

AMAZON TRAIL

Fighting for us

The battle against homophobia in Southern Oregon rages on

by Lee Lynch

On Valentine's Day, Assunta Femia, a self-described 49-year-old working-class Italian American drag queen nun, went to the post office. His innocuous visit ended with a fusillade of bullets fired at his home.

Assunta, a svelte 5 feet 10 inches tall, with golden brown eyes that are by turns intense and serene, lives in a one-gas-station town in rural Southern Oregon. When "a white boy in a pickup truck" yelled "Faggot!" Femia ignored the familiar taunt. For safety's sake, he gave the truck, with its four white male thirtysomething passengers, a good head start, then drove home. He remembers, with a quick weary toss of the head, thinking, "Goddamn, white boys are starting early this year." Then he forgot all about the incident.

"Valentine's Day was beautiful, like spring," Assunta says. "I opened the windows and doors to let Mama in."

He closes his eyes and opens his arms, as if to embrace the sunlight, the warm air, the flowering trees, every bit of flourishing life around him—Mother Nature to some, the work of a creator to others, Mama to Assunta.

Then the bullets came. Six or eight shots from what sounded like a powerful handgun.

"Certainly enough to kill someone," he says with uncharacteristic solemnity.

The attack was hardly big news. Assunta is one of a small colony of gay men who began to settle in the area in the 1970s when the back-to-the-earth movement was strong and all sorts of people sought to live simply on the land, to revel in Mama, to make the world a better place in their quiet ways. But they've never been welcome.



Assunta Femia

Voters in his county historically support hysterical anti-gay, anti-progressive ballot measures and candidates. Assunta says that deputies sometimes don't respond to hate crimes at all. The worst attack in Assunta's memory was in January 1979 when the main house, in which he lived, was burned to the ground. Two children, aged 5 and 7, woke and roused the adults. No one was hurt, but when the men found unexploded Molotov cocktails they called the police. The sheriff's staff, Assunta says, lost the evidence.

Things were different this time.

"If those women had never been murdered in Medford, this would not be this important," he says, referring to the November 1995 abductions and shootings of Michelle Adbill and Roxy Ellis, two well-loved lesbians from the next county south.

Assunta insists on action. Although the FBI was contacted it never became involved, "Because gay and lesbian people aren't covered under the Civil Rights Act of 1964," Assunta was told. Local deputies interviewed the townspeople, and an impressively professional sergeant met with Assunta and brought along a camcorder. The video of his interview is now being used as a law enforcement training tool.

Assunta Femia was born in "a little coal camp" in Holden, W.V., to a family who immigrated to work in the mines. At age 12, in 1960, he moved with his family to South Philly. By 14 he was walking picket lines with the Congress of Racial Equality. He graduated from parochial school and entered a Carmelite order to prepare for the priest-

hood. Was he out?

"I never would have done that. I was such a good Catholic child. Because, number one, it was a sin. Number two, it was a psychiatric disease. And number three, it was illegal, excuse me! I never would have done any of that stuff!" Assunta laughs, demurely lowering his eyes.

A different future loomed for him.

"The Vietnam War was happening. I had to really make a statement about the war." He left the order, refused induction and was indicted. In Boston he was part of a group that very publicly poured black paint on draft files. He did 2-1/2 years of a five-year term in a federal prison in Kentucky and the rest on parole.

He was still in the closet when he entered prison and found himself surrounded by 600 men.

"Twenty-four hours a day I had been repressing her," he says, gesturing gracefully to himself. "You see this queen before you? It took some doing to keep this inside, believe me. Then I fell in love with a big white bank robber from Altoona and had to deal with my sexuality on the spot."

Eventually, Assunta found himself—where else—in San Francisco.

"Nineteen years ago I was dragged, unwilling, to Oregon." And he chose to stay. "My roots are in the country. And this is the only place to really practice our religion about Mama and her many manifestations. I'm not rejecting Catholicism. I'm worshipping the pre-patriarchal Mediterranean religions. The queer religion," he answered when pressed, "is a solemn mystery."

Assunta is a licensed practical nurse who, unwilling, unable to hide who he is, can't get a job. He has gone back to school for his R.N. license in hopes that more education will overcome discrimination. A class-

mate asked if he had to work at being this femme.

"I'm like telling her I have to work all my life not to be this femme. This is as much as I can hold the femme in."

The Sheriff's Department has told Assunta that although the perpetrator of the shooting is known, no one is willing to testify.

"I'm the only witness," Assunta says resignedly. "But I don't mind. I never thought it would get this far."

He raves about the community support he has received.

"Once these dykes and queens got hold of this in Southern Oregon, they were like pit bulls." People besieged the sheriff's office with "phone calls up the wazoo."

A month later the verbal assaults continue. Men shout every time he goes to town. On March 16, while Assunta and a friend examined a tire in front of Assunta's house, a white male teenager screamed from a passing pickup, "Fuck you guys! White power! White power!"

"It's horrifying, but I have been inured to it since I was 5 years old. I want this to be a paradigm shift in the sheriff's office. I want those white boys over there and some who ain't to know that queer people, no matter what you may think of them, deserve the same protection as anybody else; and if we're getting hassled because we're queer, then we deserve more protection."

He adds simply, with the passion of conviction, "This is what nuns do—our nuns—fight for us."

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