A Passion to Preserve
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EXPLORING GAY MEN’S SENSIBILITIES through the lens of their culture-keeping tendencies became increasingly compelling the more I got into it, the more I paid attention to things that I had never made much note of, the more I began to remember. Besides discerning a common pattern in the lives of dozens of gay men past and present, I began to see how closely my own life fit that gender-atypical, preservation-minded archetype.

When I was eleven, my parents gave me a Bible with glossy centerfold pages between the Old and the New Testament for recording births, marriages, deaths, and the family tree. Those colorful pages awakened the documentarian in me. After noting the date on which the Bible was given to me, I filled in the names and birth dates of my brother and two sisters and me. I recorded two deaths during the next year, when a third sister was stillborn and my Grandpa Earl Fellows died. Through the next several years I blossomed into an adolescent family historian, archivist, and antiquarian.

My grandmothers encouraged these interests. I connected strongly with them, their lives and personalities were the focus of my earliest written reminiscences, and I read from those writings at their funerals. I was thirty when my Grandma Marion Fellows died, and it seemed that the breakup of her household following her death grieved me more than her death had. In light of how badly and irreparably her health had deteriorated, death was desirable. But I could see nothing beneficial in the dismantling of her home, the beautiful and harmonious composition that she had created and refined over a period of sixty years on the farm.

The farm where Grandma Fellows lived and where I grew up had been in my father’s family since 1854, when my great-great-grandparents arrived in Wisconsin from New York State. George and Delila Fellows purchased about seventy acres, including a log house and stable, from a woman who operated a stagecoach tavern on the site. Only ten acres had been broken; George brought more of it into cultivation and gradually acquired adjoining land until he owned more than three hundred acres. When his two sons, Fred and Lewis, were ready to start farming on their own in the 1880s, George split the land between them.
In reciting these details of my ancestors’ lives, I am helped by referring to *A Fellows History*, a three-page stapled booklet in a cover of faded yellow construction paper. It was my first publication, in an edition of perhaps ten copies, when I was in my early teens. I was helped in compiling it by Grandma Fellows, whose husband, Earl, had taken over the farm from his father, Lewis, in the 1920s. After the death of my Grandpa Fellows, when I was twelve, I began to spend more time with Grandma, and my desire to know more about family history blossomed. We sat at her kitchen table in the rambling 1850s farmhouse, and she answered my questions as I gleaned names, places, and dates from brittle obituary clippings and from a thick, leather-bound volume of biographies of early county settlers. Something drove me to establish a sense of connection and continuity with those who had founded and worked the family farm through the previous century.

Most compelling of all the documents in Grandma’s house were the early photographs. There were a few tintypes, but most were the cabinet-card and calling-card prints of the late 1800s. Many were unlabeled, but with Grandma’s help we identified most of the subjects and wrote their names on the back. I thought it important enough for the individual portraits of one old couple to be kept together that I took an envelope, lettered their names on it as elegantly as I could, and placed them both inside. Our photographic record took us back as far as George and Delila, but we had an unidentified tintype of a rather stiff and withered looking couple who were clearly older than they. We decided they must be Frederick and Emily, George’s parents, though I was cautious enough about this conjecture to put a question mark after their names on the protective envelope I made for them.

The two-story front portion of Grandma’s white clapboard house contained the dining room, living room, and bedrooms. The story-and-a-half back portion was the kitchen and laundry wing. From the corner of the laundry room I climbed a narrow, circular staircase to the two low-ceilinged rooms above. The room at the top of the stairs, with a window facing the farmyard and barns, had been finished with wallpaper and linoleum as a bedroom for the hired men of earlier years. The other was an attic room whose plaster and floorboards had never seen paint, paper, or varnish. The remnants of a souvenir lithograph from the 1876 Centennial celebration in Philadelphia peeled from one wall. There were boxes of 78-rpm records, a wind-up Victrola, castoff furniture, and stacks of old magazines—*Life*, *Vogue*, *Antiques*, *Wisconsin Tales and Trails*. Knee-high windows looked east toward the split-level house my parents had built a decade earlier and west toward Evansville a few miles up the highway.

