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### **“Country Faggots” are Everywhere: Gay and Lesbian Life in Rural America**

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**“Country Faggots” are Everywhere:  
Gay and Lesbian Life in Rural America**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Department of History

Hollins University

15 May 2019

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Roanoke, VA



### *Dedication*

To my friends and family, who have consistently supported me in this and all endeavors. This project would not exist without your care and love. Thank you for fielding panicked calls on the days where this felt impossible, and always reminding me of my own abilities and talents. Thank you, especially, to Taylor, B, Jackie, and Olivia, for always encouraging me to take care of myself, keeping me fed, and never making me feel bad for crying on the bad days. I would not have made it these four years without you.

To Kiera and Anna, who helped me feel like I wasn't the only dyke in all of Idaho.

To the LGBT elders who came before me, who existed in the spaces that I existed in, and paved the way for my life and happiness. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

To Dr. Coogan and Dr. Nuñez, whose classes turned my least favorite subject into my undergraduate major. Thank you for building a department which encouraged me every day to think critically, challenge what I know, and to use history to make the world a better place. I am leaving this school with a love for the past and a passionate desire to make the world a better place, and I owe it to both of you.

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## Introduction

In the small rural towns of mid-twentieth century America, many young men coming of age had their first experience with gay sex before hearing the word “gay” spoken aloud. One day in parochial school, Jim Cross heard the word “homosexual” during a lesson on the Bible. Cross, born in 1938 to a family of farmers in Iowa, described feeling sexual attraction to other males before this particularly enlightening classroom discussion, but that day in class marked the first time he possessed a word to describe what he felt. After searching for this new piece of vocabulary in his school’s dictionary, Cross’s journey to self-acceptance and the formation of his identity as a gay man began. While he would become sexually active in high school and remain that way, he would not come out until 1960.<sup>1</sup> Cross’s story shares similarities with the stories of many young men and women just like him, growing up in, or moving to, rural communities all throughout America. But what brought about this change in self-realization and sexuality?

The 60s and 70s marked a time of great change in LGBT history. The first national gay publications began circulating in the 50s, and the decades following the Lavender Scare marked a new era of visibility of homosexuality and began the discussion of gay rights. In 1964, *Life*, published “Homosexuality in America,” which brought the first waves of information on homosexuality beyond the Bible to many rural homes.<sup>2</sup> The Stonewall riot in 1969 encouraged LGBT resistance to take a radical turn. All of these factors were a part of a larger movement and cultural shift that opened the door for gay men and women to exist in new ways in rural spaces. There are many differences in the lives of gay men and women in rural areas compared to those who lived in large cities, and while most work in LGBT history has focused on the politically active gay communities in cities such as New York City, L.A., and San Francisco, this thesis will

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Cross, “Jim Cross” in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed. Will Fellows, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 76-83. s

<sup>2</sup> Will Fellows, “Part 2: Coming of Age Between the Mid-1960s and Mid-1970s,” *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed Will Fellows, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 129.

examine the ways in which gay men and women in rural areas fit into and enrich this history through oral histories, interviews, and publications that focused on rural gay communities and the specific issues they faced.

There is no strict definition of what makes an area “rural,” as shown by the discrepancy in what qualifies an area as rural within the US government.<sup>3</sup> The demographic interviewed in *Farm Boys* all grew up on farms, in isolated communities and small towns in the Midwest. The readers and writers of *RFD* offer a wider range of rural locations. A map in their fourth issue which showed stars in states where readers were located placed *RFD* readers in southeastern Idaho, throughout South Dakota, in the deserts of Arizona, and in every state except Wyoming.<sup>4</sup> Contributors and readers who wrote to the magazines described living in small towns, on farms, and in isolated areas throughout the country. The two main areas of publication for *RFD* were Grinnell, Iowa, a small college town with a population of 8,402 in 1970, and Wolf Creek, Oregon, for which population data in the 70s was not available, but the population as of 2019 is 1,629.<sup>5</sup> The gay women of *Country Women* often lived on farms, and many lived in rural communes that established themselves deep in the country in attempt to build self-sufficient communities.<sup>6</sup> There are many cities in rural states that have not received the same attention in LGBT histories as New York City and San Francisco, but this thesis will focus on gay men and women who lived in small rural communities, not cities in rural states.

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<sup>3</sup> "What Is Rural?" United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, last updated April 9, 2019, accessed May 13, 2019.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural/>.

<sup>4</sup> Map of readers, *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 2. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, copy in author's possession.

<sup>5</sup> "Total Population for Iowa's Incorporated Places: 1850-2010," Iowa State Data Center, accessed May 13, 2019.

<https://www.iowadatacenter.org/archive/2011/02/citypop.pdf>.

"Zip 97497 (Wolf Creek, OR) People," accessed May 13, 2019.

[https://www.bestplaces.net/people/zip-code/oregon/wolf\\_creek/97497](https://www.bestplaces.net/people/zip-code/oregon/wolf_creek/97497).

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed analysis of lesbian land communes, specifically in the state of Oregon, one can look at Heather Jo Burmeister's Master's Thesis. Heather Jo Burmesiter, "Rural Revolution: Documenting the Lesbian Land Communities of Southern Oregon," (Master's Thesis, Portland State University, 2013).

Rural gay men and lesbian women in the 60s and 70s interacted with their sexuality in a way that was often different from what is commonly represented in current LGBT historical studies. Due to a lack of homosexual representation in the direct community around them, the isolation of rural life, and the watchful eyes of small-town communities, gay men and women in rural areas still struggled for survival at a time when urban, gay meccas were able to thrive and begin a national, political resistance. However, despite these obstacles and perceptions of rural areas, gay men and women were able to define for themselves a gay identity that was uniquely rural, build community despite the absence of movement centers, and discover means of resisting a homophobic society and surviving that preceded the political, rural gay organization that would come decades later. This thesis will shed light on all of the above and attempt to expand the parameters of current LGBT history to include the countless gay men and women who lived outside of the urban realm.

This topic is important to the field of LGBT history because many gay men and women did not have access to the resources that allowed urban gay populations to thrive and organize.<sup>7</sup> The inclusion of rural gay men and women to LGBT history tells a more complete, truthful story of what was happening in the lives of gay people in all corners of the country, big and small. The telling of rural LGBT history is also significant, because it shows those who are currently growing up gay in rural, isolated communities, that they are not the only ones, and that there are others who came before them and lived happy, fruitful lives. Isolation is still a problem for rural

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<sup>7</sup> These “resources” include many places where gay people were able to be out or meet other gay people, such as bath houses, gay bars, gay ghettos. The high populations of cities also allowed for gay people to blend in more and not have such a spotlight on them. The ways in which these facts contributed to the LGBT urban historical narrative are shown in

George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, New York: Basic Books, 2008.

John D’Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*, New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1992.

Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*. First Simon & Schuster Hardcover ed. 2015.



LGBT populations, and to recognize the gay men and women that came before allows representation that is inclusive of rural LGBT populations today.<sup>8</sup>

This thesis will challenge many scholarly works that define being “out” and visibility as the ultimate expression of gay resistance.<sup>9</sup> To define outness as the ultimate expression of resistance is to erase a group of people who did not have the privilege of always being able to be out and any contributions they made towards LGBT resistance. When studying LGBT resistance, it is important to acknowledge the necessity of political resistance, but that does not mean that other forms of resistance should be ignored. Stephen Vider argues convincingly that “the liberation-era image of the closet itself, has long aligned privacy with secrecy, and secrecy with the home. Reiterating a separate spheres ideology, historians have tended to treat domestic spaces and practices as implicitly private, with little bearing on political and communal life.”<sup>10</sup> To analyze the importance of LGBT resistance outside of the public sphere means to re-examine the importance that the actions within the private sphere have on society.

This thesis will also attempt to fill in the gaps left by urban-centric LGBT history. Historians such as Lillian Faderman, George Chauncey, and John D’Emilio focus primarily on urban life and national LGBT movements such as the Gay Liberation Movement and the Homophile movement. In *Gay New York*, Chauncey highlights the many ways in which urban life enabled gay men to exist freely without the watchful gaze of small communities. However, Chauncey states “the making of the gay world can only be understood in the context of the evolution of city life and the broader contest over the urban moral order.”<sup>11</sup> Chauncey is correct in his discussion of cities as large gay centers with many benefits, but he suggests that formation

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<sup>8</sup> Darrel G. Yarbrough, “Gay Adolescents in Rural Areas: Experiences and Coping Strategies” in *Sexual Minorities: Discrimination, Challenges and Development in America*, Sullivan, Michael K., (New York: Routledge, 2003): 138.

<sup>9</sup> Amy Hoffman, “Do Tell: Recovering GLBT History,” *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 20, no. 1 (2013): 22.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Vider, “‘The Ultimate Extension of Gay Community’: Communal Living and Gay Liberation in the 1970s,” *Gender & History* 27 no. 3 (2015): 867.

<sup>11</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 132.

of a gay community cannot happen without urban areas. John D’Emilio, in his essay “Gay Politics, Gay Community: San Francisco’s Experience,” describes the city as “an attractive, even necessary place for gays to live.”<sup>12</sup> Evidence will show that a “gay world” did in fact exist in rural America, and while urban gay life was distinct and the birth place of gay movements in the twentieth century, the presence of rural gay men and women show that the city was not “necessary.”

The chapters in this thesis will examine different aspects of rural LGBT lives and experiences. Chapter One will examine the ways in which gay identity was formed in rural populations. What did it mean for these men and women to be gay? This chapter will analyze the ways in which gay identity was formed in areas with little to no gay representation. How did gay men and women come to terms with their sexual orientation when the words that described them could only be found in a dictionary? How did rural gay men and women interact with their sexual identity compared to gay men and women in cities with a highly visibly gay community? In what ways did sexual identity intersect with other important parts of rural identity, such as class and working background? What role did being “out” play in rural gay identity? This analysis of identity is crucial, as this definition of gay identity informed the way rural gay populations lived and interacted with their sexuality. This chapter, as well as the rest of this thesis, will draw on two main publications: *RFD* and *Country Women*. *RFD* was an independent publication, which began its run in 1974, and was created with the specific aim of connecting gay men in rural areas and providing a space to discuss the unique challenges of rural gay life. *Country Women* was a magazine born out of the radical feminist movement for women in rural areas, and while it did not focus specifically on gay women, many lesbians and bisexual women shared their experiences within its pages. This thesis will also draw upon interviews from *Farm*

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<sup>12</sup> John D’Emilio, “Gay Politics, Gay Community: San Francisco’s Experience,” in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University*, New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1992, 94.

