Farm Boys
Fellows, Will

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Fellows, Will.
Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest.
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Robert Peters

Robert was born in 1924, the oldest of five children, and grew up on a poor scrub-sand farm of forty acres near Eagle River, in Vilas County, northern Wisconsin. He married and fathered four children. The author of more than thirty books of poetry, criticism, short stories, and plays, Robert retired in 1993 from teaching literature and writing at the University of California, Irvine. He lives in the Los Angeles area with his companion of many years, Paul Trachtenberg.

Robert Peters' autobiographical poetry may be found in his Poems: Selected and New, 1967–1991 (Asylum Arts, 1992). The autobiographical prose pieces that follow are excerpted from his Crunching Gravel: A Wisconsin Boyhood in the Thirties (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993). In these excerpts, Old Crip is a rooster, Osmo Makinnen is the school bully, Lady is a cow, and Margie is Robert's sister.

KILLING THE HEN

OLD CRIP DANCED on spurless legs, making deep-maw proprietary sounds. Once the hens were eating corn and chortling, he fed himself, keeping a wary eye on us.

We selected a large Rhode Island Red, one no longer laying. “Now,” Dad said. “Point the barrel at her eye; then pull the trigger slow.”

An olio of feelings: I did not want to shoot. I did not want to displease Dad. Oblivious, the hen pecked at her corn.

The trigger felt like ice. My index finger seemed jointless.

“No, do it right,” Dad warned.

The bird’s yellowish ear was a minuscule sun. Stunned, she chortled, rattled, and fell, clawed the air, stiffened, and then stilled. Dad whipped out a pocketknife and slit her throat. “Wasn’t too bad, was it?” He lifted the hen by its legs. “Nice fat one. Be good with dumplin’s.”

I plunged the bird into boiling water. The feathers loosened immediately and smelled like rancid rags. Then came the singeing and butcher-
ing. Mom planned an early supper, complete with blueberry pie, from berries picked the previous summer.

Easter

As Easter neared, I read the Bible with increasing fervor. Whether I understood or not, each word was truth. Even the interminable “begat” verses were mines of spiritual ore. I meditated over the saccharine color prints of Jesus with lambs, of Jesus being scourged, of Jesus dying, and I began to talk to Jesus, shaping the air with my hands, imagining Him as my very own.

The circumstance resolving my struggle was my first ejaculation. I had no idea what had transpired. I woke during the night to find my belly wet. At first I thought it was blood. Without disturbing my brother, I crept from bed and found a flashlight. Where had the strange substance come from? My parents told me nothing of sexual change, and I was too naive to relate my own seminal flow to that of farm animals. My fevered psyche interpreted the incident as a warning from Jesus that I must be baptized.

I resolved to go to mass the next morning, Palm Sunday. My parents approved—though not without some hesitation that I might turn Catholic. ... I hoped to remain anonymous, so I decided to attend a later mass.

I dallied along the road, examining pools for frogs' eggs, throwing sticks and stones into a swirl of rusty water emerging through a culvert near Mud Creek, and admiring a grove of Juneberry trees loaded with blossoms. Twice I turned and started back for home.

By the time I reached St Joseph's Catholic Church, the second mass had ended, and there was no other. Jesus, I felt, had arranged this timing for some umbrageous reason of His own, sheltering me from Catholicism. Services were about to begin at the Christ Evangelical Church across the street. On the steps were Eileen Ewald and her parents. I had had a crush on Eileen ever since she appeared in second grade and said “sugar.” It was not the word itself, but her cultured tone in saying it that struck me as special. I ached to be in love with her.

I followed Eileen into the church and sat in a pew at the very back. I was entranced by the pale oak altar with its pastel plaster crucifixion. The organ music, the first I had ever heard, was splendid. All through the sermon, by the Reverend Joseph Krubsack, I sat in a daze. Jesus had directed me here!

I lingered until Rev. Krubsack was alone and told him of my wish for
baptism. He promised to baptize me and my family on the Sunday after Easter. But I would not become a full Lutheran, he warned, until I had passed instruction.

