



Rural Life

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Though queer community has often been seen as an urban phenomenon, there have always been glbtq people who, by choice or necessity, live in rural areas. Rural life offers both challenges and satisfactions for glbtq people.

Introduction

Perhaps the most familiar narrative of "coming out" begins with a young person who lives in a small town or rural area realizing that they are gay or lesbian and deciding to move to the big city where they are more likely to meet others who share their sexual interests.

This plot-line informs literary works as different as Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948) and Ann Bannon's Beebo Brinker series of pulp novels (1957-1962).

The narrative is not merely the stuff of literature. Historians of homosexuality have posited that in the pre-modern era, the rise of large cities was a prerequisite to the development of a subculture of sexual minorities. Certainly, the anonymity afforded by cities facilitated same-sex sexual activity, while the sheer numbers of people in cities made possible the creation of communities based on minority sexual interests.

Similarly, the disruptions of World War I and World War II both hastened the urbanization of the United States and contributed to the development of an American glbtq community that made possible the twentieth-century gay rights movement.

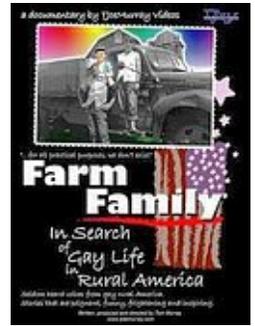
In these wars, hundreds of thousands of young men, many from small towns and rural areas, were thrown together in situations where they were free to form associative networks based on their sexual interests and identities, while women, including lesbians, were afforded new employment opportunities that gave them hitherto unknown independence.

Many of these gay men and lesbians chose not to return to their rural roots, and instead remained in cities such as New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Los Angeles, where they could participate in burgeoning gay and lesbian communities.

As the nation became increasingly urbanized during the twentieth century, American gay men and lesbians migrated from rural areas and small towns to find work in cities where they could pursue their sexual interests and live their lives more freely than they could in small towns. Hence, cities became the locus of gay and lesbian life in the United States.

At the heart of this familiar story are assumptions that go beyond the indisputable fact that large cities offer gay men and lesbians more potential partners than they are likely to find in less populated areas.

One assumption is that rural areas are unsophisticated and intolerant. Another is that cities not only offer a



T. Joe Murray's film, *Farm Family: In Search of Gay Life in Rural America* (2004) is one of several documentaries that address glbtq rural life.

zone of privacy and anonymity that rural areas do not, but also that gay and lesbian community is dependent on the amenities customarily found in urban "gay ghettos," such as clubs and bars and restaurants and other businesses that cater to sexual minorities, as well as the legal protections and social validation that cities often provide glbtq individuals.

There is some truth to those assumptions, but it is important to realize that there are alternative narratives to the familiar one of rural gay men and lesbians finding happiness in the city.

Indeed, one of the earliest literary genres associated with homosexuality is the pastoral, in which the country setting signifies the naturalness and innocence of homosexuality. This genre, which evokes nostalgia for a long-past golden age before the artificiality of city life corrupted human interaction, represents rural life as idyllic and unpretentious, simple and genuine, especially as opposed to the artificiality and competitiveness of the city.

In the distinctively American narrative genre, the Western, which frequently includes elements of the pastoral, homosociality often leads to intense, though usually suppressed or barely recognized, homoeroticism. This homoeroticism is rendered explicit in such fantasies as Richard Amory's *Song of the Loon* (1966) and its sequels *Song of Aaron* (1967) and *Listen, the Loon Sings* (1968), which celebrate love-making in the great outdoors, including passionate encounters between frontiersmen and Native Americans, and in Ronald Donaghe's *Common Sons* (2000), *The Blind Season* (2001), and *The Gathering* (2006), novels in which unapologetic gay men live openly and defiantly in rural New Mexico.

Another literary reversal of the familiar narrative is Isabel Miller's landmark historical novel, *Patience and Sarah* (1972), which recounts the joyous trials of painter Patience White and cross-dressing farmer Sarah Dowling, who leave their native Connecticut in order to set up house together in rural Greene County, New York, where they are free to live their lives unconventionally but in accordance with their natures.