*Boys* by Will Fellows, a collection of interviews of gay men who were all from farming backgrounds in rural, isolated small-town areas. An important thing to note about all three of these sources is that they were all edited by a small group of people. *Country Women and RFD* both had content that was handpicked for the magazine, and it is entirely possible that there were many voices and perspectives left out from the publications that depict different images of rural gay experiences from those represented in this thesis.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, *Farm Boys* also only shows the narratives selected by editor Will Fellows, and there could be many more different narratives out there.

Chapter Two will describe the ways in which gay people in rural areas found community. What methods existed for one gay man to find another in a town of 600 people without being outed? The 1970s were a time when publications like *RFD* and other, non-rural specific, magazines were crucial. Many men and women had to travel hours to nearby, small cities to find sexual partners. In what ways did this constant travel impact their ability to lead a happy life? In areas with small gay populations, what role did straight friends and family play in forming gay people's communities? This chapter will also examine gay men and women who left their rural communities to move to large cities but ultimately returned home to rural areas. Did they find community in cities? How was it different than what they had before? Finding community was an important tool to combatting isolation and living happy, fulfilled lives, and this chapter will highlight success, failures, advantages, and disadvantages of rural life to community building for gay men and women.

The third and final chapter will look at ways in which rural gay communities and individuals worked towards resistance of a homophobic country and the needs within their

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<sup>13</sup> There is an instance shown of fighting between the editors and contributors of *RFD* reflected in several letter correspondence between Stewart Scofield and other men whose writings and contributions were left out of several issues without explanation given. Stewart Scofield Collection on RFD, 1970-1979. University of Southern California's ONE archives. Copies in author's possession.

communities. It is clear through newsletters and oral histories that rural gay men and women who were not politically organized or even publicly out still found methods of resistance, even if that resistance was just to survive and live happily as a gay person. In what ways did gay men and women resist homophobia within their community? In what ways did they resist homophobia on a societal level? Resistance and survival was shaped by gay identity and relied on community. This chapter will not only shed light on an aspect of gay resistance that has received little attention but will help create a framework for gay resistance that is more accessible to those who did not have the same resources as gay communities in liberal city centers.

## Chapter One: Farmers, Feminists, and Fairies

The first step in introducing and integrating rural lives and experiences into the LGBT historical narrative is to create an image of rural gay identity and culture. Scholars already recognize that in the 60s and 70s, “a homosexual subculture had flourished in American cities,” but what about the thousands of gay men and lesbians that lived outside of these cities?<sup>1</sup> While much literature has been devoted to gay identity in urban areas, emerging research has shown that “people do construct gay and lesbian identities” focusing on “the elements rural gays and lesbians enjoy about rural life” as well as the “barriers they face with regards to their sexuality.”<sup>2</sup> This identity formation can be seen in the words and stories of gay men from this time.<sup>3</sup> The recognition and study of gay identity in rural areas is crucial because it not only impacts how gay men and women found community and resisted oppression, but it proves that urbanness was and is not a necessary prerequisite to building a gay identity and subculture.

The personal narratives found in Will Fellows’s *Farm Boys* and the letters and articles published in *RFD*, a magazine “for country faggots everywhere,” show that there was a sizeable population of men in rural spaces who identified as gay in the 60s and 70s. For the most part, these men accepted their sexuality as a part of their identity, whether or not their current environment allowed them to be “out.” For gay women in rural areas, a large amount of the source material comes from the feminist separatist movement that was represented in the publication *Country Women*. The question of identity in the instance of feminist gay women in rural areas is interesting because in most cases, these women’s identities as lesbians were informed by their politics as feminists. Rural gay identity was complex for both men and women.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Bosia and Meredith L. Weiss, “America’s Cold War Empire” in *Global Homophobia States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013): 73.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Kazyak, “Disrupting Cultural Selves: Constructing Gay and Lesbian Identities in Rural Locales,” *Qualitative Sociology* 34, no. 4 (2011): 564. 4

<sup>3</sup> Sally Shortall, “Gender and Identity Formation,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies* ed. Mark Shucksmith, David L. Brown (London: Routledge, 2016): 400-411.

Identity formation was heavily impacted by both the benefits and challenges of living in a distinctly rural space.

Considering identity when discussing the history of a group of people is important, because identity itself is necessary to how society functions. In an overview of identity in her essay on rural gender identity formation, Sally Shortall writes that the identity formation process is a “process of doing” that “is a continuous process rather than a trait of an individual and it is verified or questioned through social relations and social interaction.”<sup>4</sup> Identity is formed through a combination of internal and external factors. Just as identity is determined by both the “individual and collective” it impacts and is essential to the society as much as the individual. “To function,” Shortall claims, “we need shared common knowledge for social relations and social interactions. We need categories of people, and assumptions about collective identities.”<sup>5</sup> Identity is crucial for how humans, the “we” described by Shortall, understand and sort each other. Shortall’s essay also discusses the ways in which, on a personal level, the reinforcement of one’s identity is linked to positive emotions while negative emotions are linked to the threatening of one’s identity.<sup>6</sup>

Identity is important, and for rural gay men and women, gay identity was informed by several different factors: societal attitudes towards homosexuality, exposure to homosexuality and the concept of a gay identity, and rural life and upbringings. The 1950s brought a new wave of homophobia to America in the form of the Lavender Scare. Lillian Faderman wrote that in the wake of WWII “the ‘homosexual’ became a particular target of persecution in America. He or she presented an uncomfortable challenge to the mood that longed for obedience to an illusion of

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<sup>4</sup> Shortall, “Gender and Identity Formation,” 401.

<sup>5</sup> Shortall, “Gender and Identity Formation,” 401.

<sup>6</sup> Shortall, “Gender and Identity Formation,” 401.

uncomplicated morality.”<sup>7</sup> This targeting was seen in the governmental persecution and witch hunt of homosexuals initiated by Senator Joseph McCarthy. The events of McCarthyism had “created a legacy of suspicion that has been hard to overcome,” with homophobia and discrimination based on sexuality being so visibly enforced by the government.<sup>8</sup> Dennis Lindholm, born in southwestern Iowa, recalled the way in which these events impacted his perception of homosexuality, “the messages that I got about homosexuality were all very negative... Every once in a while, the newspaper would have an article about a purge in Washington.”<sup>9</sup> Not only were those who were being persecuted and fired impacted by the homophobia, but it was also shaping the way both straight and gay Americans viewed gay men and women.

Not only was identity formation shaped by the negative perceptions of homosexuality in American society, there was also a shift in the 60s and 70s that encouraged discussion of sexuality. Faderman cites the free sex movement that arose from countercultures of the 60s as something that opened the door for gay men and women to explore their own sexualities.<sup>10</sup> Emilio also highlights the impact of gay subcultures in American cities. Even if rural gay men and women did not have the same experience as urban gays, the American public’s “willingness to acknowledge the presence of a gay subculture in American cities” showed “a change in social reality, the rapid maturation in postwar America of a stable, gay world that could no longer escape detection.”<sup>11</sup> Gayness was no longer a secret, even in the most rural corners of America.

With countless manuscripts on the national forms of homophobia that was a part of the general American society, the homophobia described by the men in *Farm Boys* and *RFD* often

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<sup>7</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-century America*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 140.

<sup>8</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 155.

<sup>9</sup> Dennis Lindholm, “Dennis Lindholm,” *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 89.

<sup>10</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 202.

<sup>11</sup> John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Masking of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 139.

manifested in a critique of one's masculinity. Jim Cross remembered the ways in which "the jocks—the real macho guys—the big brutes gave me the hardest times in high school... they would get on my case about being a real femme."<sup>12</sup> Cross referenced these insults, being called 'Nellie' in the same sentence as being called "fag" and "homo."<sup>13</sup> Cross's experience was common and can be found in most of the stories shared inside *Farm Boys* and *RFD*. Excelling at patchwork or other "women's work," was often looked down on. Even though mocking somebody's masculinity does not mandate a connection to sexuality, Cross and other men specifically spoke about this kind of mockery in relation to their experience as gay men. In addition to the specificity of mockery, many gay men experienced negative reactions from at least some of their family members upon coming out.<sup>14</sup> While these experiences are a part of what shape rural gay identity, it is important to remember that they are not uniquely rural, as shown in the national events discussed previously.

Some scholars cite small town homophobia as a reason why current research and history has been so urban-centric because "rural space signifies oppression."<sup>15</sup> While violence and homophobia were present in rural spaces and should not be ignored or erased from history, it is also dismissive to state that all rural spaces signify oppression. Many gay men faced homophobia in rural areas, but many also found acceptance and peace. One *RFD* contributor discussed a couple he was close with who said "among their small town and farm neighbors they are enjoying a peace and acceptance of themselves as human beings," and in *Farm Boys* another man describes two women who "lived together in our town, they were accepted by the

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<sup>12</sup> Cross, "Jim Cross," 82.

<sup>13</sup> Cross, "Jim Cross," 82.

<sup>14</sup> James Heckman, "James Heckman," *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 100.

<sup>15</sup> Kazyak, "Disrupting Cultural Selves," 563.



community.”<sup>16</sup> Two homosexual couples being accepted is not a narrative often heard when it comes to rural experiences. Numerous gay men also received positive reactions from their families upon coming out. Cross happily shared how his family supported him and his relationships, describing his partner as “like a member of the family, and it’s been that way for a long time.”<sup>17</sup> While these sources do not mean that homophobia did not exist in rural spaces, they do depict rural communities having the capability of being accepting spaces where gay identity can flourish.

For most gay men in twentieth century, rural America, same sex attraction was noticed and sometimes acted on before those men even had an awareness of homosexuality as a concept, a part of an identity, and something they could accept about themselves. This acceptance is clearly seen in the narratives shared in *Farm Boys*. Harry Beckner, who grew up in a family of farmers in Nebraska, married a woman in 1957 to “get away from home,” but even on his wedding day he felt an attraction to the men in his wedding party.<sup>18</sup> Beckner described always having an interest in men, this attraction being “such a part of me that I always accepted it as being natural... I assumed everybody did it, because *I* felt comfortable doing it. I never thought of myself as homosexual and I knew of no one that was... I thought you had to be some kind of a fruit loop to be one [a homosexual].”<sup>19</sup> This distinction that Beckner drew between his attraction to men and being a homosexual shows that, even if he was coming from a place of denial, experiencing same sex attraction does not automatically mean sexuality is an aspect of someone’s identity.

Beckner did not accept his sexuality after his wife’s relatives returned from a trip to California and told the story of a man who left his wife for another man. They told Beckner “Can

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<sup>16</sup> “Gay Green Thumbs,” *RFD* (Summer, 1975): 10. And Harry Beckner, “*Harry Beckner*,” *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 69

<sup>17</sup> Cross, “Jim Cross,” 82.

