

Roseburg: a rural report

by Billy Russo

In recent years large numbers of gay men and lesbians have been resettling in rural America. Some of us simply want to get closer to nature and basic ways of living. Others are disillusioned by urban living and the ways homophiles are assimilated into mainstream society. In common we all envision finding the space to live our lives as we choose.

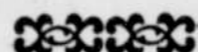
Once in rural America we find ourselves relatively alone. We live among strangers, work among strangers and by virtue of the nature of our oppression, we return to the darkness of earlier closets. We feel isolated and alone.

Those of the rural gay and lesbian community who were raised locally are also closeted. Although comfortable with who they are, most rural homophiles live in isolation, trying to live as free as possible and still pass in heterosexual towns in order to survive.

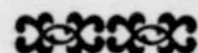
We are constantly reminded of our "place" by periodic scapegoating by the media and the rash of homophobic commentaries, letters-to-the-editor, jokes and sermons which follow.

Here in Douglas County, 200 miles south of Portland, we rebelled against that homophobia, and in doing so, added a new dimension to rural gay life. We didn't riot or barricade ourselves in a local cocktail lounge. We fought back by becoming a visible element of the community.

In November, 1980, 30 of us answered a call to come together and discuss establishing a helpline to serve the gay and lesbian community. Under the guidance of our



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founding mother, Lillene Fifield, we learned how to work together as a group. We learned how to listen to each other and to rely on the group process to work out our differences. Together, we took a giant step in the coming out experience.

The county seat, Roseburg, which has always been known as the redneck lumber capitol of the world, now boasts having the 24 hour Gay and Lesbian Switchboard, the Tuesday night Gay and Lesbian Discussion Group, weekly Gay AA meetings, and MCC services.

Essentially we were ignored by the larger, hetero-dominated society around us. We had some minor run-ins over use of public space and media coverage, but basically we were left alone. I guess they assumed we would eventually go away.

All that changed dramatically last summer,

when MCC installed a new pastor, Betty Pederson, in Eugene. Besides her primary duty in that community, she also inherited the small study group in Roseburg. She started coming down weekly, and with the assistance of Glen Scott, who has since become full-time worship coordinator, soon started a dialogue with the ministers and board of directors of the First United Methodist Church.

Through these efforts they obtained permission to use the Methodist chapel for Sunday worship. Concurrently, two men had arranged to have a holy union at the same church. Betty Pedesen officiated. Both Methodist ministers were among the invited guests.

This was too much for the religiously bigoted. They started crawling out of the woodwork in protest. A battle ensued which resulted in MCC Roseburg being voted out by the Methodist congregation. Hypocrites from other denominations joined in the din and eventually a loose-knit coalition of homophobic ministers formed. They escalated the situation by loudly calling for a day of prayer and fasting after which they issued a four part statement decrying homosexuality.

The result of all this oppression, of course, was a general strengthening of the homophile community. Many of us non-christians joined forces under the MCC banner. And today, MCC is at the forefront of our little community.

In this column I'll explore the evolution of our community. I'll talk about the things that have brought us together and those which have kept us apart. I'll discuss our triumphs and our struggles in an attempt to portray who we are, where we've been, and where we are headed. The theme "Unity in Diversity" is very applicable here where there are only a handful of feminists, half-a-dozen faggots, fewer drag queens (counting leather and cowpersons), two male nuns, and no aspiring young political types. We have had to learn to respect our differences in order to work together.

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