



AMES HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# Pammel Court

A Solution to Housing World War II Veterans at Iowa State College

by David Holmgren

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**Above:** Clotheslines and cars dot Pammel Court at Iowa State College in 1946. The complex was built on Pammel Drive, named for botany professor Louis H. Pammel.

lage"—Pammel Court at Iowa State College in Ames. What had been a polo field on the north side of campus was transformed into a community of married students in just two years.

Pammel Court was designed as strictly temporary housing to be demolished by about 1950 when the growing post-World War II enrollment was predicted to subside and return to prewar levels. Little did anybody suspect that over the next 60 years Pammel Court would house tens of thousands of students and their spouses and children at Iowa State.

Well before the war had ended, solutions were sought to ease the country back into a peacetime economy. Two major pieces of legislation passed by Congress drastically improved veterans' ability to get a higher education. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights) was passed in 1944. In 1945, amendments to the Lanham Act of 1940 allowed existing defense and war housing to be used for veterans at colleges and universities across the country. By helping returning veterans go to college—more than 2.2 million in the end—the federal government would be helping the integration of veterans more gradually into the existing national workforce.

At Iowa State, President Charles Friley correctly anticipated a major wave of applications from veterans, many of whom were married. Before the war, married students made up only 4 percent of the general student population, with no married student housing to serve them. In fact, in mid-1945 the state's assistant attorney general had issued an opinion stating that the Iowa Code gave no authority for constructing such housing. When the Iowa attorney general himself indicated that he would not overrule the opinion, the Iowa Board of Education took up the issue and convinced him to reverse his decision. Thus the groundwork was set for a remarkable cooperative effort between the federal government, the State of Iowa, the City of Ames, Iowa State College, and numerous private companies in Iowa under contract.

Over 1.9 million temporary housing units had been created during the war years by the National Housing Agency through the Federal Public Housing Authority (FPHA) for workers in critical defense locations such as military bases and defense industries. Friley moved quickly to inquire at the FPHA regional office in Chicago about obtaining surplus housing for veterans. In essence, by taking the initiative, he got ahead of the game to ensure that Iowa State's needs could be met.

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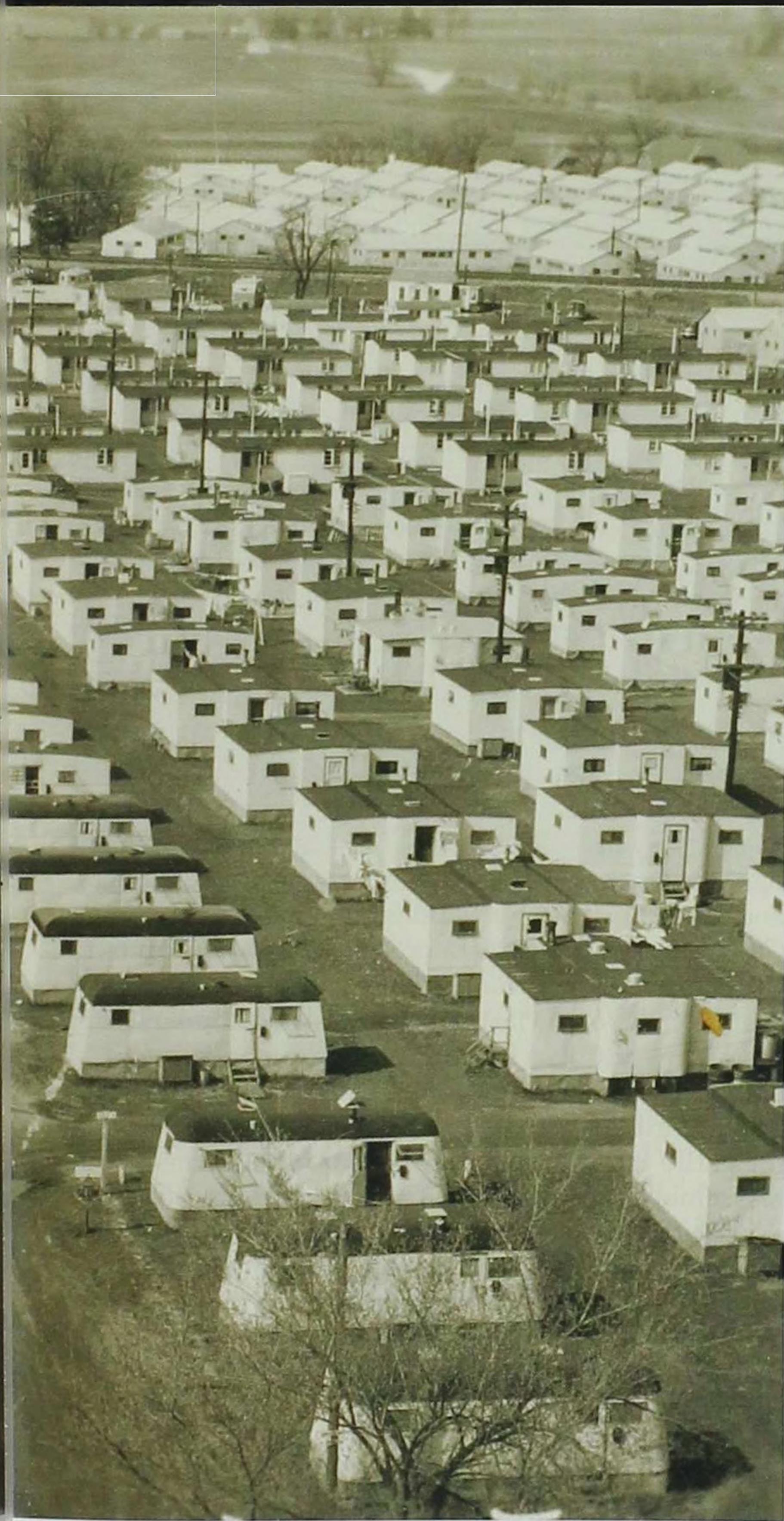