<sup>18</sup> Beckner, “Harry Beckner,” 68.

<sup>19</sup> Beckner, “Harry Beckner,” 69.

you believe it? They call it ‘gay,’” which immediately led Beckner to accept “god, that’s what I am.”<sup>20</sup> While Beckner had recognized his attraction to men before this moment, it was not until he heard the word “gay” that he introduced homosexuality as a part of his identity. Beckner remained married to his wife for twenty more years, secretly having sex with men before coming out to his wife and his family. It is important to note that even though Beckner was not “out” until the 80s, by the 60s he clearly had formed and accepted his identity as a gay man and allowed himself to pursue sexual relationships with other men. There are many men in *Farm Boys* who share stories similar to Beckner, whose identities as gay men came with many years of secrecy.<sup>21</sup>

Narratives like Harry Beckner’s, which detail the eventual acceptance of gay identity show that rural gay identity formation was shaped by the cultural context discussed earlier, but also by specific aspects of rural life. One of those aspects was rural definitions of masculinity. As mentioned above, masculinity played a large role in homophobic comments and taunts, but it also played a large role in gay identity formation. In Berit Brandth and Marit S. Haugen’s work on masculinity, they identify physical strength, land ownership, dominance over nature, and competency with machinery as integral to rural standards of masculinity.<sup>22</sup> The relationship between men and women was also crucial to rural standards of masculinity, as men were the strong landowners while women handled cooking, cleaning, and other feminine duties. The inherent importance of heterosexual relationships to masculinity can be seen in the ways in which gay men growing up in rural areas experienced homophobia and bullying. This connection between masculine and heterosexual also impacted the way in which gay men interacted with their own masculinity.

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<sup>20</sup> Beckner, “Harry Beckner,” 69.

<sup>21</sup> Similar stories to Harry Beckner can be found in *Farm Boys* under “Cornelius Utz, Missouri,” “James Heckman, Indiana,” “Dennis Lindholm, Iowa,” or “Myron Turk, Wisconsin,” among others.

<sup>22</sup> Berit Brandth and Marit S. Haugen, “Rural Masculinity,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies* ed. Mark Shucksmith and David L. Brown, (London: Routledge, 2016): 414.

Rural masculinity, which was so closely tied to heterosexuality, was a point of friction for many gay men that impacted their identity formation. Many gay men self-described themselves as the negative terms that had been thrown at them throughout their whole lives: Nellie, sissy, and others. It was common for gay men to describe spending more time helping around the house with their mothers and sisters than out in the fields with their fathers. Cornelius Utz, from Missouri, excelled at crochet and embroidery, but “wouldn’t allow my brothers to see my doing it.”<sup>23</sup> Performing traditionally feminine rural actions was available to men, but they still possessed an awareness that what they were doing differed from the norm. Utz actively tried to “be a good, sturdy, non-sissy guy,” by feigning interest in sports and playing football, even though he hated it, because “it would make me more of a man.”<sup>24</sup> There was a clear pattern of gay men showing an interest in traditionally feminine activities, but Utz illustrated the ways in which many gay men also resisted feminine activities and actively pursued a more standard form of rural masculinity. Gary Menger, an *RFD* contributor, remembered the beginnings of being “grandma’s boy... and a sissy” was “the beginning of being aware of difference, the awakening of hunger.”<sup>25</sup> Menger detailed a long and painful process of accepting that awakening. Still, he was nonetheless able to recognize those aspects of his personality that were looked down on as integral to his awakening as a gay man.

Another factor that impacted the way in which gay men formed a gay identity was a rural cultural practice of “sexual prudishness.”<sup>26</sup> Will Fellows, editor of *Farm Boys*, discussed the pattern seen among rural communities of this time where the only form of sex education that young men received was often limited to watching livestock breed. Many men recall how,

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<sup>23</sup> Cornelius Utz, “Cornelius Utz,” in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed. Will Fellows (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 35.

<sup>24</sup> Utz, “Cornelius Utz,” 40.

<sup>25</sup> Gary Menger, “Full Circle,” *RFD*, no. 1 (Fall, 1974): 8. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>26</sup> Will Fellows, “Introduction,” in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed. Will Fellows (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 18.

growing up in rural communities, parents and other adults stressed that *any* sex was a topic to be kept quiet. For Cornelius Utz's parents, "anything sexual was to be controlled or denied."<sup>27</sup> For some men, this attitude towards sexuality impeded the formation of gay identity because the idea of a sexual orientation being a part of one's identity inherently makes sexuality a more public issue. Here is one of the ways in which national discussions on sexuality became important, because they allowed many men to see past the limited view of sex that rural communities offered.

While a rural upbringing could make gay identity formation difficult, many gay men cited that background as what allowed them to accept their sexuality. For Cross, his proximity to nature gave him "a completely different perspective on how you deal with other people as well as yourself... I had a lot of time to think my own thoughts and to process those thoughts."<sup>28</sup> Away from hectic city life, Cross was allowed the space to come to terms with his sexuality. For James Heckman, growing up on a farm gave him a perspective that allowed him to see being gay as "a very natural thing. Some cornstalks do not bear ears of corn... On a farm, you accept that some things are out of the ordinary. That has helped me to accept being gay."<sup>29</sup> Here, rural life and perspective directly supported gay identity. One *RFD* reader cited his country background as something that allowed him to connect better with other gay men, stating "the country has changed or shaped our personalities so that we fit still well together."<sup>30</sup> In this instance, rural identity helped him find a community that he needed as a result of his identity as a gay man.

One of the most prevalent aspects of rural gay identity and life seen in *RFD* is the awareness of, and the attention given to, the differences between rural and urban gay experiences.

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<sup>27</sup> Utz, "Cornelius Utz," 35.

<sup>28</sup> Cross, "Jim Cross," 82.

<sup>29</sup> James Heckman, "James Heckman" in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed. Will Fellows, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 101.

<sup>30</sup> Jon Ruwoldt, "More Letters, *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 17. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author's possession.

In the first issue of *RFD*, the founders stated that “as gay people living in the country we felt a need for things that urban-oriented gay publications and adamantly heterosexual country magazines could not provide.”<sup>31</sup> Not only was there a recognition that rural gays lacked representation, but there was the acknowledgement that the rural gay experience was markedly different. This sentiment was also shared by the readers of *RFD* who sent in letters describing a desire for “country queers to build a community with our common bonds of rural, alternative identification” and the need to “provide the means of sharing with each other our thoughts, feelings, and ideas about our unique experience as gay country people.”<sup>32</sup> These men knew that rural life impacted their experiences and needs as gay men and set them apart from the mainstream gay movement.

While readers and writers of *RFD* made it clear that there was a difference between rural and urban gay men, the population of rural gay men had a division within itself. David Bell and Gill Valentine identified two different kinds of rural gay men and lesbians in their own work as “those gay men and lesbians born and raised in rural areas... and those who choose to move to a country location.”<sup>33</sup> Clearly, directly and indirectly, rural gay men were aware of these differences, and the ones that discussed this difference most openly tended to be those gay men born and raised in rural areas. While many men praised *RFD* and what it provided for them as often isolated, gay men, one man who identified himself just as “Bumpkin of N.C.” critiqued *RFD* as “a product of the urban Youth cult,” and said that actual country people “aren’t much into consciousness, of either the cosmic or self-celebrating variety.”<sup>34</sup> For this man, the urban gays who had moved to rural areas to join communes or simply to “get away” from the city did

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<sup>31</sup> RFD staff, “untitled,” *RFD* 1, no. 1 (Fall, 1974): 1. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>32</sup> Ollie, “More Letters,” *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 16. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession. And RFD staff, “untitled,” 2.

<sup>33</sup> David Bell and Gill Valentine, “Queer Country: Rural Lesbian and Gay Lives,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 11, no. 2 (1995): 117.

<sup>34</sup> Anonymous, “Letters,” *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 3. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

not “count” to him as actual rural men. He saw their priorities as removed and irrelevant from actual rural gay men. Another man shared a similar sentiment, stating his preferences for “the company of the apolitical rural faggots to many of the urbanized faggot revolutionaries.”<sup>35</sup> Not only was there a distinction drawn by both of these men, but there was also a preference for rural gay men over “urbanized” gay men.

This division within the rural gay community raises the question of whether or not simply living in a rural area makes someone a rural gay, or if they are simply still an “urbanized” gay man living in the country. This difference is also shown more subtlety in the ways that gay men who moved to the country discussed the rural culture around them. One man originally from a city described a “certain Wild-West mentality” and his fear of “how red of neck people around us can be.”<sup>36</sup> This perception showed an unfamiliarity with the rural culture, and a distance this man had put between himself as a gay man and those around him with a distinctly rural identity. The question of whether or not physical presence in rural spaces created a rural gay identity can also be seen by those men who were born and raised in country areas and moved to urban areas, but still felt connected to their rural identity. One man who moved to Palo Alto, California missed “a lot of the country experiences which I grew up with,” feeling a sense of loss being in a city.<sup>37</sup> If urban gay men did not lose their “urbanness” and did not gain a complete rural identity just by moving to rural spaces, then rural gay men did not lose their ruralness by relocating to cities.

While the evidence above focuses on gay *men* in rural areas, the radical feminist movement of the 60s and 70s produced the strongest body of evidence to analyze gay women in

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<sup>35</sup> Faygele Singer, “Letters,” *RFD* no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 36. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>36</sup> Allan Troxler, “A Rejection,” *RFD*, no. 1 (Fall, 1974): 15. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>37</sup> David Gilber, “Letters,” *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 2. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

rural areas at that time. For white, gay men in rural areas, their sexuality was the main part of their identity that was challenged by society. However, for gay women, their identity as women was just as important as their identity as homosexuals, and for many of the contributors and readers of *Country Women*, they were feminists first and lesbianism was an expression of their feminism.

Rising out of the male-dominated leftist leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, feminists at this time began a new political movement based on opposing hierarchy, achieving gender equality, and for many women, leaving a male-driven society through separatism.<sup>38</sup> *Country Women* was a magazine that rose from this feminist movement, and described itself as “a feminist country survival manual” that was created “for women living with women, with men, and alone, for women who live in the country already and for women who want to move out of the cities.”<sup>39</sup> While the focus of the magazine was not on gay women, gay women were indeed a part of the rural population that this publication sought to reach.

