Farm Boys
Fellows, Will

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Interview subjects were recruited by publicizing the Gay Farm Boys Project through press releases sent during the summer of 1992 to twenty-six gay and lesbian community publications in the midwestern United States. These included: Chicago, Illinois—*Gay Chicago, Outlines, Windy City Times*; Rockford, Illinois—*Rock River News*; Indianapolis, Indiana—*Fever, Indiana Word*; Ann Arbor, Michigan—*Michigan Tribune, Out and About*; Detroit, Michigan—*Cruise, Metra*; Minneapolis, Minnesota—*Equal Time, GAZE*; Kansas City, Missouri—*Alternative News*; St. Louis, Missouri—*News-Telegram*; Omaha, Nebraska—*New Voice*; Cincinnati, Ohio—*Nouveau Midwest*; Cleveland, Ohio—*Gay People's Chronicle, Valentine News*; Columbus, Ohio—*Free Press, Gaybeat*; La Crosse, Wisconsin—*Leaping La Crosse News*; Madison, Wisconsin—*Frontiersman*; Milwaukee, Wisconsin—*In Step, Wisconsin Light*; Wausau, Wisconsin—*Lifeline*; Westby, Wisconsin—*New Beginnings*.

To give the editors of these publications flexibility in publicizing the project, the appeal for interview subjects was provided in two forms—as a standard press release and a letter to the editor. The text of the standard release follows:

**Farm Boys Sought for Interviews**

Are you a gay man who grew up on a farm? If so, your experience as a farm boy is an important and largely neglected part of gay culture. Urban experiences are central to the lives of most gay men, but they're far from being the whole story.

The Gay Farm Boys Project is intended to give gay men who grew up on farms—whether or not they are still involved in farming—a chance to talk about their experiences and the ways in which their farm upbringings have influenced their lives.

If you are a gay man who grew up in a farming household and you think you might be interested in contributing to this cultural research project by talking about your experiences, please contact Will Fellows at...
I grew up in the sixties on a small farm in a Mennonite community in a rural area south of Cleveland, Ohio. The whole family took an active part in the daily chores of milking cows, plowing, working the gardens, cleaning the pens, killing chickens on Saturdays, and acting like saints in church on Sundays. The horrors on the farm for this guy were too many, and now in my forties I live in a suburban area outside of Cleveland. After those days in the country, I don’t have and won’t have even a pet, at least not four-legged.

Apparent in some letters and phone conversations was an assumption, suspicion, or hope that the Gay Farm Boys Project would prove to be a networking service for men in rural areas, men with fantasies about “farm boys,” men with fantasies about sex with animals, or some combination thereof. One man wrote from rural Minnesota:

I am interested in your research and how you plan to process the information. Is this for your edification? A chance to compare notes with other respondents and form some sort of support group? An opportunity to meet others in the same boat and socialize? Or what? You may have tapped a good market for this kind of research. As I expect you know, the chance to make rural contacts is very limited.

The allure of the farm-boy fantasy was brought home to me in an exploring letter from a man in suburban Chicago. Would I help him make pen-pal connections with midwestern farm boys who might be interested in hosting a city boy for a couple of days? “I love the country, and I’ve always wanted to have an adventure with a real cute farm boy way out there in the loft of the barn—wake up to fresh ground coffee, scrambled eggs with sausage, toast, and a good horse ride. I’m crazy for blond, blue-eyed hunks.” Although I could appreciate the difficulties of making satisfying connections, I did not intend the project to serve matchmaking purposes.
Thus, I avoided interviewing men whose interest in the project appeared to hinge greatly on the prospect of social or sexual networking possibilities.

A man in Chicago wrote to say that his years on a dairy farm in Ohio had given him “many tales to tell of sex with animals. Is this what you are interested in? Do you want all the naughty but nice details?” He would tell me all about it if I promised I was not with the cops. Two men in Canada sent along cartoons relating to bestiality. I had no desire to avoid the exploration of this subject, which seems to be quite strongly linked with farm life in the popular imagination. However, I had no interest in interviewing individuals whose responses to the project appeared to be entirely salacious in nature. My preference was to involve those who evinced broader imagination and greater thoughtfulness related to the stated themes of the project. Overall, I was very pleased with the magnitude and caliber of the response to my press release.

In addition to those recruited for interviews through publicity, I enlisted a relatively small number of subjects personally. These men were generally friends or acquaintances, or strangers referred to me by people I knew. All prospective interview subjects were sent the following letter describing the project and the interview process:

Thanks for your interest in the Gay Farm Boys Project. This cultural research project is intended to give you—a gay man who grew up in a farming household—a chance to talk about your experiences and the ways in which your farm upbringing has influenced your life. I am gay, grew up on a dairy farm, and am an experienced interviewer and writer. Your words will be used as part of a book based on the “gay farm boys” theme.