On weekends and school-day evenings I spent many hours visiting Grandma, helping her with housecleaning and cooking and laundry, polishing
her brass candlesticks and copper molds and silverware, ogling her antique
glass, browsing through her overstuffed bookcases. When I wanted time to
myself, I retreated to the attic and occupied myself with my own little projects:
rearranging furniture, sorting through and straightening the old stuff, print-
ing the family history. My parents had given me a toy printing press one
Christmas, so I began setting the family history in its moveable rubber type.
Several dozen words into it, I realized how tedious and time-consuming the
task was going to be. I soon purchased an inexpensive mimeograph printer
that I saw advertised in the back of a magazine. With that flimsy and messy
device I duplicated the typewritten pages of A Fellows History in my work-
shop above Grandma's kitchen.

Grandma displayed her collection of nineteenth-century glass in a bay
window at the front of the house. I learned a lot about antique glass from my
scrutiny of these pieces, and I appreciated them for their beauty and value.
There were pitchers, goblets, tumblers, finger bowls, rose bowls, spooners,
celeries, salt cellars, sugar bowls, and vases in many colors and patterns, all
arranged and rearranged for the right effect. One Christmas season Grandma
placed candlesticks on the two lower plate-glass shelves of glassware. The
candle flames looked lovely at night against the dark windows and colorful
glass. In the kitchen having supper one evening, we heard a terrible crash in
the front of the house. What we found on the window ledge and floor was a
sickening jumble of shattered glass—cranberry swirl, aquamarine hobnail,
amber thousand eye, daisy and button.

There had been another plate-glass shelf above each of the shelves on
which the candles had stood, and the flames had heated the top shelves so
much that one of them had broken and crashed through the shelf below it. I
quickly extinguished the other candle and removed the pieces of glass from
the endangered shelf above it. Then, as we began picking up the pieces and
recognizing exactly what had been destroyed, I began to sob. As I discovered
the remains of one prized piece after another, I threw back my head and let
out another wail.

I had no interest in raising livestock or crops to show at the 4-H fair
each summer. Instead, I acted in the 4-H drama club, dabbled in leather
craft and nature conservation, and refinshed antique furniture as woodwork-
ing projects. Restoring a forlorn Victorian table or washstand was far more
satisfying than constructing new furniture, which probably explains why I
was so captivated by Hans and Peter, a brightly illustrated children's book of
my Grandma's. Hans and Peter live in unpleasant rooms with disagreeable
views in a city house. When they play together they plan their dream house,
which they will build when they have grown up. But that time seems dis-
couragingly far way. Out for a walk one day, they discover a deserted shack in
a wooded field, and when they go inside, they are delighted by the lovely,
verdant view from its window. Excited by the idea of fixing it up and living in
it, Hans and Peter go to work—cleaning, papering, and painting the interior,
painting the exterior, repairing the door, and installing a doorbell. They build
furniture from scrap lumber and collect old-fashioned, castoff furnishings
from their parents. Peter makes window curtains, Hans braids a carpet, and
 together they give the landscape a total makeover.

When all is ready for their housewarming party, Hans and Peter invite
their parents and several others: the man who permitted them to use the
shack, and the painter and chimney sweep who helped them refurbish it.
The owner of the shack compliments the boys on the job they have done and
says that when they have finished school they can work in his construction
company. “If you are as industrious as you are now,” he tells them, “it won’t
be long before you have saved enough money to build a beautiful big house
for yourselves.” Hearing this makes Hans and Peter beam at each other, but
for now they are content to sit together looking out the window of their own
little house.

Maybe I wanted a friend like Hans or Peter, but mostly I wanted my
own little shack to fix up. I found it in an old poultry shed that had been
converted in some previous era to a garden cottage for my grandmother.
When I was fourteen, I decided that the low-ceilinged shed, about twelve
feet square, would be perfect for the antique shop I wanted to open. My dad
helped me move the small building closer to the highway that runs through
our farm. This new location was ideal for me, halfway between my parents’
house and Grandma’s, about fifty yards from each. Dad and I added a wide
roofed porch, installed new wood flooring, and gave it fresh paint inside and
out. I made signs, “The Olde Time Shoppe,” to place in front of the building
and smaller “Antiques Ahead” signs to post about a quarter mile in each
direction on the highway.