The women of *Country Women* who identified as lesbians or “woman-lover” showed that their identity as rural gay women was shaped by their politics and gender before anything else. One writer, identified only as ‘Morningstar’ described how she identified herself before becoming a feminist as “daughter, mother wife,” and then afterwards identifying as “witch, dyke, amazon, socialist, lesbian, feminist, more.”<sup>40</sup> For this woman, it was her realization of feminism and her desire to be separate from men that led her to identify as a lesbian. Another writer,

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<sup>38</sup> Alice Echols’ *Daring to be Bad* offers an in-depth look into the leadership, or lack there-of, different splinters, and theories of the radical feminist movement from 1967-1975. Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

<sup>39</sup> *Country Women*, no. 3 (March 1973): 1. Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University. Accessed May 13, 2019. <https://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices?a=d&d=DIAEEHI19730301&e=-----en-20-DIAEEHI-1--txt-txIN-lesbian-----1>

<sup>40</sup> Morningstar, “The Woman in the Mirror,” *Country Women*, no. 17 (October 1975): 13. Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University. Accessed May 13, 2019. <https://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices?a=d&d=DIAEEHI19751001&e=-----en-20-DIAEEHI-1--txt-txIN-lesbian-----1>

identified as ‘Sunlight’ wrote that she had “discovered lesbian feminism as a new way of being and as a new culture being born.”<sup>41</sup> For Sunlight, lesbian was the descriptor that she applied to feminism—the two were inseparable. There were many more contributors of *Country Women* who discussed a similar connection between their identity as lesbians and their identity as women and feminists.

In addition to the many women who articulated a process of “becoming” lesbians or changing through feminism, many women identified as lesbians before they were feminists. Elsa Gidlow, while reflecting on her sexuality, wrote, “early I knew that my love and commitment were to women. ‘Becoming’ a lesbian is a strange concept to me. One does not become what one is.”<sup>42</sup> Even though it took many years for Gidlow to begin having relationships with other women, she clearly saw herself as always being a lesbian and that her attraction to women was a part of her identity.

Not only was lesbianism an important part of identity for many rural women, but it was also something that made their lives better. Many women cite an increase in confidence and life satisfaction after joining rural lesbian communities. A woman identified as ‘Weed’ discussed how “being a lesbian and relating to women gives me so much emotional and sexual pleasure. I can feel open about my feelings and desires before, during and after making love, without a heavy power trip laid on me.”<sup>43</sup> For Weed, lesbianism enriched her life because it allowed her to be free from the hierarchal gender structures present in heterosexual relationships. This

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<sup>41</sup> Sunlight, “Changing Focus” *Country Women*, no. 28 (March 1978) 34. Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University. Accessed May 13, 2019.

<https://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices?a=d&d=DIAEEHI19780301&e=-----en-20-DIAEEHI-1--txt-txIN-lesbian-----1>

<sup>42</sup> Else Gidlow, “Seventy Plus Has Many Plusses” *Country Women*, no. 11 (July 1974): 18. Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University. Accessed May 13, 2019.

<https://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices?a=d&d=DIAEEHI19740701&e=-----en-20-DIAEEHI-1--txt-txIN-lesbian-----1>

<sup>43</sup> “Weed,” *Country Women*, no. 15 (April 1975): 8. Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University. Accessed May 13, 2019.

<https://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices?a=d&d=DIAEEHI19750401&e=-----en-20-DIAEEHI-1--txt-txIN-lesbian-----1>



celebration of identity showed not only the way women perceived the importance of their own identity, but the way that, again, lesbian identity was related to feminist/separatist politics.

Another distinct facet of feminist lesbian rural identity was the population of lesbians who also practiced celibacy. Moon and Leila were two women who wrote to *Country Women* to discuss the relationship between their voluntary celibacy and their identities as lesbians. Moon stated that “though I hold myself separate and celibate and have for most of seven years, I define myself as a lesbian, I’m on an exploration into self-love.”<sup>44</sup> Moon’s self-definition showed that sexual intercourse was not necessary in all cases for women to identify as lesbians. Even without the presence of sex, Moon was still able to find comfort and categorization within lesbianism. For Leila, she was not able to come to terms with her sexual identity until she entered a time of celibacy. Her celibacy allowed her to “let go of another aspect of my sexual conditioning—the taboo against sleeping with women... It may be that my sexual identity, already much shaken, quakes at the thought of thinking of myself as a lesbian, but as I talk about what I want in a relationship, I see that most of the warmth and support in my daily life comes from women.”<sup>45</sup> This anecdote showed that for one woman, a lack of sex was the only thing that allowed her to come to terms with her identity. This narrative is unique to lesbian feminists and highlights how much thought and reflection was given towards identity and identity formation at this time.

With a more solidified picture painted of what rural gay identity looked like, and what changes it brought to gay men and women’s lives, there is still the question of how gay identity intersected with rural identity. As mentioned before, most rural gay men did not separate themselves as gay men from their identity as rural men. One *RFD* contributor phrased the

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<sup>44</sup> “Moon,” *Country Women*, no. 15 (April 1975): 5. Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University. Accessed May 13, 2019.

<https://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices?a=d&d=DIAEEHI19750401&e=-----en-20-DIAEEHI-1--txt-txIN-lesbian-----1>

<sup>45</sup> “Leila,” *Country Women*, no. 15 (April 1975): 9. Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Duke University. Accessed May 13, 2019.

<https://voices.revealdigital.com/cgi-bin/independentvoices?a=d&d=DIAEEHI19750401&e=-----en-20-DIAEEHI-1--txt-txIN-lesbian-----1>

question well, saying “Time to accept being gay, with neither unwarranted shame nor pointless pride, and time to think constructively—what to do about being gay. Was it so damned important anyway?”<sup>46</sup> This question of importance was not uncommon. Rural men, especially those who were in charge of farms or dairies, had a lot of responsibility on their plate, and many had a clear sense of their identity as gay men, but saw it as just a simple fact of life. For those men, their sexuality was an aspect of their identity, but it did not define them; they were “just folks who happen to be homosexually inclined.”<sup>47</sup> Many of these men were more concerned with day to day life than their sexuality. The very existence of *RFD* and the stories of the men in *Farm Boys* shows that many rural gay men saw their identity as something that was defining to them and their way of life.

Rural gay men and women saw their rural background as just as important to their identity as their sexuality. The idea of being “shaped” by the country is common among many men, describing rural spaces as “where my foundation was laid;” recognizing the importance of their backgrounds to who they are as men, and inherently, gay men.<sup>48</sup> For one *RFD* reader, his rural identity caused tension between himself and his urban gay friends who “cringe noticeably when I mention chittlins,” but he refused to sacrifice the rural part of his identity because “... It is enough to say that all of my life is forever with me, making me permanently linked to rural Southern Ohio. And you know, I like it!”<sup>49</sup> This statement highlights the ways in which even when rural identifiers and culture caused conflict within a gay community, it was still an important part of rural, gay men’s identities and they were willing to give it up. A contributor to *Country Women* wrote that “I moved to the country for a while and another world opened up.

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<sup>46</sup> Menger, “Full Circle,” 10.

<sup>47</sup> Peter, “July 28,” *RFD*, no. 1 (Fall, 1974): 6. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>48</sup> Cross, “Jim Cross,” 83

<sup>49</sup> L. Allen Barr, “Letters,” *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 2. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

Everything was there.”<sup>50</sup> Again, living in the country, in a rural space, was seen as something that made homosexuality possible.

With the establishment that a tangible rural, gay identity did exist in the 70s, it is necessary to analyze the struggles that were specific to this identity. One of the biggest and most widely identified struggles that rural gay men faced was that of isolation and “alienation from each other.”<sup>51</sup> This rural struggle is significant, because rural gay men did not have the same access to bars, cruising locations, and did not have a large, visible gay community around them like those documented in George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* or in Lillian Faderman’s *The Gay Revolution*. One man wrote that “there are not enough open homosexuals in Josephine County to fill a single row in the tiny Evergreen theater for one night.”<sup>52</sup> It is understandable why gay identity formation happened differently in a rural area because of the sense of isolation and distance from any other gay community.

One hopeful reader, excited about the creation of *RFD*, wrote that “perhaps this magazine will help break down that sense of isolation from things gay,” showing that this isolation was not just a sense of loneliness, but also an isolation from gay culture.<sup>53</sup> Aside from cultural isolation, rural life also presented many difficulties in terms of the emotional growth that a gay man coming to terms with his sexuality needed. One reader, writing to *RFD*, recalled how “growing up gay is difficult enough in a larger community or city. When you come from a rural setting, communicating your feelings to someone who will understand and accept you, it is even harder.”<sup>54</sup> It is likely that part of why rural gay identity was such a separate entity from urban gay identity, was that gay men in rural spaces had to come to terms with their identity in a

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<sup>50</sup> Sunlight, “Changing Focus,” 34.

<sup>51</sup> Vider, “The Ultimate Extension,” 866.

<sup>52</sup> Carl Wittman, “Coming Home” *RFD*, no. 1 (Fall, 1974): 20. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>53</sup> Peter, “July 28,” 6.

<sup>54</sup> Gerry Olson, “Letters,” *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 2. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

typically different way than those men in urban areas. Sociologist Stephen O. Murray states that “organs for communicating a positive view of a group are essential to positive self-identification,” so it makes sense that rural gay identity would be different as these “organs for communicating” were either different or nonexistent in rural spaces.<sup>55</sup>

While the struggles of isolation in rural life impacted gay identity and life, there were also several benefits to rural life. Urban gay men would not be leaving cities to join communes or buy farms if there were no aspects of rural living that were in some way compatible with, or helpful to, gay identity and needs. In fact, some rural men even expressed that their location made aspects of gay life easier and more accessible. One of the men who expressed frustrations above with the lack of a gay population in the world around him was also very vocal about the benefits of being rural that urban gay men were “deprived of.” These benefits ranged from “the banal but important clean air, the fresh food,” to “the space and time to pursue a relatively open and honest loving relationship—without the constantly destructive and distracting city phenomena: sexist advertising, fear of violence, intricate sexual games.”<sup>56</sup> For Wittman, rural life benefited his life as a homosexual because it gave him the space to build a deep and meaningful relationship away from distractions and urban problems. Another reader, David, shared this sentiment and wrote to *RFD* seeking companionship and described his life as “uncomplicated.”<sup>57</sup> Harry Beckner praised his rural upbringing for that fact that “you’ve got a lot of freedom that you don’t have in town” and Dennis Lindholm described living in a rural areas as “tremendously important to my self-worth and satisfaction.”<sup>58</sup> All four of these men highlight the ways in which rural life was significant to their wellbeing and happiness.

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<sup>55</sup> Murray, Stephen O. Murray, *American Gay*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 72.

<sup>56</sup> Wittman, “Coming Home,” 20.

<sup>57</sup> David, “Blurbs,” *RFD*, no. 14 (Winter, 1977): 54. Accessed May 13, 2019.  
<https://archive.org/details/RFDWinter1977>

<sup>58</sup> Beckner, “Harry Beckner,” 74. Lindholm, “Dennis Lindholm,” 90.

