Farm Boys
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This work is about the lives of gay men who grew up on farms in the midwestern United States during the twentieth century. I have done this work in the interest of promoting a fuller appreciation of the varied origins of, and perspectives within, the population of gay men in the U.S. I hope that the reader will find these plain-spoken narratives to be engaging and illuminating in their candor, insight, and sense of humor. It is also my hope that this work will be of value to individuals who are exploring issues related to sexual and gender identity.

These men describe how they perceived and responded to a variety of conditions that existed in many of the farm communities and families of their boyhoods: rigid gender roles, social isolation, ethnic homogeneity, suspicion of the unfamiliar, racism, religious conservatism, sexual prudishness, and limited access to information. While none of these conditions is unique to farm culture, they operate in a distinctive synergy in that setting.

They also have a lasting impact. More than just boyhood memories, these stories describe the long-term influences that many of these men believe their upbringings have had on the course and character of their lives. How has their farming heritage influenced their choices and identities as gay men? How do they see themselves in relation to gay men from urban or suburban backgrounds? How do they fit into their local gay communities? Inherent in these stories are the very different experiences and perspectives of men who came of age in earlier decades of this century and those who came of age in more recent decades—especially in the 1970s and 1980s.

In preparing these narratives from interviews, I have seen myself as something of a midwife, listening to men who had something to say and delivering their experiences and perspectives to the reader in their own distinct voices. If I had believed that soliciting contributions from professional writers would have yielded as diverse a cross-section of gay "farm
of these men were writers, it is unlikely that most of these stories would have been told unless someone had come along with a litany of questions and a tape recorder.

Despite my efforts to let these men's words speak for them, my own background has no doubt influenced the ways in which I have gone about asking them to talk about their lives, as well as the ways in which I have understood and edited their words. I was born in 1957 and grew up on a Wisconsin dairy farm that had been in the family for more than a century. Apart from the inevitable jolts and angst of growing up, my childhood was one of naivety, safety, stability, and freedom. My parents expected me to do a certain amount of housework and farmwork, but my childhood was not consumed by endless toil or rigid expectations.

Living five miles from town, with few neighbor kids my age, I played mostly with my two younger sisters and weathered typical fraternal harassment from my older brother. I pleased my teachers at public school and Baptist church in town, played with my toy printing press, collected coins, and completed 4-H projects in drama, woodworking, and nature conservation. My feelings of rootedness and belonging were strengthened as I researched my father's family history, tracing our tenure on the farm back to its beginnings in the 1850s.

I chose to spend a lot of time with my paternal grandmother who lived in the old farmhouse next door, surrounded by her beloved antiques and books and other fine things. For several years in my teens, I operated a small antique shop in an old poultry shed that my father helped me refurbish. Through high school I was essentially a sexually naive loner, feeling no great inclination to date girls or to fool around with boys. I edited the school newspaper, wrote for a local weekly paper, and spent a summer as a foreign exchange student (feeling homesick much of the time). Coming out to myself and my family between eighteen and twenty-one years of age was relatively free of pain.

My life since leaving the farm for college has been largely urban, midwestern, and variously fulfilling. There is much I have come to like about city life, but I have tended to feel like an outsider in the gay communities of the cities in which I have lived. And I have had similar feelings in relation to the larger gay "community" in the United States, as represented in popular gay-themed books, periodicals, and movies. In an effort to gain a better understanding of what I bring to the experience of being gay as a result, perhaps, of my farm upbringing, I have looked for books telling...
of gay men has expanded greatly in recent years and has enriched my life in many ways, but it neglects the experiences and perspectives of gay men who grew up in farm families. Urban or suburban experiences are central to the lives of most gay men, but they constitute only part of the story.

It is not uncommon for gay men who grew up on farms to regard their rural roots as irrelevant or embarrassing. Those attitudes tend to be reinforced by the popular gay press, in which the most common representations of the rural childhood experience include a variety of farm-boy stereotypes, fantasies, and romanticized, back-to-nature images. Charles Silverstein described some of these popular perceptions in his 1981 book, *Man to Man: Gay Couples in America.*

City gays imagine the boys on the farm as somehow more wholesome than themselves. Soaking up the sun while pitching a bale of hay, their bodies taking on a bronze glow, these promising young men develop tight muscles from manual labor and hardiness; the lines in their faces and the callouses on their hands are the results of wind, rain, and the warming sun. In short, they are pictured as country bumpkins with rosy cheeks, ready to be plucked if they venture into the big city (p. 241).

In our interview, Clark Williams described his own experience with these stereotypical perceptions.

A lot of men idealize the naive, good-looking, tanned farm boy. "Wouldn’t you love to go to bed with him? Wouldn’t you love to have him, to take him down?" I’ve had some guys take that kind of approach with me. I’m supposed to be wide-eyed, naive, less intelligent, and in denial about who I am. They’ll ask me, “Are you married? Do you have a girlfriend?”

The life stories presented here are not primarily those of gay men who stayed in the rural farming communities where they grew up. A large majority of these men have left farming and rural communities, choosing to live in or near relatively large midwestern cities. Richard Kilmer was succinct in assessing his own choice to leave.

If I had stayed on the farm, I would have never dealt with being gay. I would have probably gotten married and had sex with men on the side. I think a lot of gays don’t leave the farm, so there’s probably a lot of people out there who are doing that. So many people there are alcoholics, and I think that’s what a lot of gays gravitate towards, to kind of deaden their feelings.

Barney Dews grew up on a farm in East Texas in the 1960s and 1970s, and was living in Minneapolis at the time of our interview. Although he is not a midwesterner, his description of “a centrifugal force that slings gay
people as far away as possible, to escape,” is relevant to many of these men’s experiences. It seems likely that by having uprooted and distanced themselves from the families and communities of their childhoods, these men were able to look at their lives with more insight and clarity than would have been possible had they stayed. As these stories reveal, their views of growing up range widely, from bitter to beatific.

**Note**