A Passion to Preserve
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Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Fellows, Will.
A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture.
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Cranford Sutton

In recalling his work with the southern regional office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Dwight Young says that “it seemed inevitable that in every southern town I’d go to, the people who were showing me around would take me to the home of a gay man” who was exceptionally preservation minded. If Young had gone to Willacoochee, Georgia, that man would have been Cranford Sutton.

Sutton was born in 1936 and grew up in Willacoochee, a farm market town in south Georgia. In 1925 his parents purchased the house in which they and their only child would live. He now lives there by himself. In compiling the house’s history, Sutton noted that the structure was built of Georgia pinewood in 1899–1900. To commemorate the first hundred years of the large, two-story house, he rehabilitated its exterior in the late 1990s.

Sutton worked as a music teacher, band director, and guidance counselor, mostly in a public school district near Willacoochee. Now retired, he has served on a regional development committee and is a leader in the town’s volunteer library program and its local history group.

WILLACOOCHEE DATES FROM 1889. When I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, it was pretty well self-contained, the center of the universe. We had two train lines running through here, north-south, east-west, twenty-four hours a day. Our downtown storefronts were the old-fashioned brick fronts with plate-glass windows that turned inward, inviting you in the door. We had a movie theater that operated the whole week long, with Saturday night late show and Sunday afternoon matinee. I would park the pickup truck downtown at two o’clock on Saturday afternoon just to have a parking place on the front street, because by dark everyone from the surrounding countryside had come in to buy their groceries and visit. It was a huge gathering each Saturday. We young people had many activities and two cafes, one with a piano. We would play and sing and dance there and walk and ride up and down the front street.

My parents had a strong work ethic, and I was raised to work. We farmed, and my father was a rural mail carrier, which ensured a good income. I was raised with the idea that you must take care and you must preserve, that it is important for things to be kept orderly and in good shape. My mother insisted on this house being kept clean and in excellent order and repair. Some things were too nice to be used all the time. “We don’t use that until Sunday,” my mother would say.
Long ago I was aware that this town was special and that my role in it was to be something of a caretaker. I was raised with the idea that we are stewards of our farmland and forests. And this old house was to be protected and cared for. I developed an attitude of stewardship with things and also with people. People were also to be treated respectfully, formally. Even at home, my parents corrected me if I referred to an adult by his or her first name. My parents were elderly when I was born, and I was trained to be very courteous and kind and very careful with everything. I think that’s one reason I became a counselor. And after retiring from my career as a teacher and counselor, my intention in becoming a massage therapist was to find another way to help people heal.

Willacoochee had about a thousand people when I was a child. Now we have about twelve hundred. But the town’s character has totally changed. We’ve had so many of our older people die, a whole new group of people have grown up here, and new people have moved in. Everyone’s locked in their homes with their TVs and VCRs, their cable and computers. Their attentions are turned away from the town, and many of them travel out of town to work. Willacoochee is now a bedroom community and a mobile-home manufacturing center. Everyone drives eighteen miles to Douglas to shop at the Wal-Mart.

There was a strong sense of community here in Willacoochee and a sense of history. Several of us here had talked about doing something to save that history. In 1996 we began to meet informally, and out of that grew a group called the Warp and Woof of Willacoochee History, Incorporated. We’ve had as many as fourteen in the group, nine or ten women and five men. Now we’re down to four or five members, of which I’m the only man. A pitiful little spark, but I’m thankful it’s still going.

The city council has given us the historic Willacoochee Women’s Club building, a log cabin built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The Women’s Club was organized in the late 1920s and lasted until the 1960s. So we’re in a falling-down log cabin, trying to get a grant to reconstruct the building to serve as a local museum and welcome center. The Warp and Woof has become the only civic club in town, the pseudo-chamber of commerce, and the conscience of the city council. We’ve done a census of the old Willacoochee cemetery. We’ve acquired microfilm copies of the four Willacoochee newspapers that were published from 1900 through 1930. We’ve gone into the school and given talks to the young people about our activities and some of the facts we have established about Willacoochee’s origins.

Because we have such a sense of the past and remember how Willacoochee was, at times we find ourselves trying to recreate that. Each
year we have an Easter banner parade. We've asked each church to participate in making banners, and we now have about thirty-five, most of them made by people in our history group. The ladies have sewed quite a bit, and I've made quite a few banner poles. We recruit people to carry them at the sunrise service on Easter Sunday.

"Let me live in a house by the side of the road and be a friend to man." Like Thoreau, I pride myself on keeping an open and inviting door for many visitors, local and distant. There's always been a strong sense of living presence in this house. It has never failed to be my center. I really hope I get to die at home. My mother wanted to, but we could not arrange it. The house contains the same furniture that my parents bought. The only thing of any significance that I've added is a concert grand piano. Other than that, it's like it has always been, the same early-marriage furniture that I love so much. I've had to repair or reinforce every piece of it, all the chairs and bedsteads and tables. I love this place and have a duty-bound commitment to it, but sometimes I get so sick of the constant work. One should be twenty-nine years old and have a million bucks to repair and restore one of these old houses. I have felt many times that if it wasn't the old home place and center of my growing up, I would simply pack and sell, run away!

It's kind of a given that gay men are good at cooking and decorating. That I did not get. I wire, I plumb, I do cars. I grew up with a yard full of old cars my father used on his mail route. You couldn't buy cars during World War II, so you had to make do. We couldn't afford to go on a vacation, but we could always buy car parts. That was almost as good as Christmas to me, to come home with a box of brand new parts to put on the car. And car repair was probably the only area in which my father and I really connected.

I have five automobiles, and these days my main passion is their care and repair. I got so tired of working on the house; I just recently gave up the idea of redoing the upstairs and went off and bought myself another Cadillac. A lot of my gay friends can talk car, but they're not interested in actually working on them. They don't want to get their hands dirty. I really enjoy it; if my hands are busy, my head shuts off and I can be at peace.

Highway Corridor Z, as they call it, goes from Columbus, Georgia, where the state's main military base is, to Saint Marys, Georgia, where the nuclear submarines are based at Kings Bay. This four-lane military highway came through all these small towns and destroyed their serenity and safety. With truck stops at each end of town Willacoochee has become just another little place you have to slow down. We've had people killed and injured in accidents, and we've lost a sense of community. We're a highway-divided town. Not far from here Wal-Mart's distribution center is pumping out six hundred semis a day. Plus all the other trucks that use this highway as a
connector from I-75 to I-95. I’m not seventy-five feet off the road, so all of this has spoiled sitting and visiting on the porch, which covers about two-thirds of my house.

All the problems now faced by Willacoochee and other small towns along Corridor Z could have been prevented if our city, county, and state officials back in the 1970s had possessed wisdom and foresight. Bypasses could have been constructed within short distances of the towns, allowing travelers to see what they might enjoy stopping at and visiting. At a regional meeting with officials from the Georgia Department of Transportation back in the 1970s, I was the only person to protest their plans for this highway coming directly through the center of our village.

I see in the future a revival of these wonderful small towns. I envision an exodus from the sprawl of today’s traffic-choked cities to places like Willacoochee, where walking or biking to the post office, to the grocery store, and to visit others is safe and revitalizing. I believe that we all have within us the capacity and energy to heal our differences, to coexist, to be teachers, learners, and doers together. This is what I strive for, and I’m so thankful that I have been given the opportunity to work and heal here in the wiregrass country of south Georgia.