Many scholars of gay identity cite a need for large gay populations to exist to create a solid gay identity, but the strong identity that rural gay men held shows that gay identity is possible even in areas with a small gay population.<sup>59</sup> Gay identity for rural men and women varied depending on many factors, and the rural gay experience was not homogenous. Because of the different factors of rural life and the disconnect from urban gay centers, urban-based methods of discussing gay identity don't work for rural gay communities. Rural gay identity existed separately from mainstream, urban gay identity, with its own unique complexities, contradictions, and facets. This identity is important, and the upcoming chapters will show the ways in which this identity shaped rural gay communities and rural forms of gay resistance.

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<sup>59</sup> Murray, *American Gay*, 74.

## Chapter Two:

### Constructing the Rural Gay Community

“For some time now, I have felt that community can be built even if that community is ‘long distance.’”<sup>1</sup>

The way in which community was formed by gay men and women in rural areas, just like individual identity, was shaped by rural life, resources, and the pre-existing rural community. *Cassell’s Queer Companion* defines community as “a concentration of those who identify themselves in one way and organize themselves into primary groups.”<sup>2</sup> In this definition, self-identification plays a role in community formation. The role of identity in community formation indicates that if there are aspects of rural gay identity that are distinct from its urban counterpart, then there will also be distinctive aspects of the community formation in rural areas. In their paper on the role of heterosexual allies in gay community, Elisabeth Burgess and Dawn Baunach define gay community as “the distinct physical and social space as well as a network of social connections among gay men, lesbians, and other sexual minorities.”<sup>3</sup> This definition, which draws on a large scholarly body of work on gay identity, highlights both the physical and non-physical aspects of gay community.<sup>4</sup> The means of finding and creating community in rural areas were typically different than in urban spaces, due to the isolation of rural areas and the nature of the collective rural communities in small towns and farm areas. *RFD, Country Women*, the personal narratives in *Farm Boys*, and other sources on rural gays illustrate multiple ways in which the need of community for gay men and women was fulfilled.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter, “July 28,” 6.

<sup>2</sup> “Community.” *Cassell’s Queer Companion*, (1995): 55.

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Burgess and Dawn Baunach, “Heterosexual Allies? Understanding Heterosexuals’ Alliance with the Gay Community,” *Sexuality & Culture* 18, no. 4 (2014): 937.

<sup>4</sup> The scholars that Burgess and Baunach engage with include T. Skelton and G. Valentine, “Finding oneself, losing oneself: The lesbian and gay ‘scene’ as a paradoxical space.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27 no. 4 (849-866), S.O. Murray *American Gay*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 196), and L. J. Rupp and V. Taylor *Drag queens at the 801 Cabaret*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Similar to the body of literature on gay identity, scholarly work on gay community has been primarily urban-centric. In his article “Homosexuality and the City: An Historical Overview,” Robert Aldrich discusses the ways in which cities have historically been significant areas for LGBT community development and progression.<sup>5</sup> In LGBT historical overviews, such as Faderman’s *The Gay Revolution*, the narrative is told mostly through the different groups that formed in and operated out of cities such as New York City and San Francisco.<sup>6</sup> George Chauncey’s focus on New York City’s gay ghettos is just one example of the many historical works that focus on LGBT urban communities. While urban gay communities were essential to the growth and progress of the gay movement, analyzing the communities found in rural areas allows historians to show a more complete representation of America’s LGBT history.

One thing that is clear in the words of gay men and women from rural areas was that a conscious need for community was felt among these men and women. They did not simply accept that rural living meant they could not have a gay community. One man wrote to *RFD* that “being a person who has a strong tendency towards being a hermit and being Gay has been both a joy beyond all belief and a pain. Perhaps this magazine will help break down that sense of isolation from things gay.”<sup>7</sup> This man felt an isolation from all things gay and the gay community, and he actively participated in *RFD* as a way to solve that isolation through community. Another *RFD* contributor wrote about an “awful heaving loneliness” which he often suffered with, and how he hoped that finding community and connecting to others could provide a solution to that loneliness.<sup>8</sup> Another contributor to *RFD* wrote “It is necessary for country queers to build a community with our common bonds of rural, alternative identification.”<sup>9</sup> These

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Aldrich, “Homosexuality and the City: An Historical Overview” *Urban Studies*, 41 no. 9, (August 2004): 1720.

<sup>6</sup> Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*, (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Peter, “July 28,” 6.

<sup>8</sup> Camas, “Down on the Farm,” *RFD* no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 42.

<sup>9</sup> Ollie, “More Letters,” 16.

examples illuminate another reason why community is important to the study of gay men and women in rural areas: community is important because these men and women explicitly talked about the need for it, the ways in which it could help them, and how it impacted their lives.

A well-documented method for gay men and women from rural areas to find community was the migration of young, gay adults from small towns to larger cities. Chauncey's *Gay New York* cites that as early as the 1930s gay men from small towns moved to New York because "their local communities frowned upon homosexuality, and New York [seemed to them] to be the capital of the American homosexual world."<sup>10</sup> Carl Wittman, a gay liberationist in San Francisco called the city a "refugee camp for homosexuals," in his manifesto while issuing an active call for gays outside of the city to move to San Francisco.<sup>11</sup> This desire to move to the city highlights not only one way in which rural men and women found community, but it also shows that the need for community was felt among all gay Americans. Community was important, because countless men and women, who were able to, packed up their lives and moved to completely new cities to be around others like them. Other cities such as Los Angeles and Philadelphia were also large urban centers for homosexual communities.<sup>12</sup>

Population centers of rural states that still had a more predominant gay population than a 400-person town became a popular destination for rural gays with the means to move. Cities such as Minneapolis or Madison were popular among rural gays in surrounding states. One man recounted how his move to Lincoln, Nebraska from a fairly isolated crop farm allowed him to come to terms with and accept his own sexuality.<sup>13</sup> For those gay men who were not willing or able to completely move, weekend or night visits to cities became common practice. For Harry

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<sup>10</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, Les. "San Francisco." In *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600* David Higgs. (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999):.

<sup>12</sup> Aldrich, "Homosexuality and the City," 1720.

<sup>13</sup> Larry Ebmeier, "Larry Ebmeier," in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed Will Fellows, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 157.



Beckner, his visits to the city nearest him were how he met his long-term partner. Beckner told one oral history collection, “We met in Carter Lake Park in Omaha, looking for tricks. I’d taken the whole day and gone to town...”<sup>14</sup> Not only does Beckner’s story show the steps that gay men in the country were willing to take to find others, but it also highlights that rural gay men were not completely separate from their urban counterparts. By visiting cities instead of completely moving, gay men entered urban spaces without completely leaving behind or rejecting their rural identities.

While these stories reveal that some gay men left rural areas to find community, there were also many ways in which gay men and women found community within their rural surroundings. One of these methods was using already established rural connections and community to find other gay men and women within that community. For many gay men, finding others like themselves was not a matter of going out and meeting new people. They simply had to discover who in their already tight-knit community felt the same things and had the same desires.

Many of the men in *Farm Boys* discussed subtle signals that they looked for in other men that let them know who to approach. Jim Cross described spending time with a young man, stating “I saw this guy and I knew that he was watching me too.”<sup>15</sup> Cross recognized through what he described as body language and conversation, that he was talking to someone who has interested in him. This was someone Cross was already familiar with, as he was a part of the rural community. Cross recounted the uncertainty in the way in which those contacts were initiated, remembering that with the same man “At first, the attraction was more like questioning—he was wondering where I was at, I was wondering where he was at—until we had

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<sup>14</sup> Beckner, “Harry Beckner,” 74.

<sup>15</sup> Cross, “Jim Cross,” 80.

spent enough time together and finally realized where we were both at.”<sup>16</sup> Cross and this young man both had to be cautious, but they were able to connect with each other and communicate without being explicit that they were interested in one another. This watching and questioning allowed them to form a relationship under the watchful eyes of a small-town community. ‘

Beyond behavior like watching and noticing interest, certain labels were given to men that meant they were safe to approach. Beckner described a sexual encounter he had with a coworker who he had gone to high school with. Beckner felt comfortable approaching him because he was a cheerleader in high school “and when a guy was a cheerleader, he was a pussy.”<sup>17</sup> While not every male cheerleader is necessarily gay, Beckner saw a male who was stepping outside of traditional gender expectations, and that gave him a signal that he would be safe to approach. An interview with an elderly farmer which was featured in the first issue of *RFD* discussed another gay man in town who he had a friendship with and how the farmer knew his friend was gay because “you could read it all over him, the way he spoke, his actions and everything.”<sup>18</sup> Gay men seemed to be able to notice just through mannerisms and body language when they had found someone within their community that they could be safe with.

A very common indicator that a man could be safe to make an advance upon or form a relationship with was his marriage status. Doug Edwards, from Hendricks County, Indiana, described a man he had worked with whom he had a brief sexual relationship with as “two years older than me and also unmarried.”<sup>19</sup> The specific wording of “unmarried” or “bachelor” is very common throughout *Farm Boys*. In a time when the nuclear family was seen as essential, people took notice of young, unmarried men. While being a bachelor could have drawn some scrutiny,

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<sup>16</sup> Cross, “Jim Cross,” 80.

<sup>17</sup> Beckner, “Harry Beckner,” 74.

<sup>18</sup> “Old Farmer Interview,” *RFD*, no. 1 (Fall, 1974): 25. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>19</sup> Doug Edwards, “Doug Edwards,” in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed Will Fellows, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 149.

being single and unmarried allowed gay men to find others like them who happened to not have wives. Martin Scherz of southeastern Nebraska remembered two men who lived in his town as “bachelors who lived together on a farm in our community. There weren’t many bachelors who lived together around there, and in high school I had a feeling that something was different about them.”<sup>20</sup> Scherz later went on to form a relationship with one of these men, which would highlight another way in which gay men in rural areas found community with each other.

While there were many non-verbal ways gay men recognized each other on farms and in small towns, once one man connected with another, it was not uncommon to discover others in his community that were also gay. In Martin’s case, after asking Bill, one of the bachelors in his town, who else was gay, Bill responded “You don’t want to know” which Martin interpreted to mean “that there were a lot of husbands around there who had been friends of his.”<sup>21</sup> Once you entered this sub-community of gay men, one was often able to learn who he could connect with, who he was safe around expressing his sexuality. Norm Reed from northeastern Ohio, made a similar connection after seeing a prominent figure from his church in a city bath house one night. Though he was married and had children, the two men “spent hours on the phone, sharing experiences and how we felt.”<sup>22</sup> Not only was Reed able to make a sexual connection, but he was able to experience the emotional connection and sharing that was seen in urban gay communities.