I used old barn boards to build display shelves and gathered merchan-
dise wherever I could find it. Grandma gave me some things and sold me
some, and I frequented secondhand stores, household auctions, and antique
shops. My salary of seventy-five dollars a month as church janitor helped to
finance my purchases. I kept my small shop stocked with small things, mostly
pressed glass pieces in various Victorian patterns, dishes of porcelain and
stoneware, kerosene lamps, cast-iron banks, jugs, crocks, and anything else
that appealed to me. Grandma Franklin, my mother’s mother, helped me
diversify my old-time merchandise by supplying rustic bars of her home-
made lye soap and boxes of her divinity candy. Mom helped me decorate the
shop by providing colorful curtains for the windows and various linens, which
I used in my displays.
On family camping trips my favorite destination was Nelson Dewey State Park in the Mississippi River country of southwest Wisconsin. The park was named for the state's first governor, who settled there in the 1830s and whose restored house was open to tour. I was especially drawn to Stonefield Village, an outdoor museum of farm history and village life that the Wisconsin Historical Society had developed on the site of Governor Dewey's farm. And just down the road from Stonefield Village was the small river town of Cassville, where Nelson Dewey arrived from New York State. The eastern speculators for whom he worked saw the budding settlement as the likely site for the capital of the Wisconsin Territory and built a four-story brick building there to house the new government. Instead, the building became the Denniston Hotel. It had known a rowdy and bedraggled life as a bar and rooming house for many decades before I saw it.

That dilapidated Federal-style building on the riverfront enchanted me. My fascination grew when I read *The Shadow in the Glass*, August Derleth's novelized portrait of Nelson Dewey. Perhaps I believed that by rehabilitating the debauched building I could somehow redress the great losses of the governor's life, including his lonely death in a rented room in the building. Or maybe I was simply stirred by the building's shabby fate. In any case, I fantasized about moving in and setting up shop: Dad would help me fix it up. I would sell antiques, Grandma Franklin's soap and candy, Mom's baked goods. It would be a family operation, with my sisters and maybe even my brother pitching in. We would make the place thrive again.

While many boys my age got into sports, hunting, cars, and girls, I rode the school bus home to chum with Grandma and my old-fashioned things. I hung out the open sign near the highway in front of my antique shop most days during my early high-school summers and on weekends in spring and fall. Wearing the key to my shop around my neck, I was always ready for business, though I might be doing farm chores, moving the lawn, or working in the vegetable garden. When my help was needed with haying, I was able to watch for customers by unloading bales from the wagons in the farmyard instead of working in the distant fields or up in the hot, dusty haymow. My attraction to the antiques trade was not entirely undivided, though: I sometimes found it difficult to tear my eyes from the sweaty, muscular hired hands when they came down from the mow for water and air.

During my high school years I became the family photographer, documenting holiday gatherings and creating a photographic record of Grandma's house, inside and out. In the upstairs hallway I photographed each of the four massively framed portraits of both my paternal great-great-grandparent couples—as a record, in case there were a fire. I snapped photos of the burgeoning contents of Grandma's china closet and the heavily book-lined walls
of her study. I photographed Grandma sitting in her bay-window chair, reading or looking pensive against a backdrop of flowering houseplants and antique glass, writing letters at the kitchen table, hanging Christmas decorations. At Thanksgiving I created an oral as well as a photographic record of the day. With Grandma, my parents and siblings, and an aunt, uncle, and cousins gathered around Grandma’s long dining table, I tape-recorded my dad saying the blessing and then everyone in turn saying something for which he or she was thankful. I also wandered around before and after the meal, recording stretches of conversation here and there.

By my last year of high school, after a student-exchange summer abroad, running my antique shop lost its appeal. It seemed petty, musty, materialistic—at odds with the other pole of my compass, a Thoreauvian desire to jettison excess and live simply. Further, I was trying to distance myself from an arena that seemed queer and unwholesome. I had picked up on things that unsettled me: My father had insisted on accompanying me when I shopped at Charles Shannon’s Magnolia House Antiques near Evansville. I had seen Charlie at auctions through the years, where in my naive eyes he made a vaguely disreputable, clownish impression. He was generally seen as a lecherous homosexual alcoholic, though I never heard my parents make disparaging remarks about him. Grandma was not one to hold her tongue out of kindness, but she made only infrequent and benign references to “hahmassexuals,” perhaps because she wondered about her uncommon grandson. One day she told me about being on a garden tour in the South and her amusement in overhearing one man say to another in an excited, effeminate voice, “Oh, darling, that’s a dogtooth violet!”

