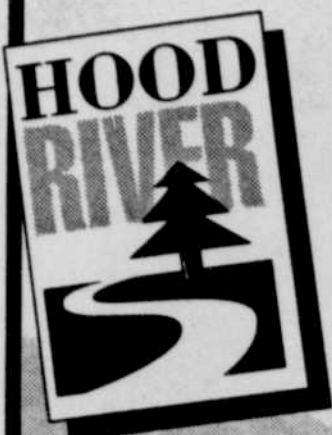
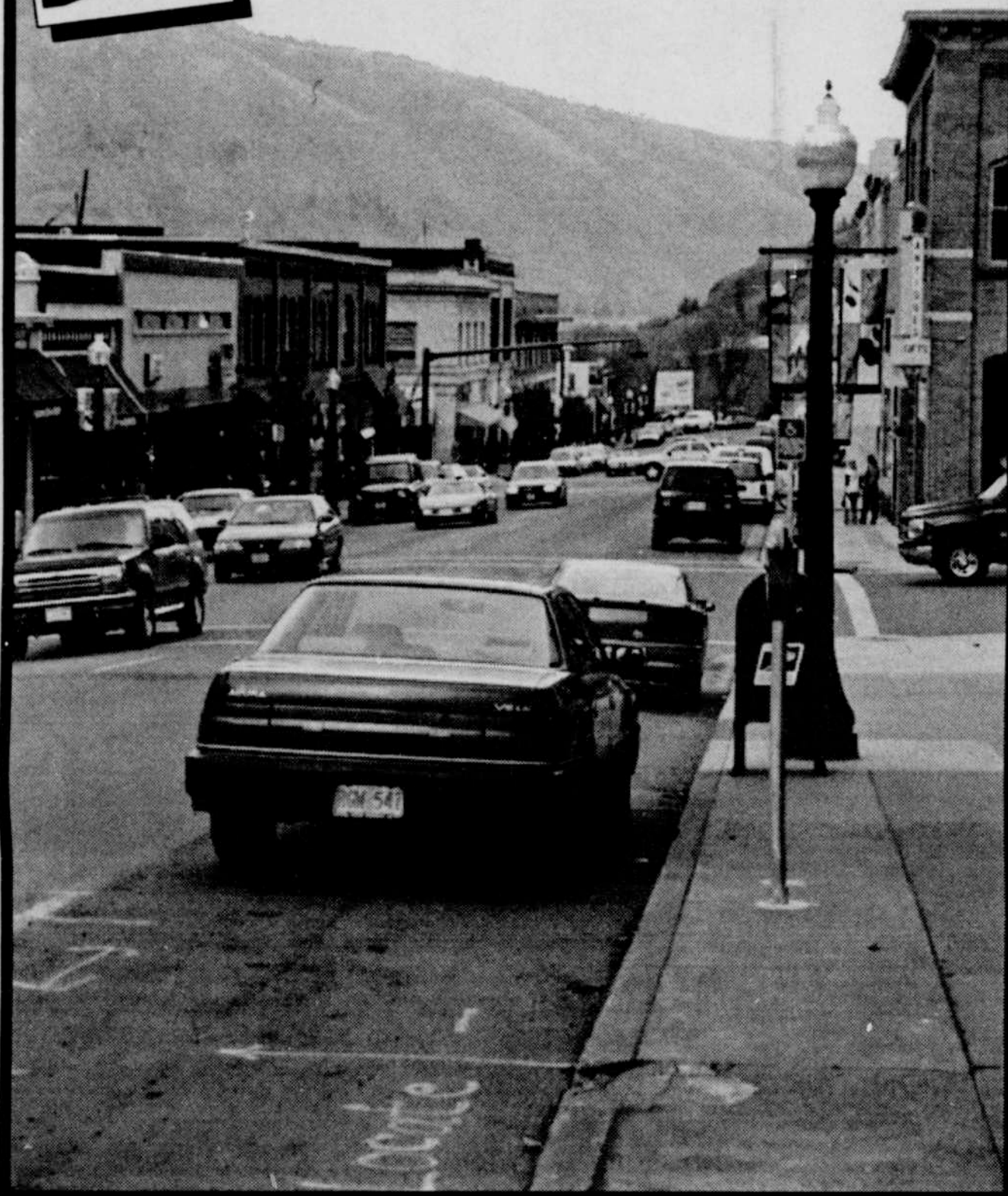




Take Me to the River *The secret is out about the Columbia Gorge*

PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS



Continued from Page 1

All of this quietly has transformed a once-conservative rural region focused on apples and timber into a sort of hub of open-mindedness—and a friendly place for gays and lesbians so rare in the rural United States.

