

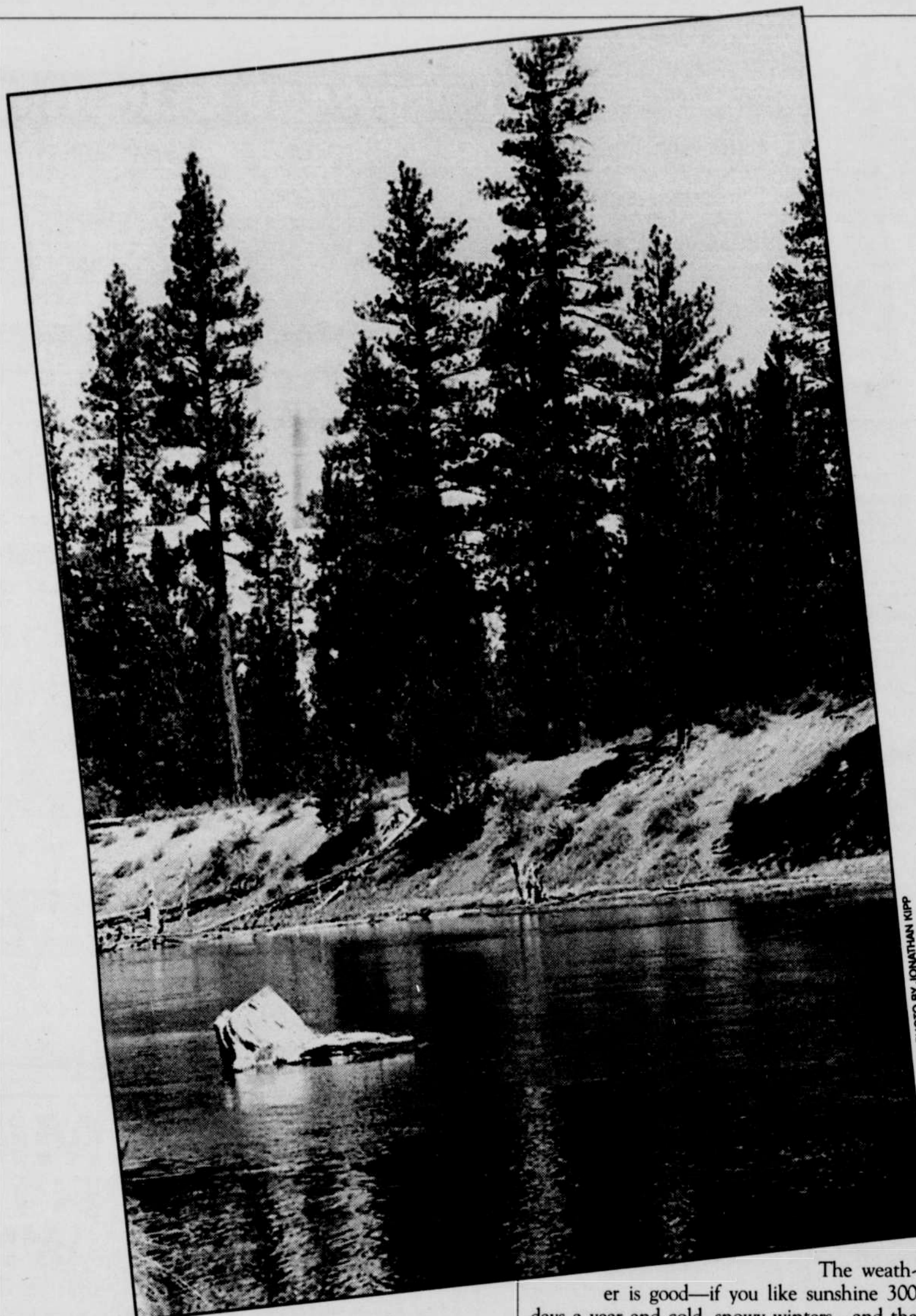


PHOTO BY JONATHAN KIPP

Around the **BEND**

**Gays and lesbians are moving
a little closer to heaven**

by Jonathan Kipp

Once considered just a weekend destination for snow skiing, a round of golf or a Deschutes River raft trip, Bend has changed. Today's Bend, 177 miles southeast of Portland, is more than twice as big (population 52,029) as the smallish town of 10 years ago. Of course, that means more traffic and higher housing costs (the average home costs \$157,000).

But the good news is that growth has brought something positive to the area as well: diversity. And like other growing rural areas in Oregon, especially ones that lure tourists, the region is attracting gays and lesbians, and not just for vacation.

The weather is good—if you like sunshine 300 days a year and cold, snowy winters—and the scenery is among Oregon's best. Although some gay men are selling their urban digs and moving there, lesbians are the driving force of Bend's "gay scene."

With world-class fishing, skiing, golfing and a host of other outdoorsy activities, this town is mostly for the active. "It's a sportswoman's paradise," says Cecilia Lee, who lives near Bend.

