

SILICON VALLEY

LIFE

COMING & GOING

While more people jump into the valley pool, others are as eager to get out

BY DIANE REZENDES
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IN ALL fairness, we had been warned. Before deciding to relocate from Boston, what we knew about the Bay Area could be summed up as follows: The economy is booming, the weather is ideal and the traffic is awful. Nice people like us who come from New England to visit for two weeks end up sending for our things and staying for years.

Friends wished us luck finding a place to live, then the hearsay statistics began to fly, Cliff Claven-style: lowest vacancy rate in the country, highest median home price and so on. Accuracy didn't seem to matter as much as dramatic effect.

We had in mind a cozy little cottage with lots of light, a fireplace, hardwood floors and a deck. We also had a budget of \$1,200 a month. We could pay more but really didn't want to: How would we ever save for a place of our own? Besides, we were about to leave the beautiful New England home we were renting for only \$900 a month.

Armed with reference letters from Joe's employer, our bank and our landlord, we felt well-prepared for our weeklong visit to find housing. At home, this would appear overeager, even pushy. We even took out an ad in the paper — a waste, some said. I gamely replied: "It's OK; we only need one response." But

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Jumping into the Silicon shuffle

Roads not so bad, but housing is

COMING

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as the week wore on, no one responded. I felt foolish.

Poring over newspaper and Internet listings, we answered 60 ads; spoke with 48 landlords, property managers and real estate agents; and visited 18 places. We got used to a new way of looking. In New England, you would never drive to a house and study it from the outside. The neighbors would think you were a stalker. You'd call first, and if the landlord liked you, you'd make an appointment.

An older home in Boston dates from the mid-1800s, and a truly old home would have been built around the time of the American Revolution. Here, when a landlord says it's an older home, that means it was built shortly after World War II.

There were other differences.

Back home, a square foot is 12 inches by 12 inches. But here, I've made an important architectural discovery: the California Square Foot. It's about 9 by 9. (Do people count driveways in their estimates?)

We struck up conversations about our housing search with everyone, hoping to find leads. We got none, but we learned that everyone is keen on stock options. From coffee servers to real estate agents to room service, they all wanted to know the same thing: How are your stock options? I hadn't a clue about stock options before Joe took this job.

We had a lot to learn.

Road rules

The traffic is heavy but not as bad as we expected. What's more, people here obey traffic laws. This will require a major adjustment from Boston driving, where using turn signals is considered giving aid and comfort to the enemy.

At home, we tune to the weather report so we'll know what to wear. We are as yet uninitiated in the ways of microclimates, so we still can't quite make sense of an update such as, "high today 60 to 90 degrees."

Our impression that the tight market creates an atmosphere of desperation was only strengthened by what we saw at an open house in Palo Alto our second night.

The rooms were small, the apartment dark and the carpet in need of replacement. But it was only \$1,400. (I knew I was beginning to adapt; Day 2 and already I could use the words "only" and "\$1,400" together without flinching.) In Boston, would-be tenants don't actually see one another, yet here were 16 people! Some were seated around the

kitchen table and on the floor filling out applications. The rest seemed to be in various degrees of supplication before the landlady. We'd never seen anything like it.

Finishing second

We applied for a house in Willow Glen. It was cozy and clean, with a big back yard. But there was a problem: our cat. Later we heard from the landlady. She found a cat-free tenant, but we were her next choice. Sort of like being runners-up at a beauty pageant. It's flattering, but you still go away empty-handed.

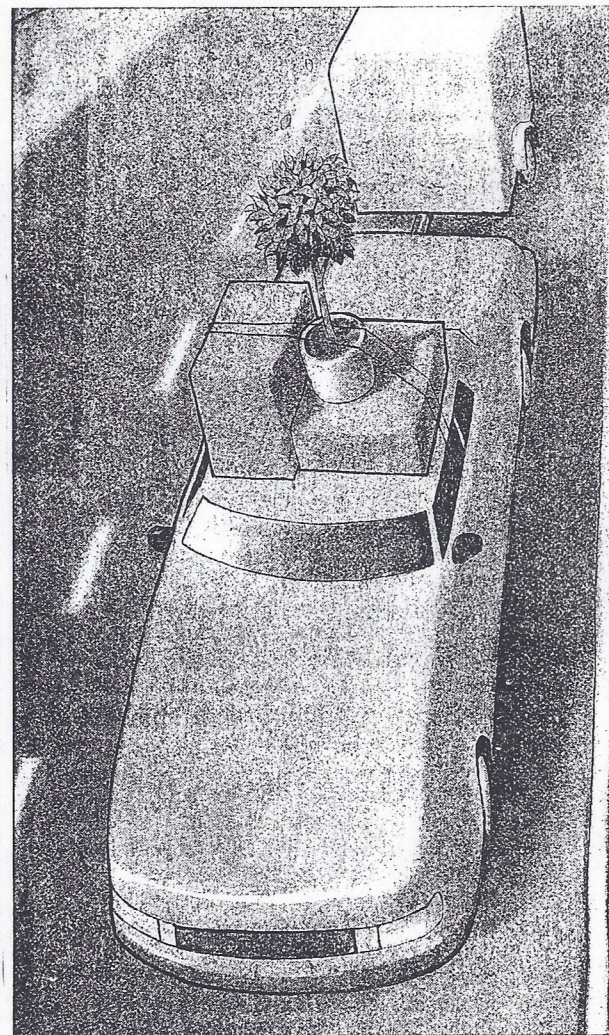
Another place, this one a cottage in Saratoga, even had fruit trees in the yard. The rent was high at \$1,800, but the appeal of a cottage in the country was strong and our will to save money was becoming weak.

The cottage turned out to be one big room and upstairs bedroom, with variegated orange carpeting, circa 1978, throughout. The kitchen was so narrow that the refrigerator door opened only part way. When asked how she determined the rental rate, the landlady's response was untainted by subtlety: "Because I can get it!" followed by a not-quite-evil laugh. And the application fee would be \$40. For the credit report, she said, I'd never heard of paying for a landlord to run a credit check before. Plus two months' security, with no interest.

By law in Massachusetts, security deposits go into escrow accounts with annual interest checks issued to the tenant.

Wising up

My sticker shock had now gone into overdrive. I told Joe I want to start a movement like Peter Finch did in "Network." Except in my movement, tenants will say to property managers and landlords, "I'm



smart as hell, and I'm not going to pay it anymore!"

Last, we applied for a Mountain View duplex, submitting our references, credit report and deposit. Each time we spoke with the landlady after that, she wanted more. First it was renters' insurance. Then it was a special rider on the insurance — for the cat. Finally, she declared that our credit report was no good. The reason? Our report came from

Equifax, one of the three major credit bureaus. She preferred TRW, and that we pay her for it. We withdrew our application.

We flew back to Boston without a place to live, dejected that after such searching we still came up short but pleased we didn't give in to our moments of desperation.

At home, there was one message on our answering machine. It was the one we'd hoped for: a cottage in Portola Valley, in our (adjusted) price range. The place sounded perfect and the landlady seemed kind.

We spoke with her tenant, who has enjoyed it, and so the next day, we sent in our first month's rent.

We could finally drop our backup plan: pitching a tent in the parking lot of Joe's office by Great America.

And I'm not even (too) worried about earthquakes.

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