Too much of a young fogey to find hippiedom attractive, I nonetheless effected an unconventional look during my last year of high school: I went to school wearing my great-grandfather’s long black Knights Templar coat and white gloves from the late 1800s. In my writing and photography for the Evansville Post, I found an outlet for my interest in historical things, researching and writing about the city’s past. I spent one semester at the mammoth state university in Madison, where I did some writing for one of the campus newspapers. An assignment to report on the activities of a recently formed gay student group gave me an unnerving glimpse of gay people of my own age. When it began to dawn on me that I was one of them, I fled the big city and headed for a rural college town in southwest Wisconsin.

At eighteen my year in Platteville turned out to be a time for reclaiming my childhood passions and owning my queerness. For the first time since my grade-school 4-H days, I plunged into theater and appeared in several campus productions. I spent a summer weekend by myself in Cassville, getting reacquainted with the streets and dark brick buildings of Nelson Dewey’s
backwater town on the Mississippi. I fell headlong into my first homosexual adventures, embroidered flowers and birds on my jeans, dropped out of school for a while.

After a few months of hermitage back on the farm, I took a job in Madison and moved into a small apartment there. That summer I made my first visit to a gay bar. Feeling terribly nervous and out of place, I went home with the first person who chatted me up. That particular connection was ill conceived, but the summer was redeemed when a tall, slender, muscular man introduced himself to me at the campus bookstore where I worked. His reddish-blond hair was thinning, his beard and moustache were closely trimmed, and his eyes flashed with gentle warmth. He looked familiar. With a hint of shyness he told me that his name was Mike Saternus and that he recognized me from the summer day, a year earlier, when I had stopped by the old Cooksville Congregational church.

My sister and I had bicycled to Cooksville that day, just wandering around the tiny village, which was a few miles from the farm. When we paused to take a look at the restoration work that was going on at the church building, an attractive man introduced himself as Mike and showed us around, explaining the building's history and pointing out various design details. I was thrilled to know that the old structure was in the hands of someone who planned to restore it rather than use it as a barn or knock it down for its lumber. The deserted church building had been a landmark in my childhood. Perched high on a limestone foundation, it loomed close to the road at an intersection on the frequently traveled route to my maternal grandparents' place. The small, long-abandoned house across the road from the church also intrigued me. It languished behind a tangle of vegetation, its paintless clapboard siding long gray from weathering. Now both the 1879 church and the 1848 house were in Mike Saternus's restorative hands.

During our bookstore encounter Mike Saternus invited me to come out to Cooksville to get better acquainted, to take another look at the church, and to see what he was doing as he started restoring the dilapidated house. My weekends with Mike and his partner, Larry Reed, that summer and fall included visits with several of their gay neighbors, most notably Sunday morning coffee at the home of the village's gay elders, Marvin Raney and Chester Holway. In their company I learned more of Cooksville's rich history, including the leading role that queer men have long played in the preservation of that place. I have given them their own chapter.

I am but one manifestation on the spectrum of culture-keeping queer androgyny. In contrast to others profiled in this book, my own story falls toward the unexotic end of the range. I was a boy whose gender-atypicality
was expressed more subtly than dramatically, more inwardly than overtly. I don’t recall ever being called a sissy. By way of providing a reference point at the exotic end of the spectrum of gay male gender identity, I introduce Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, the self-chosen name of a cross-dressing gay man who was born in Mahlsdorf, Germany, in 1928. “I get into a housedress that fits me well and I get the urge to clean and to polish.” Von Mahlsdorf tells his life story in the book I Am My Own Woman, originally published in German as Ich bin meine eigene Frau, which may also be translated as “I am my own wife.”

From an early age von Mahlsdorf understood himself to be a girl in a boy’s body. He enjoyed a very close relationship with his mother and told her when he was twenty that he was really her oldest unmarried daughter. When von Mahlsdorf’s mother informed him that he should start thinking of finding a woman and getting married, his response left her perplexed but smiling: “Ich bin meine eigene Frau.”

“When I was five or six,” von Mahlsdorf recalls, “I preferred to play with old junk rather than real toys. True, I would sometimes pass the time with the doll furniture my mother had given me, or the train set, which had been a present from my great-uncle. But what I really enjoyed was cleaning and admiring my great-uncle’s old clocks, kerosene lamps, paintings, and candlesticks.”

