



Bobbie Willis

Where She Hangs Her Hat

Do women seeking women seek Eugene as home? ■ By Bobbie Willis

If gay and lesbian rights were in a soup pot on the stove, now would be an interesting time to see whether that pot o' rights cooks to something presentable or boils over in a charred and smoky disaster. Given last year's local enactment of the Domestic Partnership Registry, last month's national Supreme Court decision to strike a Texas law banning private, consensual sex between same-sex adults, and the recent move in Canada to recognize same-sex marriages, your gut might tell you, "Things *are* changing ..." But the most difficult of the battles — gays in the military, gay adoption and gay marriage — hang in the balance; all heating up just in time for the 2004 elections.

Census figures do not indicate a definitive number of lesbians nationwide — they only indicate the number of same-sex households willing to be described as such, and willing to participate in the study. The actual number of lesbians could very well be much greater than the census shows. Willingness to participate in such studies to more accurately reflect the true numbers of gays in America will depend on what future developments take place in gay and lesbian rights nationwide.

In any case, to see Eugene ranked so high on a list of cities that doesn't include metropolitan heavyweights such as Boston, Chicago or even New York City might make you wonder: Does the Emerald City deserve such props? Is Eugene a Mecca for women who love women? And what is it about the Big E that appeals to the lesbian community, if it really *does* appeal to the lesbian community?

Good Ol' Girl

Sue Hartman didn't choose Eugene. She was born and raised here. She knew as early as first grade that she was attracted to women, "but I didn't have the words to talk about it ..." she says.

When Hartman was a girl, harboring crushes on other little girls, her conservative mother discovered Hartman's feelings, and as Hartman describes it, "The shit hit the fan ... I wasn't allowed to figure out my sexual identity for sure."

"So," she says, "I had boyfriends in junior high school." Later, in the early 1960s, while a student at South Eugene High School, the shit, so to speak, again hit the fan. "I fell in love with one of my best friends, who was straight. The school found out ... South Eugene was nothing like it is today ... Nobody came out. I was out there by myself, ostracized by my friends."

Later after that emotional upheaval, Hartman joined South Eugene's softball team. She even agreed to join a teammate on a double date. And, she says a little ruefully, "I got interested. You know, he was a nice guy, a country boy. We got married and moved to Seattle, which" she pauses, "didn't work out."

Soon after they married, Hartman's husband was drafted to fight in Vietnam, and she says, "People are different after war." She and her husband did have a child together, a daughter.

Hartman didn't choose Eugene, but after three years in Seattle and a split from her husband, she decided to move back home. "Actually, I moved back to Springfield," she says. "More affordable." She worked as a heavy equipment operator, a job scene that didn't make it easy to meet people, or more specifically, to meet women.

Hartman decided after some time to take action: She started a social group for lesbians — a gathering where women could hang together and get to know each other. The group originally began with Hartman and a friend who frequented Neighbors, probably Eugene's most openly queer-friendly hangout.

Seven years ago, a very serious on-the-job

accident left Hartman with little time or energy to contemplate nurturing her social network. As a result of the accident and Hartman's stress following, she left her job and has spent the last few years trying, she says, "to get myself together." Only recently has she felt healed enough to approach life with some normalcy, to look around again at the lesbian scene in Eugene.

Last October, she decided to revive the social group, moving it further and further from the nighttime bar scene. "We were at Cornucopia Deli, then North Bank," she says. But the group's growing numbers necessitated a final move to Roaring Rapids Pizza, where they've been happily getting together for months now. Every first and third Saturday of the month at 5 pm, Hartman facilitates a group of women ranging in number "from six to almost 30," in the process of socializing, networking and just generally having a good time. Each of the establishments at which the group has gathered, Hartman says, has "just been so great, treated us all so well."

Has Eugene-Springfield been the perfect place for Hartman? "I haven't been in a committed relationship in 15 years," she says. But her roots run deep here; with her new job as a care provider and a flourishing group of friends, she's here for now.

Career Move

Lynn Stephen, professor and head of the UO Anthropology Department, says, "I didn't *decide* to move to Eugene." Eugene originally came onto her radar when her partner, Ellen, was offered a job with the UO Sociology Department. They moved here from Boston in September 1998. "Basically, [Ellen] said that she would not accept the job if there was not the possibility of a job that I could apply to here, because we were a couple."

Stephen doesn't see Eugene as a hotbed of

lesbian lifestyle and politics, mostly she says, because of her own background and history. "I had lived in Boston since 1979 — basically my whole adult life. Boston was really one of the sort of birthplaces and bastions both of the women's movement and the lesbian and gay movement That was the period of my life when I had the most consolidated, public gay identity type."

Stephen and her partner had both a thriving, politically active social network and a growing family to tend to in Boston. "We had a small child, who was 4 when Ellen applied for the [UO] job and 6 when we finally moved here. We had just bought a house together, and I was tenured and had been promoted to a full professor."

But in September 1998, the UO offered jobs to both Stephen and her partner. "It was being a couple, and actually the university *responding* to that, though it took two years and was uncertain at times ... But the fact that the university took seriously partner hires, and lesbian partner hires — that's why we came. [While] we didn't select to come here ... I felt our relationship was valued, and that the university also valued us as individuals who could contribute something and be a worthwhile investment. This was what got us here."

Stephen did not come with preconceived notions about Eugene being particularly lesbian-friendly. "The talk I heard was more hippie, ecology, etc. My first impressions didn't include this gay thing." It was only after being in Eugene and seeing other couples around town that the tolerance became apparent to Stephen. "But," she says, "I'm not really in that in my daily life at all the way I was in Boston."

Having a family and settling into family-friendly Eugene was more the focus of this place. "I came here as a parent. I got to know all of the parents at school, helped in class, went to a few zillion soccer games ..."

September marks five years in Eugene for Stephen and her family, which includes her 11-year-old son and now another son, three-and-a-half. They have built a community around the kids' school life and their own university connections. Stephen has even been thinking again of specific activism — she's decided to pursue a minor in gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered/queer studies. In fact, she and her partner recently turned down the opportunity to return to the East Coast.

She explains, "As a couple with two children, there were some very positive things about being here versus being in the East: good school system; we like our house; there's tons of stuff for kids — sometimes it seems like Eugene is organized for children; there's no traffic; it's clean; it's safe; kids can walk to school; they can ride their bikes; they have more freedom ... We want to give this experience to our kids."

Is Eugene Stephen's last stop? She says with a smile, "We're here for now."

New Wave

Ashley Birch, 22, moved to Eugene with her high school girlfriend three and a half years ago from Salt Lake City. Birch has been out since she was 15. In comparing life in Eugene to life in conservative Utah, she pauses a second to think and says, "In Utah, at least you know what you're dealing with" in terms of who's going to have a problem with a person's sexual identity. In Eugene, the liberal reputation can be a little misleading, she says.

Birch is part of a thriving new wave of young lesbians in Eugene. Between the UO