Life stories rooted in farm childhoods have been largely neglected in the growing literature that documents the lives of gay men in the U.S. If you grew up on a farm—whether or not you are still farming—I welcome your participation in changing this situation. Whatever your age and whatever your life is about now, your story is a unique and valuable part of gay culture.

Here are some basic details about being interviewed:

- The interview is informal, in-depth, and is meant to be a relaxed and enjoyable experience. Please try to set aside two to three hours for it.
- We can hold the interview at your home or at some other mutually agreeable location.
- The format and content of the interview are flexible and specific to the individual. General areas that we are likely to cover include: childhood experiences; family relationships; parental values, beliefs and attitudes; development of your sexual awareness, understanding and self-acceptance; your present life situation, values, beliefs, attitudes, etc.
• The interview will be recorded (audio, not video) and portions of the transcript will be used as part of a book based on the “gay farm boys” theme.
• There is no payment for being interviewed or for any use that may be made of the content of the interview, but your participation will be duly acknowledged.
• If you desire anonymity, names and other key details of your story can be changed. At the interview, we will come to an agreement about these matters—on which you are free to change your mind later.
• If you would like further information, please contact me at the address or phone number listed above.

Between the spring of 1992 and the autumn of 1993, I conducted interviews with seventy-five men from rural farming backgrounds. Ages of subjects ranged from twenty-five to eighty-four years, with men in their twenties, thirties, and forties representing more than three-quarters of those interviewed. All subjects were European-American, reflecting the vastly dominant ethnic profile of the rural farming population in the midwestern U.S.

Most of the men I interviewed lived in, or near, relatively large midwestern cities and were no longer engaged in farming. This prevailing profile may result from a number of factors. First, this research project was publicized in gay and lesbian community publications centered primarily in larger cities. In addition, a greater proportion of gay-identified men from rural farming backgrounds may live in larger cities rather than small cities and towns or rural areas. Further, several men living in small towns and rural areas declined to be interviewed for reasons that appeared to center around concern about their identities being revealed.

The men I interviewed seemed to possess a wide range of sometimes mixed motives for agreeing to participate: they hoped that by telling their stories they could contribute to illuminating people’s minds and hearts, thus making a positive difference for future generations; they were simply responding enthusiastically to a project that struck them as “a great idea,” and wanted to help out so that the project would be successful; they wanted to tell what they considered to be interesting stories about their lives. A self-therapeutic motive was evident in some interviews; these subjects seemed to be influenced by a confessional or cathartic impulse to tell all, perhaps in an effort to pull together life’s loose ends and enhance their self-understanding. It was evident, as well, that some subjects hoped that their participation would assist them in meeting other men with similar backgrounds, interests, and values.

Most interviews were conducted in the midwestern United States, in-
cluding the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska. One interview was held in California. Subjects participated with the understanding that they would not be paid for any use that might be made of interview material. Most interviews were two to three hours in length, exploring many facets of the individual's life. I was often surprised and moved by the extent to which the men I interviewed seemed to make open books of their lives. I took a casual, conversational, free-form approach to interviewing, letting the subject have primary influence on the structure of the interview. While the scope of my questioning was consistent from one interview to another, the sequencing of, and relative emphasis given to, the various lines of inquiry were influenced greatly by the ways in which each subject was inclined to talk about his own life. A summary of the major areas of inquiry follows.

**CHILDHOOD BACKGROUND**

- Where did you live as a child? What kind of farm was it?
- How would you describe your involvement in farm work? In house work?
- How would you describe your childhood relationships with your parents? With your siblings?
- Besides your parents, did any other adult play a significant role in your childhood on a day-to-day basis?
- Where did you go to school as a child?
- Describe your playmates/friends in elementary, junior high, and senior high school.
- Were you involved in any school-related activities in junior or senior high school?
- Were you involved in any non-school-related activities during junior or senior high school?
- Was there any particular place on or near the farm where you would go to be by yourself?

**FAMILY ATTITUDES, BELIEFS, VALUES**

- How would you describe the beliefs/attitudes within your family when you were a child about people who were different from yourselves because of race, ethnicity, or religion? What were your family's prevailing attitudes regarding gender roles, sexuality, and homosexuality?
• How would you describe the influence of church/religion on your childhood?