In terms of the question of physical location, it is true that farm towns did not have gay bars with drag nights or safe spaces for glory holes. However, the isolated nature of rural America meant that there was plenty of geographical space for anyone who did not want to be seen. Many men describe going to empty fields, wooded areas, or dead-end roads. Even though there was not a central meeting place, there were still many areas that gay men could go to

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Scherz, “Martin Scherz,” in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed Will Fellows, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 166.

<sup>21</sup> Scherz, “Martin Scherz,” 167.

<sup>22</sup> Norm Reed, “Norm Reed,” in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed Will Fellows, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 120-121.

express their sexuality privately. For Jim Cross, open spaces allowed him to explore his sexuality as a young teen. After being caught once engaging in sexual activities in his family's barn with another young man and being told to "get your clothes on... and play like you're supposed to play," Cross and the young man began to find alternative locations.<sup>23</sup> For three years, Cross and the young man would hike into the woods beyond his farm, where it was "real safe, because there were lots of places where nobody would find you. We made a number of little hideaway places."<sup>24</sup> While the sheer population density of cities could have allowed many gay men to remain unseen, the sparsely populated open fields and forests of rural areas also gave gay men spaces where they could remain unseen.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the secret communities of gay men that could be seen in rural towns, there were also instances of gay people being allowed to just exist in rural spaces and not be bothered. Beckner recalled two unmarried women who lived together and were welcomed into the community, as well as two unmarried men who his mom referred to as "brothers," though Beckner noted that they did not share a last name.<sup>26</sup> In an interview for the Country Queers Oral History Project, a lesbian named only Frances described being accepted by her community.<sup>27</sup> What is worthwhile noting is that there is more evidence in the studied sources of lesbian couples or lesbian individuals being easily accepted by communities than visible gay male couples. This acceptance of lesbian women over gay men could be a result of lack of evidence, but it could also indicate a difference in which rural communities viewed gay men as opposed to lesbians.

While there is evidence of gay community being able to exist within normal, everyday rural life, there were also ways in which gay men and lesbians found community that involved

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<sup>23</sup> Cross, "Jim Cross," 78.

<sup>24</sup> Cross, "Jim Cross," 78.

<sup>25</sup> For further examples of this, one can look at the interviews of Norm Reed, Bill Troxell, Martin Scherz and Tom Rygh, in Will Fellows' *Farm Boys* as well as Gary Menger's "Full Circle."

<sup>26</sup> Beckner, "Harry Beckner," *Farm Boys*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> "Frances. 78. Western MA.," *COUNTRY QUEERS : a multimedia oral history project documenting the diverse experiences of rural and small town LGBTQIA folks in the U.S.A.*

<https://countryqueers.com/2013/09/27/8-francis-78-western-massachusetts/>

looking beyond their local community. There were two ways in which gay publications like *RFD* allowed the construction of gay community for rural men. First, publications allowed the construction of a “long distance” community where rural, gay men were able to write in and share experiences and read the experiences of others in order to not feel so alone. Through sharing poetry, erotic stories, recipes, and thoughts, rural gay men across the country were able to form a community that provided them with support and connections without having to travel.

*RFD* as well as other publications also provided a platform for both gay men in rural areas to invite others to their land, and for gay men who had grown sick of urban life to search for someone who would take them in and allow them to live and work. One man offered “For our brothers who want to get into the country—we’ll exchange good Oregon mountain land for carpentry help, fence building, sawmill labor, etc., during the coming summer. Food and shelter no problem.”<sup>28</sup> Rural isolation can be so extreme that there is nothing for miles upon miles. Magazines like *RFD* allowed these men to not just find a solution to the general problem of rural isolation, but to specifically fix that problem with the virtual company of other gay men.

Another way in which community was built in rural America for gay men and lesbian women was through the presence of communes. The movement of communal, rural living in America hit its peak in the 60s and 70s, and gay communes specifically were modeled in many ways after radical feminist and women’s liberation communes.<sup>29</sup> These communes were where many of the lesbian women who wrote into *Country Women* resided. Interestingly, for many of these women they discovered their sexuality through feminist communities, and that then led them to finding homes in specifically lesbian feminist communities. One woman described the changes in her life that led to her current state of happiness as “starting with feminism, they [changes] kept on. Starting with coming out, they reached new levels of intensity. Starting with

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<sup>28</sup> Garin Bjester, “Letters,” *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 2. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>29</sup> Vider, “The Ultimate Extension,” 866.

living-with-women, there is more happening than ever before.”<sup>30</sup> Stories like this one are interesting, because they highlight the fluid relationship between identity and community. This woman in particular discovered her lesbian identity through her feminist community, and then left that community to find a more specific community that more aligned with her identity as a lesbian. This journey of identity realization was one of the main differences between feminist and lesbian communes and the gay male communes to be discussed next. With gay male communes, men were going there specifically looking for a place that aligned with their identities. But for many women, they would not even have a complete awareness of their identities until they were deep within the community.

Discussing gay communes in the 1970s becomes difficult when one realizes just how different each community can be from commune to commune. The Hop Brook Commune in Massachusetts advertised, “The way this works is we only live with people whom we get off on”<sup>31</sup> This commune advertised an invitation-only community that focused on sexual relationships. Other communes took a more practical approach, calling for gay men who had experience or were even just interested in living intimately with the land and creating self-sufficient, gay living spaces. Gay communes during this time allowed communities of gay men from both urban and rural areas to gather under a wide variety of interests, priorities, and lifestyles. Community on communes differed greatly from much of the rural community discussed earlier in this chapter, because this community was made to exist completely separate from straight, rural communities.

In addition to the unique gay and lesbian communities that formed in rural areas, many gay men and lesbians had other communities that provided them with support just as much as gay communities did. Similar to the intersection of rural and gay discussed in chapter one, there

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<sup>30</sup> Morningstar, “The Woman in The Mirror,” 13.

<sup>31</sup> “Hop Brook Commune” *RFD*, no. 1 (Fall, 1974): 10-11. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

are many ways in which largely heterosexual communities were still important to gay men and women. For one gay man who had no desire to “lose myself in a large city or lock myself in a ghetto,” he became a teacher and found community in the rural school district where “everybody knows everybody else.”<sup>32</sup> For this man, he actively sought support and community, however it was not with other gay people, but simply those in his school district. Another man, Cornelius Utz, from Buchanan County, Missouri, offered a narrative that would seem to differ from what one would expect of a rural gay man, whose community was the church.<sup>33</sup> Even though they are not strictly gay, these communities are still important because they help to tell the story of how these gay men survived in places that did not offer the same opportunities and advantages of urban spaces.

“Gay community” is not the first thought someone has when thinking of rural America, but it is evident that there is a history of gay men and women connecting with one another and connecting with the larger community to not only survive, but to live their lives actively as gay men and women. Men and women actively sought out community in rural spaces to help them survive and to ease the isolation felt by most of rural America. These communities allow readers to see rural gays not as outliers or rarities, but as pieces of rural America just as much as tractor trailers and dirt roads are. The study of rural gay community is also important because it widens the definition of what gay community looks like. When we remove cities as a necessary prerequisite for gay community, the door opens for a more inclusive and wide-reaching study of LGBT histories and experiences.

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<sup>32</sup> Ronald Schoen, “Ronald Schoen,” *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, Will Fellows, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 125.

<sup>33</sup> Utz, “Cornelius Utz,” 45.

## Chapter Three:

### Dirt Road Resistance

The 1950s saw the first articulation of homosexuals as “an oppressed cultural minority” as a result of Harry Hay and the birth of the homophile movement.<sup>1</sup> Into the 60s, regional gay organizations spread across the United States, all with different goals and approaches but with one commonality: they were made up of homosexual Americans making a conscious choice to organize.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the 60s, the formulation of more radical organizations like the Gay Liberation Front took the homosexual movement in America to more radical extremes that involved systemic change. The members of the GLF themselves stated that “sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished.”<sup>3</sup> Gay organizations became more active, more radical in some instances, more visible, and grew in more and more cities. However, the growth seemed to be limited to just that: cities.

In his book *The Unfinished Revolution: Social Movement Theory and the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, Stephen Engel argues that LGBT mobilization and resistance is linked to the formation of both gay identity and gay community. Engel shows that the gay and lesbian movement is “grounded in a shared and community identity”<sup>4</sup> This connection between community, identity, and movements explains the gap between urban centered LGBT movements and rural gay spaces where organized movement was not seen during the 60s and 70s. Rural gay men and lesbians did have their own forms of resistance based on their rural gay identities and forms of communities, but these men and women resisted in a way that was outside of the gay movement at the time. Movement theory scholars such as Engel focus on

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<sup>1</sup> Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 67.

<sup>2</sup> Faderman, “Part 2: The Homophiles” *The Gay Revolution*, 41-91.

<sup>3</sup> Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 199.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen M. Engel, *The Unfinished Revolution: Social Movement Theory and the Gay Lesbian Movement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2001): 16.



physical movement centers, collective action, and a direct engagement with the state.<sup>5</sup> Due to the isolation of rural life and the different ways in which community and identity manifested for rural gay men and lesbians, this method of looking at LGBT resistance strictly through social and political movements leaves little to no room for non-urban gays.

At a time when gay and lesbian organized political resistance was centered in cities—where rural gay men and women either did not have access or where the “city talk” isolated rural counterparts—how did men and women in rural areas resist both societal and local homophobic oppression? This chapter will focus on the alternative ways that gay men and women in rural areas worked towards resisting a homophobic society. Evidence of gay rural life showed both mindsets of separatism—gay men forming farms in deeply isolated communities and radical lesbian communes where patriarchal heterosexuality was avoided—and a desire to integrate into heterosexual rural life and to make those spaces more accessible for gay men and women. Resistance existed in easily recognizable forms, such as legal action against discrimination, and in less recognizable ways such as dance, cooking, and writing poetry. This chapter will highlight the diverse methods of resistance that show the many contributions of rural gays to the fight against homophobia and an oppressive heterosexual society.

One common mindset that existed among rural gay men and women was the idea of changing heterosexual minds about the value and morality of homosexuality through living as an example of a good, upstanding member of the community. One man, a teacher in Wisconsin, described how serving as a “great example as a gay man, in my teaching and in the way I live my life” made him not only a better teacher, but allowed him to be a living argument against homophobic rhetoric, especially rhetoric that painted gay male teachers as predatory.<sup>6</sup> Frances, a lesbian, stated that it did not matter how much a person tried to hide it, two people of the same

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<sup>5</sup> Engel, *The Unfinished Revolution*, 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Beutel, “Joh Beutel,” in *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, ed Will Fellows, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 111.

sex living together would be noticed. Frances believed that rural communities “just, figure it out, and what you have to do is prove yourself, that you’re a decent human being... Cause they don’t, you know, they respect you more, to stand up, you don’t have to publicize, just live.”<sup>7</sup> Frances was aware that her community suspected she was gay, and her response to that was to prove just by living that she was a decent human being despite what misgivings people would have about her sexuality. While this act was not the outright organization and resistance associated with the narrative of gay revolution, Frances still, on an individual level, took conscious steps to resist the homophobia she faced on a personal level and make rural life possible for her as a lesbian.

