply continues to disappear,” the firm wrote in the Jackson Hole Report. “The overall numbers available are a record-breaking low.”

Representatives for Crowley Capital, which bought the RV park about 18 months ago, said the eviction notices have nothing to do with real estate values. Instead, Crowley Capital representatives said tenants are being forced to evacuate the trailer park because of a faulty septic tank that could endanger the health of the Snake River.

Teton County regulators and the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality ordered Crowley Capital to repair the septic issues, even if it meant displacing the tenants, said Matthew Kim-Miller, an attorney for the owners.

Yet, the eviction orders have sparked considerable debate in Teton County.

In November, local newspaper Jackson Hole News & Guide noted that the eviction notices appeared timed to coincide with the end of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s moratorium on evictions due to the pandemic. The new federal stimulus package extended the eviction moratorium by one month, to Jan. 31. But researchers and advocates warn that as many as 40 million people could face eviction without the protections.

“I worry they are just using the septic system as an excuse to shut everything down,” Powell said.



TOP: Powell removes tape from the foam board insulation that shielded his trailer from the winter cold. It will be thrown out before his move. ABOVE: Powell attaches a fifth-wheel trailer hitch to his truck bed and prepares his trailer for the move.

In recent days, amid a backlash from tenants and the public, Crowley Capital reached an agreement with some of the tenants to allow them to stay, for a reduced rent, in the RV park through the spring. But starting in January, there will be no direct water and sewer hookup, which will force residents who stay to remain both in their RVs and campers until resupplied or emptied.

Powell initially struggled with his plans and considered moving back to his native Texas. But with the construction industry booming in Teton County, Powell decided to stay for the work — he's currently working on a new 5,000-square-foot house that he estimates to be worth at least \$14 million.

His boss is going to let him park his RV in his front yard, a potentially lifesaving respite even if his rent will increase to about \$1,000 a month.

“I’ve watched this for 22 years,” Powell said. “I build houses for the rich, but I live in a 32-foot trailer.”



Powell drives some of his belongings to a storage unit.