

## AMAZON TRAIL

# Learning to march

*For a people accustomed to hiding, to living in shadows, pride comes in steps*

by Lee Lynch

**Y**ou always remember your first. Gay Pride march, that is. I didn't march that first year. The significance of the Stonewall riots had not yet become clear to me. Gay Liberation was suspect. Civil rights were for minorities. I didn't feel like a member of a minority group back then. I had a lover, a job, an apartment, a car. I simply accepted that I had to lie to my family, my co-workers and just about everyone else in my life in order to get and keep what I had.

For me, it was *The Ladder*, that monthly declaration of lesbian independence, that opened my eyes. For others it may have been a simple yearning for freedom, or telltale ulcers—some tip-off that living in closets wasn't good for us.

Then there was a women's dance held in the basement of some sympathetic church. A small group of lesbians met every week to talk, not drink. At a party some exhilarated gay man described a fabulous march in the city with more gay people than he could have imagined. Mainstream newspapers reported crowds of hundreds, thousands.

There was something in the air beckoning, challenging, daring us to all to come out for a few hours, one day a year. We were too young or too oppressed to know that the taste of freedom was more addictive than any substance we'd ever used to dull the pain of living condemned and in hiding.

Those slow, early years of liberation may be a jumble of memories, but not my first march. It was big. We filled the streets as far back and ahead as I could see. You're not really aware you're making history while in the midst of it, but that day I knew—I think we all knew.

We were a force of nature—a river of queers overflowing our banks, a tidal wave of agony splintering a hundred thousand closet doors, the human spirit rising in a tide that would never recede—right there on familiar streets.

Before, we'd walked those streets only at night, always frightened, whispering, hypervigilant and timidly defiant. At my first march the sun shone. We sang "Here come the les-bee-uns!" Didn't we bellow; didn't we strut and sashay.

Oh, the bulldykes and the guys in cowboy hats, the bedazzling, bedecked femmes of all genders! The long-haired boys, the short-haired girls, the costumed and the barely dressed. The chants that blew the roof off the city, the visions that were born and grew. The laughing cops who couldn't guess that we'd be walking beats beside them.

The massed excitement would carry so many of us into then unthinkable queer careers: organizers, politicians, singers, historians of the gay culture. That day we were, unknowing, carrying not only banners and posters, but America's future. While we thought we were having fun, we

were creating a revolution, spawning everything from protective legislation to gay credit cards to rural gay sanctuaries. We were laying the foundation for the Supreme Court to rule against Colorado's Amendment 2.

Deep in the shadow of the citadels of respectability, thousands of us marched. There were bar floats and fun floats and religious floats. We were not only educating those who watched, but ourselves. Imagine, gay people in organized religion. Could we change even the major institutions of our oppression?

Drag queens blazed in their finery, moving sparks of angry, exultant life. They sang their own songs, the cheerleaders of our parade. I remember feeling torn: We'd be damned for their stereotypical antics, but they were at the very heart of queerness.

I wanted to hide them and was ashamed for wanting that. I feared they'd ruin the revolution, and knew their fierce defiance was the revolution. I wanted the drag queens to go away, and I wanted to be a drag queen. Next year I'd wear a tie. Next year.

Once part of our great upheaval I had no doubt that there would be a next year. I looked around that day and saw, by sheer numbers alone, that we were unvanquishable. Strangers smiled at one another. Before, in the bars, in a store, at work, we had used highly evolved signals that involved ducking the head, averting the gaze and telegraphing recognition all at the same time. It was a double-survival tactic: We risked no overt confession and were strengthened by acknowledgment.

When the ticker tape began to float down from windows full of cheering, waving, smiling people, I felt that we were being blessed. We were war heroes. Outer space pioneers. We were presidents that day, and Olympic champions. We were the toast of the town. No one who has been so celebrated can ever go back into hiding.

A woman I'd known in college rushed out of the crowd and hugged me. I'd suspected, but now she told me, told the world, "I'm GAY!" All over the streets the silent sister- and brotherhoods were shouting in welcome and appreciation of one another.

We were thirsty and too excited to wait in line for sodas. We were tired and too buoyant to rest our blistered feet. We were hot and too euphoric to seek shelter.

Shelter found us as we reached the city park. We showered ourselves with water fountain spray and flung ourselves onto the cooling grass. As the speakers praised our numbers, a prowling straight woman tried to pick me up, eager to come out, to be a part of us.

Like the drag queens, the religious queers, the butches with beer bottles, and the women and men who stepped off the sidewalks to swell our power, we marched because everyone deserves a pride day, week, month—a life of pride. You always remember your first.



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**"Together for Freedom United for Justice" Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Pride 1996**

**Friday June 21st  
5 - 10 pm  
Dinner at the Waterfront  
8 - 11 pm  
Youth Dance w/DJ Alex  
Waterfront Park  
SW Front & Ash**

**Saturday June 22nd  
11 am  
The Parade  
NW 9th & Everett  
1 pm  
The Rally  
7 pm  
The Dance  
w/Boka Marimba  
Waterfront Park  
SW Front & Ash**

**Sunday June 23rd  
9 am  
Pancake Breakfast  
10:30 am  
Interfaith Service  
12 noon  
The Festival  
all at Waterfront Park  
SW Front & Ash  
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Rose City Softball Assoc  
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The AIDS Memorial Room establishes a permanent local display of "life journals" representing those men, women and children who have lost their lives to AIDS. The Archives Room will be available for collecting, storing and displaying gay, lesbian and theater community memorabilia. For more information contact Don Horn at 230-9404.