While Frances and John’s resistance was conducted simply through educating their community through living and working hard, many gay men and women took a more active role in educating members of rural communities. Another gay teacher, identified only as Kevin, wrote to *The Gay Alternative* and discussed the importance of staying closeted, as this status allowed him to continue his career as a teacher in a rural, conservative area so that he could continue “making the best of our opportunities and advancing human understanding in our own small sections of the world.”<sup>8</sup> Not only did Kevin show that there was a conscious push to educate rural communities and “advance human understanding,” but he served as a counter-narrative to the idea that coming out was a necessary pre-requisite to gay resistance. He used a heterosexual mask not as a way of giving in to homophobia, but to change homophobic mindsets. Doug Edwards also discussed the importance of inter-community education, citing it as being more useful than the gay rights movement. For Edwards, attempting to educate and persuade heterosexual community members allowed him to “assault frontally” homophobia.<sup>9</sup> Edwards did not go into specifics on what this education looked like, but he served as evidence for the presence of a conscious effort to change minds in rural areas.

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<sup>7</sup> “Frances. 78. Western MA.,” *COUNTRY QUEERS*.

<sup>8</sup> C.T. Kevin, “A Letter from a Gay Teacher” *The Gay Alternative*, no. 1 (Philadelphia, Summer 1974): 18-19.

<sup>9</sup> Doug Edwards, “Doug Edwards,” *Farm Boys*, 144

While the examples above showed a more subtle, immersive form of education and bringing change within a community, there was one example that suggests that there was also open and vocal discussion of gay rights. In an unsigned postcard to Stewart Schofield, one of the key founders of *RFD*, one man wrote “Rick and I are going to talk to a singles meeting tonight. A group of ‘young men and women’ trying to understand all about the world and its meaning. It should be a real trip.”<sup>10</sup> While not explicitly stated, these two men probably went to the singles meeting to discuss homosexuality and its “alternative” lifestyle. This instance is the only one found in the evidence studied that showed such blatant and open discussions of homosexuality in rural areas in the 70s, but that does not mean that similar evidence does not exist elsewhere.

In addition to gay resistance in rural areas taking the form of attempting to change the minds of individuals within the immediate, rural community, subverting heterosexual norms was another commonly seen example of alternative gay resistance. An interesting case study in this practice was the importance of dance in rural gay communities and how it allowed gay men and women to resist heterosexual expectations. Dance had historically been important to the gay revolution and crossed the urban and rural divide.<sup>11</sup> In a feature on dance by *RFD* reader Rob Dobson, he reflected on the importance of dancing during “the earlier days of gay liberation” in which “people danced in circles in the bars... In a bar in Portland now there is folk dancing in the early evenings. And on a farm in Oregon men do Scottish dance wish each other as partners, looking each other in the eyes as they pass and turn and fly feeling joyful.”<sup>12</sup> Once attending a show at a small inn with live music, Allen Young wrote about how his friend David “called a Virginia reel, and he specifically went out of his way to say that it didn’t matter what sex your

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<sup>10</sup> Postcard to Stewart Schofield, August 2, 1974. Copy in author’s possession, obtained from the University of Southern California’s ONE archives.

<sup>11</sup> The importance of dance in gay spaces such as bars, night clubs, and private parties is documented in both Lillian Faderman’s *The Gay Revolution* and George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*.

<sup>12</sup> Rob Dobson, “Dance Liberation,” *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 30. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

partner was.”<sup>13</sup> By calling for this dance in a venue that was not a gay bar, David challenged heterosexual expectations and showed an alternative to the heterosexual individuals and couples present. It was a courageous but safe way to reject heterosexual rules and regulations.

A similar moment of resistance could be seen in the actions of a small community of rural dancers composed of both gay men and lesbian women who “decided to junk the tradition of heterosexual couples” which allowed them to not only resist homophobia but also “freed us from much of the sexism in country dancing.”<sup>14</sup> By refusing to adhere to the expectation for male and female dancing partners set by heterosexual standards, and instead having couples of men dancing with men and women dancing with women, this group saw themselves as both challenging homophobia and sexism. Two of the men who traveled together to a formal ball in the Bay Area and danced as a pair received rude comments and negative responses from the heterosexual dancing couples present. There was a clear message sent to them that what they were doing was not okay. However, at the end of the event, they did have a few women express to them their gratitude at the change the men had started. This comment caused the author to speculate, “Will things improve when more dancers desire these changes? Or will there be outright war?”<sup>15</sup> The author knew that by dancing so publicly, even at an urban event, norms and social expectations were being challenged, and that there could be pushback to those challenges. Dancing as a man with another man was a clear act of resistance.

Dobson’s piece, mentioned earlier, also went into how revolutionary he felt it was for men to just dance in general. Dobson’s identity as a dancer was linked to his identity as a gay man, made clear by his statement, “I find it impossible to separate my dance involvement from my self-identification as a faggot... men’s dance is even more revolutionary, because men are

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<sup>13</sup> Allen Young, “The Deadly Nightshade,” *RFD*, no. 1 (Fall, 1974): 7. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>14</sup> Carl, “Loving Dance” *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 32. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>15</sup> Carl, “Loving Dance,” 32-33.

expected to be the workers, the breadwinners...It is more threatening somehow to see men enjoying their bodies through movement for its own sake.”<sup>16</sup> Dobson saw dancing in general as a way for all men to resist society’s expectations based on not just heterosexuality but gender roles in general. Because they were not going into production or masculine jobs, male dancers resisted by refusing to do what society expected.

For Dobson, gay men were best suited to perform this type of resistance, because “what man is readier than a faggot to break the shackles placed upon his body? Who more willing to enter forbidden territory? Who more able to explore a traditionally female activity?”<sup>17</sup> Because gay men were already resisting expectations just by living as gay men, they were well suited to do the work of questioning society through dance. Dance became even more revolutionary when it incorporated not just men dancing, but gays dancing together who “form an even greater threat, and men dancing together with any kind of affection or eroticism create the greatest threat of all.”<sup>18</sup> The combination of threatening gender expectations and sexuality expectations made gay dance revolutionary on two levels. The act of dancing is not often understood as revolutionary action, but it became a form of expression that allowed gay men and women to challenge and subvert the heterosexuality that was, and still is, ingrained into society.

Dobson also saw dance as a way to not only resist society by challenging it, but it also allowed gay men to overcome their self-hatred and reclaim their own bodies. When discussing the benefits that dance had for his own introspection and self-worth, Dobson wrote “It seems that faggots could find value in this experience [dance], being so burdened as they all seem to be with the ‘I’m ugly and worthless’ syndrome caused by so much internalized oppression. More than any other activity, dance makes me feel good... like a healthy member of the world

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<sup>16</sup> Dobson, “Dance Liberation,” 27.

<sup>17</sup> Dobson, “Dance Liberation,” 28.

<sup>18</sup> Dobson, “Dance Liberation,” 27.

community.”<sup>19</sup> While resistance against homophobia was important, Dobson highlighted another crucial aspect of resistance: the need of gay men and women to raise themselves up out of the self-hate they had been taught. Dance was just one of the means that was available to rural gay men to free themselves of that internalized hatred. Dobson wished for each “faggot to take ownership of their bodies, to wake up to the psychophysical torture we’ve allowed” and to “reclaim our bodies from the culture which has tried to possess them for so long.”<sup>20</sup> The reason that dance was so crucial as a tool to accomplish Dobson’s goals was that it was just as possible in rural spaces as urban. All men needed was space, of which there was plenty in isolated farm towns. Gay men were able to dance in their own living rooms or in secluded wooded areas. Urban movement centers were not a necessity; therefore, dance was a form of resistance that was accessible to rural men and women.

While the breaking of heterosexual norms was an important act of resistance, what did rural gays hope to accomplish by breaking those norms? One reader, Peter, wrote to *RFD* that “...we have broken through some of the strongest and all-pervading of norms. If we are able to break through those norms with love, strength, concern, and openness then we may well be able to shape the ‘new society’ with a healthier perspective on sexuality. I feel that this is an important and unique charge.”<sup>21</sup> For Peter, the breaking of heterosexual norms was an important step to not just changing society but building a new one free from homophobia. Another reader of *RFD* had a clear awareness of the importance of individual action and had a desire, similar to Peter, for a new society. He wrote to the magazine that “our individual social revolution begins wherever we are at the moment,” and that for rural gays this revolution meant “we learn how to survive with the land, that we bring up children in a non-oppressive environment...and most

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<sup>19</sup> Dobson, “Dance Liberation,” 29.

<sup>20</sup> Dobson, “Dance Liberation,” 30.

<sup>21</sup> Peter, “Dear *RFD*” *RFD*, no. 1 (Fall, 1974): 6. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

important that we don't lose contact with others elsewhere in the country and the city who are working toward the goal of a free, cooperative society."<sup>22</sup> Peter and the second writer, Ollie, show an attempt to build a new society, and that there were many ways in which rural gay life was a useful tool to build that society.

In addition to actively resisting external homophobia, another way in which rural gays acted out in resistance was to work towards changing their own internalized homophobia. One of the regular contributors and planners of *RFD* described his work on the magazine and how it allowed him to come to terms with his internalized oppression. Peter wrote, "I know and feel the conditioning—the oppression—we've lived with... I have really opened up to a lot of my deepest feelings working here on *RFD*. I am becoming aware of the oppression I've felt for so long. I am unfolding."<sup>23</sup> The very existence of *RFD* was an act of resistance as it allowed gay rural men to contact each other and share their experiences in a way they could not have before, and for Peter the act of creating the magazine allowed him to resist the forces of society that wanted him to be blind to his own oppression.

As mentioned earlier, the existence of *RFD* was revolutionary in that it gave gay men a platform to connect with each other and share their rural experiences. An *RFD* contributor wrote about the need to "communicate with others the struggles and changes we are going through in our personal lives so that our insight might be of benefit to others."<sup>24</sup> Ollie saw that the importance of *RFD* was its ability to share and enable gay men to help each other survive. Ollie's call to action was simple: "...sit down next to that window, put the pen in hand, and write, draw, paint and sing what we do in our lives. Create, and share that creation with others. Put it in an envelope and send it to your friends, send it to your lovers... let's tell each other what we're

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<sup>22</sup> Ollie, "More Letters," 16.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Robin, "Out on the Lake," *RFD*, no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 23. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author's possession.