PLOUGHING AND SEEDING

For five dollars, my uncle hired out his team, Bill and Bess, for plowing. I was a coward near horses, and when Dad asked me to drive the team while he steered the plow I refused. Horses would suddenly shake their necks and bare their teeth.

My uncle was a hard driver. I had seen him beat Bill with a club while the horse was tied in his stall. In pain, the horse broke free and ran from the barn toward Minnow Lake, with my uncle in pursuit. I followed and saw him corner Bill, who waited docilely while my uncle, his wrath spent, grabbed the broken halter and stroked Bill’s neck with surprising gentleness.

Eruptions of violence always dismayed me. In a recurring dream, Osmo Makinnen threatened to attack. When I sought to defend myself, my arms froze at my sides. Usually I woke in a sweat. Why my impotence? Dad had given me pointers—and he had boxed at carnivals. To support my ineptitude, I found the Bible useful. If you followed Christ’s example, you simply turned the other cheek. I found the violence of men far worse than any violence of horses. A man enraged by a horse unleashed an enormous force few men could hope to restrain.

One lasting image is of my father beating Lady. I had been told to graze her in timothy along Sundsteen Road. Since she was always docile, I went to the house for a drink of water and lingered talking to Margie. When I returned, Lady was not where I had left her. Shortly, I heard my dad’s angry voice—the cow was in the cornfield. When he flung stones at Lady, she sped crazily across the potato field. Dad cornered her near a fence, grabbed a tree branch, and beat her. She stumbled and fell, quivering, her belly swollen with calf. I grabbed the branch. Dad was shaking with rage. I flung my arms around Lady’s neck. I felt her blood on my face. Slowly, she righted herself. I told Dad it was my fault. “It’s all right,” Dad said. “Take her to the barn. Give her water.”

TIMBER

On weekends I accompanied Dad to Buckotaban Lake, where we peeled logs for the Wisconsin-Michigan Lumber Company. Dad and a friend, Mar-
ion Briggs, were hired to strip bark from the logs and pile them so that sledges and tractors could reach them for easy hauling. Briggs was a tall, husky man in his thirties, with a small daughter. He had been abandoned by his wife, reputedly a Spanish dancer. His mother raised the girl, keeping her in homemade dresses of an ugly Victorian style. Briggs was a violinist who, under mysterious circumstances, had given up his career. Only rarely would he consent to perform. He encouraged Dad to play instruments. They earned thirty cents for each log trimmed of branches and debarked. By working hard, they could finish six or seven trees an hour. My job was to peel logs Dad had trimmed and slashed along one side. I used a “spud,” or tire iron. Pine bark came off easily. The spruce were difficult though. On these I used a drawknife, a blade with two parallel handles, scraping free the obstinate bark without gouging the wood. Since I was slow, Dad worked most of the spruce himself. The best logs would be sawed into lumber, the remainder pulped. Our clothes and hands were coated with pitch. Only kerosene would cut it.

Briggs worked by himself, creating his own piles of timber. One afternoon he walked over to me, chatted briefly, and then whipped out his penis. There’s a protocol for relieving yourself in the presence of other males: either you turn your back or you stand beside them, facing the same way; neither of you gazes at the other. Briggs’s member was almost equine; I had never seen anything like it. Dad came over and spoke curtly to Briggs, who never displayed himself to me again.

THE JOLLYS

By traversing Ewald’s forty and our own, we reached Perch Lake, the best of all nearby lakes for swimming. Minnow, nearer our house, was thick with bloodsuckers. And wading was impossible—you were soon up to your knees in muck. Perch Lake had a wide sandy shore and a sandy bottom. To get to the beach you had to cross a large potato field owned by a bad-tempered bachelor, John Simon, the town grave digger, whose house was invisible from the lake.

A grassy bluff with scrub Norway pines overlooked the beach. By getting a good run, you propelled yourself into the water. We had contests to see who could jump the farthest. For a swimsuit I wore old jeans cut off above the knees. My sisters had one-piece suits from Sears. Nell, only four, rarely went with us. My cousin Grace’s breasts had already formed. George Jolly delighted in flashing his rear at Grace—“mooning,” he called it.