Moreover, the early gay liberation movement was often allied with the progressive hippy counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, and, like the hippies, many lesbians and gay men regarded going "back to the land" an essential part of building community and spirituality.

This reverence for the land finds contemporary expression in the Radical Faeries, a movement founded by gay rights pioneer Harry Hay in 1979. The group sponsors gatherings of the tribe in rural settings, such as Blue Heron Farm in DeKalb, New York; Kawashaway Sanctuary in Minnesota; Short Mountain Sanctuary in central Tennessee; and Wolf Creek Sanctuary in southern Oregon. In these enclaves, the faeries commune with nature away from the distortions of an urban environment.

Similarly, many lesbians retreated to the countryside in the 1970s, forming women's land trusts to allow a wide range of women access to a rural lifestyle. Some women's land remains in existence today, including the Oregon Women's Land Trust (OWL), founded during the 1970s near Coos Bay, Oregon; the Huntington Open Women's Land Trust (HOWL), established in 1986 in northwestern Vermont; and Camp Sister Spirit, founded in Ovet, Mississippi in 1993.

It is no coincidence that the largest annual celebration of women's music, the legendary Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which was launched in 1976, is held on 650 acres of privately owned women's land in remote Hart, Michigan.

At the same time, however, it is well to remember that both the pastoral and the Western frequently have tragic endings. In the film *Brokeback Mountain*, directed by Ang Lee and based on Annie Proulx's short story, for example, the love between two men is doomed at least in part by the homophobia and violence sometimes said to be endemic to rural life.

Country Life

While many glbtq people who were raised rurally have found it necessary to leave the countryside in order to come out, others, economically or emotionally bound to their families or to the land itself, have stayed, often living closeted lives, but sometimes finding creative ways to build queer community where they live.

In addition, many gay and lesbian people, whether born in the country or the city, simply prefer the slower pace of small-town or rural life to the stressful rat race of urban existence, and find that they are happiest where they feel a greater connection with the earth and with the seasons of the year.

Even though rural areas are often perceived as socially and politically conservative and even dangerous for glbtq people, many glbtq people are drawn to the country for its beauty, peace, and promise of a more natural and self-sufficient lifestyle.

Recent demographic studies based on the 2000 census have revealed that self-identified gay and lesbian couples live in 99% of the counties in the United States. Although gay rural life has sometimes been described as the embodiment of the "don't ask, don't tell" mentality, and some rural gay men and lesbians have reported anxiety over a felt need to hide their sexual orientation, in even the most conservative of American rural areas, there are gay and lesbian couples who feel safe enough to identify themselves on confidential census documents if not necessarily to their neighbors.

Still, the biggest challenge of rural life for glbtq people is a feeling of social and geographic isolation and invisibility. In some rural areas, there simply may not be enough out gay men and lesbians to constitute a community or to allow one to connect with others. The social and geographic isolation and invisibility experienced by rural gay men and lesbians is both the cause and effect of a general lack of resources in the broader community to support citizens who identify as gay or lesbian.

Nevertheless, most rural gay men and lesbians do form friendship groups and make connections with other gay men and lesbians in the country. Through these friendship circles, gay people in rural areas can become visible, at least to each other.

Indeed, as Paul Cogan has observed, "Friendship is a central element of rural gay life. Through friendship, rural gays are able to create, transform, maintain, and reproduce their identities and communities."

While it is often necessary for gay men and lesbians living in rural areas to travel long distances to interact with other gay individuals, new technology, including especially the Internet, has facilitated interaction and communication between people who are geographically distant.

The Internet offers a variety of safe online or "virtual" spaces in which people in remote areas can seek out information ranging from news to glbtq community and political organizations and help-lines, as well as safe sex information and peer support groups.

Although many relationships established online remain virtual, others develop into offline friendships and even long-time companionships.

