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At home with the riverboat aristocrats

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By all outward appearances, some of the more patriotic, God-fearing Americans in town live at the foot of Southeast Harney Street, on the right side of the (railroad) tracks and the "No Trespassing" signs.

Those would be the homeowners of the Portland Rowing Club, an elite, floating enclave of 17 houseboats on the Willamette River, just south of the Sellwood Bridge.

The private club -- membership is required of all residents -- was established in 1879, and 126 years later, the board of directors is still diligently defending the grand traditions of the flotilla:

Motorized vehicles are not allowed on the walks or ramps. "Flags" -- to quote the nine-page Portland Rowing Club rulebook -- "must be raised on Memorial Day and lowered on Veterans' Day."

And finally this: "Each house must display Christmas lights during the holiday season from the second week in December through New Year's Day."

Who could possibly object to such all-American covenants and restrictions?

Joan and Randy Jackson of Temecula, Calif. And this is their story.

At the end of July, the Jacksons agreed to purchase a houseboat at the Portland Rowing Club for \$499,500. It was, Joan Jackson said, "our dream home." The three separate buildings in the moorage provided adequate living room for the Jacksons; Joan's 82-year-old mother, who is battling Parkinson's disease; and her sister, Valerie, who also planned to move to Portland to care for their mother. And the river site was a short drive to the nearest hospital and the VA.

The contract stated the Jacksons must be accepted as members to the club and abide by its rules. That was fine with the family. But when the Jacksons paged through the club's covenants, they grew concerned. They were perplexed by the prohibition on "motorized vehicles" -- Joan's mother is forced to ride on a scooter because of her health problems -- which seems to be an obvious violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"I thought that was a little off-base," Jackson said, "but I was willing to do it." The rules on the flag and the Christmas lights, however, were a different matter: The Jacksons are Jehovah's Witnesses.

Those two rules conflict with our religious convictions," Joan said. "Our faith prevents us from pledging our allegiance to any sovereign nation on the Earth." It also prohibits the family from celebrating the Christmas "holiday" by stringing up lights.

The Jacksons were so excited about the houseboat, however, that Joan penned a lengthy letter of introduction to the club, offering a compromise. Instead of the U.S. flag, Joan wrote, "We would be happy to fly the flag of the Portland Rowing Club." Instead of Christmas lights, she added, "We would be willing to string white lights on the home for the entire year and light them for the purpose of beautifying the view from the river."

The club responded last Wednesday with a terse unsigned reply, saying the board "has

decided not to grant the two waivers requested."

Club "Commodore" Dick Aanderud and manager Candace McElroy refused to comment or elaborate Friday. The two local agents involved, Jeff Parker of Parker Realty and Walter Valenta at Harbor Properties, decried the restrictions, Valenta noting, "They have the effect of excluding people. That's why the rules have to change."

And Pegge McGuire of the Fair Housing Council of Oregon said she was eager to file a fair-housing complaint on the Jacksons' behalf. There is considerable case law, she said, to contest covenants that discriminate against Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses and people with visible disabilities. The effect of the club's rules are "discriminatory," McGuire said, "even if the intent is not discriminatory."

Whatever the intent of the highly decorated, flag-waving folks at the Portland Rowing Club, the effect has been to send the Jacksons back to California.

"Obviously, there isn't a place for us there," Joan said. "The hostility isn't worth it for us. We couldn't call that place home."

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