COMING OUT TO SELF AND OTHERS

• When did you first become aware of your same-sex orientation? How would you describe your reaction? Did you talk with anyone or do anything else about it?
• Do you recall any books, magazines, movies, TV shows, or other forms of popular information or entertainment that were important to you in coming to understand your sexual identity?
• At any time during your childhood, did you know (or know of) someone who was gay—and you were aware of it then?
• Did you have any intimate physical or sexual experiences while growing up?
• How would you describe the influence of the farm culture of your childhood on your ability to recognize and come to terms with your sexual orientation?
• Is there any particular theory explaining the causes of homosexuality that you are especially inclined to believe?
• To what extent have you come out to your parents and other family members?
• Were you ever married?
• When did your parents and other family members learn that you were gay? What were their reactions?
• How would you describe your current relationships with your parents and other family members?

BEYOND COMING OUT

• If subject did not stay in farming: Did you ever seriously consider farming for a living? Was being gay a factor in deciding not to farm?
• If subject stayed in farming: How does being gay fit into your life as a farmer?
• If subject has lover/partner/mate: How, when, and where did you meet? Did he grow up on a farm? Has he gotten to know your parents and other family members? How would you describe his relationship with them?
How These Stories Were Discovered

• How would you describe your attitudes about intimate relationships with men?
• How would you describe your involvement in the gay community?
• How would you describe your political perspectives, especially with regard to issues of concern to gay people?

GENERAL REFLECTIONS

• What are your best memories of growing up on a farm? What are your worst?
• How would you describe the influence that your farm upbringing has had on the character and quality of your life?
• How would you describe your current feelings about being a gay man?
• How do you feel about the life choices you have made in light of being gay?

The fact that all interviews were based on the same range of questions contributes to a similarity in the topical range of these narratives. However, interview subjects differed greatly in how they responded to the interview process. Some subjects seemed to be most comfortable with a very clearly delineated question-and-answer format, and tended not to go off on their own. Others were more self-directed in what they had to say; I would ask a question to get things going, ask questions for follow-up or refocusing as I was inclined, move things along occasionally with a new line of questioning, and the subject would take it from there. These were generally the best interviews, driven less by my questions than by the force of the subject’s narrative spontaneity.

Earnestness abounds in these stories. While the reader will find moments of humor and light-heartedness throughout this collection, many of these stories are largely serious in tone. I believe this results from several conditions. First, it seems likely that the more serious-minded would choose to participate in an in-depth autobiographical interview as part of a cultural research project, especially when they know that portions of what they say may be published. In addition, many of those who chose to tell their stories had some distinctly serious things to talk about. There is also the editorial reality that humorous exchanges in conversation do not always translate effectively in print. More fundamentally, though, I believe
that many of these men were less interested in entertaining me and my potential readers than in telling about their lives and being heard.

It was fascinating to experience the various ways in which these men approached telling me—a stranger in most cases—about themselves. Some men seemed to be quite comfortable talking frankly about intimate matters; others seemed nervous or embarrassed. Some were inclined to take an orderly, linear, chronological approach in recounting the events of their lives. (One man in his early seventies reported the exact dates of several events of his personal development during the 1930s, including that of his pubescence.) Other men seemed to prefer a looser, more thematic approach to talking about their lives, which was more compatible with my style of questioning.

Some men were quite inclined to reflect on and analyze their experiences, and to talk about the emotional and psychological aspects of things. Others were more disposed to talk about specific people, places, and events. Most gratifying to me were those occasions when rich surface details came accompanied by insightful analysis and reflection. The questions that seemed to be most challenging for many subjects were two that I asked in tandem toward the end of the interview: How would you describe your current feelings about being a gay man? How do you feel about the life choices you have made in light of being gay?

Somewhat less than half of the men represented in this collection used pseudonyms, including Henry Bauer, Dennis Lindholm, James Heckman, Norm Reed, Ronald Schoen, David Foster, Doug Edwards, Bill Troxell, Martin Scherz, Heinz Koenig, Dale Hesterman, Everett Cooper, David Campbell, Richard Hopkins, Lon Mickelsen, Steven Preston, and Connie Sanders. All prospective interview subjects were informed that their names and other identifying details would be changed if they so desired. At the time of the interview, each subject was asked to specify the extent to which he wished to have these things changed. Some subjects stated that a simple change of their own names would be sufficient, while others desired a more thorough masking of identities by giving pseudonyms to other individuals mentioned by name in their interviews. If the subject desired geographical anonymity as well, the locale of his childhood was obscured by describing it in terms of a county or general region of a state, with no specific place name. Thus, the only names that have been replaced by pseudonyms are those of persons, not places.

I generally did not ask any interview subject to explain either his desire to have his identity concealed or his willingness to have it revealed. We simply came to an understanding on the matter and left it at that. I took this approach because I did not want the issue to get in the way of their talking comfortably with me about their lives. It was apparent from the
interviews that the desire to conceal was generally rooted in considerations of personal and family privacy, as well as privacy for other individuals whose lives were touched on during the interviews. Also of concern to some subjects were their employment security, personal safety, and the sensitive nature of some of the things they talked about.