One typically thinks of rural gay people as closeted to one degree or another, but some gay men and lesbians in the country are open as to their orientation, and many of these have found their neighbors welcoming rather than censorious.

A live-and-let-live attitude characterizes many rural areas, perhaps especially in the Northeast and the western United States and Canada as opposed to the southern United States. While rural areas in general tend to be conservative, they are not necessarily homophobic.

There may be a direct correlation between the strength of fundamentalist religion in particular rural areas

and the level of homophobia felt by gay and lesbian residents.

In addition to the geographic and social isolation of rural glbtq people, the next biggest challenge facing gay men and lesbians who live in rural areas is the absence of equal rights and protection from discrimination, a challenge that is exacerbated by a feeling of political powerlessness in conservative areas.

While all glbtq people in the United States suffer from unequal treatment under the law, in most cities there are laws protecting gay people from the most blatant forms of discrimination, even when those cities are in conservative states. In rural areas, except for those in liberal states that have enacted state-wide protections against discrimination, no such prohibitions against discrimination exist.

Media and Entertainment

Gay people have made their presence known in such staples of country life as the rodeo and country music. Not only are there a number of openly gay or lesbian country music performers, including K. D. Lang and Chely Wright, but several heterosexual country singers, including such stars as Dolly Parton and Garth Brooks, have expressed support for the struggles of their glbtq fans.

The popular gay rodeo circuit gives many rural gay men and lesbians an opportunity to celebrate both their cultural heritage and their sexual identity.

Rural gay and lesbian life is chronicled in several publications, including journals such as *Country Women*, which was published in Albion, California from 1973 until 1980, and *RFD*, published since 1974.

Will Fellows' *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (1996) collects the oral histories of more than three dozen gay men, ranging in age from 24 to 84, who grew up in farm families in the midwestern United States. A play, *Farm Boys* (2004), by Dean Gray and Amy Fox, was adapted from the book. It has been produced in New York and St. Paul, Minnesota.

Karen Lee Osborne and William E. Spurlin's *Reclaiming the Heartland: Lesbian and Gay Voices from the Midwest* (1996) presents a diverse collection of fiction, poetry, and essays from writers who have lived or are living in the Midwest, including especially in rural areas.

Thomas Bezucha's independent feature film *Big Eden* (2000), a romantic comedy about a New York City artist returning to his Montana home to care for his grandfather, offers an affecting, if romanticized, account of rural life.

Kate Davis's *Southern Comfort* (2001) is a documentary that tells the fascinating and moving story of the last year of the life of Robert Eads, a female-to-male transsexual who lived in the back hills of Georgia.

Jane Anderson's HBO film *Normal* (2003), starring Tom Wilkerson and Jessica Lange, explores, with equal doses of pathos and humor, the journey of a midwestern farm couple as they cope with the husband's decision to undergo sexual reassignment surgery.

Glenn Holsten's documentary *Jim in Bold* (2003) tells the tragic story of Jim Wheeler, a rural gay youth who committed suicide in 1997 after constant harassment at school.

T. Joe Murray's documentary film *Farm Family: In Search of Gay Life in Rural America* (2004) offers an interesting look at the lives of gay families in the American heartland, documenting the challenges as well as the joys they experience, and both the support and the scorn they receive.

Malcolm Ingram's *Small Town Gay Bar* (2006) is a gritty documentary that paints a vivid and disturbing picture of queer life in rural northeastern Mississippi, where homophobia is the norm and the closet a

necessary survival tactic for most glbtq people.

The documentary, *Out in the Silence* (2009), directed by Joe Wilson and Dean Hamer, grew out of the ugly reaction to the announcement in Wilson's home-town newspaper in rural Pennsylvania after the directors married in Canada in 2004. Though grounded in small-town Pennsylvania and in the personal history of Wilson and Hamer, the documentary explores more generally the quality of life of gay men and lesbians in small towns, including most poignantly instances of bullying and bigotry.