But the secret slowly is getting out. Some Oregon and Washington urbanites are trading their city bungalows and stressful commutes for digs in the Hood River area, five minutes from the nearest river launch. Others are keeping their urban homes and buying acreage to build a weekend getaway. Some arid

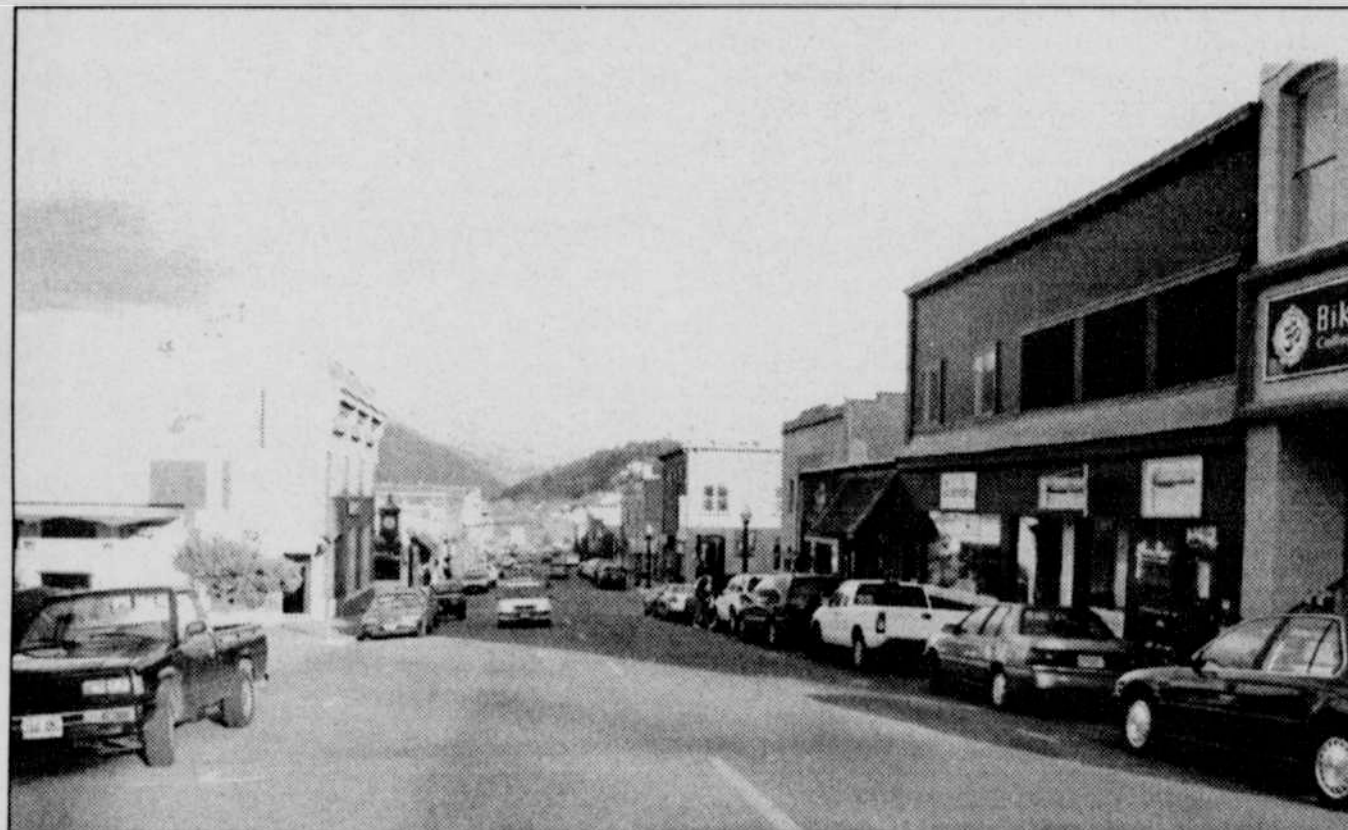
real estate in Washington sells for \$1,000 an acre.

There aren't any bars, pubs or restaurants in the area exclusively serving the gay community. Not yet, anyway.

But the locals are welcoming gays and lesbians like never before. In response, whether

Within a couple of years, a tiny congregation in White Salmon, Wash., just across the Columbia from Hood River, decided to call Erb in for an interview. The church needed a new pastor; she needed a new church.

The church asked to meet with both women during the interview process. Mann



for a Sunday drive and coffee, for brunch at the Columbia River Gorge Hotel or to start a new life altogether, gays are starting to flock to the area.

THE JEW AND THE GENTILE

Five years ago, Amy Mann became completely obsessed with moving from southern Indiana to the Pacific Northwest after she saw the Oregon coastline for the first time. But one major obstacle stood in the way: Her partner of 15 years, Jean Erb, needed to find a church willing to allow her to continue her life's work as a pastor.

Mann and Erb had decided a few years earlier that they weren't willing to live in the closet any longer. They had done that out of necessity before, but they were tired of living a double life. So if Erb was to become a pastor in the Northwest, everyone was going to know she and Mann loved one another. End of story.

went willingly but expected just to observe. To her surprise, the selection committee wanted to know all about her.

Although the women weren't going to keep their homosexuality a secret, Mann's Jewish religion wasn't something they were eager to reveal until people got to know them. But during the interview, one of the committee members asked whether she would be joining the church.

Erb jumped in and answered for her partner. "She can't," she started off.

As it turns out, the women were a hit during the meeting, and not only did Erb get the job at the United Church of Christ in late 1998, they soon moved into the parsonage next door. Erb proudly says the 123-year-old church—which has 80 members, about 30 of whom show up every Sunday—is the only "open and affirming" congregation between Gresham and Walla Walla, Wash.

The small hillside town of about 2,000,

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