“My passion for collecting things began on its own, without urging from anyone.” That passion drew von Mahlsdorf inexorably to rummaging through the rubbish, even going door-to-door asking for castoff things. He quickly developed a sixth sense for furniture made in Germany in the late nineteenth century, a period known as the Gründerzeit, and would get a heart-pounding thrill whenever he spotted its characteristic columns, turned legs, and ball-shaped decorations among the rubbish. “When I found something beautiful, I had only to bring my mother around. ‘Oh mommy, please. . .’ Then she would nod, ‘Okay, take it upstairs with the rest of your junk.’ And radiant with joy, I carried the former showpiece up to the attic where I had set up my treasure chamber.” The child was happy among his treasures: “I continually rearranged things, polished my furniture, dusted, laid down a crocheted doily here, removed one there, and repaired little bits of damage.”

It is impossible to convey briefly the amazing and quirky richness of von Mahlsdorf’s life. He is the girl-boy from Mahlsdorf who makes the rounds of secondhand shops after school and lugs furniture home on the streetcar. He collects and repairs clocks, gramophones with horn-shaped speakers, automated music players, ornate furniture. He reacts with horror to seeing obedient townspeople contribute beautiful old household articles and art
objects to Nazi scrap-metal drives. Required to attend a Hitler Youth rally on a very hot day, he longs to be at home, dusting. His great-uncle says to him thoughtfully, “Child, you should have been a girl in 1900. Then I would have hired you as a servant. You would have been a pearl!”

Von Mahlsdorf is the girl-boy who saves his aunt’s houseful of furniture from destruction during the war by arranging to have it stored in a barn outside Berlin. At fifteen he murders his abusive father in an act of self-preservation. Required to help clear things from the ravaged apartment of a Jewish couple who have been “called for,” he saves their bookcase and some of their Hebrew books. Crouching in the cellar of a house during a bombing raid, he frets about the fate of a beautiful cupboard he glimpses there: “I admit that it is completely absurd to regret the destruction of a scalloped edge in such a situation, but that’s how I am. My desire to keep beautiful objects safe is stronger than any other.”

Von Mahlsdorf is the woman-man who, on a subsistence budget after the war, begins to resuscitate a ravaged seventeenth-century palace that is to be torn down. While cleaning one of the palace’s rooms in kerchief and apron one Sunday morning, he suddenly finds himself showing the place to townspeople attracted by the sound of one of his automatic music machines. Despite living always near the edge of poverty, he finally realizes his dream of having his own Gründerzeit museum in an eighteenth-century mansion back in Mahlsdorf that had captivated him as a child: “This house is my fate. It called out to me in its greatest need, and I was there for it.”

For years von Mahlsdorf scavenged Berlin houses about to be torn down, finding many of the things he needed to restore his house: doorknobs, doors, stucco rosettes, skirting boards, historically accurate door moldings, windows, and window handles. “The only thing I am suited for is preserving things and making them whole,” he wrote. “My driving need has always been to preserve things, not for myself, but for posterity, to establish a continuity, not a senseless ending. I am inspired by that idea. Whatever you can accomplish with your two hands, I thought, you must do. . . . I am not concerned with dead stones or lifeless furniture. They are embodiments that mirror the history of the men who built them, who lived in them. Senseless destruction does away with a former way of life, the foundation of our spiritual and aesthetic culture, and irretrievably impoverishes our daily lives.”

“I am always sensitive to the aura of a clock, a house, or furnishings. Objects put together without love don’t do anything for me.” Pieces of old furniture looked at von Mahlsdorf and told him stories—“about the people who had made them, and about those people with whom they had spent decades as silent guests.” When the future of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf’s museum was threatened by the East German government in the 1970s, he
felt “like a tree whose roots had been severed.” Told by officials that he did not possess the appropriate credentials to be in charge of a museum, von Mahlsdorf blanched. “The gentlemen did not want to acknowledge that without my two hands it would all be a wasteland, that nothing would have been created here if I were not a woman in a man’s body. Because as a child I had played with doll furniture, because I am still a neat housewife today, because Gründerzeit amuses me, and because I always want a home around me: that’s why the museum stands.”

Charlotte von Mahlsdorf attributes his culture-keeping propensities to being a woman in a man’s body. I attribute my own to being a male with a decided dose of feminine sensibilities. Despite these differences in our self-understanding, von Mahlsdorf and I have much in common. Queer and preservation minded from childhood, we have marvelous company in the pages that follow.