I enjoyed going to Perch Lake with the Jollys. George was my age, Bill
a year older. They lived at the opposite end of Sundsteen, a mile and a half past the school. I thought nothing of walking the distance to meet them, and since there were no telephones, there was no way of knowing whether they would be home or not. They came from a huge family of ten children. Bill and George loved fishing and often went to Columbus Lake.

The Jolly house was a two-storey affair covered with gray shingles. It had the usual spread of outbuildings—a barn with lofts for hay, a henhouse, a pigsty, and corrals for cows. The father and the oldest son worked for the Wisconsin-Michigan Lumber Company. Mrs. Jolly was an ebullient woman with huge breasts who wore the same dress for months, until it turned to shreds. All of her dresses were of the same magenta Rit tint, the hue rubbed dull by grease and child-soil.

The downstairs living room doubled as a bedroom. Here the parents slept in a single bed with the three smallest children. Upstairs, the four boys shared another bed, as did the girls, Margaret, Helen, and Lucille. No rooms had rugs or linoleum. Bill and George would lie on the floor directly over the dining table, collect bed fluff, wood slivers, and mouse turds, and drop them through a crack into a pan of baked beans below. Daily, Mrs. Jolly baked bread and cinnamon rolls. She gave me thick slabs of hot bread smeared with bacon grease and peanut butter or wild cherry (“pincherry”) jam. There was never enough silverware. The family ate at a rectangular oak table in two shifts, the older girls feeding the younger children. In the center of the clothless table, near a platter of fried pike and perch, stood the blue roaster full of beans. Bread, homemade jelly, butter, lard, fresh milk, coffee. To help yourself to food you simply reached into the roaster and then wiped your fingers on some bread. No plates matched, and most were cracked. Only the parents used spoons and forks. Cinnamon rolls. Fresh gooseberry pie.

At school Bill and George often took my part against Osmo Makinen. Bill, blond, short, and muscular, was quieter than George, who had black hair like mine and was always mischievous. Both were good students. The three of us would start high school together. Bill later died at Monte Cassino in the early years of the war.

From the Jollys I learned how to fish, and they taught me the little I knew about sex. They seemed wiser than I, perhaps because they had older brothers, perhaps because they were raised far more permissively; their mother hardly had time to linger over their nurturing.

For our night swims in Perch Lake, Bill would bring matches, and after we swam, we’d rustle up wood for a fire. Bill had already reached manhood, but George and I lingered in late adolescence. One evening, George and I, naked, were horsing around, grabbing one another. Bill squatted
near the fire watching. When George wrestled me to the sand, pinning my shoulders, Bill came over. His penis was hard. He started to play with it. George also began masturbating. I sat hunkered with my head on my knees, amazed, excited, yet vaguely embarrassed. Out in the lake, hundreds of toads swam toward our fire. As they hopped frantically ashore, we beat them with sticks and threw them into the flames. Then we doused the fire and left the beach.

COLUMBUS LAKE

I met Bill and George Jolly one morning at their house at 6 A.M. Their seventeen-year-old brother, John, a freckled, husky youth, was still asleep on the bed the three of them shared. He was lying on his back and his sheet had worked up across his chest, revealing a sizable erection. George settled a noose of fishing line around John's penis and dropped the loose end of the line out a nearby window. “Watch,” he laughed, running downstairs.

The black thread moved with delicate tugs. John grew even more erect. George yanked harder, and John awoke, cursing. “That’s George doin’ it again, right?” Keeping the string taut, he went over to the window and urinated. George yelled, ran back upstairs, and proceeded to wrestle his naked brother to the floor.

Later, while George ate breakfast, I helped Bill dig night crawlers. They loaned me a cane pole; they each had casting rods. They jammed some bread and cheese into a bag, which would serve also for bringing fish home.