Lesbians can be seen fly-fishing and riding horses, while some gay men are spring skiing down the slopes of Mount Bachelor; others are sipping lattes at the sidewalk cafes downtown, waiting for the next Gore-Tex-clad triathlete to saunter by.

Everyone's cheeks seem to be touched with sunshine in Bend—even in April. Residents will tell you there is no better place to live. Wide-open spaces; towering, snow-capped Cascade Mountains framed by blue sky; green fairways; and warm days and cool nights.

Bend might not have a gay bar with a thundering disco beat or a serene bookstore stocked with the latest lesbian-penned fiction, but locals will tell you there is something much better: the night sky. "The best stars," one Portland transplant sighs, "the best stars."

One might wonder if Bend's up-close-and-personal view of the universe makes this growing haven a little closer to heaven. "This is god's country," one woman says.

For more information visit the Internet site www.ci.bend.or.us.

Season's greetings

Gail Witte first visited Bend while on vacation in 1978.

Within two days she knew the small central Oregon city was going to be her new home. She liked the wide-open spaces, the green landscape and the beautiful weather.

"It's me," she says. "It felt like home."

Although Witte just was visiting, she immediately went shopping for a horse ranch—a quest that was one part fantasy and one part pure determination. She quickly found a 65-acre spread that she knew had to be hers.

The catch? "I made an offer without two dimes to rub together," she explains.

Her offer was accepted, and Witte returned home to find investors for her dream. Three months later, with only \$300 in her pocket, no job, no credit and not knowing one person in the area, she made the move from Southern California.

Her background in the horse and feed businesses would help her get a start in her new home. She once had a job at a feed store and later as an \$800-a-month ranch hand working "23 hours a day, seven days a week."

Today, Witte is helping others follow their dream of moving to one the nation's quickest-growing resort towns. Selling real estate and serving as her agency's supervising broker allows her the flexibility to spend time on the area's lakes and rivers, where she pursues her obsession: fly-fishing. During the summer she tries to work no more than three days a week.

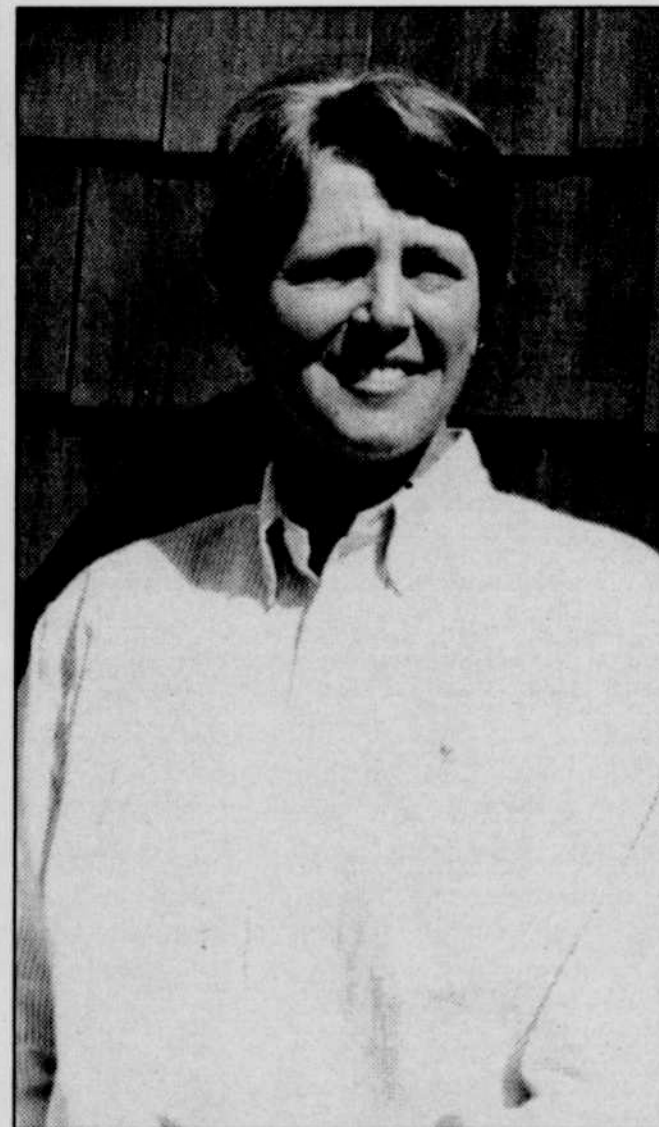


PHOTO BY JONATHAN KIPP

Real estate agent Gail Witte is helping others follow their dream of moving to one the nation's quickest-growing resort towns

More than 60 percent of Witte's clients are gay. Most newcomers, she says, are moving to the area to live and work or retire.

Fewer buy weekend homes and commute from larger cities in the Willamette Valley. Whatever their agenda, Witte says almost all of her clients from Oregon are looking to escape the rain.

They usually come to her via word-of-mouth, from Seattle to Florida. "It's happened all over the country," Witte says about her diverse clientele.