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**Above:** This photo and similar views of the installation of housing units at Pammel Court were discovered in Governor Robert Blue's Papers in the State Archives of the State Historical Society of Iowa (Des Moines center). Iowa State's business manager, B. H. Platt, had sent the photos with his report on enrollment, which he predicted would jump 53 percent from fall 1945 to spring 1946.

**Below:** Despite a variety of housing units for veterans and their families, the units were all undeniably small.



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streets, water lines, sewers, and electrical service, as well as securing and transporting units, were staggering, especially because of the lack of postwar construction materials and the need to complete the work quickly, despite adverse weather. After grading work was done for roads and driveways, excavation for sewer and water ditches was finished by Central Construction Company of Indianola, and installation of simple foundations of plywood floors on small concrete piers was completed by Kucharo Construction Company of Des Moines. Electrical equipment was ordered from companies in Fort Dodge and Cedar Rapids as well as other states. Boilers, water softeners, pressure water tanks, and pumps were acquired from the Army Air Base at Sioux City.

Iowa had had few defense plants or military posts during the war, so housing units had to be transported from other states. The types of housing included standard trailers, expandable trailers, demountable houses, and metal Quonset huts and barracks. J. D. Armstrong Company of Ames transported 150 housing units to the campus. Forty trailers were moved from an ammunition depot in Hastings, Nebraska; 68 trailers from the Army Air Corps Base in Alliance, Nebraska; and 50 demountable houses from the Badger Ordnance Plant near Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin. Armstrong performed the entire disassembly, transportation, placement, and reassembly procedures of these units. Transportation averaged \$267 per unit, far more expensive than the houses themselves, which the college acquired for only \$1 each. The first trailers arrived in early December 1945, and after college maintenance crews reconditioned them, they were ready for occupancy when the winter quarter started on January 3.

These and succeeding developments were watched closely by the *Iowa State Daily Student* and the student body. No less than a dozen articles in the student newspaper marked the progress of Pammel Court between October 1945 and the following July.

**T**he first Quonset huts arrived during the second phase of construction late in May 1946, from a navy base at Tacoma, Washington. J. C. Schilletter, Iowa State's first residence director, reported the availability of 152 trailers, 50 demountable houses, 50 Quonset huts (divided to accommodate two families each), and 65 lots for privately owned housing.

This was only the beginning. With no letup in demand, B. H. Platt, Iowa State's business manager, requested an additional 734 metal barracks. As they arrived from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and a prisoner-



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**Pammel Court's rows of housing for married veterans lay on the north side of Iowa State campus in Ames (1948 photo).**

of-war camp at Concordia, Kansas, they were occupied immediately. In the months to come, more housing units were shipped from Grand Island, Nebraska. There were so many metal buildings that Pammel Court was dubbed "Silver City."

With this large addition, Pammel Court now extended to the east of Stange Road. By July 1947, Schillester could report that by fall there would be 1,032 units available—five times as many as a year before. Yet 500 requests were still on the waiting list.

An area had also been developed where students could bring their own trailers. One married couple bought an old passenger bus, overhauled the engine, took out the seats, built cabinets, installed electrical wire and a water tank, and parked it in Pammel Court. During the summer of 1947, they drove it home to the Ozarks and then returned for the fall quarter and parked it again in Pammel Court.

The housing units were functionally adequate but definitely not spacious. Trailers were only 7.5x22 feet (165 square feet) but nevertheless included a living room, bedroom, gas range, and fuel-oil stove. Both the outer and inner walls were made of plywood sheeting but were insulated, and they rested on temporary wooden trestle foundations. The stoves "have not proved too satisfactory in winter time during high winds," the *Iowa Engineer* noted, "but have kept the trailers at a reasonably warm temperature without too great a cost." Bathrooms, tubs, showers, and lavatories were in nearby utility buildings, about one for every 20 to 25 residents. Water had to be hauled from the utility buildings and stored in five-gallon cans in the trailers.