To reach the lake we traversed a superb stand of virgin timber—pine, hemlock, and cedar, with some yellow birch. Partridge flew from thickets. When we reached a floating bog, I matched my footsteps to George’s. One misstep and you were up to your waist in muck. As it was, on any portion of the bog your feet were under water. The trick was to leap to the next clump before the mass sank deeper under your weight. The vast lake was visible a hundred yards off. We soon reached high land and a rapid creek that flowed into the lake.

We dropped our gear on the sand and stripped to our underwear. The shallow water was rife with pickerel weed. Beyond was a drop-off where Bill planned to fish. We tied fish stringers and a small bag of worms around our waists. George showed me how to bait the hook.

Bill hooked two walleyes and some bass and bluegills. George caught a pickerel, which he threw back, saying it was too bony, and nearly a dozen bass, bluegills, and large perch. My catch consisted of six bluegills and three smallmouth bass.
We stopped for lunch, stripped, and had fun swimming and splashing. When we were thirsty, we simply scooped up handfuls of water and drank. A doe and a fawn appeared. A black bear, fortunately without cubs, spied us and waddled back into the forest. While Bill continued fishing, George and I lay stretched out on the sand, absorbing sun and talking about girls. He claimed that he "did it" with Alice Carlson. She was the oldest of a brood of children left motherless when their mother had died giving birth. I knew George was fibbing, yet I chose to believe him, enhancing his prowess, fearsome and mysterious to me. Perhaps I had a crush on George, of the kind youths have on one another. I don't know. The more masculine—and crude—he was, the better I liked him. I wished for the afternoon never to end.
CHARLIE MATTEK had staked his Guernsey bull in the north pasture, waiting for Lady. When I led her to the gate, the huge Guernsey caught her scent, grew aroused, reached the end of his tether, and pawed the ground. While he grew frenetic, his penis dripping, Lady seemed oblivious of him and kept munching grass, well beyond his reach. When Charlie pulled Lady nearer, the bull began licking her, his penis a hot rod of meat ready for penetration. He shuddered and withdrew, lowing. Strings of semen dripped from Lady. "That should do it," Charlie said. I led Lady home. I was to bring her back if she remained in estrus.

CARNIVAL

The carnival took place in a field at the junction of Sundsteen Road and Highway 17. I walked there before opening day to help erect tents and booths. Brightly painted vans were arranged in a row at the back of the field. Barred wagons, badly in need of paint, held a lion and a gorilla. Some booths were already up. There would be a ferris wheel and a merry-go-round. The carnies looked rough, most of them unshaven, some stripped to the waist. The women among them dressed like men.

A large tent was splayed over the dirt, ready for hoisting. Half a dozen men were driving stakes into the ground and tying guy ropes. "Don't just stand there!" a voice shouted. "Get to work." The man, in his mid-twenties, wore red trunks and was tanned a savage brown. His biceps were huge and flexed as he stood before me. His accent was strange. "He'p get this tent up and you'll earn a silver dollar."

I held the guy wires taut while he secured them to stakes. The crew raised the tent, working a large center pole upright. We erected shorter poles. The pungent odor of crushed grass blended with the snake-like smell of canvas.

We set up platforms for a trapeze and surrounded an area of painted boxes and hoops with a circle of wire, where the lion and gorilla would perform. Near the center pole stood an ornate calliope, which received power from a noisy generator.

When we broke for lunch, the carnival man invited me to his wagon. His name was Brik. He was from Georgia, and traveled with the show for half the year, moving north during the warm season and moving south when it got cold. He bossed the crew.

The interior of his wagon was set up like a living room, complete with
small sofa and an embroidered, brightly colored pillow saying "I LUV U MOM." A small dinette contained a couple of chairs and an icebox, and a mattress and blankets were on the floor. "Like liverwurst?" he asked. "Sure," I said, sitting at the table. He brought out milk and pop. "Milk keeps my muscles big," he said. "I suppose you noticed."

"I want to look like you," I said, feeling stupid as soon as my words were out.

