

A MOVING experience



By Gretchen Heber
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

It seemed like a good idea last spring. We'd sell our cute but cramped dwelling in the city and buy a grand new house in the 'burbs. We're picky about tile and carpet and faucet handles, so we figured we'd better do one of those pick-a-floorplan, pick-your-paint, watch-'em-build-it arrangements.

Then our Realtor told us we'd need to put the city house on the market right away, during the summer selling season. But the new house wouldn't be ready 'til Christmas.

The city house sold right away. We would have to move twice. Which meant nearly five months in a 1,000-square-foot rental house with three kids under 3, two dogs, two cats and a garage crammed floor to ceiling with inaccessibly packed-up possessions — oh, what a party!

Should you be among the 21 million Americans preparing to change addresses this summer, please enjoy these tips from a regrettably now-seasoned mover.

Select a moving company — carefully

Don't get a quote over the phone. According to Texas Department of Transportation rules, you have a right to a written estimate. Get it.

For our first move, we used an "apartment mover." These are the companies with names like Big Bob's Moving Company or Three Sisters Who Need Work. They tend to give estimates over the phone based on the number of rooms in your home and your descriptions. They charge by the hour, so they're not necessarily interested in giving a particularly accurate estimate. If it takes longer, they still get paid. While you may have better luck, our move with this type of company was a disaster. The guys were late, they knocked down the mailboxes trying to back in the driveway, and one thought a single bed rail made a sufficient load to carry out to the truck. The move cost a fortune — about \$1,600; the phone estimate was about \$700 — and took forever; we were assembling cribs at 2 a.m. while the twins snored on mattresses on the floor.

The second time, we used a national company, one you think of for interstate moves. But they also do local moves, and much more professionally than the smaller movers. And in our case, much more inexpensively and efficiently.

A company representative came to the house and performed a thorough inventory of our stuff. Actually, we had about a half-dozen companies come. The bids varied wildly — from \$900 to \$1,900. We picked one whose bid was about \$1,000 with a not-to-exceed figure of \$1,200; the final bill was in the middle. One salesman said it would take two full days; we'd have to spend the night in a hotel because our stuff would be on a truck overnight. This is the company that intended to inventory everything, which

seemed overkill for a move of less than 5 miles, where the stuff would stay on the same truck. Don't pay for a service you don't need.

Ask about drive time. Many movers charge you for the time it takes them to drive from their parking lot to your house and back. This is irritating; no one pays me to drive to work. At any rate, make sure you're clear on their policies here.

Janeé Briesemeister, senior policy

analyst for Consumers Union, says the rules under which movers operate for moves within Texas are quite different from those in place for interstate moves. She also suggests you select a licensed mover. "If they've gone to the trouble of getting a license, they're more likely to follow the rules," she says. (Check out www.txdot.state.tx.us/mcd/consumerinfo/hhgindex.htm)

See MOVING, E3



MOVING: Or, the fine art of packing your entire life in one (mislabeled) box

Continued from E1

Start packing early

Months early. You'll be stunned at the amount of stuff you've accumulated. Start collecting boxes as soon as you have an inkling you'll be relocating. For example, go to Target on Monday mornings, when they're restocking the shelves. Walk the aisles, and ask for the boxes as they're being unloaded. Don't be embarrassed; toilet paper boxes are really quite roomy. Take them home and immediately start filling them. Write the destination room on the sides of boxes, not the top. Some moving companies will loan or sell (\$2-\$15, depending on size) boxes, delivering them — along with packing paper and tape — in advance of moving day. The company we used for the second move brought out wardrobe boxes the morning of the move. We loaded up the hanging clothes as they moved out our other stuff. At the new house, we unpacked the wardrobe boxes and the movers took them away. Very efficient. No extra charge.

Toss the junk

Really. Be ruthless. Get rid of the stuff you haven't used in years. Have a garage sale, although don't be too disappointed if no one buys the junk you haven't used in years. It's junk. You don't want it; shoppers don't want it. Goodwill might not even want it, but it's worth a shot. You can try selling your unneeded books to used book stores. Some nonprofits, such as the Arc of Texas, which



Brian Williamson AMERICAN-STATESMAN

benefits people with disabilities, will come to your house and take away that outrageously outdated 2002 model plasma TV. (Call 707-0008.)

Don't forget the 'extras'

Don't underestimate the stuff "you'll just move yourself." If you think your house had a lot of unused

junk, have a little peek at your garage. All that stuff you think you'll just toss in the back of your car and haul over yourself ADDS UP! We found that toddlers and mounds of hand tools in a moving car don't mix well — especially with twin brothers within tossing range. Get more boxes and box the stuff up; let the movers take it. A caveat: Most movers won't take plants, so you will have to take

those yourself.

Recruit kid care

Have someone available to take care of the kids. For both our moves, we had family in to help. We took kids, aunts and grandparents to the destination house; they rolled around on un-furniture-encumbered carpet while Mom and Dad helped move. Make sure to take over enough supplies — food, diapers, beer — to get them through the day. We gave the adults camping chairs to sit on.

Keep the must-haves handy

Pack a box of "immediate use" items and move it yourself: sheets, PJs, extra sippy cups, toiletries and prescription drugs. You don't want to be searching through 102 boxes at 11 p.m. trying to find Junior's retainer or Sissy's won't-sleep-without-it snugglybear.

Finally

Mind that you don't become so enamored of your movers that you start giving away your possessions to them. I recently went looking for our barbecue grill, only to learn that my husband had bestowed it on one of the movers, who had astutely observed that we had two. (The fact that it took me 4 months to discover the loss may legitimize my husband's decision, but still.)

gheber@statesman.com; 445-3506