County Closets E-Zine was launched in 2010 in order to be the e-zine voice of rural gay men and lesbians everywhere. The online publication contains a great deal of information about glbtq rural life, including first-person accounts of growing up gay or lesbian in rural communities as well as news, history, and advice.

A recent reality television show, *The Fabulous Beekman Boys*, which debuted in 2010 on the Planet Green network, reverses the typical scenario of gay men leaving the country for the city by following the mostly comic exploits of a gay couple who move from New York City to Sharon Springs, New York, a rural area upstate. The series features Josh Kilmer-Purcell and his partner Brent Ridge as they learn how to become farmers to eighty goats, two pigs, a dozen chickens, and a llama.

Violence

Although the stereotype of rural gay life as fraught with fear is undoubtedly overstated, country life is not without its dangers. Thriving urban queer communities, such as those in San Francisco, Seattle, Dallas, New Orleans, Atlanta, and New York, have large contingents of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans people who have fled rural areas in order to live openly. These émigrés from rural areas not only fear rejection and stigmatization in their hometowns, but actual physical violence as well, and often with good cause.

Although the level of violence directed at glbtq people in rural areas is undoubtedly much less than that encountered in large cities, rural gay and lesbian people often lack the kind of organized support systems and political power that urban communities rely upon for protection.

It may be noteworthy that three of the most brutal and widely-publicized murders of glbtq people have taken place in rural areas: Teena Brandon in Nebraska in 1993, Matthew Shepard in Wyoming in 1998, and Billy Jack Gaither in Alabama in 1999.

The lesbian sanctuary Camp Sister Spirit repeatedly suffered aggressive hostility and harassment from some of its Overt, Mississippi neighbors in the years after its founding in 1993. The women's retreat finally won the hearts of the local community during the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when the camp's founders Brenda and Wanda Henson offered open-handed support to everyone, gay or straight.

Young People

Glbtc youth are often particularly vulnerable to abuse. Legally bound to their families until they come of age and exposed to bullying and intimidation if their identity is suspected, they often lead lives of quiet desperation.

Studies by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) have indicated that rural gay and lesbian students are even more likely than their urban and suburban peers to be harassed and bullied in school. Their plight is rendered even worse by the fact that they are less likely to know of any openly gay or lesbian teachers or administrators and they have little or no access to glbtq-supportive community resources.

Rural school boards often resist the formation of gay-straight alliances and frequently fail to accord glbtq students their civil rights.

In 2010, for example, the Itawamba County School District in rural Mississippi refused to allow Constance McMillen to wear a tuxedo to her senior prom and to bring a female date.

The ensuing controversy led to a law-suit filed on McMillen's behalf by the ACLU and catapulted the brave young woman to national prominence. Ultimately, the school district settled the lawsuit by agreeing to pay McMillen \$35,000 and to institute a non-discrimination policy throughout the district, which is believed to be the first such policy in the state.

Despite the success of her lawsuit, it is worth noting that McMillen was forced to transfer out of the rural district in order to escape harassment from other students. She graduated from a high school in Jackson, Mississippi.

In the past decade, a number of organizations have recognized the need to support glbtq youth. Many of these resources are conveniently gathered in Christopher J. Stapel's *No Longer Alone: A Resource Manual for Rural Sexual Minority Youth and the Adults Who Serve Them*.

If glbtq rural youth are particularly vulnerable, many of them are also amazingly resourceful in asserting themselves and their identities, from organizing fundraisers in barns and cross-dressing displays in the aisles of Wal-mart to lobbying legislators, as Mary Gray discovered in her study of rural glbtq youth visibility.

Conclusion

Most empirical studies of gay and lesbian life in the United States have been based on urban populations. Only recently have scholars turned their attention to the problems and pleasures experienced by glbtq people who live in rural areas.

From these recent studies, it seems clear that many gay men and lesbians who live in the country do so out of choice and report high levels of satisfaction in many aspects of their lives.

However, in most surveys, rural glbtq people also report having experienced high levels of discrimination and express the need for more resources and increased visibility.

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