"You've got height, lad. Here, stand with your back against mine. You'll see."

His buttocks flared against mine. He tightened the muscles of his back. "I was right. You're taller." He faced me. His chest was covered with curly black hair. "You'll have hair, and it'll be as black as mine." He laughed. "And you'll get muscles." He had grown up on a farm. "I like ramblin'," he said. "I could never be like my dad, married to some woman, with kids tying me down."

He smeared liverwurst on slabs of soft A & P white bread, piling the sandwiches on a paper plate. "Two's plenty," I said. His bare knees touched mine. He spread his legs. I felt giddy, swallowed milk, and finished my sandwich. A magnetic current from his knee jolted me. There was sweat on my lip.

"Well, let's get on. There's more work to do." If I stayed, in addition to the silver dollar, he'd see that I got a pass for the big tent show. "I wish you was older," he said. "I'd ask you to join this here carnival, and live with me."

Later, I went to his wagon to collect my pay and found him on his couch stark naked. "Don't get upset, lad. You've seen a man naked before. I have to wear my 'public duds' for tonight." I stole a look at his penis. It had an enormous foreskin. He pulled some dress pants on, felt in his pockets, and withdrew a silver dollar. "Don't see many of these around," he said. "Plenty in Colorado, though." He gave me a piece of paper saying "Tent Show: Admit One."

I thanked him. He told me that if I helped tear down the tents the next night, I'd earn another dollar.

All the way home, I heard his accent. In a trance, I milked the cow. I'd go anywhere he wanted, do anything he asked.

I plastered my hair with brilliantine. I regaled Margie with descriptions of the tiger (in actuality a defanged beast) and the gorilla. She would use my show pass; I'd sneak under the tent.

The Big Show was exciting, particularly the aerialists, billed as The Flying Godeckes from Poland. Spangles barely concealed the runs and tears in their tights. Glimpses of peach-colored flesh glowed whenever the woman balanced on her head and spread her legs and the trapeze turned.
The aerialist doubled as a lion-tamer, while his partner put the gorilla through hoops and loops. A scrawny elephant, tuskless, performed listlessly with a girl dressed as a ballerina with glittering tiara sitting on his head. A pair of clowns pretended to throw pails of water at the audience; the water was feathers. During the show, Brik circulated, supervising the erection and removal of props.

I treated Margie to cotton candy and a sideshow featuring a fat woman with a second head growing from her side, a midget missing all fingers except for his thumbs, and a mummy, reputedly the body of John Wilkes Booth, stolen from its grave. Most fascinating of all was a lady gecko. Once a night, so the hype went, she required a feast of hen's blood, Black Orpington, to be precise. We paid our fifteen cents and crowded close. A nervous hen was tied by its leg to a stake in the ground. Harsh recorded music, in scratchy violins, heralded I-Zelda's appearance. She undulated forth, painted like a gypsy and dressed in a gaudy skirt and layers of beads. "A good fat hen holds one pint of hot blood," a tout exclaimed. "For your admission, you will observe I-Zelda, Princess of Turkey, bite this here black hen's throat. It will cost you another fifteen cents to see her suck out the life, killing the chicken dead!" He motioned us closer. "Anybody with a bad heart, leave now. What you are about to witness ain't for the squeamish!" No one left. Margie looked puzzled, then horrified.

With ceremonial gestures, I-Zelda smoothed her hands over her body, jangled her bracelets in a brief dance, circled the hen (now positioned between two large lighted candles), took up the fowl, and began sucking its beak. She pulled a scarlet scarf from her cincture and wound it about the hen, securing its wings. Taking the bird firmly by its feet, she placed its entire head in her mouth. The bird struggled. I-Zelda withdrew the head. Trickles of blood were visible on its throat. I-Zelda's mouth was bloody.

Margie was sick. We pushed our way through the crowd and started home. This incomplete act, like so many in a lifetime, assumed a mystical force. Was she a sorceress, or merely another desperate human performing an outrageous act of survival?

