

What's good about Klamath Falls

by Jim Hunger

A Klamath Falls friend, upon reading one of my commentaries based on my experiences in this vicinity, asked me, "Couldn't you write something good about Klamath Falls?" His question caused me to pause and reflect upon my literary objectives and guidelines in writing the articles. Certainly I hadn't intended to be a cynical jeerer, but rather a detached, unsparingly honest observer and interpreter; moreover, I thought I had made an effort to include some positive remarks. Controversial points of discussion raised by me in the articles were also brought up by myself and others at Klamath Gay Union meetings and to local individuals, and so should not have been particularly surprising to anyone involved. The purpose of this final installment concerning this area is very definitely *not* to renege on any of my past comments; sometimes the truth hurts, but I for one still think it's important. Instead, with this ponderous vignette I wish to, "write something good about Klamath Falls." I continue to stand by my previous statements, which were made in sincere attempts at journalistic objectivity. However, I don't aspire to a reputation of being capable only of sour invective, of being able to glimpse only the seamy underside without ever noticing any glimmer of hopeful promise. If my previous remarks on the society of Klamath County have left a completely negative impression of this locale, then I have failed to present a totally accurate, comprehensive image of this place, and hope with this final segment on this subject to correct any one-sidedness I may have been guilty of.

Of course, for natives, Klamath Falls offers that very special designation of *home*, something almost mythical in modern American society. While many gay people who grew up in the backwaters and left have unpleasant memories of their hometowns, few can escape a tinge of nostalgia over the concept of home. Many of the old-fashioned ideals of yesterday seem bound up in this notion, as well as a solid sense of security which so often seems lacking in modernity.

As a small town, Klamath Falls offers more than just a home for natives, though; it also offers gay people a place where socializing isn't primarily confined to the bar scene.

While some gays here do go to the bars, the closest establishment popularly referred to as a gay bar is 65 miles away, in Ashland, and so going to the local saloons is something one is more likely to do in order to drink than to cruise, unless one is really good at scoring in a potentially hostile environment. In my experience, gay socializing in Klamath Falls happens most frequently in people's homes, or perhaps outside. Klamath Gay Union meetings were always held in the houses of members, and often consisted of cozy, conversational evenings, when everything was going well. Attendants might share news, experiences, and books, and discuss topics of interest. In Klamath Falls I first managed to find a copy of *Song of the Loon*, a gay classic of the '50s which I'm convinced has as one of its major settings a site somewhere in Klamath County, either on Crater or Upper Klamath Lake. While technically friendships everywhere have the same potential more or less, little town relationships seem more focused on quality than quantity, basically because there are fewer people around to become close to, and so one spends more time with the friends one does have. While one might do the same in the city, due to the sheer numbers, one tends to develop more acquaintanceships in a city, and hence to spend less time on each. A common complaint about modern society is that it has become coldly impersonal, but this problem is more pervasive in urban than rural areas. Certain institutions, such as federal agencies, tend to be bureaucratically faceless wherever you encounter them, but in small towns like Klamath Falls, you are more apt to meet your neighbors and the check-out clerk at the local supermarket than you would in a big city.

Klamath County has a number of positive qualities which are intrinsic to the locality. The environment consists of high desert and forest, with some incredibly beautiful scenery. The Klamath Basin is a paradise for outdoors people who don't mind slightly chilly summer nights occasionally and snow in the winter. Here there is an abundance of hiking, hunting, fishing, and cross-country skiing. Rock hounds and amateur archaeologists may find ample opportunities to pursue their hobbies and be fabulously successful. Gay people interested in American Indian culture will find the old native culture of the Basin of particular fascination since the indigenous society had no apparent discrimination against homosexuals; in fact, one of the most respected and feared shamans of the Klamath Tribe was a homosexual male transvestite known as White Cindy. Also, when Applegate brought white culture to Southern Oregon, the Klamaths didn't even have an institutionalized position of tribal chief,

though the Indian culture in the Basin is verifiably older than any other in the United States except for the ancient Hopi civilization. On a more immediately practical level, Klamath Falls is the sunniest city in Oregon, and has tremendous energy resources. Not only might one make use of abundant solar energy here, but there is also much geothermal potential in the Klamath Basin. While these energy systems are expensive to install, they're cheap or free after that point. In addition, many people in this area heat with wood, and obviously there is a plentiful supply of that around as well. Unlike most regions, the Basin could not only easily be self-sufficient in energy, it could also have extra to export.

While the city of Klamath Falls can honestly only be described as ugly, with a few dramatic changes it could be turned into a very attractive center. Most of the buildings are rather nondescript and would lend themselves handily to some sort of urban renewal development. I've often thought that it would be marvelous if they turned the downtown into a glass-topped, geo-thermally heated greenhouse mall. Although few impressive old edifices remain, there are a number of good examples of art deco architecture here which hopefully have been recognized as being worth saving before being old enough to be candidates for the wrecker's ball. These could be incorporated as focal points in some great architectural development, and indeed one, the Esquire Theater is in the process of such renovation. Klamath Falls also has a superior library for a town its size, as well as a county museum any community could be proud of. Unfortunately, the hours for both of these establishments have been curtailed in the interests of budget cutting, but this unhappy situation is happening everywhere. Klamath County also recently elected two liberal county commissioners, a majority on the three member board, which surprised not a few local citizens, and while candidates for the third position, which is up for grabs this year, don't appear to be very inspiring, the political atmosphere is somewhat hopeful for progressives.

For me, personally, the Klamath Basin has offered much which would have been unavailable or at least more difficult to find elsewhere. My position as a teacher in a rural school has afforded me closer contact with my students than I would have been likely to encounter in a metropolitan school. While this can at times cause me some uneasiness as a gay person in a profession that tends to persecute gay people, it has also allowed me to be a more personal part of my kids' lives, an opportunity that I'll always cherish. In addition, my living arrangement here is perhaps the most pleasant I've ever experienced: I live in a very comfortable little cottage outside of

town, amid horse pastures and with views of two mountains; my house is easily overheated by its woodstove (my other two local habitations had geo-thermal heat), and I have no other utilities except electricity. My quarters are crowded with comfortable furniture, much of which was loaned to me by local friends, and for the past two summers, when I've returned to Portland and summer school, a friend has allowed me to store my humble accumulation of wealth at his place. When I leave Klamath Falls, I'll miss the less hectic pace of life here, which can be boring at times, but which is also mercifully peaceful and uncomplicated.

Like all places, Klamath Falls has its negative qualities; however, there are enough positive characteristics that a gay person might find happiness here, particularly if one values solitude, or moves here with an established lover. Unemployment is high in the Basin, but it seems to be a problem almost everywhere these days, and the cost of living here is low, with inexpensive accommodations easy to find. People here seem able to survive without a great deal of difficulty, though prospering is harder.

There: now that's the last I'll ever write about Klamath Falls, good or bad; it's time to move on to other things. But wait! I forgot to recount the story of the rancher's son who liked "to do it in women's panties." Oh well, it's too late now!



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