Farm Boys
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PART 1

Coming of Age Before the Mid-1960s
Our Favorite Team, by Jeff Kopseng, based on a 1920 photo of an Indiana farm boy, courtesy of Larry Reed
Introduction

DESPITE PROFOUND changes in the character of U.S. life from the early 1900s to the mid-1960s, there was little change throughout this era in the kind or quantity of information about homosexuality accessible to a farm boy coming of age in the Midwest. The invisibility of homosexuality through the 1930s was described by Robert C. Reinhart in *A History of Shadows*. Gays lived without a literature, a means of communication to serve their interests and needs, or any sense of community. When gay people were even heard about, it was in the pages of psychiatric journals, annals of jurisprudence, or the news columns that chronicled sexual transgressions, but usually in such veiled terms that readers were hard put to know why the person had been sentenced to five years in jail (pp. 53–54).

The veil was drawn back from homosexuality in two novels published in 1948—Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar*. To the extent that mainstream publications gave these works any notice, their reviews ranged from disagreeable to hostile. The Kinsey report on American male sexual behavior, also published in 1948, was not so easily ignored. The report stated that homosexual activity was much more common than generally believed, that very few individuals were exclusively homo- or hetero- in their sexual nature, and that many individuals had a mix of both homo- and heterosexual experience. Kinsey’s findings challenged America’s ability to sustain the denial, silence, and ignorance surrounding homosexuality, but even in the face of scientific evidence the facade of America’s Victorian/Puritan sexual code did not crumble. The Kinsey report astonished, appalled, and fascinated millions without seeming to enlighten very many.

Throughout the 1950s, the efforts of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the Eisenhower administration to expel Communists, sex perverts, and other undesirables from influential positions captured headlines and spawned localized witch-hunts around the country. In the face of these oppressive attitudes, today’s organized gay rights movement got started in the 1950s and early 1960s, but it was an exclusively urban phenomenon with very limited reach.

The tenor of prevailing notions about homosexuality was both reflected in, and reinforced by, the mass media. National mass-market peri-
odicals gave minimal coverage to the topic. In 1959, *Time* presented a psychiatrist’s view that the homosexual is a “psychic masochist,” a glutton for punishment whose “distorted pleasures feed on the allure of danger.” The gist of a 1960 article in *Newsweek*, “To Punish or Pity?,” is conveyed effectively by the title. *Newsweek* reported in 1961 that the number of homosexuals in the military was increasing. “These people are sick, they need treatment. They can be cured if they want to be,” a psychotherapist stated. From a preventive perspective, he advocated school-based psychiatric treatment on the premise that homosexuals could be spotted as early as seven years of age.

For many of the men whose stories are presented here, coming of age between the mid-1920s and the mid-1960s meant bearing a burden of unequivocally negative feelings toward their emerging selves. Some carried this burden for decades, others for only a short time. For more than half of them, this negativity was shouldered in tandem with the expectations and responsibilities of marriage and parenting. Those who managed to avoid marriage were faced with the task of creating a meaningful life focus and identity apart from mainstream conventions and often without the example of role models that were acceptable to them.

Henry Bauer’s tale of psychoanalytic misadventure is emblematic of coming of age during this era. So is Cornelius Utz’s account of coming out to himself in his seventies, after thirty-five years of marriage. Robert Peters’ reminiscences are snapshots from the life of a naive adolescent male on a poor backwoods farm in the late 1930s. In light of the oppressiveness of this period, the diversity of experience in this group of stories is notable. For example, Jim Cross and Dennis Lindholm were born within two years of each other and both grew up in Iowa farm families, but that is about the extent of their similarity. Jim came to grips with being gay in his early twenties and with relatively little pain; Dennis came out in his mid-forties and with much trauma.

In the face of a debilitating lack of self-confidence, John Beutel struggled to achieve a sense of self-worth through his work as a teacher. For Ronald Schoen, being able to help a gay student through the uncertainties, fears, and isolation of his rural teenage years has been greatly rewarding. Myron Turk winces at seeing a nephew in the midst of a painful adolescence similar to his own. Norm Reed, who hoped that marriage and religion would banish his homosexual feelings, continues to adhere to the fundamentalist beliefs of the church that ostracized him. In contrast to Harry Beckner’s light-hearted account of growing up gay, James Heckman’s suicide attempt is a reminder that many gay farm boys who were fated to come of age in this era did not make it to the next.
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