

The lives and deaths of rural organizations

by Jim Hunger

Shortly after my return to Klamath Falls this fall I learned that the Klamath Gay Union had begun to meet again informally after a hiatus of about half a year. You've never heard of the organization? Neither have many of the homosexuals who live in the Klamath Basin, although a major objective of the K.G.U. has been to increase membership, to reach out to all those lonely gays ("Ten percent!" Richard is fond of intoning) who surely must be pining away, alone and lonely, unaware that there is a group meant specifically for them right here in Klamath country. So why do we fail to make connections? A number of complications exist, some of which are rooted in the organization and its locale, but more of which can be traced to the types of homosexual personalities extant in a rural environment like Klamath County.

While rustic regions are almost invariably conservative and culturally backward, Klamath County historically has glorified a sort of aggressive, dog in the manger ignorance that makes most other rural areas seem progressive by comparison. A local surveyor recently told me that Klamath Falls is the only township in the United States with thirty-seven instead of thirty-six sections, apparently because the original planners didn't bother to survey in the more difficult to reach terrain. In the Klamath County Museum (itself an anomaly in light of the prevailing local attitude toward culture) is a display presenting the educational history of the county which reveals that the schools in Klamath County were closed for several years in the past when the residents refused to spend any more money for books or teachers after having built a much-needed new school building. The attitude of Klamathites toward education has changed little throughout the years; school budgets, which must be voted on annually, never pass on the first balloting, even though Klamath County has the second lowest cost per student rate in the state. Considering the cost of staging an election, this predilection toward negativism can be an expensive, nonproductive habit. The long-range effect of this disposition is even more costly, however. As a cultural group, Klamathites say no to new ideas, to anything suggested by a nonconformist to the prevailing posture, to anyone considered to be a pariah by the power echelon. What remains is uninspiring mediocrity, to be experienced by those who are too small-minded to notice the inferiority of the local lifestyle, or those who for whatever reason are unable or unwilling to escape it.

Of course, conservative Klamath residents don't see their actions in this uncomplimentary



While rustic regions are almost invariably conservative and culturally backward, Klamath County historically has glorified a sort of aggressive, dog in the manger ignorance that makes most other rural areas seem progressive by comparison.

light, but rather see them as a manifestation of their rugged individualism. This is the interpretation which is pap-fed to the children, and with minimal exposure to divergent ideas, this is the point of view they generally accept, particularly in the outlying areas.

Most rural societies are conservative red-neck and distrust outsiders or new ideas, but in the Basin this tendency is carried to an extreme. I have heard of other towns in Oregon that are known for their arch-conservatism, and perhaps they are on a par with Klamath Falls; since I haven't lived in them, I can't know. Even so, I still feel that Klamath Falls is particularly extreme in this respect since it is isolated in the Cascade Range, unreachable except via mountain passes that for half of the year are regularly snowed in. Residents occasionally leave the Basin for medical treatment or on shopping trips (tacit acknowledgement of the lower quality of life at home), and one might think that these sojourners would pick up new ideas or experiences in the outside world, but rarely does anyone witness anything mind expanding in a Fred Meyer or a doctor's office. People who do encounter something that is for them extraordinary can't be expected to

derive much wisdom from such rare occurrences.

Like any backwater grassroots organization, the Klamath Gay Union is a product of its environment. Most of the members were born in the area, and though most of them have also spent a part of their life outside the Basin, they return to the surroundings that they grew up in. I'm one of the rare exceptions, being a non-native who came here to accept a job offer. People give a variety of reasons for returning to the Basin, but usually at least in part it is a familiarity with the culture, a love of the environment, and a sense of discomfort with a large metropolitan setting. Family and profession also figure largely. Klamathites frequently do move out of the county, but almost as often return in a year or two; some people seem to wander in and out, hating their hometown but apparently unable to sustain a lifestyle on the outside.

In the two years that I've been associated with the K.G.U., its membership has fluctuated, though it's always been a relatively small number, with an average of around five to ten participating members. A primary reason for this poor showing is that Klamath homosexuals usually are extremely close'd,

often not even open to their own sexuality. The majority of those who have acknowledged their divergent sexuality view homosexuality as a flaw, something to be ashamed of and to despise themselves for. Even some local gays who ostensibly espouse a more enlightened view of their sexuality will inadvertently reveal a subconscious acceptance of a negative view of homosexuality. Of course, totally closeted locals never attend K.G.U. meetings. Those with inner conflicts concerning their sexuality regularly do, however, and figure largely in the turmoil which the organization periodically experiences. Since subconsciously they have a negative attitude toward homosexuality, they respond to other members with intolerance, particularly if the other person possesses some personality traits which they interpret as being characteristically gay. These people never appear to realize their ambivalent attitude toward homosexuality, or at least never overtly admit it. They come to the meetings purporting either to have a desire to participate in the organization and the advancement of the local gay culture, to meet and socialize with other local gays, to develop a better self-awareness through group interaction, or all