<sup>24</sup> Ollie, "More Letters," 16.

doing.”<sup>25</sup> Similar to dancing, gay bars and urban luxuries were not needed to simply write down one’s experiences, to send a letter to a lover. This call to action showed the way in which resistance was again possible for rural gays outside of mobile, political gay organizations.

Outside of the resistance that is present in every page of *RFD*, the entire act of putting the magazine together was an act of resistance. In the early days of publication, contributors coordinated between areas in both Iowa and rural Oregon. This small group of, at first, men, with the help of some women, decided to take action into their own hands by creating *RFD* “for country faggots everywhere” and worked out printing methods, shipping, distributing and spreading the word—all while most had jobs and farms of their own.<sup>26</sup> By creating *RFD*, rural gay people had a chance to form a community and voice their thoughts and experiences that did not exist before. Not only was this resistance against homophobia, but it was resistance against urban-centered movements and publications that often left little room for the worries of a gay farmer. Another form of resistance was simply donating to the publication. Correspondence from the creators of the magazine showed that in the early days of the magazine, printing and shipping costs were difficult to estimate and expensive when it came to shipping to so many rural areas. Other gay men and women who made donations made the publication of *RFD* possible.

In addition to the overarching means of resistance already discussed in this chapter—educating others, living as an example, subverting societal norms, sharing experiences, overcoming internalized homophobia—the sources studied for this thesis are filled with miscellaneous acts of resistance. *The Gay Liberator* published the story of Peggy Burton, a lesbian from a small town in Oregon who suffered the common injustice of being fired after her

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<sup>25</sup> Ollie, More Letters,” 16.

<sup>26</sup> Information about this can be found in the letters and correspondence between three main contributors: Allen, Stephen, and Carl, whose correspondence that author has accessed through the ONE Archives at the University of Southern California Libraries.



sexuality became publicly known.<sup>27</sup> Because the state of Oregon was at that time among six states which had consensual sex laws, Burton had grounds to sue in an attempt to get her job back.<sup>28</sup> Burton, refusing to let her career be taken away, resisted by pushing back against the administration that fired her. Another example of resistance is the evidence of rural gay men who wrote to gay, incarcerated men. By at least 1977, *RFD* circulated in some prisons, and one such prisoner wrote to *RFD* expressing his appreciation of the magazine and the way it connected him with other gay men. He issued an open invitation to “any and all of my brothers and sisters who would like to brighten up my day now and then by dropping me a few lines”<sup>29</sup> Connecting with gay prisoners was again, a way of resistance against multiple oppressive forces. It was a continuation of the trend of rural gay men making meaningful connections in a world that wanted to prevent it, and it was also a way of supporting incarcerated men who suffered at the hands of the criminal justice system.

While there are many ways in which gay men and women in rural areas resisted homophobia and injustice, there remains evidence of rural gays who felt that their community was not doing enough. One writer of *RFD* worried that the isolation of rural life and the separation of rural gays from their urban counterparts was harmful to the gay rights movements as a whole, asking “What negative effect does it have on the urban-based sector of the movement to have lots of us tripped out in the daffodils rather than on the picket line? Do we have some special responsibility to the urban Movement?”<sup>30</sup> While change and resistance constantly happened on an individual and local level in rural areas, there was still the question of the social responsibility to the greater movement. Were these men and women avoiding a call greater than

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<sup>27</sup> “Teacher Fired—Fights Back,” *The Gay Liberator*, (Detroit Michigan, Pansy Press, September 1972): 20.

<sup>28</sup> “Teacher Fired,” 20.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Baker, “untitled,” *RFD*, no. 14 (Winter, 1977): 48. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

<sup>30</sup> Faygele Singer, “Yet More Letters,” *RFD* no. 4 (Summer, 1975): 36. Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest. Oregon Historical Society Research Library. Copy in author’s possession.

their local communities? This concern was reflected in the accounts of many other men, who worried especially that urban gays moving to the country were in a way running from responsibility.<sup>31</sup>

The narrative of rural gay resistance looks very different from the timeline laid out in books like Lillian Faderman's *The Gay Revolution*. Men and women with working class responsibilities and lives, who lived in tight knit but isolated communities operated at a different pace and in different ways than urban gay communities. The disconnect from the movement centers and, on a basic level, the vast difference between urban and rural life likely contributed to the differences in gay resistance that we see between urban and rural narratives. However, the lack of political organization and mobilization does not mean that resistance was not happening even on the quietest of farms, and recognizing this resistance only adds to the ever-growing story of gay resistance and revolution in America.

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<sup>31</sup> Reflected in several accounts in *Farm Boys*.

## Conclusion

The voices and experiences reflected in this thesis recover only a portion of what is lost from the LGBT historical narrative when we focus solely on urban experiences. As stated in the introduction, almost all of the primary sources studied in this thesis come from source material that was edited and carefully selected. It presents a view of these people and these issues that was constructed. There are numerous collections that remain unprocessed in poorly funded archives, private collections that can only be accessed in person, and even more rural LGBT elders who are still alive in rural areas that can be interviewed. There is still much work to be done uncovering these documents to enrich and widen the scope of rural LGBT studies. To understand and fully integrate rural histories into the LGBT narrative, more work must be done in expanding the geographic, chronologic, racial, and socioeconomic demographics which are studied.

The 1960s and 1970s were influential times when it came to LGBT identity, community, and resistance, but the rural LGBT narrative does not end there. When we look past those decades, we see rural LGBT communities coming together in new, public ways. In Idaho in 1994, the fight against the Idaho Citizens' Alliance's homophobic Proposition One saw gay men and women in small rural corners of the state coming together to publicly, and successfully, oppose the proposed legislation.<sup>1</sup> The death of Matthew Shephard in rural Wyoming in 1998 brought a national discussion of LGBT hate crime laws and the treatment of gay men and women in rural spaces.<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1993, the organization Southerners on New Ground (SONG), was created not just with a focus on supporting rural, Southern LGBT communities, but also with a dedication to a "multi-issue southern justice movement that unites us across class, age, race, ability, gender, immigration status, and sexuality; a movement in which LGBTQ people – poor and working class, immigrant, people of color, rural – take our rightful place as leaders shaping

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Pursley, "With the Lesbian Avengers in Idaho," *Nation* 260, no.3 (1995): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Peterson, *Murder, the Media, and the Politics of Public Feelings Remembering Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr.*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2011, 25.

our region's legacy and future."<sup>3</sup> This vision, taken from their website, also reveals the ways in which rural LGBT movements began to interact with other social justice issues beyond sexuality and gender.

In her article "Do Tell: Recovering GLBT History," novelist Amy Hoffman states that "recovering and reframing history" is not just important, but "crucial and particularly revelatory for GLBT communities."<sup>4</sup> Hoffman writes of the general importance of sharing the alternative narrative of LGBT history, however there is only so much work LGBT history can accomplish when the communities and individuals it is analyzing comprise only a portion of the larger group. Rural gay men and women have long been excluded from the larger LGBT historical narrative, due to a lack of visibility, difficulty in obtaining sources, and the misconception that rural spaces are so conservative and homophobic that there has never been room for anything deviating from heterosexuality to exist. However, rural gay men and women *have* existed, and it is important to weave their narratives and experiences into the pre-existing, urban-based history in order to tell a truthful and complete history. These people deserve to be remembered, and when we ignore their existence in the narrative we are doing them a disservice.

When we leave room for rural gay men and women in the LGBT historical narrative, we see that organized resistance did not happen for everyone in the same time frame as those presented by current scholars previously mentioned. It complicates the narrative, highlighting the ways in which change happened differently in different parts of the country. Bringing in this new piece of history also allows LGBT scholars to critique the ways in which different gay movements excluded or ignored their rural colleagues, which could also educate current urban-based organizers on the need to consider rural communities' struggles and needs. Integrating rural LGBT history allows us to understand how current organizations like SONG were created

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<sup>3</sup> "Vision, Mission, and History," Southerners on New Ground, accessed May 13, 2019.

<http://southernersonnewground.org/about/>

<sup>4</sup> Amy Hoffman, "Do Tell: Recovering GLBT History," *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide* 20, no. 1 (2013): 22.

to meet a need that had existed for decades. Such organizations are important, because the demographic they cater to has been largely under-represented, and rural LGBT history helps to show the importance of representing these groups, and the ways in which they have remained unseen for so long.

Even today, there are still large differences in the experiences of rural gay men and women to their urban counterparts. Despite the advent of the internet, isolation remains a large problem for gay individuals in rural areas.<sup>5</sup> The American small farming town has changed, but there are many corners of the country where communities like those described in the noted sources still exist. Recovering the rich history of rural gay men and women is one of the steps to helping aid in the removal of isolation and other struggles that contemporary LGBT communities still face. Something that contributes to rural gay isolation is the fact that not only do gay men and women perceive a lack of representation in their immediate community, but there is also a sense that gay men and women have never been able to survive in rural areas. Learning about the lives of gay men and women who held onto their rural identity and lives builds a greater understanding of the LGBT community. If gay men and women, both young and old, struggling in rural areas can look at a history book and see themselves represented in the past, it helps remove a sense of that isolation. They no longer have to feel alone, and they can move forward knowing that it is possible to be gay and exist in rural spaces. This history shows it, the lives of these people show it, and their words show it. This thesis accomplishes important work in giving some sense of justice to those who suffered under an oppressive, homophobic society while also aiding gay men and women who are currently struggling with many of the same issues of those who came before them.

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<sup>5</sup> Kazyak, "Disrupting Cultural Selves," 564.

Rob Dobson, in the midst of reflecting on academic work he had heard about that sought to uncover medieval instances of homosexuality stated that “I surely hope that faggot historians will find evidence of our antecedents but I do not want to depend on it.”<sup>6</sup> Dobson felt a deep need to feel the presence of others like him in history. There is no doubt that gay men and women in rural areas still feel that need. As a lesbian from rural Idaho, I grew up with the same sense of isolation reflected in the words of those that came before me. I constantly felt that my sexuality was in direct contradiction with my rural upbringing. Seeing evidence that there have been, for decades, men and women who were able to accept both their rural and gay identities, exist happily with partners in farms and small towns like mine, and find community, has given me hope that two parts of my identity that once seemed in direct contrast can exist in harmony. Through work like this thesis, historians can provide representation and a sense of history and belonging to a wider LGBT audience, accomplishing justice for both our elders, and gay men and women in rural areas today. I hope, just as Dobson did, that more “faggot historians” may find evidence of more and more of our antecedents, and continue the work outlined in this thesis.

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<sup>6</sup> Dobson, “Dance Liberation,” 32.

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