I did not return to Brik the next evening. I stayed in the field all afternoon gathering and husking corn. I chopped wood. After supper, I lay in bed praying for Christ to quiet my turbulence. He approached with palms extended, the wounds visible. He smiled, His robes wafted by an aromatic breeze. As He neared, I saw that His face was the carnival man's!
Fights

To stifle the numerous quarrels Margie and I had that summer, my mother would declare, "Just wait till you get to high school. Those guys are tough. They'll knock your block off."

My worst quarrel with Margie occurred a week before high school, the week after the county fair. To play pig family we formed a circle of kitchen chairs on the grass. Our conflict was over which of us would play the sow. Margie felt that a male should always play the boar, lingering at the back of the pen digging up roots while the lucky sow lay on her side squirting forth piglets. For a convincing porcine look, we wore Dad's heavy winter coats.

I would, for once, be the sow! I grabbed the coat my sister preferred, put it on, and flopped down in birth throes. I loved the delicious sensation of birthing. Squirt. Squirt. Squirt. When I turned to lick the piglets, Margie kicked at me and yelled. I fought back, spraining her hand. She announced she would drown herself in the lake.

I called her bluff, waved good-bye, and took the coats and chairs back into the house. Half an hour later, I began to worry, filling in time with some desultory hoeing in the flower garden. I started for the lake, near panic. No signs near shore of her shoes or clothes, no footprints, no evidence of a drowned person in the water. If she had indeed jumped, she had drifted into the cranberry marsh, out of sight.

I returned home. As I passed a hayrick, crying, Margie jumped out laughing. "Served you right," she said. I felt both angry and relieved.

From this point on, we played few childhood games. Within a few days her menstrual cycles began. Mom was in the Rhinelander Hospital having her goiter removed. Dad sent Margie to Aunt Kate to explain the facts of life and chose the occasion for my own sex education—or at least he tried. He explained "monthlies" and said it was time I "fucked" a girl. I should cross the road and take Celia Kula into the woods and "do it." I was shocked. The paradox of women as both citadels of purity—this is how I saw my mother, and how my father conditioned me to see her—and licentious whores was painful.

Gym

I dreaded gym class, so I delayed the perfunctory physical examination for weeks, hoping I would contract a disease rare enough to excuse me from class. Not only was I inexperienced at games, but I dreaded showing my-
self nude to strangers. The ball we had played at the Sundsteen Elementary School was for kids. Even then, I could rarely catch a ball, and my balance was terrible—I had never ridden a bicycle. The only thing I did well was sprint over the rough terrain of those gravel country roads.

The principal, Mr. Kracht, known for his violent temper as “The Bull of the Woods,” demanded to know why I was not attending gym. He was unimpressed when I said I lacked money for clothes. His ultimatum: “Attend on Monday! I will personally see you do!”

While the other students suited up, I stalled, removing my shirt as carefully as if it were glued to burn scabs. The locker door hid my lower body from view, and I faced the wall, preferring to show the world my rear rather than my privates. Once in the gym, I stood about with my arms awkwardly folded, intimidated by the prowess and agility of the other boys, especially those from town. When it came time to choose up sides for games, I was always chosen last. I avoided showers until the gym teacher threatened to strip and scrub me himself. “We don’t want you stinking in class,” he said.

Again, I lingered, disrobing slowly, waiting for the other boys to finish. Draping my towel in front of me, I’d make my way to the end of the shower, face the wall, and bathe. Weeks elapsed before I was able to linger and enjoy the hot spray, a treat indeed considering our primitive bathing conditions at home.

Eventually, one of the flashiest town boys, Augie La Renzie, took an interest in me. I helped him with Latin declensions. He was curly-haired, funny, incredibly agile, and popular with both girls and boys. In his freshman year he made varsity basketball. During free periods, we would meet at the gym, where he gave me pointers on basketball. I was soon fairly adept at free throws. Augie also gave me health advice: Never wear someone else’s jock strap; keep the venison out of your teeth; stop using brilliantine. He grew up to marry the county judge’s daughter and became a World War II ace and a commercial pilot.