While I liked the idea of using real names, obtaining a candid, uncensored account of these men's lives was much more important to me. In some cases it seemed that a desire or willingness to be identified by real name, however daring or courageous, was accompanied by a disinclination to be fully candid. Moreover, the desire or willingness to be identified by a real name did not seem to be consistent with an overall openness about being gay in day-to-day life. Some of the men who elected to have their stories presented pseudonymously seemed to be quite open about being gay. Conversely, some of the men who chose to be identified by their real names did not seem to be especially open about being gay in their daily lives; in these cases, electing to be identified by a real name may have been motivated by a desire to take advantage of the opportunity to come out, in print, once and for all.

Of the seventy-five audio-taped interviews, I selected the fifty most substantive and representative to be professionally transcribed. I then selected approximately half of these fifty to shape into full-length narrative chapters. Each of these interview subjects was then invited to review a draft of his chapter, with the following instructions.

Thanks for your willingness to review the enclosed draft of your life story as adapted from your interview. I would like you to check it for accuracy and for speaking style. Does it reflect your way of saying things? You may find that reading it out loud is helpful. In shaping your spoken words into text, I have adhered to your own word choices as much as possible. Because I try to avoid over-editing and imposing my own words on you, this spoken-to-written transformation sometimes results in awkward wording. I hope that you will do what you wish to fix any grammatical awkwardness that you perceive.

I would also like you to consider whether the piece seems to be a fairly well-rounded, balanced presentation of your life story. If there are changes you could make that would clarify or enrich it, please do so. Keep in mind, however, that I am not looking for you to update your story. I want it to reflect your life as you saw it at the time of your interview. With that in mind, you are welcome to expand on anything, to add new material, or to delete material. Simply cross out any text to be changed or deleted and write in the new text, if any. You may write anywhere on these pages or on separate sheets of paper. Using a pencil is probably a good idea. It's likely that in most cases I will agree on the re-
visions that you specify, but I reserve the right to leave anything un-
changed if that seems most appropriate to me.

All twenty-six subjects of these full-length chapters agreed to partici-
pate in the review process, which improved the narratives in important
ways. Most helpful was the addition of text that clarified or elaborated on
various topics that had not been covered adequately in the interview. Also
helpful were suggestions for rearranging portions of the text to enhance
flow and coherence. Some subjects made changes in wording that were
intended to soften their expressions of anger or other strong emotions or
opinions. In one narrative, for example, “It was a big, hot bitch of a day,”
got whittled down to, “It was a hot day.” I believe this impulse was largely
the result of these subjects being struck by the sometimes startling force
of spoken words put down on paper. Some expressed misgivings about in-
cluding text that they decided was too intimately revealing. Since all of
the men who made these problematic revisions had elected to use pseud-
onyms, I felt comfortable disregarding any of their requested revisions
that appeared to diminish the character and substance of their narratives.

I excerpted material from many of the transcribed interviews that were
not used as the basis of full-length chapters. The most substantive of these
excerpts were also made available for review by the interview subjects, with
instructions similar to those detailed above. These excerpt narratives are
shorter than the full-length autobiographical chapters, and they typically
address a single topic or theme. While they lack the larger context of the
longer chapters, they provide concise and engaging illustrations of impor-
tant themes that emerge in the longer chapters.

Selected quotes for use in the introductory text were excerpted from
several of the interviews that were not fully transcribed. In addition, I in-
vited all interview subjects to share with me any materials they had writ-
ten that were relevant to the focus of the project. In the cases of five in-
dividuals, portions of these autobiographical writings were woven into their
transcript-based narratives.

I have chosen to arrange these life stories according to the subject’s
year of birth. This arrangement appeals to me because it acknowledges the
primacy of time and fate. Moreover, it takes advantage of the historical
perspective on American culture which many readers will bring to their
understanding of these stories. It also allows the reader to perceive more
readily the ways in which the experience of growing up gay in the rural
Midwest has and has not changed through the century.

I have divided the narratives of these men, born from 1909 to 1967,
into three groups based on the calendar years during which they came of
age (by my judgement, the period between their fifteenth and twentieth
birthdays). The oldest of these three groups includes those who came of age anywhere between the mid-1920s and the mid-1960s. The middle period comprises those who came of age from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. The youngest group includes those who had their fifteenth and twentieth birthdays anywhere between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s. This chronological framework delineates three quite distinct eras in American mass culture with regard to the kind and amount of information about homosexuality and gay identity accessible to midwestern farm boys. Each of these three groups of life stories is preceded by a description of the era.