Demountable houses were larger, typically from 13x29 feet to 13x38 feet, and included one or two bedrooms, living room, kitchen, and bath. They came with coal furnaces, running water, and automatic electric water heaters.

Veterans received \$125 per month (roughly \$1,300 today) for living expenses and they were expected to pay 25 percent of that for rent. But Platt, Iowa State's business manager, saw that this penalized those veterans or their wives who worked part-time jobs for additional income. In August 1948, he set a flat monthly rate of \$22.50 to \$25.00, which helped couples who had part-time jobs and reduced the rent by up to \$15 for residents in general.

There was no individual phone service. Pay phones were installed in unheated booths (*below*), but one area

AMES TRIBUNE PHOTO (1953) COURTESY OF AMES HISTORICAL SOCIETY





Married veterans juggled academics, families, and other demands as they established a strong sense of community in Pammel Court. The pony ride (below) was part of the May Daze activities in the spring of 1947 and was covered by *Look* magazine.



ALL FOUR PHOTOS: IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY/SPECIAL COLLECTIONS DEPARTMENT

of 400 housing units had only six phones. Residents wishing to make a call had to walk a block or more. For someone trying to call a resident, the problem was extremely difficult. The caller had to know which phone booth to call and hope that a passerby might pick up the phone and agree to find the resident. If a long-distance call came into the college switchboard, the Ames telephone company would send a messenger taxi out to Pammel Court. Neither the college switchboard nor the Ames phone company had information on which pay phone was nearest a particular resident. Western Union would deliver messages but only during daytime hours, and those hours were restricted on weekends.

**T**he married students moving into Pammel Court quickly began to form a community and make lives for themselves. As early as February 1946, a group of them organized the community with a constitution and a mayor, council chairperson, and four council members. The mayor acted as the village representative to the college and outside authorities. Dues consisted of voluntary contributions of 50 cents per unit. The council was empowered to make all decisions relating to the administration of Pammel Court except those reserved for the college administration and voters.

A cooperative grocery store was established with membership dues of \$2 a month. It opened in early 1946, but by summer the increase in residents put such great demand on the store that it was enlarged under the direction of the council and the labor of many of the store's board members. The store employed a full-time manager, a bookkeeper, and three full-time clerks and soon added a meat department and ice cream freezer.

Residents also coordinated nursery and day-care services, thereby sharing babysitting responsibilities without paying. Simple play areas were constructed, and residents built a recreation building for children in the spring and summer of 1947.

The spirit of cooperation was pervasive. Volunteers were trained in fire fighting, and when rats appeared in Pammel Court, 125 residents joined in a four-day rat-killing campaign, bagging 750 rats.

The veterans were older than most students and had experienced the discipline of the service and horror of the war. Although this created a more serious educational atmosphere on campus, the veterans wanted to have a good time, too. Notwithstanding the aid from the GI Bill, many struggled to make ends meet. Just going to a local restaurant or getting a glass of beer once in a while was almost a luxury. But the married

students of Pammel Court proved that creating a community and having fun did not have to be elaborate, luxurious, or expensive. The council sponsored a number of social activities for residents. Three days of events in 1947 were covered by *Look* magazine in a story titled "Mr. and Mrs. Week End at Iowa State." With the children tucked into bed, parents attended a "Hard Times" dance, with music by Scotty's Hylanders. One young lady supposedly performed a shadow strip tease behind a sheet with a light that showed only her silhouette. The audience perceived a complete strip, but it turned out that she was wearing a bathing suit. The weekend included diaper-changing derbies for fathers, a hula performance, raffles for free groceries, pony rides, portrait drawing, and a children's costume contest—all proceeding amidst mass consumption of ice cream and pop.

Although most World War II veterans at Iowa State had graduated by 1951, enrollment continued to climb as more single students and non-veteran married students sought degrees. Between 1950 and 1969, Iowa State's enrollment rose by 45 percent. The pressure for temporary housing continued, and single students were eventually allowed to live in Pammel Court.

**N**evertheless, parts of Pammel Court were decommissioned in the 1950s and 1960s because of extreme deterioration of some of the units. All of the trailers were removed between 1950 and 1952, and the Quonset huts were gone by 1960. East Pammel was demolished in 1956 and replaced by Hawthorn Court, an apartment complex designed for long-term use. By 1967, all the demountable houses and barracks south of the railroad tracks had been removed, but there were still 668 units in use north of the tracks. In the 1970s, a large complex known as Schilletter Village was built to the north of Hawthorn Court. It was named for J. C. Schilletter, the first director of residence, who had figured prominently in the building of Pammel Court. Other changes in the 1970s brought down even more units, but 522 were still in use in 1979. The following year, a graduate student in architecture wrote a thesis on the development of Pammel Court and concluded that it had "become a visual eyesore unrepresentative of an otherwise vigorous and progressive building program." Yet even as late as 1988, 520 of the original 734 aluminum barracks were still in use. Despite the continued predictions of Pammel Court's demise, the last units were not taken down until 2003, to make way for new construction.

Many temporary housing complexes were con-