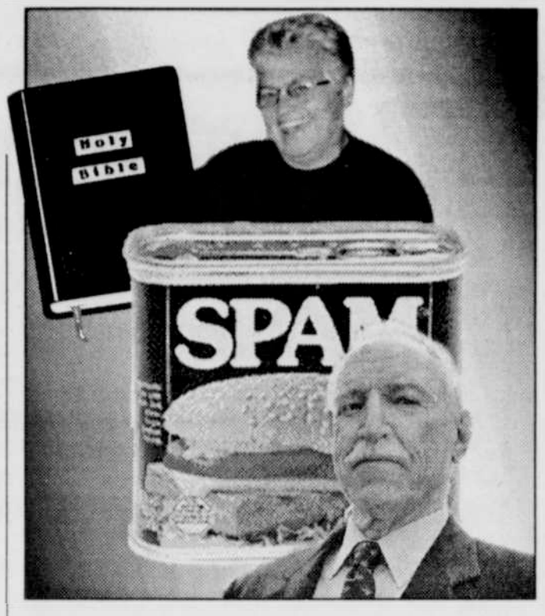

Jean Harris (top) and the man with the Spam, James Hormel

POLITICAL POTPOURRI

From the City of Roses to the District of Columbia, the struggle for equality ebbs and flows

by Inga Sorensen

The voice crackled over the telephone line, long distance from the country's capital: "It was very moving. This couldn't have happened to a sweeter man!"

The voice was that of Jean Harris, who heads up Basic Rights Oregon, a statewide gay and lesbian rights group. She, along with her partner, Gwenn Baldwin, executive director of the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center, had just snagged a glimpse of history by witnessing the swearing in of the nation's first openly gay ambassador.

For nearly two years, conservative senators had blocked James Hormel's nomination to become U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg, fearing he would promote a so-called "gay agenda."

It took a circumventive play by the president in early June to finally install Hormel to the post, and on June 29 the San Francisco philanthropist—flanked by a few hundred friends, family members and dignitaries—was sworn in during a ceremony held in the State Department's main reception room.

Just Out's Washington, D.C., correspondent, Bob Roehr, writes: "James Catherwood Hormel raised his right hand and placed his left on the family Bible held by his life partner, Timothy Wu. Hormel's maternal grandmother had given it to his father in 1901.

"'I do solemnly swear...' Hormel repeated after Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.... When it was done, the room erupted into a joyous round of whoops and applause. It bounced off of the crystal chandeliers and gilded Corinthian columns of the Benjamin Franklin room, that faux antiquity fabricated on the top floor of the modern, architecturally banal seat of American diplomacy. A normally private ceremony was replete with network television cameras."

Albright noted: "This is one of those glorious days when the nice guy finishes first. We are delighted to welcome Ambassador Jim Hormel to our diplomatic team. He has made a lifelong habit of doing well by doing good.... Today we send a message that neither race, nor creed, nor gender, nor sexual orientation is relevant to the selection of an ambassador from the United States."

Roehr reports that the secretary praised Hormel for retaining his grace and sense of humor throughout the bumpy process.

According to the *San Francisco Examiner*, a few days earlier Oregon's Republican senator, Gordon Smith, mingled with Hormel and Wu at a soiree hosted by Luxembourg's ambassador to the United States, Arlette Conzemius, who gave a dinner at her country's embassy in D.C. to welcome Hormel.

About 15 people reportedly attended the affair on Washington's Embassy Row, including California's Democratic senators, Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer.

Smith, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, had called for lifting the holds placed on Hormel's nomination by conservatives. He argued against fellow Republicans, saying Hormel should be judged on his qualifications alone, not his sexual orientation.

"The moral is, you just have to keep fighting," said BRO's Harris.

Sound counsel, which Harris herself will have to follow. After all, the day before Hormel's swearing in, the Oregon House took a mighty whack at same-sex couples in Oregon when it approved House Joint Resolution 4, a proposed constitutional amendment that defines marriage as the union between a man and a woman.

The measure was approved on a 32-26 vote.

"We need to preserve the environment for our children," said Rep. Juley Gianella, R-Aurora, during floor debate. "We are raising a confused generation that doesn't know right from wrong."

Rep. Kevin Mannix, R-Salem, sponsor of the bill, blasted away: "We refuse to validate lifestyles we believe go beyond the line."

Opponents, meanwhile, argued that a definition of marriage has existed in statute for nearly two decades and there's no reason to cement that language into the constitution.

"I don't think we should try to dictate matters of personal choice," said Rep. Bill Morrisette, a Democrat from Springfield.

"What are we afraid of?" added Rep. Jo Ann Bowman, a Portland Democrat. "Why is it necessary for us to pick a group of citizens and say they don't deserve constitutional protection? We're going backwards, folks."

A couple of weeks earlier, House Joint Resolution 29 was tabled, essentially meaning it's kaput.

It was crafted in response to a December ruling in *Tanner vs. Oregon Health Sciences University* that stipulates state and local governments must offer domestic partner benefits to same-sex couples, and that gay men and lesbians are protected from employment discrimination.

HJR29 would have both defined marriage as the union between a man and a woman *and* invalidated *Tanner*; the more streamlined HJR4 specifically targets same-sex marriage.

"Legislators who were with us on HJR29 felt like they had to do something [on the marriage issue], so they went with HJR4," said Harris, who was hopeful up until the final moments that HJR4 would take a dive in the House.

"It was an uphill battle, but we were very close," she said.

The measure now advances to the Senate for consideration.

Despite media reports that HJR4 is headed for a Senate committee that's somewhat less than gay-friendly, Harris thinks there's still time to get it plopped into friendlier waters.

"It's not the done deal some are claiming it is," she said.

But even if HJR4 clears the Legislature—and thus heads for a public vote come November—Harris said she's already working to collect donations for the multimillion-dollar campaign to combat it.

"That's part of the reason I'm here today," she said from D.C., where potential contributors celebrated Hormel's victory.

In related news, the Oregon Republican Party's state central committee backed an Oregon Citizens Alliance anti-gay rights measure poised for the 2000 general election.

It did so in a meeting room at the Salem Public Library. Members of the media were blocked from attending the mid-June gathering at which the committee endorsed an OCA-proposed ballot measure that seeks to prohibit public school instruction from "encouraging, promoting or sanctioning" homosexuality. The meeting marked the first time an entire central committee meeting has been deemed off-limits to the media.

Said Harris: "I think the Republicans are doing us a favor by linking themselves with the OCA. Let them do it!"

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