IT MAY SEEM UNLIKELY that a book about gay men as keepers of culture would be inspired by a book about gays growing up among cows and corn fields, but that’s what happened. In creating my first book, Farm Boys, I immersed myself in the life stories of gay men who grew up in farm families. I had long suspected that my own rural upbringing exerted a lasting influence on how I lived my life as a gay man. It seemed that getting other gay men from similar backgrounds to tell me about their lives would serve as a lens through which I might gain some insight into my own life. So I traveled around the Midwest one year doing autobiographical interviews.

Gender-role nonconformity was prominent in many of those Farm Boys interviews: As boys, most of the men I spoke with had been especially drawn to doing things that lay outside the range of activities approved for males. Instead of working in the fields or repairing farm machinery, they preferred doing things in and around the house, and were often very good at them: gardening, cooking, food-canning, flower-arranging, decorating, sewing and other needlework. At first, I was bothered by this strong gender-atypical trend; I assumed it was the result of a pervasive bias in my self-selected group of interview subjects. There must be plenty of gay men out there who were regular, gender-typical farm boys, I thought: Perhaps the atypical ones are simply more inclined to talk about their lives. Maybe the regular guys just aren’t sufficiently chatty or insightful or out of the closet to want to do this sort of interview.

Then, as it eventually occurred to me that what I was seeing was perhaps characteristic of gay childhood, this trend toward gender-atypicality began to intrigue me. For one thing, it mirrored my own childhood. And it was at odds with the old saw about gay males being no different from straight males except for their sexual orientation. This notion developed as a central tenet of the gay rights movement since the 1970s, the decade in which I came of age and came out, when gay men in America went macho in their self-presentation: “We’re men, first and foremost; regular guys who just happen to prefer guys.” All of this led me to wonder: If we differ from straight
men only in terms of sexual orientation, not in any other essential ways, why was I discovering this preponderance of gay men who had been manifestly queer since childhood, usually years before their sex lives got going? In the years since Farm Boys was published, the responses I’ve had from readers have consistently affirmed the book’s gender-atypical portrait.

The extraordinary and pioneering involvement of gay men in historic preservation is something of which I’ve long been at least vaguely aware. Though I paid little attention to it at the time, many of the men I interviewed for Farm Boys engaged in some sort of culture-keeping: they lived in restored older houses, often furnished and decorated with antiques, many of them family heirlooms; they compiled information and objects related to family heritage and local history. I didn’t ask them specifically about these interests; they were simply evident in one way or another.

Only since completing Farm Boys have I considered gays-in-preservation a phenomenon worthy of exploration. To the limited extent that I gave it even a passing thought in earlier years, I suppose I saw the apparently disproportionate presence of gay men in historic preservation as the stuff of stereotype. And so I failed to take it seriously. If outside of our sex lives we gays are just like straights, then it must be only a stereotypical illusion that gay men are inordinately drawn to being house restorers and antiquarians—or interior designers, florists, hair stylists, fashion designers, and so forth. Now it’s clear to me that gay men really are extraordinarily attracted to these kinds of work. Rather than dismissing these realities as the stuff of stereotype, I see them as the stuff of archetype, significant truths worthy of exploration. Gay men are a prominent and highly talented presence in many female-dominated fields that revolve around creating, restoring, and preserving beauty, order, and continuity. It’s a phenomenon that seems to grow out of an essential gay difference.

In his book about why so many gay men love musical theater, John Clum hints at this essential differentness: “For me, being gay has as much to do with an investment in certain kinds of culture as it has with my sexual proclivities.” Gay rights pioneer Harry Hay goes further, saying that we gay men “must disenthral ourselves of the idea that we differ only in our sexual directions, and that all we want or need in life is to be free to seek the expression of our sexual desires as we see fit.” Gay men as keepers of culture proves to be a powerful lens through which to examine some of the distinctive dimensions of gay male lives beyond sexuality per se. With this book, I hope to add my small lamp to a fuller illumination of what it means to be gay.
A Passion to Preserve